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Ambivalent Internationalisation: Reviewing Literature on the Social Policy Context for International Students in the United Kingdom and Implications for Social Exclusion

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This study explored the social policy context for international students in the UK and its implications for social exclusion (an inability to fully participate in society). Within a rapid review policy literature addressing international student experience, forty-two articles from the Web of Science and Social Science Research Network (SSRN) were selected through multiple screenings. Migration and education were the most explored policy areas, followed by inequalities, work, health and wellbeing, security, and housing. Results demonstrated that policy both creates barriers to inclusion (e.g. hostile environment migration/bordering practices) and supports inclusion/adaptation to social exclusion-related challenges (e.g. sanctuary scholarships for forced migrants, Graduate visas). All international students to some degree lack equitable participation in wellbeing-relevant provision. Overall, policies are constructed so the state and universities can extract value from internationals without fully including them in British society. Policies abdicate responsibility for students' inclusion, making it expensive and complicated to build a life there.

Keywords: International students; higher education; social exclusion; rapid review; United Kingdom

Introduction

International students (IS) yield substantive economic, social, cultural, and intellectual benefits for the United Kingdom (UK) and its universities. Knowledge, skills, and networks gained benefit students, their home communities, and foster global cooperation for sustainable development and tackling global challenges. The government's International Education Strategy (IES, dated 2019, updated 2021 and 2022) aimed to reach 600,000 IS in the UK by 2030 (Department for Education and Department for International Trade, 2022). Total IS numbers hit almost 680,000 in 2021/22 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023). In the UK, universities can charge higher fees for IS than domestic students (Lewis, 2023), representing a key revenue source. Considering changes like demographic aging and Brexit, and recognising IS' role in filling labour shortages, a Graduate visa route allowing international graduates to remain in the UK and seek work after studying was reintroduced. These more welcoming moves towards IS, however, contrast with a less welcoming tone that some government officials have taken in recent years towards migrants in general and IS in particular, and the wider hostile environment migration policy (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). However, research has seldom explored international students' access to, and need for, social

policy support (Bilecen, 2020). This novel study uses a rapid review methodology to analyse literature documenting social policies across the breadth of IS experience, summarising the policy context for IS in the UK and its implications for social exclusion. By using a targeted search strategy, this is the first paper to provide a holistic overview of literature on IS-relevant social policy in the UK, simultaneously focusing on specific policy areas.

Social exclusion

Social exclusion is defined variously across disciplines. This paper adopts the United Nations' (2016: 18) definition: "... a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state". Multidimensionally, exclusion encompasses issues which are economic (access to financial resources, products, and services), social (inclusion within social networks and organisations), political (access to and influence over political processes, like voting), and cultural (access to the arts, free cultural expression and participation). As a dynamic process, social exclusion describes both the state of exclusion, and the processes through which exclusion occurs. Thus, exclusion is distinct from related concepts like poverty, which generally focuses on (monetary) resource deprivation (Byrne, 2005). Fundamentally, that IS come to study in the UK implies a certain level of financial means. One should consider the processes of exclusion affecting students once they get to the UK, and those preventing many prospective students from coming in the first place.

As a relational process beyond the sole responsibility of the excluded person/s (Millar, 2007), exclusion should be understood relative to a certain political and social context, and its intersecting and overlapping inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989). Levitas (2000) outlines that social exclusion is often politically and discursively constructed through ideas about what the excluded lack (namely money, work, or morals) but one should not disregard the concept's descriptive utility for understanding how individuals and groups are systematically excluded from society.

To avoid a wholly deficit-based approach, establishing a positive counterpart to exclusion is important. One suggestion is that participation in society indicates that someone is not excluded (Burchardt *et al.*, 1999; Steinert and Pilgrim, 2003). However, this puts the onus on the socially excluded person/s to participate, ignoring that exclusion is relational; actors and institutions often actively exclude certain groups/individuals (Byrne, 2005). Burchardt (2000) qualified that social exclusion is the enforced lack of participation. Others propose social inclusion as an antonym (Byrne, 2005). Social inclusion describes processes of improving participation in society through expanded access to resources, rights, opportunities, and expression, especially for those disadvantaged or marginalised based on age, gender, 'race', ethnicity, migration status, sexuality, class, or socioeconomic status (United Nations, 2016). Social inclusion/exclusion provide complementary lenses to view people's access to participation, the processes by which this is determined, and intersecting inequalities therein.

For students, exclusion prevents access to or full engagement in UK society, with implications for wellbeing; social exclusion has been associated with lower resilience, poorer self-esteem, and worse life satisfaction (Arslan, 2019). Psychologically, exclusion involves physical/emotional separation from others, subjectively experienced as rejection and ostracism (Riva and Eck, 2016; Wesselmann, *et al.*, 2016). Short term, social exclusion is associated with cognitive deficits, worse self-regulation, difficulties with delayed gratification, increased risk-taking, self-defeating behaviour, unhealthy eating, procrastination, a decreased sense of meaning in life, viewing oneself and others as less human, lethargy, and diminished emotional expressiveness; long-term, it is associated with worsened mental and physical wellbeing (including suicidal ideation, eating disorders, substance abuse) and even violence (Bernstein, 2016; Wesselmann, *et al.*, 2016). Social exclusion makes studying in the UK less desirable, likely frustrating attempts to sustainably internationalise higher education (HE) and fulfil targets laid out in the government's International

Education Strategy to increase IS numbers and education exports (Department for Education and Department for International Trade, 2022). This risks knock-on educational/financial implications for universities dependent on IS fees.

The role of social policy

Social policy concerns how societies meet needs relating to security, education, work, health, and wellbeing, and deals with resolving inequalities in these domains (Platt, *n.d.*). Social policy covers two thirds of UK government expenditure (Dean, 2019), and includes the activities of formal and informal non-state institutions (families, charities, universities, etc.). Critically, social policy is not merely a benign instrument for apolitical ‘problem solving’. Social policy forms a central part of the social and physical ecologies fostering or inhibiting IS adaption. For instance, visa rules designed to ensure IS are engaging in education might prevent them from taking a break from their studies during personal crises.

Most (84 per cent) prospective IS do not intend on remaining in the UK for more than three years after graduation (QS, 2022). However, social policy traditionally treats the nation as a closed system, assuming that citizens are net recipients of support early in life, late life, and when they fall on hard times, but are generally net contributors throughout their working lives. IS do not neatly fit this model. Banting and Koning (2017) explore the implications of this temporary status for migrants’ access to social protection, as temporary migrants are effectively excluded from contemporary welfare states, lacking access to welfare benefits, student loans, pension schemes, etcetera. The term welfare chauvinism has emerged in social policy literature to describe sentiments/efforts excluding immigrants from welfare benefits and social services (Careja and Harris, 2022). In the UK, IS on a Student visa have no recourse to public funds (NRPF), barring them from benefits for low income individuals and housing support (UK Visas and Immigration, 2014), and pay higher tuition fees than domestic students without access to government loans (Lewis, 2023).

However, little attention has been paid to IS’ need for, and (limited) access to, social policy support, nor the implications for their social exclusion (Bilecen, 2020). This was illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic: with closed campuses and travel bans, many IS experienced isolation from family and other personal support networks, financial hardships, and lost income from part-time employment on/off campus; while receiving little state financial support, the provision of universities’ semi-formal support schemes (ranging from counselling services to student clubs) was disrupted and patchy, further promoting feelings of anxiety about health, safety, and the future (Bilecen, 2020). Inadequate support affects those already in the UK and has implications for who can afford to come to study in the UK in the first place.

Social policy decisions directly and indirectly affect the adversity and exclusion IS and prospective IS face, by imposing visa requirements, constraining labour market access, limiting which family members can be brought to the UK, and so on. Simultaneously, social policy constitutes and influences the moderating factors within the social ecology which positively/negatively affect adaption (e.g., providing counselling services, enshrining legal protections, funding scholarships, establishing/communicating anti-discrimination legislation, etc.). This dual role makes understanding IS’ social policy contexts complicated.

Aims and research question

Social policy can influence IS’ subjective and objective experiences of social exclusion, both directly and in interaction with different social ecological factors. However, literature on the social policy context for IS is fragmented across disciplines and subject areas, and the topic receives little attention or understanding (Bilecen, 2020). This study aims to gather and consolidate existing

knowledge on the topic and identify areas for improved understanding and addresses the following research question:

According to the literature, what is the social policy context for international students in the United Kingdom and what are its implications for social exclusion?

Method

This study used a rapid review of literature discussing the UK social policy context for IS at university. Rapid reviews (rapid evidence assessments, restricted reviews) are a subset of systematic reviews which minimise cost/duration by removing/simplifying elements, such as by narratively summarising results, limiting inclusion criteria by date, including only published literature, and having only one person extract data (Tricco, *et al.*, 2015; Varker, *et al.*, 2015; Aronson *et al.*, 2018). Rapid reviews are appropriate in such cases as this, where a robust literature summary is needed, but policy-relevant evidence is required quickly, the field is rapidly changing, funding is limited, and one must quickly progress to empirical activities.

For four reasons, it was decided to review academic literature discussing social policy, rather than policy itself. First, to connect disparate literature which discusses different social policy issues in isolation. Second, to provide a theoretical lens and enable the coverage of trends over time rather than isolated policy documents. Third, because policy itself rarely explicitly and solely focuses on IS; they are affected (or ignored) by broader policies. Finally, to indicate where the social policy field can go to support IS inclusion.

The dual role of the social policy context in influencing exclusion and adaptation was reviewed. Following a broad conceptualisation of social policy (Platt, *n.d.*), the review broke down literature into policy subdomains including health and wellbeing, housing, security, education, work, inequalities, and relevant migration policy. Only English language publications were sought due to the authors' language and UK focus. Data were summarised narratively, which was suitable to gather a broad overview of social policy and its implications for social exclusion.

Methodological clarity and quality are essential, but focus should be on justifying decisions, rather than eliminating bias by disregarding researcher subjectivity. Nonetheless, for transparency and ease of critical appraisal, this rapid review followed Varker *et al.*'s (2015) eight steps: (1) review initiation, (2) question development, (3) methods development, (4) information retrieval/management, (5) screening step 1: abstract – retrieval of papers, (6) screening step 2: full paper – data abstraction, (7) assess the quality of the evidence, (8) report findings. The first author handled screening and data extraction. The other authors supported with synthesis and reporting.

Web of Science (WoS), which covers published academic papers across social and natural sciences, was searched using the structured Boolean search string in Table 1. Search terms identified papers on the nineteenth of January 2023 mentioning IS, the UK or its constituent nations, and social inclusion/exclusion, social policy, a sub-area of social policy, or salient social policy topic relating to IS. An initial longlist of 1407 papers were exported for screening abstracts. For additional literature, the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) was searched for articles mentioning 'international student' in their title, abstract, or keywords. This broader search term was chosen because the detailed Boolean string did not return any articles in this smaller database. Conducted on the sixth of February 2023, this search returned 276 papers, which were initially screened online. Searches were restricted to papers published 2010-onwards to cover present policy with historical lead-up. Online government information on policy details was consulted ad hoc.

In the first screening, 1683 abstracts obtained from WoS and SSRN were assessed for compliance with inclusion criteria (Table 2). Afterwards, seventy-three remained, sixty-eight papers from WoS, and five from SSRN.

Table 1. Boolean search term for the Web of Science search

Target Population	Country	Social Policy Areas
(("international student") OR ("international students") OR ("overseas student") OR ("overseas students"))	AND (("united kingdom") OR ("UK") OR ("Britain") OR ("England") OR ("Scotland") OR ("Wales") OR ("Northern Ireland"))	AND (("social policy") OR ("social policies") OR ("social protection") OR ("benefits") OR ("benefit") OR ("social security") OR ("social insurance") OR ("security") OR ("work") OR ("employment") OR ("health") OR ("wellbeing") OR ("well-being") OR ("welfare") OR ("no recourse to public funds") OR ("hostile environment") OR ("visa") OR ("visas") OR ("migration") OR ("immigration") OR ("social exclusion") OR ("social inclusion") OR ("mental health") OR ("university") OR ("higher education") OR ("immigration policy") OR ("poverty") OR ("food poverty") OR ("inequality") OR ("inequalities") OR ("racism") OR ("discrimination") OR ("xenophobia") OR ("housing") OR ("accommodation"))

Note: Search term was applied to all contents of papers (title, abstract, keywords, full text).

Table 2. Inclusion criteria

Domain	Inclusion Criteria
Topic	Discusses international students AND social policy/a specific area of social policy (housing, employment, etc.)
Academic discipline	Any social science or related discipline
Methods	Any
Population of interest	International students at a higher education institution, including those completing, or have completed, a full degree programme at bachelor's master's, doctoral, or post-doctoral level, or participating in exchange programmes
Type of literature	Published journal articles, book chapters, conference proceedings, PhD theses, reports published by research institutes, government reports, reports published by non-governmental organisations, other grey literature
Date of publication	2010-onwards
Geographical region	United Kingdom (including England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland)
Language	English

In the second screening, shortlisted papers were obtained from databases and read fully. Five full texts (all from WoS) could not be obtained, leaving sixty-eight for the final screening. Figure 1 displays the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram for the screening process. Ultimately, forty-two papers were included.

For these forty-two papers, detailed notes were taken and key information was extracted (Table 3). Papers were classified into one or more policy areas: health and wellbeing, housing, education, work, security, migration, inequalities. This helped to understand the relative coverage

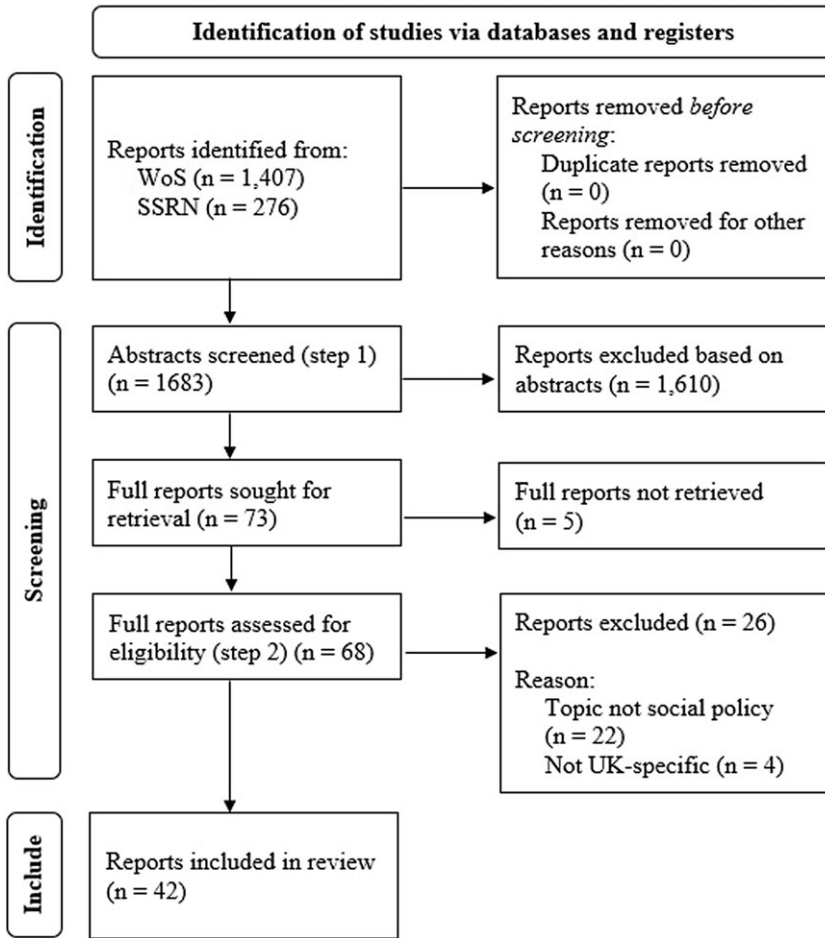


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram for paper screening and selection / Description: Provides an overview of the process for selecting the forty-two papers included in the review from an initial list of 1683 abstracts.

of different areas of social policy in the literature, and to ground synthesis. Key messages, including recurring themes and novel/contrasting findings, were summarised.

Results

Summary of papers included in the review

Migration and education were the most explored policy areas, followed by inequalities, work, health and wellbeing, security, and housing. About half of papers explored multiple areas of social policy. Almost four-fifths of papers were empirical, and most were qualitative; fewer were quantitative or mixed methods (combining quantitative and qualitative strategies). Over two-fifths combined methodologies (including those combining multiple qualitative methods). Common methods included interviews, surveys, focus groups, and the analysis of documents pertaining to the legal and policy context. Supporting Document A describes key policy instruments and implications for IS.

Table 3. Summary of included papers

	Count	%
Area of Social Policy		
Health and wellbeing	3	7%
Housing	2	5%
Education	19	45%
Work	9	21%
Security	3	7%
Migration	22	52%
Inequalities	13	31%
<i>Multiple</i>	22	52%
Type		
Non-empirical	9	21%
Qualitative	22	52%
Quantitative	4	10%
Mixed methods	7	17%
Method (selected methods, not exhaustive)		
None	9	21%
Interviews	17	40%
Focus groups	6	14%
(Auto)ethnography	1	2%
Case study	5	12%
Survey	9	21%
Secondary quantitative analysis	5	12%
Legal/policy/document analysis	6	14%
<i>Mixed/multiple methods</i>	18	43%
Source		
WoS	40	95%
SSRN	2	5%

Note: Categories for area of social policy and method are not mutually exclusive and may overlap.

Migration

Twenty-two papers discussed migration issues/policy (Warren and Mavroudi, 2011a, 2011b; Tannock, 2013; Jenkins, 2014; Doyle *et al.*, 2016; Mughal, 2016; Moskal, 2017, 2020; Pilcher and Richards, 2017; Beech, 2018; Dear, 2018; Howe, 2018; Levatino, *et al.*, 2018; Lomer, 2018; Walsh, 2019; James, 2020; Amuendo-Dorantes and Romiti, 2021; Murray and Gray, 2021; Pearson, 2021; Fidler *et al.*, 2022; Pazil, 2022; Brotherhood, 2023). Research charted the changing migration system for IS over past decades, observing its movement from being relatively receptive for IS, until it took a more restrictive turn in the 2010s (Levatino, *et al.*, 2018; Lomer, 2018; Brotherhood, 2023). IS are counted in total migration figures, and within this restrictive turn, have been caught in wider efforts to reduce immigration, affecting entry/admission, in-country rights, and students'

ability to continue living in the UK after their studies. Amidst a hostile environment migration policy which seeks to make living in the UK so unpleasant that ('illegal') immigrants opt to leave (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021), universities are recruited into border control (Dear, 2018).

Migration policy continuously evolves; students and universities must remain up-to-date and adaptable (Levatino, *et al.*, 2018; Lomer, 2018; Pearson, 2021; Brotherhood, 2023). With changes to visas, charges, in-country rights, and post-study employment routes, the ability of students to study in the UK is not guaranteed, and the feasibility of them remaining to complete their studies may change mid-course (e.g., due to changes in their ability to fund their studies through employment during or after their studies). Policy changes have made it more difficult and expensive for individuals and their families to come to the UK to study, increasing entry requirements and curtailing in-country rights like access to employment and public funds. English language requirements have expanded and standardised (Pilcher and Richards, 2017; UK Visas and Immigration, 2020; Pearson, 2021). Moreover, changes to Graduate visa routes mean that it is not clear if IS can have a future in the UK after their studies (UK Government, *n.d.*). The hostile environment has expanded, and through bordering processes, universities, landlords, employers, healthcare providers, and other bodies actively monitor students and share information with the Home Office (Jenkins, 2014; Dear, 2018; Walsh, 2019; Murray and Gray, 2021; Brotherhood, 2023; Home Office, 2023). While many students recognise the potential utility of Biometric Residence Permits' (BRPs), cards displaying migrants' personal details, fingerprints, photograph, and immigration status, the fact that migrants, but not British citizens, must hold these reveals double standards (Warren and Mavroudi, 2011a, 2011b). Forced migrants face these challenges with the added barrier of unclear and inconsistent support, although universities provide financial/in-kind assistance through sanctuary scholarships (Murray and Gray, 2021). Brexit means that EU and non-EU students now face similar scrutiny, projecting the idea that the UK does not want immigrants amidst falling EU/EEA student numbers (Amuendo-Dorantes and Romiti, 2021; Fidler *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, migration policy excludes IS from full and equitable participation in UK society, and prevents many from coming at all. Furthermore, the changing policy landscape means students cannot be sure that their rights and avenues to participation will remain.

Health and wellbeing

Three papers discussed issues and policies relating to health and wellbeing (Doyle *et al.*, 2016; Al-Oraibi *et al.*, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2022). Some did this more directly while others discussed health and wellbeing in passing while focusing on adjacent areas (e.g., healthcare access in migration policy).

All IS are to some degree barred from equal, full participation in health and wellbeing provision, compared to British citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic evidently affected IS' wellbeing, exacerbated by separation from home support networks (Al-Oraibi, *et al.*, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2022). Adjustment strategies to COVID-19 were individual (e.g., physical/mental preparation), interpersonal (e.g., sharing meals, monocultural social networks), and institutional (e.g., university-provided online counselling); (Liu *et al.*, 2022). IS experience challenges with their mental health and wellbeing, notably loneliness, and while university support is often valuable (e.g., mental health services, events and support for IS to socialise), these are not always right for individuals with personal, social, cultural, and practical barriers to getting the most of this support (Al-Oraibi *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, the prevalence of loneliness implies that, at least subjectively, many do not feel included. The Health Surcharge, which visa holders must pay to access the National Health Service (NHS), is a tangible financial barrier to equitable access to health and wellbeing support, made visible by the potential requirement to have one's BRP when accessing public health services (Brotherhood, 2023). IS are not fully included in health and wellbeing support, and compensate through individual financial contributions, interpersonal networks, and a patchwork of university support.

Housing

Two papers discussed issues and policies relating to housing (Soorenian, 2013; Dear, 2018). Key themes include bordering and inequalities for disabled students.

Access to quality housing is central to inclusion. IS' access to such housing is gatekept by private landlords who are obliged to check students' tenants right to rent in the UK, or by higher education institutions (HEIs) providing accommodation directly (Dear, 2018; UK Visas and Immigration, Home Office, Immigration Enforcement, 2023). With access to housing tied to the coordinated monitoring of residential status by multiple bordering agents, changes in personal circumstances or migration policy can alter students' rights and access to accommodation, with knock-on impacts on meaningful inclusion in society. Challenges encountered by specific groups, including disabled students, in securing appropriate high-quality housing, intersect with their international status as they often cannot view accommodation beforehand, lack information, encounter language barriers, and/or lack local support networks and resources (Soorenian, 2013). Some IS are particularly excluded from accessing housing and the subsequent benefits for social inclusion.

Education and student experience

Nineteen papers discussed education issues and policies (Er, 2012; Tannock, 2013; Walker, 2014; Doyle *et al.*, 2016; Mughal, 2016; Hayes, 2017a, 2017b; Pilcher and Richards, 2017; Huang and Turner, 2018; McKay *et al.*, 2018; Nzomo, 2019; Walsh, 2019; Hayes and Cheng, 2020; James, 2020; Amuendo-Dorantes and Romiti, 2021; Pearson, 2021; Rhoden and Kinchington, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2022; Olenina *et al.*, 2022). Papers elaborated on HE internationalisation and addressed specific issues, including IS' exclusion from certain metrics in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), challenges encountered by doctoral students, class dynamics, university-specific support schemes, the educational needs of students and their families, and the role of private colleges in international HE.

The role of IS and internationalisation in UK HE has expanded dramatically, and fees paid by internationals (which due to a lack of 'home fee status' are significantly higher than domestic students') sustain British universities within a globalised and marketised HE system (Walker, 2014; Lewis, 2023). However, a 'liberal paradox' and hostile environment in the educational system prevent full inclusion (Levatino, *et al.*, 2018). While valued economically, lacklustre socioeconomic support and high fees means IS are disproportionately self-funded, concentrated in higher-ranked institutions, and come from relatively privileged backgrounds (Olenina *et al.*, 2022). This plays into the perception that they are 'cash cows', and in the extreme can involve students being taken advantage of by predatory private colleges (Er, 2012). Tony Blair's Prime Minister's Initiatives (PMIs), sought to enhance IS experiences through streamlining entry and admission procedures and work rules, expanding Foreign and Commonwealth Office-funded Chevening scholarships aimed at international postgraduates, funding small projects, promoting international partnerships and transnational education, and internationalising curricula (Lomer, 2018). Meanwhile, university library support and small-scale schemes holistically facilitate inclusion and intercultural learning and support transitions (Nzomo, 2019). For instance, the Cultural Awareness and Knowledge Exchange Scheme (CAKES) was a small university-based programme featuring student-driven workshops blending academic (e.g., academic writing, critical thinking) and sociocultural activities (e.g., trips, local dialect sessions); McKay *et al.*'s (2018) evaluation reported promising findings regarding academic and social transitions. However, IS are excluded from mechanisms assessing the quality of their educational experiences, like key TEF indicators, and lack a meaningful voice in shaping university directions (Hayes, 2017a, 2017b; Hayes and Cheng, 2020; Office for Students, 2020). Simultaneously, students receive limited support or information regarding educational opportunities for their families (Doyle, *et al.*, 2016).

Work

Nine papers discussed issues and policies relating to work (Doyle *et al.*, 2016; Moskal, 2017, 2020; Howe, 2018; Huang and Turner, 2018; Goodwin and Mbah, 2019; Fakunle and Pirrie, 2020; James, 2020; Fakunle, 2021). Three key areas are relevant. First, IS' ability to work *during* their studies. Second, their ability to work (inside and outside the UK) *after* their studies. Third, the employability support provided by universities and opportunities to acquire work-related skills/experiences.

IS are not fully included within the UK labour market. Despite having the same educational load as domestic students, IS have limits to what, and how much, work they can do alongside their studies. Violation of limits can result in severe consequences, including deportation. IS thus become a legally constructed underclass of workers, and those who are forced to work illegally to make ends meet due to their class and socioeconomic status are made vulnerable to exploitative employment practices by employers (Home Office, 2016; Howe, 2018; Fakunle and Pirrie, 2020; Fakunle, 2021). Frequent changes to post-study work rights mean that, while international graduates can currently remain in the UK and seek work for at least two years, this right comes with substantial visa fees and restrictions, and the changeable policy space means students starting their studies cannot be confident of inclusion in the UK labour market and wider society after graduation (Moskal, 2017, 2020; James, 2020). Moreover, policies governing work limits can hinder IS' ability to gain work experience during their studies, such as through internships, and university employability provision is often ill-suited to ensuring that IS have equitable opportunities to develop work readiness (Huang and Turner, 2018; Goodwin and Mbah, 2019; Fakunle and Pirrie, 2020; Fakunle, 2021). Intentionally or not, social policy ensures that IS follow a 'migration for education' rather than 'education for migration' trajectory; students should be coming to pursue their education and benefit the university sector, not pursuing their education with a view to settle in the UK and 'steal' jobs from British workers.

Security and xenophobic abuse

Three papers discussed issues and policies relating to security, all focusing on experiences of abuse of an explicitly racist and xenophobic nature, experienced acutely by members of certain groups (Brown and Jones, 2013; Li, 2022; Pazil, 2022).

IS face security issues, especially with racist and xenophobic abuse, disproportionate for students from certain backgrounds (e.g., East Asians, Muslims, etc). IS in the UK are frequently racialised as people of colour, categorised under the blanket term of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME; Madriaga and McCaig, 2022) while 'whiteness' is considered the default. Meanwhile, universities' internationalisation strategies map IS onto the idea of diversity while often ignoring race and racism (Buckner, *et al.*, 2021). Research detailed verbal and physical abuse, being followed, pejorative comments about home countries, Islamophobia, and concerns about British drinking culture (Brown and Jones, 2013; Li, 2022; Pazil, 2022). Affected students rarely approach authorities about these issues, revealing barriers to their inclusion within the security-promoting instruments of the British state (Brown and Jones, 2013; Li, 2022; Pazil, 2022). This is likely compounded by notions, professed by universities and the police, that their concerns often amount to cultural deficits and misunderstandings (Li, 2022). For inclusion in British society IS must feel (and be) safe, and that is evidently not always the case. Positive contact with local communities, like through volunteering with community organisations and contact with churches, has potential to improve perceived safety (Li, 2022).

Two levels of inequality in inclusion within UK higher education

Thirteen papers touched on inequalities (Brown and Jones, 2013; Soorenian, 2013; Tannock, 2013; Hayes, 2017a, 2017b; Dear, 2018; Moskal, 2020; Buckner, *et al.*, 2021; Rhoden and

Kinchington, 2021; Madriaga and McCaig, 2022; Olenina *et al.*, 2022; Pazil, 2022). There are two levels at which inequality in inclusion must be considered: exclusion from coming to the UK, and exclusion once in the UK.

As Tannock (2013) highlights, amidst high tuition and visa fees, studying in the UK is expensive for IS. Limited funding opportunities (barring some scholarships and home country state funding) and structural barriers to the UK labour market (e.g. the working hours limit) make it difficult for less privileged international students to access UK universities. Consequently, admissions data indicates a lack of class diversity among IS, who are generally self-funded (Olenina *et al.*, 2022). Poorer students who make it to the UK and are forced to work illegally to meet basic needs experience legal and economic precarity (Howe, 2018). In this first inequality of inclusion, the global working class overwhelmingly lack equitable access to British higher education.

The second inequality of inclusion concerns those who manage to come to the UK but face especially acute barriers to inclusion based on intersecting inequalities on top of the factors discussed so far (Crenshaw, 1989). Class inequalities can be exacerbated by additional costs associated with being disabled or caring responsibilities (Rhoden and Kinchington, 2021; Sooreanian, 2013). Gendered inequalities affect women during and after studies and are intensified because women assume most caring responsibilities amidst minimal university support (Moskal, 2020; Rhoden and Kinchington, 2021). Gendered and racial inequalities are compounded, for instance, Muslim women rendered 'visible' by their wearing of headscarves are singled out for xenophobic abuse (Pazil, 2022). Thus, even among IS who make it to the UK, some face particularly acute exclusion.

Conclusion and discussion

What is the social policy context in the UK?

Results suggest that UK social policy provides limited support to IS in facing challenges, and often poses difficulties. Migration policy erects barriers which affect who can come to the UK, limit in-country rights, and make it difficult to remain after completing studies (Levatino, *et al.*, 2018; Lomer, 2018; Pearson, 2021; Brotherhood, 2023). Students pay visa fees, including a Health Surcharge, while missing access to many services and elements of support by a lack of 'home fee status' and NRPF (UK Visas and Immigration, 2014; Brotherhood, 2023; Lewis, 2023). Simultaneously, they require BRPs, physically embodying difference. Within a hostile environment, non-state institutions, including landlords, healthcare providers, and universities, become responsible for border enforcement (Dear, 2018). A 'liberal paradox' is observable, whereby UK society, especially universities, depends on inflated IS' fees and international graduates' labour, but is hostile to the idea that IS might settle and become included in British society (Levatino, *et al.*, 2018). Subsequently, opportunities for students to work in the UK during and after their studies are curtailed and changeable (Home Office, 2016; Moskal, 2017; Howe, 2018; Fakunle, 2021). Xenophobic and racist abuse, including physical assault, are an unfortunate reality for some IS, especially to those who are 'visibly' different (Brown and Jones, 2013; Li, 2022; Pazil, 2022). These incidents are seldom reported to the police who, like universities, can be dismissive of the racialised nature of these incidents, chalking them up to cultural misunderstanding by victims (Li, 2022). Meanwhile, universities celebrate a sanitised version of diversity from having students from of different nationalities come to the UK (Buckner, *et al.*, 2021). While the material barriers IS face, partly resulting from social policy but also from external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, can diminish health and wellbeing, students often do not, or cannot, access support (Doyle *et al.*, 2016; Al-Oraibi *et al.*, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2022).

Nonetheless, there remain promising avenues for harnessing social policy to support IS. Paying the Health Surcharge affords IS with access to the UK's nationalised healthcare system which in many countries would require private insurance (Brotherhood, 2023). Through sanctuary scholarships, universities support some of the most vulnerable and precarious individuals to achieve educational aspirations (Murray and Gray, 2021). Small-scale schemes, geared towards creating opportunities for intercultural interaction and learning, support students' adaptation to UK university life (McKay *et al.*, 2018). While university library support and careers services can be improved, there are resources in place to help students pursue academic and personal development in the UK (Nzomo, 2019). Outside university, own-culture networks, volunteering organisations, churches, and other groups provide tangible resources and valuable social support which can make a real difference to students' lives (Li, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2022).

Implications for social exclusion

Across social policy domains, IS are structurally and substantially socially excluded in the UK. Exclusion occurs on two levels, first the overwhelming inaccessibility of UK universities to the global working class, and second the inequitable inclusion of students who make it here. Effectively, the social policy context is constructed so that the state and universities can extract value from IS without including them in British society. Inflated fees support universities' management, teaching, and research activities, while universities and the state largely avoid responsibility for the wellbeing of the students themselves, making it expensive, complicated, and undesirable to build a life in the UK.

IS face barriers to social, economic, political, and cultural inclusion (United Nations, 2016). Socially, xenophobic abuse and structural racism (Brown and Jones, 2013; Madriaga and McCaig, 2022), paired with inadequate support from universities, the state, and other institutions, prevent full inclusion in UK society (Bilecen, 2020). Economically, restricted access to public funds and services British citizens can take for granted, along with limitations to labour market access during and after studies, takes equitable economic participation off the table (UK Visas and Immigration, 2014; Howe, 2018). Politically, IS have limited voting rights (Johnston, 2023), and as the review here demonstrates, they are in fact objectified in political discourses and decisions, caught up in political hostility towards immigration and used as a political football in a changeable policy landscape (Dear, 2018). Culturally, it appears that concerns IS have in adapting to British culture (e.g., around drinking) are not consistently taken seriously (Li, 2022).

While exactly what it means to be excluded is contested (Levitas, 2000), looking at social policy according to the literature reviewed, it is difficult to argue that IS are not socially excluded in the UK. Table 4 highlights social policy factors which serve as barriers and supportive factors for inclusion. Some (e.g., BRPs) potentially do both. Taking the rejection/ostracism distinction from psychology (Riva and Eck, 2016), some barriers can be seen as actively rejecting IS' inclusion, like bordering and the hostile environment. Others are more reflective of ostracism as they ignore IS' needs, such as a lack of 'home fee status', NRPF, or exclusion from TEF indicators.

Social exclusion and inclusion are dynamic processes (Millar, 2007; United Nations, 2016). Policy influences processes of exclusion, and recruits various actors/institutions (universities, banks, landlords, etc.) to this end. However, some actors/institutions can foster inclusion and resilient adaption. Small-scale schemes discussed here give an indication of where to start, creating deep and meaningful opportunities for intercultural exchange, while recognising IS as autonomous democratic equals who are nonetheless situated in a social context characterised by embedded intersecting inequalities (McKay *et al.*, 2018). Universities and institutions in the local community and beyond can help equip IS with the tools, resources, and support they need to be more comprehensively included in UK society and, if they choose, to build a life here.

Table 4. Barriers to inclusion and supportive factors

Barriers	Factors Supporting Adaption
Biometric Residence Permits	Biometric Residence Permits
Bordering	Graduate visa
Brexit	Health Surcharge
COVID-19 restrictions	Home/UK government scholarships
Health Surcharge	International education strategy
Hostile environment	Prime Minister's Initiatives
Lack of home fee status	Sanctuary scholarships
No recourse to public funds	University support
Prevent	
Teaching Excellence Framework	
Visa restrictions	
Working hours limit	

The state of the literature and future directions

By focusing on academic publications, this paper skews towards discussion of policy areas most discussed in literature, notably migration, education, and work. Less research explores IS healthcare or housing despite clear inequalities in access. Future research looking beyond the lens of academic literature, directly at policy, would be valuable. Additionally, further research exploring inequalities among IS and how these are affected by social policy, including those based on intersections of class, ethnoreligious background, home country, and the underexplored area of LGBTQ+ identities, would be informative. Previous research has demonstrated issues caused by structural racism for students racialised as BAME in terms of access to the most prestigious institutions, grades, post-study outcomes, narrow curricula, inclusion, and mental health (Arday *et al.*, 2022). The interaction between international status and racial inequality deserves further exploration.

Most literature discussed detailed how policy constrains IS. Studies seldom identified how students accessed and utilised support. Resilience describes dynamic processes of positive adaption in the face of significant adversity (Luthar *et al.*, 2000). Ungar's (2011) social ecological approach holds that, because resilience occurs amidst social and environmental adversity, emphasis should be placed on the role social and physical ecologies play in fostering positive development amidst adversity. Future research should adopt a social ecological resilience approach to explore how IS adapt to challenges (including exclusion caused/exacerbated by social policy), and how social ecologies provide resources, skills, and knowledge needed to do so. While understanding IS adaption is important, one must keep an eye on rectifying inequitable social policies contributing to social exclusion.

Limitations and methodological considerations

This study provides grounding in the social policy context for IS, rooted in the academic literature but supported by grey literature and government sources. While effort was taken to ensure that the search strategy was comprehensive, given the broad, amorphous nature of social policy and the wide variation in terminology used, it is possible that some relevant papers were not identified. This is especially possible as a rapid review, needed to ensure that timely evidence was gathered to inform subsequent empirical work, necessitated shortcuts, like avoiding

forwards and backwards citation. Furthermore, given the highly contemporary nature of the topic, and the rapidly evolving policy space, relevant literature may have been published since the initial search. This study focused on the UK. Exploring how social policy for IS varies internationally would be valuable, but was beyond scope. This review delivers valuable and robust findings which can serve as instrumental to guiding subsequent research activities, and in providing an analysis of the contemporary social policy context for IS and its implications for social exclusion.

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