

THE IMPACT OF NEO-LIBERAL FRAMEWORKS ON STUDENT MOBILITY AND INTERNATIONALISATION IN AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Internationalization and academic mobility have traditionally been pivotal components within higher education, each serving distinct roles. Internationalization has been instrumental in promoting academic exchange, enabling knowledge dissemination, fostering research collaborations, and driving shared innovation. However, the emergence of neoliberal ideologies has embedded global capitalism's market dynamics into higher education systems globally, aligning the sector increasingly with market-oriented values. This paper investigates the effects of neoliberalism on the internationalization of higher education in Africa, with particular emphasis on evolving trends in international student mobility. It contends that neoliberal influences on international mobility extend beyond mere market considerations, touching on issues of hegemony within global knowledge frameworks that often marginalize African nations and institutions. The study is based on published sources and accessible statistical data from governmental and non-governmental entities. By exploring the intersections of neoliberalism and internationalization in higher education, this paper highlights the complex and nuanced nature of these dynamics and their concrete implications for the movement of students across borders. Furthermore, the article considers how neoliberal entanglements may shape the future trajectory of internationalization within African higher education contexts.

Keywords: internationalization, student mobility, neoliberalism, Africa, brain drain

INTRODUCTION

While neoliberalism is frequently lauded for its capacity to increase private sector efficiency, it brings with it a range of unintended consequences that undermine the social obligations of the public sector, including education. Central to neoliberal ideology are principles of free market competition, individualism, limited government intervention, deregulation, and

privatization. These tenets are primarily oriented towards enhancing the efficiency of market capitalism by markedly reducing government expenditures, regulatory oversight, and public sector ownership (Blum, 2022). The rise of neoliberalism in the latter half of the 20th century has profoundly influenced higher education policies across many nations, promoting privatization within the education sector, restructuring university administration around market-driven principles, reducing public funding, and encouraging institutions to focus on revenue-generating activities (Amey and David, 2020). Neoliberalism posits that higher education is predominantly a private asset, suggesting that its benefits accrue primarily to individuals—through increased earnings and enhanced social mobility—rather than contributing substantially to societal advancement (Marginson, 2013; de Wit, 2019).

The emphasis on reducing higher education's societal benefits to a predominantly individual level has ushered market values into the academic sphere and spurred the growth of private educational institutions. This shift has also intensified competition among universities, with a focus on positioning students as consumers to be attracted and retained (de Wit, 2019). Consequently, universities are increasingly compelled to implement market-oriented approaches in their internationalization efforts. Such strategies include attracting international students and establishing campuses abroad, aimed primarily at ensuring financial viability and institutional sustainability (Knight, 2023). Within the neoliberal framework, students are viewed largely as rational, self-interested consumers and prospective workforce members, highlighting their economic contributions. This has fostered a commodification of higher education, wherein institutions actively compete for international, tuition-paying students. In this competitive landscape, universities often prioritize “marketable” fields of study, reshaping their missions and curricula to align with labor market expectations (Amey and David, 2020). Thus, the internationalization of higher education has increasingly become a strategy for revenue generation and global branding rather than a vehicle for fostering intellectual and cultural exchange.

The reduction of public funding has led institutions to increasingly shift the financial burden of education onto individual students through the expansion of student loans and tuition fees. In some cases, such as South Africa and Nigeria, this shift has made higher education less affordable, increasing student debt burdens and exacerbating inequalities (Ayuk and Koma, 2019; Lebeau and Oanda, 2020). Moreover, as a revenue generation strategy, universities have started to focus on commercializing research, forming partnerships with corporations, and offering fee-based services. By adopting a customer-centric approach, neoliberalism transforms the curriculum into a commodity that is transferred from teachers to students. This

perspective implies that higher education institutions should provide quantifiable, standardized, and market-responsive curricula and research. While these activities may bring in additional funds, they have also impacted the autonomy and integrity of academic research. Research partnership in higher education, which is one of the core areas of internationalization, has been shaped and drifted by funding lines. Thus, the neoliberal perspective on the internationalization of higher education places significant emphasis on economic imperatives, prioritizing the generation of revenue for higher education institutions.

The neoliberal approach often minimizes the social, cultural, and intellectual aspects of internationalization, emphasizing economic rationality instead. However, the internationalization of higher education serves numerous functions that extend far beyond institutional revenue generation. It plays a critical role in facilitating the exchange of best practices and experiences, enabling knowledge sharing, supporting collaborative research that influences community well-being, and fostering cultural exchanges and capacity building in areas such as postgraduate supervision and research. Although neoliberalism has increasingly shaped higher education's internationalization in many nations, this process has undergone multiple stages of evolution, particularly prior to the 1990s (de Wit, 2019). Historically, the concept of internationalization in higher education has shifted: initially focusing on academic and cultural exchange during the 1960s and 1970s, promoting peace and mutual understanding in the 1980s, transitioning to development aid in the 1990s, and more recently, prioritizing national competitiveness and market-driven imperatives.

The current focus on attracting tuition-paying international students has transformed higher education into a lucrative sector for developed nations, with 90% of international students enrolling in institutions within OECD countries (Knight and Woldegiorgis, 2017). This pattern has persisted for years, as reflected in UNESCO's findings. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2017), five countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia—consistently lead in hosting international students, collectively enrolling over 75% of the global international student population. The financial implications of this influx are substantial for host countries. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that revenue from education exports in Australia rose markedly, from \$16.3 billion in 2011 to AUS\$25.5 billion in 2022 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Similarly, in New Zealand, higher education services have ranked as the fourth-largest service export since 2010, significantly boosting the national economy (ICEF Monitor, 2023). Although profit motives have long been intrinsic to the neoliberal framework of internationalization, they appear to be expanding in both scale and influence. Today, higher

education services are viewed increasingly as commodities, discussed within the context of free trade and formally recognized under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO), to be exchanged internationally like other tradable services.

Developed nations, particularly the UK, USA, Australia, and New Zealand, engage in intense competition for international students, vying for access to markets in Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Kuroda et al., 2018). This global competition is often interpreted as a contemporary form of imperialism, offering funding and scholarships while simultaneously imposing structures that foster dependency and exploitation. The economic leverage of these nations enables them to assert cultural and institutional dominance, a dynamic perpetuated through internationalization processes. Postcolonial theories critically examine these hegemonic legacies, addressing the resulting power asymmetries and cultural subordination within transnational interactions, while also considering the impact of economic incentives in shaping global academic relationships (Amey and David, 2020). Neoliberalism thus reframes internationalization within a context of global economic power, prioritizing market-oriented and profit-driven goals at the expense of broader academic and cultural values.

Market-driven policies have increasingly become powerful influences shaping universities' approaches to internationalization (de Wit, 2019). This shift has placed universities under growing pressure to focus on research and programs that cater to corporate needs, leading to a decline in academic scholarship. The prioritization of market-oriented policies and privatization has undermined academic freedom, critical inquiry, and intellectual diversity, resulting in a more instrumental and utilitarian perspective on higher education. This article examines the impact of neoliberalism on the internationalization of higher education in Africa, with a focus on international student mobility trends. It begins by analyzing the interconnection between neoliberalism and internationalization, underscoring the complex and multifaceted nature of these concepts and their practical implications for student mobility. The discussion then addresses how international student mobility within African higher education is shaped by neoliberal imperatives. The article concludes by considering the broader implications of neoliberal influences for the future of internationalization in African higher education.

NEOLIBERALISM AND THE SHIFT IN INTERNATIONALIZATION PRIORITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Neoliberalism is a political and economic ideology that prioritizes free-market capitalism,

deregulation, and individualism (Harvey, 2005). The term "neoliberalism" was originally coined in the 1930s by German economist Alexander Rüstow, who sought to differentiate the prevailing collectivist liberal ideals from the principles of classical liberalism (Turner, 2008, p.4). In subsequent decades, influential economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, who were critical of Keynesian and socialist economic frameworks, organized the Mont Pelerin conference to advocate for classical liberal ideals, including free markets and individual freedom. In the early 20th century, figures like Milton Friedman began championing the benefits of a free-market system, yet neoliberalism did not achieve widespread acceptance until the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, governments worldwide began adopting neoliberal policies—such as deregulation, privatization, and austerity measures—aimed at stimulating economic growth and reducing state intervention in the economy. The foundational principles of neoliberalism include market efficiency, individualism, deregulation, privatization, free trade, limited government involvement, and fiscal austerity (Harvey, 2005; Mudge, 2008).

Since the 1980s, a marked global shift toward neoliberal ideology has emerged, emphasizing the promotion of free markets, minimal government intervention, deregulation, privatization, and individual freedoms. This transformation was initiated either directly by governments or as a response to external pressures from international financial organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which enforced structural adjustment programs (SAPs) as conditions for financial aid (Allais, 2014). The spread of neoliberalism has led to a profound restructuring of social, political, and economic systems, influencing multiple domains of public and private life. Neoliberal principles and policies have permeated beyond traditional economic frameworks, affecting sectors such as education, healthcare, social welfare, culture, and even interpersonal relationships:

Neoliberalism is the linguistic omnivore of our times, a neologism that threatens to swallow up all the other words around it. Twenty years ago, the term 'neoliberalism' barely registered in English language debates. Now it is virtually inescapable, applied to everything from architecture, film, and feminism to the politics of both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. (Rodgers, 2018, p. 78)

Neoliberalism has significantly reshaped the higher education sector, traditionally viewed as a public good rather than a market-driven entity (Shore, 2010). Within the neoliberal paradigm, higher education is predominantly framed as a supplier of a skilled workforce essential to the global economy. Influential transnational organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, along with national policymakers, commonly operate under the assumption that higher education serves a critical role in preparing future workers to bolster economic productivity within a globalized economy.

Consequently, higher education institutions are increasingly compelled to operate within market frameworks, where they must demonstrate their ability to yield a satisfactory return on investment.

Marginson (2013) argues that neoliberalism has reshaped higher education primarily through two interconnected market policies: New Public Management (NPM) and the Neoliberal Market Model (NLMM). NPM introduces market-oriented administrative practices from the private sector, aiming to enhance efficiency and accountability within public institutions, including universities. This approach incorporates performance-based funding, quality assurance processes, and outcome-focused evaluation systems. Meanwhile, the NLMM has driven the further commercialization of higher education, framing it as a commodified service and positioning universities as competitive market entities. Under the NLMM, academic institutions are expected to operate as profit-driven enterprises, prioritizing revenue generation by attracting tuition-paying students, forming corporate partnerships, and monetizing research outputs. Both NPM and NLMM underscore the centrality of market principles and competition in influencing the governance and functioning of higher education institutions.

Traditionally, the focus on internationalization in higher education has been rooted in exchange and collaboration, emphasizing the importance of engaging with diverse academic cultures and languages. However, since the late 1990s, a gradual shift towards a more competitive approach has emerged. Van der Wende (2001) describes this as a paradigmatic transition from cooperation to competition. Within a neoliberal framework, internationalization in higher education has increasingly aligned with market-oriented narratives, positioning universities as tools to enhance economic competitiveness. Institutions now engage in fierce competition to attract international students and scholars, both of whom are valuable contributors to the knowledge economy. This pursuit of international recruitment success, research excellence, and institutional prestige is a driving force for both universities and governments (de Wit, 2019). This competitive thrust extends across various dimensions, including securing research funding, achieving high rankings in global university assessments, and gaining visibility through influential publications (Wan et al., 2017; Hazelkorn, 2018).

The neoliberal institutional framework has promoted a shift within higher education from a cooperative to a competitive approach, significantly influenced by the impact of global rankings. In striving to improve their standings, universities have increasingly concentrated on areas emphasized by ranking methodologies, including research output, international reputation, and institutional resources (Hazelkorn, 2018; de Wit, 2019; Amey and David,

2020). This heightened focus on rankings has driven a market-oriented approach, as universities seek to outperform peers, attract students, and secure funding. Marginson (2017) outlines three primary ways in which global rankings have reshaped the internationalization of higher education: (i) by intensifying competition among universities and nations, (ii) by establishing a hierarchical system of evaluation, and (iii) by fostering a performance-oriented culture based on checklists and specific metrics. However, this "Global Academic Rankings Game," as termed by Yudkevich, Altbach, and Rumbley (2016), predominantly involves a select group of institutions, focusing more on prestige and reputation than on educational quality or student outcomes. Despite extensive scholarly critique questioning the validity of ranking indicators, rankings have become widely accepted as measures of quality within neoliberal universities (Wan et al., 2017; Hazelkorn, 2018).

De Wit et al. (2015, p. 29) define internationalization as "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society." While this academic perspective on internationalization highlights the importance of scholarly collaboration and interconnectedness, the neoliberal interpretation of internationalization places economic and commercial priorities at the forefront, often sidelining social, cultural, and academic considerations. The pervasive influence of neoliberalism not only diminishes the social, cultural, and intellectual foundations of internationalization in higher education but also undermines essential values of academic community, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and diversity. Although the impact of neoliberalism on higher education varies internationally, neoliberal principles—such as competition, marketization, and stratification—have become dominant elements shaping the internationalization process (Bamberger et al., 2019; Bulut-Sahin and Kondakci, 2022).

The concept of neoliberal globalization and its impact on universities remains a contested and evolving area of debate. Some universities have embraced a neoliberal, market-oriented model, striving to secure high rankings and compete globally, while others remain dedicated to their foundational educational mission—promoting critical thought and independent scholarship (Amey and David, 2020; Wan et al., 2017). The paths that universities pursue are influenced by a complex mix of institutional objectives, stakeholder expectations, and broader socio-economic contexts. Generally, within the neoliberal framework, the internationalization of higher education has generated significant economic advantages for Global North countries that have adopted a global entrepreneurial approach. This model emphasizes

internationalization programs aimed at cultivating "global citizens," equipped with skills to succeed in varied international markets (Bulut-Sahin and Kondakci, 2022). Following this perspective, two primary types of internationalization policies emerge: (i) horizontal internationalization among Global North countries, characterized by reciprocal learning and collaboration grounded in shared economic, cultural, and social values; and (ii) vertical internationalization, which connects economically advanced Northern countries with less developed Southern nations, often reflecting asymmetries in economic and academic exchange.

In the neoliberal framework, vertical internationalization functions in a top-down manner that fosters exploitative dynamics by channeling fee-paying students from economically disadvantaged countries in the Global South to wealthier nations in the Global North. This system not only fails to enhance the higher education infrastructures of the Global South but also intensifies issues such as brain drain, negatively impacting the global rankings and reputations of institutions in these regions (Wan et al., 2017). This model perpetuates colonial, Eurocentric narratives by positioning the Global North as the primary site of knowledge production, with the Global South relegated to the role of consumer. Underlying this model is the assumption of a "single modernity" or "singularity of origin," which sustains Eurocentric ideologies of culture and knowledge flowing unidirectionally from a centralized production core to a peripheral consumer base. This Eurocentric view implies a linear trajectory of historical development, with Europe seen as the cradle of modernity and the central source of cultural diffusion. Such a perspective overlooks the rich, diverse intellectual traditions of various world regions, which a non-neoliberal framework of internationalization would recognize and celebrate. By disregarding the agency and self-determined knowledge systems of non-Western societies, this model assumes a passive role for them as mere consumers of externally defined knowledge, thereby ignoring their capacity to shape and contribute to global knowledge networks.

The interplay between neoliberalism and the internationalization of higher education manifests through three interconnected aspects of globalization. First, the predominance of capitalist market competition has led universities to embrace neoliberal ideologies in their internationalization strategies, emphasizing rankings, the recruitment of fee-paying international students, and the adoption of New Public Management and Neoliberal Market Model principles. This shift reflects a strategic focus on economic competitiveness, where institutions aim to enhance their market positions globally. Second, the rise of the knowledge economy has underscored the value of graduates and skilled labor as critical assets in production, effectively commodifying education and casting students as prospective

knowledge workers. Higher education institutions, responding to the knowledge-driven demand for skilled manpower, have intensified internationalization efforts to attract talent and expertise. However, this approach has contributed to a brain drain from the Global South to the Global North, effectively exploiting skilled labor to the detriment of developing nations. Lastly, the global movement of ideas, structures, and systems within the neoliberal context perpetuates the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge systems. Internationalization, framed within neoliberalism, often reinforces Eurocentric dominance, thereby marginalizing alternative perspectives and depriving international students of diverse intellectual viewpoints. In this way, the convergence of neoliberalism and internationalization prioritizes market competition, commodifies education, fosters brain drain, and sustains Eurocentric hegemony within global knowledge frameworks.

TRANSNATIONAL STUDENT FLOWS IN AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The political economy of student mobility encompasses the complex interaction between political and economic forces that govern and influence the cross-border movement of students for educational purposes. This field of study involves analyzing how governments and higher education institutions shape policies and practices that facilitate or restrict student mobility, as well as examining the broader economic impacts of these international flows. The concept of the "university" itself, derived from the notion of the "universe," highlights the fundamental role that knowledge exchange and the mobility of scholars play in the landscape of higher education. Historically, academic mobility has been a cornerstone of higher education, with scholars crossing borders and moving between institutions in pursuit of knowledge, intellectual exchange, and the enrichment of their academic and cultural experiences.

Mobility in higher education extends beyond the movement of individuals to encompass the circulation of ideas, values, knowledge, structures, technologies, services, and products. Within the framework of internationalization, mobility not only refers to the cross-border movement of students and scholars but also includes the transnational flow of academic programs and educational providers (Knight and Woldegiorgis, 2017). This concept of mobility spans various dimensions, incorporating both temporal and spatial elements. Mobility can occur physically or virtually, with durations ranging from short-term engagements to lifelong pursuits. It may be driven by personal choice or influenced by external pressures and can involve full-degree programs or temporary academic exchanges. Thus, mobility remains a complex and multifaceted concept, and scholars continue to debate and refine its definitions.

Understanding student mobility in higher education presents a complex challenge, largely due to the conceptual overlap with related notions such as migration and displacement (Anderson and Blinder, 2014; Clarke, 2012). In this article, international student mobility specifically refers to the temporary relocation of individuals for educational purposes to a country other than their own. This mobility includes both inbound and outbound flows, as students move between countries either globally or within a particular region, such as Africa. Motivations for such mobility are varied, encompassing academic, economic, and cultural incentives. Key drivers include the pursuit of knowledge exchange, best practices, prestigious qualifications, advanced research capabilities, and income generation for host institutions through tuition fees, along with fostering cultural integration (Knight and Woldegiorgis, 2017). The growing trend in international student mobility is also fueled by an increasing demand for specialized, technical post-secondary education, prompting students to seek educational opportunities abroad that may surpass those available in their home countries.

Despite its complexity and ties to the concept of migration, student mobility has attracted significant scholarly attention in discussions about the internationalization of higher education, as emphasized by numerous authors (Knight and Woldegiorgis, 2017; Schoole, 2006; Teichler, 2009; Altbach, 2004). Many studies situate international student mobility within the context of the "global knowledge economy" or "information society," where economic and social activities increasingly center on the exchange of information and intellectual property rather than physical goods (Shields, 2013). Conversely, neo-Marxist analyses challenge the notion of an egalitarian, post-capitalist knowledge economy, questioning the commodification of knowledge as "intellectual property." Bob Jessop (2003), for instance, contends that knowledge is a "fictitious commodity" made artificially scarce through intellectual property regimes and market-oriented educational reforms, ultimately serving capitalist objectives. From this neo-Marxist perspective, higher education transcends the role of mere human capital; it is viewed as cultural capital leveraged by elite groups to uphold and reinforce the dominance of their status-group culture (Shields, 2013).

The historical trajectory of student mobility within Africa is closely linked to the evolution of higher education on the continent, which was deeply shaped by colonial legacies. Modern higher education institutions in Africa were largely established through colonial interventions, with European powers creating institutions aligned with their own educational frameworks, resulting in distinct Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone models. These colonial legacies have profoundly influenced current degree structures, languages of instruction, student mobility patterns, and partnership trends within African higher education.

Consequently, contemporary African higher education systems still reflect colonial imprints, evident in curricula, instructional languages, degree frameworks, and dominant knowledge systems (Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck, 2015).

The higher education systems in many African countries were purposefully designed to sustain a relationship of dependency on European institutions. This strategic design ensured that African universities remained reliant on European counterparts for essential aspects such as accreditation, degree structures, leadership frameworks, and academic partnerships. Consequently, African higher education systems have evolved in ways that perpetuate a dependence on European institutions. For example, the University of Ibadan, founded in 1948, was established as University College London's branch and became Nigeria's first degree-awarding institution, maintaining strong links with the UK educational framework. Similarly, the University of the Gold Coast in Ghana and the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, both founded in the same year, began as University Colleges affiliated with London (Hallberg Adu, 2019). Additionally, when the University of Dakar was established in 1958, a decree from the French Ministry of Education designated it as the eighteenth university within the French higher education system (Lulat, 2003).

The Francophone context of higher education in Africa presents a particularly complex landscape, characterized by the persistent influence of French colonial models that continue to shape various system aspects. Even post-independence, universities in former French colonies have retained strong administrative ties with French institutions, perpetuating the tradition of sending African students to France for higher education rather than building equivalent opportunities within Africa. According to the ICEF Monitor (2023), France remains the primary destination for students from Francophone Africa, with African students constituting 23% of France's foreign student population. For example, 85% of mobile students from Madagascar choose to study in France (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). This trend of aligning with former colonial powers is also observed among Anglophone African countries (Hallberg Adu, 2019). As such, the internationalization of higher education in Africa remains intricately linked to the continent's colonial history. Current patterns of international student mobility mirror the enduring legacy of colonial ties, with many African students opting to study in higher education institutions in former colonial nations. Key drivers of this trend include shared academic languages and similarities in educational systems, which significantly influence students' decisions regarding where to pursue education abroad. These factors reinforce the historical mobility patterns established during the colonial era, highlighting the lasting impact of colonial relationships on higher education in Africa.

African students pursue higher education and research both within the continent and internationally. Within Africa, countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt have become popular destinations, leading to significant intra-African student mobility (Knight and Woldegiorgis, 2017). At the same time, many African students seek education abroad, engaging in inter-regional mobility with destinations like France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Germany being particularly prominent (Hallberg Adu, 2019; Campus France, 2023). While intra-African mobility has notably increased, especially since the end of apartheid when South Africa became a major destination for African students, the number of African students studying outside the continent has tripled over the past 30 years. According to Campus France (2023), approximately 5% of African students now study abroad, accounting for nearly 7% of all degree-seeking international students worldwide. This increase in inter-regional mobility has been further propelled by neoliberal reforms in higher education systems in the Global North, such as Europe's Bologna Process, which has intensified efforts to recruit international students from the Global South. These trends reflect a complex landscape of mobility shaped by both historical ties and contemporary neoliberal influences.

Since the early 1990s, the shift from welfare states to "workfare post-national regimes" (Robertson et al., 2002, p. 477) in many countries has fostered conditions conducive to increased student mobility. Whereas welfare states traditionally regarded higher education as a public good, funding it accordingly, these workfare regimes have reframed higher education as a commodity with primary benefits accruing to individuals. Consequently, students are now expected to shoulder a larger share of the costs associated with higher education. In this neoliberal context, academic mobility is frequently portrayed as an individual endeavor driven by economic incentives. Within the broader framework of human mobility, including migration and labor mobility, neoliberalism views individuals as rational agents pursuing enhanced economic prospects (Harvey, 2005). This perspective suggests that people relocate to optimize their economic potential, leveraging factors such as higher wages, improved job opportunities, or entrepreneurial possibilities. Thus, student mobility, shaped by similar economic motivations, is increasingly seen as a calculated investment in one's economic future within the neoliberal paradigm.

Student mobility is often associated with the pursuit of global skills and competencies, as well as the formation of social networks and migration opportunities, all of which contribute to enhanced economic prospects within a human capital framework of mobility (e.g., Choudaha and de Wit, 2014; Maringe and Carter, 2007). This economic perspective interprets

international student mobility as a function of the supply-demand dynamics in higher education, drawing on the push-pull model from international trade to explain the phenomenon (Moon, 1995; Beech, 2017). Push factors—such as limited access to quality education and employment opportunities in students' home countries—encourage students to seek educational opportunities abroad. Conversely, pull factors, including the prestige of educational institutions, career opportunities, and cultural exposure, draw students toward particular countries. While this economic lens offers valuable insights into the motivations for student mobility, it is essential to also consider the broader social, cultural, and political factors that shape these decisions. The neoliberal approach to internationalization primarily interprets mobility within the framework of a globalized knowledge economy, emphasizing supply and demand. However, it often overlooks the implications of the predominantly one-directional flow of students from the Global South to the Global North, failing to account for the structural imbalances and potential consequences of this trend on both sending and receiving regions.

Despite the intensifying competition in higher education, international student mobility remains largely characterized by a pronounced South-to-North trajectory. English-speaking countries in the Global North, in particular, continue to be the most sought-after destinations for international students. In 2022, five predominantly English-speaking countries—the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—hosted 47% of all international students globally (ICEF Monitor, 2023). While African nations suffer substantial losses due to brain drain, the recipient countries benefit significantly from the expertise and skills brought by African professionals. For instance, Canada gains an estimated US\$384 million annually from the contributions of African professionals, while the United States reaps around US\$846 million, and the UK benefits approximately US\$2 billion (Mills et al., 2011). The economic impact of foreign students on the UK has seen remarkable growth, with revenue from international education increasing from £31.3 billion (US\$39 billion) in 2019 to £41.9 billion by 2022 (Mitchell, 2023). The British government, under its international education strategy, aims to expand the number of international students from 485,000 in 2019 to 600,000 by 2030 and increase the value of education exports to £35 billion. This trend reflects a strategic emphasis on international students as a significant economic resource, further intensifying the South-to-North flow of student mobility.

International student mobility from the Global North to the Global South is relatively rare, with students from affluent countries typically choosing other economically advanced nations, indicating a preference for horizontal mobility (Hallberg Adu, 2019). Horizontal mobility refers to the movement of students among countries with similar economic standing and educational

infrastructure. In contrast, student flows from the Global South to the Global North have led to what is commonly termed brain drain, where international students frequently transition into skilled immigrants, ultimately strengthening the knowledge economies of Northern countries. Africa, the youngest continent demographically, sees an estimated 10 to 12 million young people enter the labor market annually, yet also experiences significant emigration of its skilled workforce. The African Union estimates that approximately 70,000 skilled professionals leave the continent each year (African Union, 2021). The 2022 Africa Youth Survey found that around 52% of young Africans aged 18–24 are considering migration upon completing their education (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2022). Studies show that Africa incurs annual losses of roughly US\$2 billion due to professionals and executives relocating to countries like Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA (Boon and Ahenkan, 2012). This data highlights severe implications for Africa's future development. Viewing international student mobility merely as a platform for exchanging ideas, knowledge, and cultural practices risks presenting a misleading perspective that ignores the structural power imbalance favoring the Global North. This asymmetry results in a continuous drain of talent from the South, reinforcing existing economic and educational disparities between the two regions.

The higher education system in Francophone Africa faces significant challenges due to the substantial outflow of students, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine, who migrate to France for their studies. During the 2021–2022 academic period, approximately 92,000 students from sub-Saharan Africa pursued education in France, representing 14% of international students from the region and 23% of France's total foreign student population (Campus France, 2023). Among these students, those from Senegal constitute the largest group, followed closely by students from Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon. This trend reveals that a considerable portion of these students, especially those specializing in STEM fields, are not returning to their home countries after completing their studies (Woldegiorgis, 2018). The internationalization of higher education thus contributes to the South-to-North migration of skilled labor, posing significant challenges for developing countries. These nations often face shortages of skilled professionals in critical sectors, which impedes their socio-economic development and progress. Meanwhile, the Global North benefits from the expertise and contributions of these graduates, exacerbating disparities in the global distribution of skilled labor and reinforcing existing global inequalities. This dynamic underscores the role of internationalization in perpetuating an imbalance that favors wealthier nations at the expense of the development needs of the Global South.

The recruitment of students from Sub-Saharan Africa by institutions in the Global North

is intensifying, with projections indicating that the region's 430,000 outwardly mobile students may double by 2050 (Campus France, 2023). This shift is occurring within a broader context of evolving global population dynamics. Asia, having reached a peak in population growth, is undergoing demographic shifts, whereas Africa is entering an era of significant population expansion (Kuroda et al., 2018). In response, higher education systems in countries with declining populations are increasingly likely to attract more international students, a trend that could intensify both the brain drain from Africa and the competition for international study opportunities. Consequently, African nations may become focal points not only for student recruitment but also for broader economic, research, and academic collaboration. The anticipated growth in international student mobility underscores the need to continue critical discussions around internationalization to mitigate potential adverse effects. Key issues include the erosion of cultural values, the exacerbation of brain drain, and the reinforcement of inequalities tied to existing power dynamics. Without proactive measures, these challenges are likely to persist, making it essential to address them early on. The potential consequences of this trend fall into two primary categories. First, sending countries may face a shortage of skilled professionals in crucial fields, stalling their developmental progress. Second, developed nations benefit disproportionately from the skills and contributions of these students, leading to an uneven global distribution of talent and perpetuating economic and educational inequalities. This imbalance reinforces the need for sustainable approaches to internationalization that consider both the opportunities and the costs for sending countries.

Since the early 1990s, the internationalization of higher education has expanded beyond the mere cross-border movement of individuals to encompass educational programs, providers, projects, and policies. Africa, in particular, has seen a proliferation of structures that support new models of internationalization. These structures include international branch campuses, foreign private universities, foreign distance education providers, and joint international universities. Additionally, initiatives such as franchises, double and joint degree programs, and online learning opportunities have gained traction, promoting international collaboration within the region (Knight, 2023). For example, in 2017, approximately 35% of tertiary students in Mauritius were enrolled in foreign higher education programs, including branch campuses, partnership programs, and distance education offerings. In Botswana, students in International Programme and Provider Mobility (IPPM) programs constituted about 30% of total higher education enrollments. By 2019, Mauritius hosted 43 approved foreign higher education providers offering over 180 programs, primarily through three registered international branch campuses and franchise agreements (Knight and McNamara, 2017; Tertiary Education

Commission, 2020; Knight, 2023). These developments underscore the increasing role of transnational education partnerships in shaping the higher education landscape in Africa, providing students with access to diverse academic offerings and fostering broader international engagement across the continent.

Recent trends indicate a gradual shift in the global landscape of international student mobility, with China, Japan, and Southeast Asia experiencing growth rates in incoming students that rival those of traditional destinations (Kuroda et al., 2018). Additionally, the BRICS nations—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—have increasingly shaped the international mobility of students, fostering cross-border exchanges of expertise and knowledge and redrawing the global map of higher education (Novgorodtseva and Belyaeva, 2020). These countries have successfully attracted substantial numbers of students from the Global South, with particular growth among African students studying in China. Between 2011 and 2017, the number of African students in China rose by an impressive 258%, a stark contrast to the growth rate of 30% in the United States and declines of -2% and -24% in France and the United Kingdom, respectively, during the same period (Mashininga et al., 2022). This trend continued until the COVID-19 pandemic, with approximately 80,000 African students enrolled in Chinese institutions by 2019 (Mashininga et al., 2022). Brazil has also become a key destination for students from Portuguese-speaking African countries such as Angola and Mozambique, offering a cultural and linguistic affinity that attracts students from these nations. India, too, has seen an influx of African students, with around 25,000 enrolled across approximately 500 public and private universities (Association of African Students in India, 2023). Sudan and Nigeria are among the top five countries sending students to India, along with Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Zambia, Ethiopia, and Burundi. Affordable tuition fees are one of the primary factors drawing African students to Indian institutions, making it an appealing alternative for those seeking quality education at a lower cost (Mashininga et al., 2022). This shift highlights a diversifying landscape of international student destinations, with BRICS nations emerging as influential players in global education, providing viable options for students from the Global South and reducing the traditionally dominant North-South flow in student mobility.

International student mobility carries intricate political and economic implications, driven by market competition and power dynamics. The global competition for international students disproportionately benefits countries in the Global North, where robust higher education systems and globally recognized rankings lend credibility to institutions. This dominance is further reinforced by Eurocentric knowledge systems that perpetuate narratives of research and

innovation excellence. However, the neoliberal framework underlying global student mobility sustains an imbalance that subordinates African higher education to the Global North, contributing to challenges such as brain drain and the diminishing presence of African scholarship. The expanding trend of student migration from the Global South to the Global North compounds these issues, depleting local talent and expertise in Africa. Notably, newer mobility schemes within Africa and among BRICS nations have introduced alternatives, potentially diversifying destinations for African students and reducing the historical dominance of Northern institutions (Novgorodtseva and Belyaeva, 2020). While these initiatives offer promising pathways for change, they are still in their infancy, making it too soon to assess their full impact on global student mobility patterns. For meaningful progress, African governments must prioritize substantial investment in their higher education sectors, focusing on increasing access and enhancing quality. Reliance on the Global North for educational services and postgraduate training fosters an unsustainable dependency. By investing in their academic infrastructures, African countries can reduce this dependence, empower local institutions, and support the growth of independent and resilient knowledge systems within the continent.

CONCLUSION

Neoliberal ideology has profoundly influenced the higher education sector, driving trends such as the commercialization of knowledge, sector liberalization, and the redefinition of students as customers in the educational marketplace. It has introduced quality assurance frameworks, public management systems centered on measurable performance indicators, a shift from cooperation to competition, the rise of rankings and ratings, and a heightened focus on profit motives over the foundational educational mission. Within this neoliberal paradigm, international student mobility has become a lucrative element of global trade, with a small group of countries in the Global North capturing over 80% of the revenue from fee-paying international students. While international student mobility brings considerable academic and economic benefits to students from both the Global North and Africa, it has also had adverse effects on African higher education and the broader economy, primarily through brain drain. The migration of skilled professionals from Africa to the Global North has weakened the intellectual and economic foundations of African nations. The political economy of international mobility transcends mere market dynamics, raising concerns about hegemonic structures within international knowledge systems, where African institutions often face marginalization. This article examines the far-reaching impact of neoliberal imperatives on the

internationalization of higher education, particularly in relation to the trends in African student mobility. It emphasizes the urgent need for African governments to prioritize substantial investment in their higher education sectors, focusing on expanding access and improving educational quality. Excessive dependence on the Global North for higher education services and postgraduate training fosters an unhealthy reliance on these regions. The article advocates for strategic investments in African higher education systems to reduce this dependency, empower local institutions, and advance the continent's intellectual and socioeconomic development in the long term.

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