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## **What Drives International Students to Choose Australia as Their Tertiary Education Destination? A Synthesis of Empirical Evidence**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This systematic literature review synthesizes empirical evidence to comprehensively examine factors driving international students' choice of Australia as their preferred destination for tertiary education. Deductive analysis of findings from the 46 selected studies, framed within the push and pull framework, identified 27 factors that revealed Australia's distinctive attractiveness to international students. The results of this review reaffirmed the strengths of Australia's environmental images in the international tertiary education market, highlighting that it could be a double-edged sword. The review discusses Australia's attractiveness, especially after the COVID-19 crisis and suggests strategies to make the international education sector more sustainable. This review provides implications for policy, practice, and future research that are of importance to work towards enhancing Australia's intake of international education. Additionally, it serves as a valuable resource for those seeking guidance on effectively attracting international students in the post-pandemic era.*

**Keywords:** Australia, higher education, international students, push and pull framework, study destination, systematic literature review, tertiary education

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Australia is the third largest study-abroad destination in the world. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were approximately 580,000 international students – the term used to refer to individuals who study in Australia on a student visa, with total export revenue estimated at approximately AU\$38 billion in 2018/19 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). More importantly, the growth of international students has broadened Australia’s cultural landscape and diversified Australia’s local skillset (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). In December 2022, the number of international students recovered at 395,478 (Department of Home Affairs, 2022). Given that Australian universities heavily rely on international students for revenue (Horne, 2020), there is a need to better understand the factors that motivate students to choose Australia as their study destination.

International students often choose to study abroad to obtain international qualifications, widen cultural understanding, improve a foreign language, seek immigration opportunities, or raise their psychic gains (Tokas et al., 2022; Tran, 2019). Closer scrutiny reveals specific factors for Australia’s success including its attractive and flexible pathway to higher education (Bank et al., 2007), and the vital role of credit transfer for international students who want to transition from vocational education courses in their home country or Australia (Bandias et al., 2011). There are also external factors that push students’ decisions to study in Australia, such as government policies, visa regulations, and economic conditions (Azmat et al., 2013; Gong & Huybers, 2015). More recently, the pandemic has reshaped the international education landscape and influenced the decision to study overseas. For example, university reputation and career opportunities are top concerns of Chinese students and their parents in the pre-pandemic period (Lu et al., 2018; Yang, 2007), but affordable tuition fees, flexible payment options, and a welcoming and safe learning environment provided by universities appear as appealing factors that enticed them after the pandemic (Cheah & Shimul, 2023). Therefore, a pressing requirement exists for a timely and systematic literature review that explores all factors influencing international students’ inclination towards choosing Australia as their educational destination.

### **The ‘Push and Pull’ Framework**

The ‘push and pull’ framework is a useful tool for understanding factors that motivate or discourage students from pursuing academic goals. Originally coined by Coleman (1968), it has been widely used in the field of education, especially in relation to the international mobility of students and skilled immigrants. Studies (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Nghia et al., 2019) have shown that international students are often motivated by a combination of push and pull factors. Push factors, generally negative and related to their home country, push people to leave their home country whilst pull factors, generally positive, attract academics to host countries (Toren, 1976). An understanding of push and pull factors is often used by universities and policymakers especially those in developed countries to devise effective strategies to attract and retain international students (Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

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The framework has been used to understand various relevant issues in international education mobility such as brain drain and return intentions (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Hoo et al., 2014), the repatriation of graduates (Singh, 2020; Toren, 1976), re-expatriation (Ho et al., 2016; Hoang & Turner, 2023), and especially the decision to study abroad (Cheah & Shimul, 2023; Li & Qi, 2019; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Over the last 50 years, there has been extensive research using the push and pull model in diverse contexts and movements to explore the factors that influence students' decision to study abroad. For instance, before 2000, McMahon (1992) shed light on the outflow of students from developing to developed countries in the 1970s and Agarwal and Winkler (1985) examined the movement of students from developing countries who came to the US during the Cold War era. After 2000, researchers started using the model to explore the flow of mobile students in more diverse directions: South to North countries (Chen & Zimitat, 2006), South to South countries (Bodycott and Lai 2012; Lee 2014), North to North countries (McCarthy et al. 2012), or a combination of multidirectional flows (Barnett et al. 2015).

## **Research Aim**

Despite the wealth of research conducted on Australia's appeal to international students, there is a notable absence of a comprehensive study that systematically examines all the factors influencing their choice of Australia as a destination for tertiary education. This systematic literature review, framed within the push and pull framework, aims to address this lacuna by answering a critical question: "What drives international students to choose Australia as their tertiary education destination?"

Although there are some debated drawbacks such as overlooking potential pull factors from the home country and push factors from the host country (Cheah & Shimul, 2023), the framework has been widely used to understand the factors (especially external forces) influencing international students' decision in choosing a study destination. Within the Australian context, this framework has become a prevailing approach to investigating the factors that attract students to pursue their studies "down under". This review, therefore, provides not only a systematic summary of all factors but also a comparison of these factors in juxtaposition under the push-pull framework. By juxtaposing individual and broader factors, such a review can effectively capture the complex and dynamic nature of the decision-making process to study in Australia as well as extend the scholarly dialogue on the application of the push and pull framework in the contemporary world. The article carries implications for international education research and practices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This systematic literature review synthesizes existing empirical evidence on factors driving international students' choice of Australia as their tertiary education destination. It followed methodological guidance to conduct quality

systematic reviews from Alexander (2020) and Petticrew and Roberts (2008). The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines suggested by Page et al. (2021) were also employed to limit bias and transparently report the systematic review process. The review team included four educational researchers from culturally diverse backgrounds: two from Southeast Asia countries and two from Western countries.

### **Selection Criteria**

Selection criteria were established, followed by the literature search and selection procedure which are presented in Figure 1.

Inclusion criteria:

- The study in the publication is empirical.
- It reports factors driving international students' choice of Australia as their tertiary education destination.
- It is published in a peer-reviewed academic journal, book, or conference proceeding.

Exclusion criteria:

- Research work published in other forms such as theses, reports, or magazines.
- The full text is not retrievable.
- The full text is not in English.

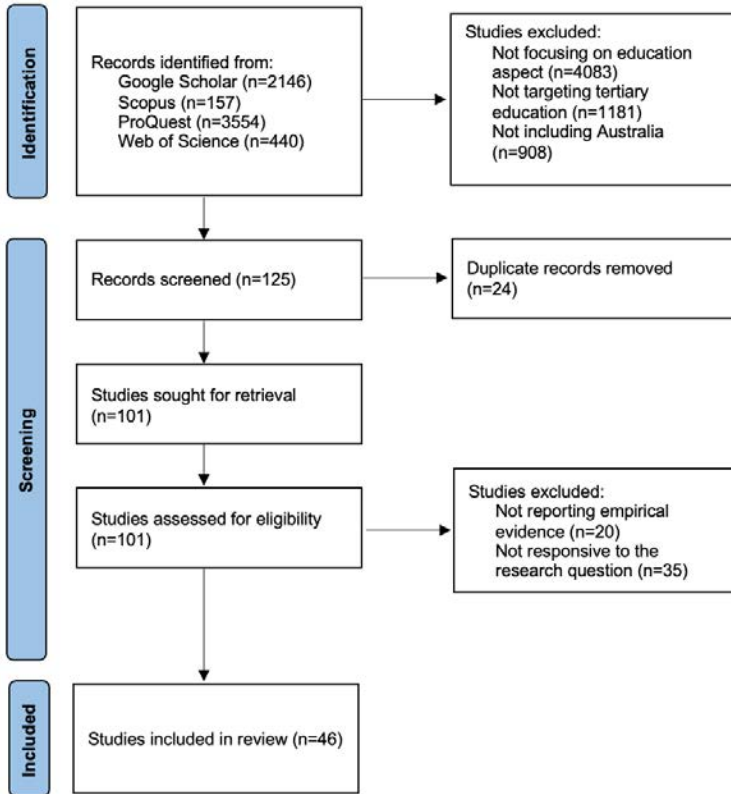
### **Literature Identification**

The literature search and identification were conducted from February to March 2023 on four well-cited databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Web of Science. Search terms included six following sets of keywords: "Australia" AND "tertiary education destination", "Australia" AND "higher education destination", "Australia" AND "study overseas", "Australia" AND "study abroad", "Australia" AND "international students", and "why international students choose Australia". There was no time limit set in our literature search. Following the exclusion criteria, a total of 6297 publications were identified.

### **Screening**

Two members of the review team worked individually to undertake an initial assessment of the relevance and suitability of each search result by title and abstract. This activity excluded 6,164 publications including 4,083 records not focusing on education but other aspects such as travel and tourism, 1,181 papers not targeting the tertiary education sector, and 908 records not containing Australia in the scope of study. A total of 125 full text studies were downloaded and gathered for further assessment by the whole team, and 22 duplicated records were removed manually. Then, we closely followed inclusion criteria to assess the eligibility of each study. Abstracts were carefully read, and full text articles were skimmed, resulting in the exclusion of 62 articles. These included 20 review

studies and 35 studies that did not respond to the research question. After these activities, 46 studies were progressed to the next stage – full-text analysis (Appendix 1).



**Figure 1: The “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis” (PRISMA) Flow Diagram**

### Data Extraction, Synthesis, and Analysis

NVivo version 12 was used to conduct a deductive thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In each study, text segments that discussed factors driving international students’ choice of Australia as their tertiary education destination were identified and coded by themes (nodes). Then nodes (coded information) were assessed and grouped into broader categories including pull and push factors. As suggested by Nguyen et al. (2022), we recorded the general characteristics of selected studies (such as year of publication, research approach, research participant, country of origin, sector, and field of study) and the

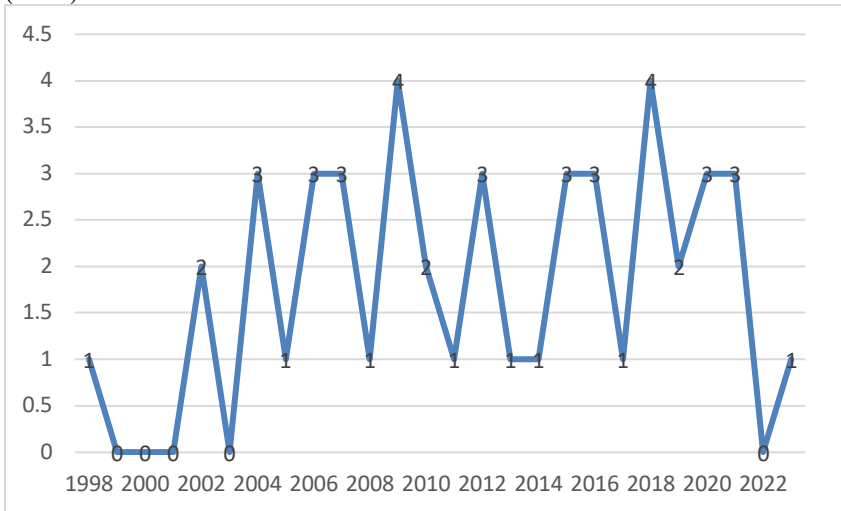
frequencies of nodes identified through the data analysis. The matrix-coding query in NVivo was also run to report the number of nodes (factors) by the selected studies' general characteristics (see Appendices). The obtained results provide implications for future research and practice.

## RESULTS

### Publication Profiles

#### *Year and Type of Publication*

The 46 selected studies were published from 1998 to 2023. Half of them were published within a 10-year period from 2009 to 2018. The largest number of studies published within a year was four – in 2009 and 2018 (see Figure 2). Regarding the type of publication, journal article was the most common type (nearly 90%), followed by book chapter (8.7%), and conference proceeding (2.2%).



**Figure 2: Distribution of the Retained Studies by Year**

#### *Research Contexts*

Of the 46 selected studies, there were 31 studies specifying the international students' country of origin. These included countries in Asia (93.4%), Latin America (3.3%), and Europe (3.3%). Specifically, of 29 studies recruiting participants from Asia, 11 (nearly 38%) had participants from China and six from Southeast Asia (20.6%). The remaining Asian countries were Japan, Taiwan, Korea, India, Hong Kong, and Mongolia.

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In terms of location of study, 10 studies (21.7%) included the destination city in Australia: five in metropolitan areas and five in regional areas. Ten studies (21.7%) detailed the international students' fields of study including accounting, business, tourism, and STEM-related courses such as physics, construction, and health.

Regarding the tertiary education sector, there was only one study (2.2%) exploring VET as a tertiary education choice for international students. The remaining of the selected studies explored higher education (undergraduate and postgraduate) pathways of international students in Australia. Approximately 80% included the undergraduate sector, 65.2% involved the postgraduate sector including 8.7% on research courses.

### ***Research Methodology and Participants***

More than half of the retained studies employed a quantitative design. The remaining used qualitative (23.9%), or mixed-methods (19.6%) approaches. Surveys were the most frequently used method (71.7%), followed by individual interviews (34.8%), and focus groups (10.7%). Almost 94% recruited students as research participants. The perception of other stakeholders who may have an influence on international students' choice of Australia was under researched. Parent voices were included in two studies, and recruitment practitioners were involved in only one study.

### **What Drives International Students to Choose Australia as Their Tertiary Education Destination?**

The review identified 27 factors driving international students' choice of Australia as their tertiary education destination, including 22 pull factors and five push factors (Table 1).

#### ***Pull Factors***

There were 46 studies investigating why Australia is attractive to international tertiary education students. The review results revealed 22 pull factors which are presented in descending order of frequency (f).

The top five most frequently reported factors were career opportunities and life experiences (f=22), quality education and qualification (f=21), cost of study and living (f=19), migration prospect and policy (f=18), and reputation of tertiary education institutions and academic staff (f=16). It is worth noting that international students often had a long-term vision for the post-study future when considering Australia as a tertiary education destination. For example, Shah et al. (2021) found that Mongolian prospective postgraduate students working in the mining sector selected to study in Australia because of work opportunities and the quality mining workforce in Australia. In the same vein, many Asia Pacific students enrolling in occupational therapy courses desired to pursue migration pathways and build careers in the country after graduation (Dos Santos, 2021). To

reach these career and life goals, international students invested in quality tertiary education and often took university ranking and reputation of academic staff into consideration (Cheah & Shimul, 2023; Gong & Huybers, 2015). Significantly, Australia offered worldwide-recognized education and qualifications with more affordable cost of study and living expenses (Bendrup et al., 2020; Min & Falvey, 2018). These factors made Australia a preferred option compared to other countries to study abroad.

The second most frequent group of factors (frequency ranging from 10 to 14) contained seven factors: physical environment and lifestyle (f=14); family influence (f=13); western culture and English language (f=12); safe, low crime, low racial discrimination environment (f=12); course variety, content, and duration (f=10); scholarships (f=10); and recommendations from others (f=10). Previous research (Bayyurt, 2020) revealed that English was the most preferred language for international students. Among different English-speaking education destinations, Australia was well-known for its multicultural society, good lifestyle (Bendrup et al., 2020); safe, low crime, low racial discrimination environment, and warm weather (Kemp et al., 1998; Shah et al., 2021; Yang, 2007); and often described as a 'beautiful', 'welcoming', 'relaxing', 'comfortable' destination (Dos Santos, 2021; Park, 2009). Unsurprisingly, Australia was recommended by many international students' parents, relatives, and friends (Velliari, 2016). As reported by Chinese students, parent voices had a significant influence on their study abroad destination because family would sponsor major fees and expenses (Yang, 2007). Scholarships offered by Australian universities, therefore, eased the financial burden and lent considerable weight to the decision making (Yang et al., 2018). At higher degree by research level, scholarships generously covered both tuition fees and living allowances that allowed international students to fully focus on their study (Bendrup et al., 2020). Moreover, there were course-related factors attracting students' interest such as quality content (Azmat et al., 2013), and wide range of available courses (Cheah & Shimul, 2023).

The next five factors having a moderate frequency (from 5 to 9) included education agents and marketing information (f=9), proximity to home country (f=8), ease of university entry and graduation (f=6), fast course offer and visa granting (f=6), and work rights and visa conditions (f=5). It seems that education agents played a vital role in the selection of Australia as a study abroad destination. As Su and Harrison (2016) investigated, many international students relied on education agents' recommendations to decide on not only city destination but also university and field of study. Australia's geographical proximity to Asia was another advantage as Asian students could conveniently travel to their home country (Cao & Tran, 2015). Ease of university entry and graduation appeared as another factor, pulling students from China where getting a university place was extremely competitive (Wu & Myhill, 2017). Interestingly, fast admissions and visa applications made Australia more attractive than other countries. For example, many students decided to study in Australia simply because the country granted them a visa sooner than other destination countries (Yang, 2007). Fast visa grants, coupled with work rights, increased international students' intention to start their academic journey in Australia (Shah et al., 2021).



**Table 1: Factors Driving International Students' Choice**

| <b>Category</b>     | <b>Factors</b>   | <b>Studies</b>   | <b>f</b> |
|---------------------|--|--|----------|
| Pull from Australia | Career opportunities and life experiences                        | S5, S7, S10, S13, S14, S16, S20, S21, S24, S25, S29, S30, S36, S37, S38, S39, S40, S41, S43, S44, S45, S46 | 22       |
|                     | Quality education and qualification                              | S1, S3, S4, S5, S8, S9, S13, S16, S19, S24, S25, S30, S32, S35, S38, S39, S40, S43, S44, S45, S46          | 21       |
|                     | Cost of study and living   | S4, S6, S9, S13, S14, S15, S16, S19, S21, S27, S32, S33, S34, S35, S37, S40, S41, S43, S44                 | 19       |
|                     | Migration prospect and policy                                    | S3, S12, S13, S14, S16, S17, S20, S21, S22, S25, S27, S29, S30, S33, S34, S37, S39, S44                    | 18       |
|                     | Reputation of tertiary education institutions and academic staff | S7, S15, S19, S21, S25, S27, S29, S32, S33, S36, S38, S40, S42, S43, S44, S46                              | 16       |
|                     | Physical environment and lifestyle                               | S3, S10, S13, S14, S18, S21, S28, S32, S33, S40, S42, S43, S44, S46  | 14       |
|                     | Family influence   | S3, S6, S9, S13, S20, S25, S32, S35, S36, S37, S38, S39, S40   | 13       |
|                     | Western culture and English language                             | S1, S3, S10, S13, S16, S27, S34, S39, S40, S41, S43, S45   | 12       |
|                     | Safe, low crime, low racial discrimination environment           | S1, S3, S9, S10, S14, S18, S19, S21, S27, S32, S40, S43  | 12       |
|                     | Course variety, content, and duration                            | S4, S7, S16, S25, S28, S33, S37, S40, S43, S46   | 10       |
|                     | Scholarships   | S2, S16, S24, S27, S33, S36, S40, S41, S44, S45  | 10       |
|                     | Recommendations from others                                      | S4, S8, S9, S19, S26, S29, S32, S36, S38, S44  | 10       |
|                     | Education agents, marketing information                          | S4, S6, S11, S29, S31, S32, S37, S40, S43  | 9        |
|                     | Proximity to home country  | S1, S3, S9, S13, S16, S19, S29, S40  | 8        |

|                          |   |                              |   |
|--------------------------|---|------------------------------|---|
|                          | Ease of university entry and graduation | S2, S8, S29, S33, S37, S40   | 6 |
|                          | Fast courses offer and visa grant       | S13, S27, S33, S41, S43, S44 | 6 |
|                          | Work rights, student visa conditions    | S2, S3, S13, S41, S43        | 5 |
|                          | University pathway from VET, ELICOS     | S29, S32, S34                | 3 |
|                          | Prior Australia experience              | S24, S40, S44                | 3 |
|                          | Public universities                     | S1, S21                      | 2 |
|                          | Education cooperation                   | S33, S36                     | 2 |
|                          | City size                               | S21                          | 1 |
| Push from home countries | Poorer education quality                | S18, S24, S35, S39, S40      | 5 |
|                          | Competitive university entry            | S13, S16, S39                | 3 |
|                          | Family expectation                      | S16, S38, S39                | 3 |
|                          | Social norms                            | S5, S40, S45                 | 3 |
|                          | Unavailability of desired courses       | S3, S39                      | 2 |

The least frequently reported factors pulling international students to Australia were university pathway from vocational education and training (VET) or English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) (f=3), prior Australia experience (f=3), public universities (f=2), education cooperation (f=2), and city size (f=1). As previous studies (Cao & Tran, 2015; Min & Falvey, 2018) explored, international students who could not meet university admissions requirements may choose VET or ELICOS as a starting point for their higher education journey. These students would study elsewhere if the pathway to university in Australia was impossible. Specifically, Australian public universities were more preferred over non-public institutions by Asian international students, especially Chinese students (He & Banham, 2011; Kemp et al., 1998). The review results also revealed that students who had prior Australian experience, either from a short-term stay in Australia or joint cooperation programs in home countries, tended to select the country for further study (Choi et al., 2012; Dos Santos, 2021; Wu & Myhill, 2017). Finally, city size may present an influence on student choice, indicating that this non-academic factor could be utilized in Australia international education’ marketing strategies (He & Banham, 2011).

***Push Factors***

Five push factors, reported from 11 studies, were found in the search for literature on the students’ preference to choose Australia as their preferred destination. These factors include poorer domestic tertiary education (f=5), competitive university entry (f=3), family expectation (f=3), social norms (f=3), and unavailability of desired courses (f=2). Specifically, the most common reason driving international students to study abroad was their dissatisfaction with

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tertiary education in their home countries (Bendrup et al., 2020; Tran, 2019). For instance, some Vietnamese students complained about “suppression of students’ academic freedom, injustice in university admission, and lack of transparency in assessment and evaluation” (Tran, 2019, p. 765), while Chinese students felt frustrated with the highly competitive university entry (Yang, 2007). Another academic-related factor was the unavailability of desired courses at home (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Tran, 2019). Social norms could be the rationale behind the study abroad decision, as Ichimoto (2004) provided an example, Japanese women found Australia a fresh start because they were not welcome to domestic political, social, and employment activities. In China, the one-child policy promoted parent commitment to providing the best education for their child, therefore; family expectations might contribute to the students’ destination choice (Bodycott, 2009).

### **Factors Driving International Students’ Choice by the Selected Studies’ General Characteristics**

The matrix coding query in NVivo was run to classify the identified factors by the selected studies’ general characteristics: year of publication, country of origin (Asia and China), location of study (metropolitan and regional Australia), tertiary education sector (VET, undergraduate, postgraduate including higher degree by research), and research design.

#### ***By Year of Publication***

From 2000 to 2004, the most important factor to international students was quality education and qualification (f=3). In the next 5 years (2005-2009), it changed to career opportunities and life experiences, cost of study and living, and migration prospects and policy (f=5). Career opportunities and life experiences remained the most influential factor (f=5 and 6 respectively) in the 2010-2014 and 2020-2023 periods. But from 2015 to 2019, what drove international students to choose Australia the most were cost of study and living, migration prospects and policy, reputation of universities and academic staff, and family influence (f=6) (Appendix 2).

#### ***By Country of Origin (Asia and China)***

Australia is a preferred education destination of students from Asia, especially China. Of 46 selected studies, 29 studies recruited Asian participants and 11 included Chinese participants. Top five factors for Asian students were career opportunities and life experiences (f=16), quality education and qualifications (f=14), migration prospects and policy (f=11), reputation of universities and academic staff (f=11), and physical environment and lifestyle (f=11). Chinese students, more specifically, cared about reputation of universities and academic staff (f=7), career opportunities and life experiences (f=7),

migration prospect and policy (f=6), cost of study and living (f=6), and quality education and qualification (f=5) (Appendix 3).

### ***By Location of Study (Metropolitan and Regional Australia)***

There were only 10 studies that detailed the international students' location of study in Australia: five in regional and five in metropolitan areas. Unsurprisingly, regional Australia attracted international students mostly by lower cost of study (f=5) and living and safe environment (f=4). However, those who decided to study in metropolitan areas were interested in migration prospects and policy (f=3). This is an interesting result as students who desired to migrate often select to study in regional Australia to maximise their migration points (Appendix 4).

### ***By Tertiary Education Sector***

The review revealed that the rationale behind the international students' choice of Australia as a tertiary education destination varied depending on sector they came to study. Migration prospect and policy was the principal reason for undergraduate students (f=17), and for postgraduate students it was quality education and qualification (f=16). Meanwhile, higher degree by research students selected Australia because of career opportunities and life experiences (f=4) (Appendix 5).

### ***By Research Design***

Almost all the identified factors were triangulated by different research designs (Appendix 6). The most frequent factors verified by the quantitative design included cost of study and living (f=12), physical environment and lifestyle (f=11), and safe environment (f=11). Qualitative evidence confirmed the importance of factors such as career opportunities and life experiences (f=9), quality education and qualification (f=5), reputation of universities and academic staff (f=5), family influence (f=5), and agent educations and marketing information (f=5). Mixed-methods studies reaffirmed the role of quality education and qualification (f=6), career opportunities and life experiences (f=5), and migration prospect and policy (f=5) in the international students' choice of Australia.

## **DISCUSSION**

This systematic literature review synthesized empirical evidence resulted from the search strategy to examine factors driving international students' choice of Australia as a tertiary education destination. Deductive analysis of findings from the 46 selected studies revealed 27 factors contributing to the international students' decision to study abroad in Australia. Understanding these factors is of importance to working towards enhancing Australia's intake of international education. The review discussed Australia's attractiveness, especially after the

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COVID-19 crisis and strategies to make the international education sector more sustainable.

### **Australia's (Un)Sustainable Attractiveness**

As conceptualized in the push and pull model, pull factors encourage people to come to study and stay in destination countries; and push factors, simultaneously, discourage individuals from staying and may even force them to leave home countries (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pan, 2010). An unsurprising result of this review is that pull factors far outnumbered push factors. Five push factors found in this study (poorer domestic tertiary education, competitive university entry, family expectation, social norms, and unavailability of desired courses) did not specifically explain why international students decide to study abroad in Australia as these are also commonly reported by international students in other destinations (Tran, 2019; Yang et al., 2018). This review, therefore, focused on discussing the 22 identified pull factors that revealed Australia's distinctive attractiveness to international students.

Consistent with the literature (Bendrup et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2012), this review underscored that Australia offers potential international students with an attractive combination of academic and non-academic advantages. It is worth noting that top student source countries including China, India, Nepal, Vietnam, and Malaysia are located in Asia (QILT, 2022). Compared to other Western-culture and English-speaking education destinations, Australia attracts Asian students by providing world-recognised education in close proximity to their home country (Abubakar et al., 2010) with a competitive lower cost of tuition and living (Min & Falvey, 2018; Yang, 2007). However, as Park (2009) explored, Australian universities are strongly perceived with environmental rather than academic images. In line with this finding, the results of this review reaffirmed the environmental strengths of Australia in the international tertiary education market. Of the 22 pull factors, 10 were environment-related factors (e.g., career opportunities and life experiences, safe environment, Western culture and English language, and proximity to home country), eight were academic-related (e.g., quality education and qualification, reputation of tertiary education institutions and academic staff, and scholarships), and four were person-related (e.g., family influence, recommendations from others, and prior Australia experiences). This paper argues that Australia's greater strengths in what has been identified as environment-related factors could be a double-edged sword.

The United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) remain the biggest competitors for Australia's international education sector (O'Kane et al., 2023). Universities in these two Anglophone countries are well perceived for academic image (Park, 2009) and remain dominant in the world top 100 of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (Belkin & Hua, 2022). Previous research shows that international students prefer the two countries to Australia because of perceived higher quality facilities and academically oriented universities (Lu et al., 2018; Park, 2009), stronger university alumni associations and networks (Chen & Zimitat, 2006), and countries' innovation strengths (Lu et al., 2018;

Tantivorakulchai, 2014). A major barrier to studying in the US and the UK is financial issues (Park, 2009) and cost is a complicating choice making factor. In Asia, Australia has to compete with emerging competitors including its traditional source countries such as China and Malaysia (O’Kane et al., 2023). Asian destinations have overwhelming environment-related strengths such as close geographic proximity and comfortable climate (Bhati & Anderson, 2012). More importantly, available scholarships offered by Asian universities (Lu et al., 2018), coupled with their rise, especially Chinese universities, in world rankings (Belkin & Hua, 2022) indicate an increasingly competitive nature of the international education market that Australia is facing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the sustainable attractiveness of Australia’s international education sector. It mirrored Australian ideas of international students as “cash cows” (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020, p. 1373) in good times, but “an unnecessary burden on the Australian economy” (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020, p. 1373) in bad times. This would cost dearly as international graduates spread the negative experiences during the COVID-19 crisis among their communities and networks (Alcorn, 2020). It is, therefore, crucial to discuss strategies to maintain sustainable attractiveness of Australia to international students.

### **Post COVID-19: A Re-start for Australia’s International Education**

International students have been returning to Australia since December 2021 when borders reopened to non-citizens. About 580,000 international students living in Australia before the pandemic (Hurley, 2022), and the figure was 395,478 in December 2022 (Department of Home Affairs, 2022). In the research literature, the interest in international education in the post-pandemic world has been emerged (Cheah & Shimul, 2023). These indicate a good sign for the Australia’s government to reset the international education sector.

### ***Employability Support for International Students and Graduates***

It was warned that international students might shun Australia after their unfavorable treatment and the government’s inadequate support during the crisis (Alcorn, 2020). To revive the country’s image, it appears that care and support pertaining to employability and employment are needed for both current students and graduates. This is because, as this review revealed, career opportunities were the most frequent factor influencing international students’ choice of Australia.

For current international students, student visa’s work restrictions have been removed from January 2022 to June 2023. Since July 2023, a limit of 48 hours per fortnight will be introduced – eight hours more than the pre-COVID limit. International students who have been working in the aged care sector are the exception to the rule as they can work without restrictions until December 2023 (Department of Home Affairs, 2023). For international graduates, post-study work rights and migration policy are the focus of attention. Since February 2023, a two-year extension of post-study work rights will be granted for international

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graduates whose degrees in areas of skill shortages such as medical and nursing, teaching, and agriculture (Austrade update, 2023).

However, international students and graduates could not effectively utilise such chances or opportunities if they are not aware of employability capitals (Tomlinson, 2017) and prepare for Australian workplace culture. It would be better if Australian universities could guarantee to provide international students with work experiences relevant to their field of study and beneficial for their future career via work-integrated learning (WIL) initiatives (Nguyen & Dakich, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). As Jackson (2016) suggested, WIL has been increasingly considered as a key factor for study destination decision. Additionally, there should be a clear migration pathway for international graduates who successfully land a job and potentially succeed as permanent residents, instead of letting them stuck in the current ‘permanently temporary’ migration system (Grattan, 2023).

### ***Enhancing Academic Reputation***

As aforementioned, Australia is well perceived for its environmental images in the international education market (Cheah & Shimul, 2023; Park, 2009). However, when it comes to the choice of higher education (HE) institutions, reputation and rankings do matter (Bendrup et al., 2020; Velliari, 2016). This is why international students concentrate in the most prestigious universities (denoted in Australia by membership of the Group of Eight) earn more than half of university revenue from overseas students (Hurley, 2022). Except for the Group of Eight members, other associations of universities such as the Australian Technology Network, Innovative Research Universities, and Regional Universities Network seem to be unfamiliar among potential international student communities. This review suggested that Australia should prioritise promoting academic reputation of all 43 universities, so the spread of enrolments can be move even across the Australian sector, rather than focusing on a few prestigious universities. By doing this, Australia can market its nuanced academic landscape, especially when ‘on a population parity basis we [Australia] have more universities in the world’s top 500 than Canada, the UK and US’ (Horne, 2020).

### ***Promoting VET-HE Pathways***

This review confirmed that the undergraduate sector is the biggest contributor to Australia’s international education export industry. Nearly 80% of the selected studies explored the undergraduate sector (appendix 4). Review results also emphasized that vocational education and training pathways for international students are under-researched: only one of the 46 selected studies (Cao & Tran, 2015) investigated the topic. However, this review suggested that VET pathways could be a potential vehicle to improve Australia’s intake of international education. There is compelling evidence that highly competitive university entry pushes Asian students, especially those in China and Vietnam, to study abroad (Tran, 2019; Yang, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial that

international students are aware of all their options, including VET, as there are many strong pathways offered in VET to HE and migration. That is an area mixed-sector colleges, dual-sector universities, and registered training organizations could further contribute to the international education sector.

### **Implications and Limitation**

While the primary objective of the study did not revolve around evaluating or scrutinizing the push and pull framework, the systematic review still offers valuable insights into its applicability in the present context. Notably, in an increasingly interconnected world with diverse migration narratives, the simplistic analysis of only two drivers, namely push and pull factors, may not fully capture the intricate nature of student choice narratives. Indeed, the decision to study abroad is often a complex and multifaceted one, influenced by a range of constantly changing dynamic individual, social, cultural, and economic factors (Cheah & Shimul, 2023; Lu et al., 2018). On the other hand, the study also indicates that the framework appears to assume a certain degree of agency on the part of international students, which may not always be the case, especially for those from low-income backgrounds or facing political or social pressures (since they may not have the same level of control over their decision to study abroad). Furthermore, given its tendency to focus on individual-level factors, the framework might overlook the broader structural and systemic issues that shape international student mobility patterns (e.g., factors such as immigration policies, institutional practices, and global economic trends might be downplayed).

This systematic review has some implications for future research. Asian countries were the country of origin for the majority of the selected studies. Additional research is needed to better understand the rationale behind the destination choice of international students from other regions such as South America, Europe, and America. Another area for further investigation is the reasons international students select to study in metropolitan or regional Australia. As aforementioned, international students' VET pathways are under-explored. It is important to examine the awareness of these pathways among potential markets and the challenges facing international students in studying VET courses. Methodologically, quantitative approaches were dominant. The employment of other approaches such as qualitative could generate deeper and more detailed understandings of the destination decision process. Although student perceptions are crucial in this topic, the voices of other stakeholders including parents, education agents, and university admissions would provide more insights into the choice of Australia as a tertiary education destination.

Limitations of this systematic review lie in the exclusion of studies that were not written in English and in other forms such as reports, theses, or magazines. Moreover, the literature search was conducted in only four databases. The search strategy used in this review could overlook relevant studies.



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Considering the originating question: “What drives international students to choose Australia as their tertiary education destination?” this review surfaces insights that the offer for international students’ needs to be considered more holistically and globally. Rather than perceiving any individual country as a binary: destination or non-destination, it is crucial to recognize the intricate nature of individuals, their career narratives, and the broader political and migration forces that contribute to the vibrant tapestry of international students' courageous journeys.

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