

# **Study experiences and the post-study intentions of female international undergraduate students.**

The number of female international students is increasing exponentially, and whilst international study may engender many benefits and challenges, little is known about their intentions once they complete their studies. This article reviews the literature on female international students with specific focus on exploring post-study intentions. A scoping review of four electronic databases was completed. After applying criteria to determine suitability, 30 publications were included in the final review. Analysis revealed three key foci: 1) the rationale for studying internationally; 2) the study experience; and 3) post-study intentions. The literature illustrates that an international study experience has the potential to be a powerful transformative opportunity if positive experiences outweigh the negatives. The findings also indicate that the post-study intentions of female international students are under-researched. The article contends that attention should be given to supporting the needs of this group, with a view to maximising post-study opportunities.

Keywords: graduate destinations; higher education; tertiary; post-secondary; global mobility; female students; women; employability; graduate outcomes

## **Background**

Higher (post-secondary) education has become increasingly accessible since the 1970s with unprecedented growth in student numbers over the past four decades (OECD, 2017). Moreover, students are choosing to study away from their home countries; there was a 50% increase in the number of foreign students enrolled in tertiary education worldwide from 2005 to 2012 (OECD, 2015). In 2012 more than 4.5 million students were enrolled

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in higher education outside their country of citizenship; of these, 48% were female (OECD, 2014; OECD, 2016).

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) refers to international students as those who have “crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin” (UIS, 2017, n.d). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) uses the term international student to define someone “who has moved from their country of origin for the purpose of study” (OECD, 2016, p. 337) and defines foreign students as “those who are not citizens of the country in which the data is collected” (OECD, 2016, p. 336). The enquiry reported here adopted the term ‘international student’; however, due to the interchangeability of the above definitions in the literature, all definitions were included in the search criteria.

The literature between 1990 and 2016 indicates that higher education is undergoing a profound process of globalization (see for example Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; OECD, 2017; Teichler, 2015). Inherent in this process are new and rapidly changing realities that require theoretical and empirical research (Kosmützky, 2015). One such reality is that student mobility has increased dramatically over recent years and that over the past 15 years the number of female international students has almost doubled (UNESCO, 2010). Overall, the “exploding demand for tertiary education worldwide and the perceived value of studying at a prestigious post-secondary institutions abroad contribute to an increasing and diversified flow of international students” (OECD, 2016, p. 328).

Fanning these fires of growth are the initiatives designed by policy makers to stimulate and encourage international student mobility. As examples, the European Union under the flagship initiative ‘Youth on the Move’ mandated that by 2020, 20% of

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graduates will have experienced university level study or training in another country (Council of European Union, 2011, in OECD 2016, p. 329). As a potential destination for international students, the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia outlined its objective to enrol 200,000 foreign students by 2020 (Abd Aziz et al., 2011). Reforms to fee and enrolment structures in New Zealand, Denmark and Sweden resulted in increased enrolments from cohorts such as PhD students, which in New Zealand almost doubled in number after fee subsidies were introduced (OECD, 2016).

Significantly, growth in the global mobility of students, academics or the general workforce can result in 'brain drain'. This is seen when outbound mobility is greater than inbound mobility (Abd Aziz et al., 2011; Altbach & Knight, 2007, Ashton & Wagman, 2015; Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; OECD, 2016). The relationships between skilled workers and economic growth are complex, particularly with reference to developing countries. Outbound mobility of talent may still contribute to the economy of an exporting country via activities such as entrepreneurial and philanthropic ventures (Ashton & Wagman, 2015). Despite this, and inverse to strategies designed to attract international students, policy makers must also consider incentives to attract globally mobile students to return home. Recent initiatives from Italy and Israel are promising: their governments are offering strategic incentives for international students who return home after completing their studies. These include internships, favourable working conditions, and grants to assist with research (Ashton & Wagman, 2015).

Much of the literature on international student mobility refers to Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull framework to describe factors that influence mobility decision-making. Originally a concept used in population studies (Lee, 1966), the push-pull framework was first presented in the higher education context by McMahon (1992) and

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Altbach (1998), who used it to categorise ‘push’ factors that may prompt students to leave their home country: for example, a course not being available for study; and ‘pull’ factors—the enticements of a prospective host country—such as a low cost of living or the quality of education.

Although recent and seminal works continue to cite push-pull theory (see, for example Ahmad & Buchanan, 2015; Alkazon, 2015; Hung, 2010; Migin, Falahat, Yajid, & Khatibi, 2015; Pimpa, 2003, 2004, 2005; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007; Wintre, Kandasamy, Chavoshi, & Wright, 2015; Zhang et al; 2013), this article responds to a pressing need to consider the decision-making process for prospective international students as a more wide-ranging concept. This need is exacerbated by rising international student numbers, expansions in the locations and provenance of higher education institutions, increasing modes of transnational study delivery, volatile financial economies, changing political landscapes, rapidly developing technology, and transformative sociocultural landscapes.

Shown at Figure 1, María Cubillo, Sánchez and Cervino (2006, p. 107, Figure 1) encapsulate these issues in their intuitive model, which represents the multi-faceted and non-linear decision-making process in which students engage when intending to purchase an international education.

Despite the continued rise in global mobility across higher education and the workforce in general, PricewaterhouseCoopers (2016) report that only 20% of the internationally mobile workforce is women; they also report that 71% of female millennials want to work outside their home country during their career. Creating a more gender-inclusive culture of international mobility emerges as a fundamental necessity in promoting economic equality (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2016). This phenomenon was

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foreshadowed by the 2010 report on Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship by the OECD, in which key findings noted that females have “strong academic aspirations and expectations in terms of high-status employment but there are systematic gender differences in careers aspirations in occupational areas at both tertiary level and in vocational training” (OECD, 2010, p. 8).

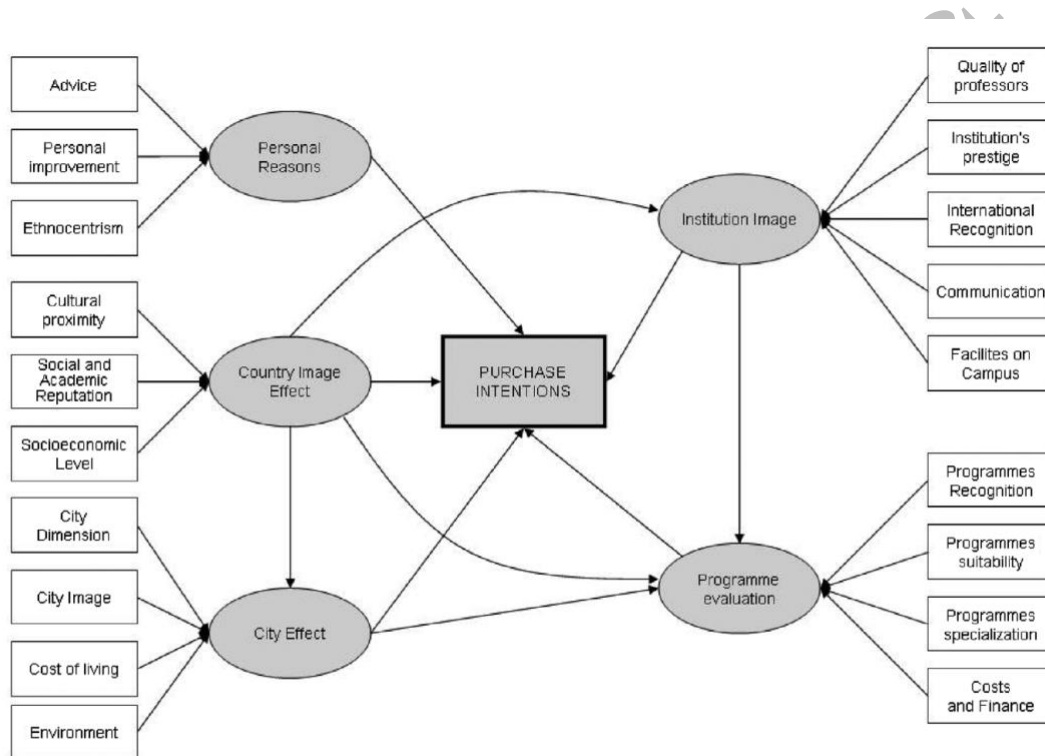


Figure 1. A model of international student's preference. "International students' decision-making process", by J. María Cubillo, J. Sánchez and J. Cervino, 2006, International Journal of Educational Management, 20(2), p. 107. Copyright obtained from the Copyright Clearance Center.

This point of tension - the under-representation of women in the internationally mobile workforce despite the rapid rise in international student mobility – again raises the question of what female international students hope to do on completion of their studies and how an international degree is relevant to these plans. Initial evidence suggests that the post-study intentions for female international students may be influenced by what others expect of them, as opposed to their expectations of self.

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## Method

This article reports the findings of a scoping review of the literature. The review was conducted to identify publications that would help address the research question: namely, what do female international students hope to do on completion of their studies, and how does an international degree relate to these plans? While the focus of the investigation was on female student intentions post-study, the literature does so in the context of expectations and experiences of students engaged in international study. These elements are also reviewed here.

Electronic searches were carried out in March and April 2016 for studies published from 1990 to 2016, using the following search terms and Boolean operators:

- "international student" OR "foreign student" OR "global mobility" OR "overseas student" OR "study abroad";
- AND female OR woman OR girl;
- AND intent\* OR expect\* OR "career pathway" OR aspir\*.

The search included the four databases of OVID, Proquest, Wiley and SCOPUS, in addition to searches within the grey literature on Google and Google Scholar.

Papers were included if they:

- discussed, or were relevant to, female international students;
- contained information about intentions OR expectations OR future aspirations in relation to international students; and
- were journal articles, published theses, scholarly reports, editorials, position papers or guidelines on international students.

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Papers were excluded if they:

- were not written in or translated into English;
- discussed international students but contained no discussion or analysis pertaining to females;
- discussed international students in the context of vocational education programs, student exchange or study abroad, such as studying in another country for one or two semesters. However, the search term 'study abroad' was still employed as some sources used this term to describe an international student;
- discussed female global mobility but not in the context of students, for example employees or wives of students; and
- were older than 1990.

## Results

### Search Results.

Articles that met the inclusion criteria were included in the scoping review. Using the search terms and databases, 427 publications were identified as potentially relevant; a further 50 publications were located via citations and reference lists from seminal articles and publications. Sixty-seven records were removed due to duplication, resulting in 410 publications identified as potentially relevant to the review.

Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, and from this process 304 articles were excluded. The remaining 106 full-text articles were next assessed using the exclusion criteria, and from this process 76 were excluded. Illustrated at Figure 2, the

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remaining 30 sources formed the final sample, which included 14 journal articles, 14 published theses, one book chapter and one working paper.

Endnote was used to organise, categorise and group the literature. After the information was screened, all eligible articles were charted in Excel to record the following information for each study: author, year of publication, type of literature, research purpose, location of the study, home country of students, female only or both male and female, methodology, student type (e.g. undergraduate or post graduate), frameworks used, and results summary.

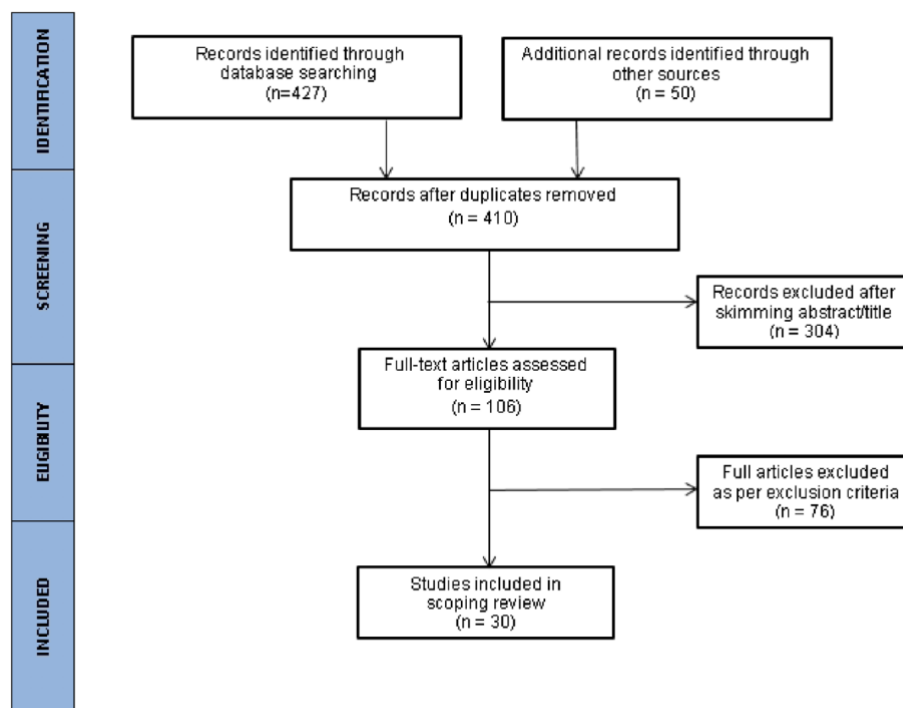


Figure 2. Review process.

Analysis and charting of the scoping literature identified four major themes, which are discussed in turn.

### ***Choosing to study internationally.***

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The first theme included explanations of how and why students decide to study internationally. The push-pull framework was the primary theory used in publications that focussed on how female international students made the decision to study internationally (Bamber, 2014, 1994; Lee, 2014; Zhang et al., 2013). Findings indicate that female students were more influenced than males by the ‘pull’ factors of a safe environment, low tuition fees, the attraction of living in a new and exciting place and opportunities for international networking. By contrast, males were more influenced by the physical learning environment. Both gender groups held similar views with regards to the importance of a friendly and supportive learning environment, quality of education, and recognition of host qualifications (Lee, 2014).

Career gain was reported as the primary motivating factor for females choosing to study internationally. Hines (1994, p. 212) described this as “a strong desire to complete their degree and to find employment that would fully exploit their education”. A higher degree was viewed as crucial to career advancement in the competitive Chinese job market. The speed of completion was also important: for example, a motivating factor for Chinese females choosing to study in the UK was the one-year duration of a master’s degree as opposed to three years in China (Bamber, 2014). Family influence was frequently cited as a motivator for female international students seeking an international education. “Filial piety” emerged as a dimension of family influence. This is pivotal in Confucian philosophy, in which further education is seen as pleasing to parents (Zhang et al., 2013, p. 151). Possession of a higher degree that enhances reputation within family and society were further motivating factors (Hines, 1994; Bamber, 2014).

### ***The study experience.***

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Eighteen of the 30 sources described the study experience for international students. There was a consensus that students were transformed by this experience; however, the literature revealed contrasting perspectives as to whether the international study experience was positive or negative.

*The positive study experience.*

Self-discovery and transformation were recurring themes in relation to positive transformation (Erichsen, 2009; Ito, 2004; Qin & Lykes, 2006; Wang & Lethbridge, 2008). The literature focussed on students adapting to the personal, social, academic, financial and familial challenges that accompany the experience of studying internationally. The terms reinventing selves (Erichsen, 2009), reweaving (Qin & Lykes, 2006), cultural adjustment (Ito, 2004), self-formation (Marginson, 2014) and self-transformation (Gregory, 2014) were all used to describe the process of change afforded by the international study experience.

The five review articles that focussed on positive transformation as a facet of the female international student experience were studies of Asian students studying in the United States of America. Only the work of Erichsen (2009) included students from non-Asian countries (Germany and Kenya), although the remaining participants in that study were from Asian countries.

Erichsen (2009) noted the transformative experience of international study, incorporating a growth in self-confidence, a strengthening of identity and culture and a wider worldview. Living internationally may in fact represent a release from familial scrutiny for many female students, and this affords prospects for experimentation and the pursuit of new opportunities (Creamer, 2004; Ito, 2004; Jeyabalasingam, 2011). The “last hurrah” (Creamer, 2004, p.72), being freed from expectations and a final reprieve from

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adult responsibilities, were concepts fondly regarded by female international students. Qin & Lykes (2006, p. 192) describe this freedom as a “waking up feeling”, with female international students from China reporting more psychological freedom, a new vision to explore the world, a mature sense of who they were, and the awareness of the right to fight for things one deserves.

To suggest that all findings on the female international study experience were positive would be misleading. Challenges identified in the literature focussed on positive transformations, but these were grounded in the notion that by successfully managing these obstacles and engaging in life in the host country, students acquired a sense of satisfaction, self- discovery and confidence borne by mastery of these challenges (Erichsen, 2009; Ito, 2004; Jayabalasingam, 2011; Qin & Lykes, 2006). Wang and Lethbridge (1995, p.132) referred to the ways in which Taiwanese women described the refinement achieved by studying overseas, labelling this process of self-discovery as “tu chin”, meaning to become gold plated. Overall, within this theme the challenges of studying internationally were acknowledged, but the net result of the educational experience was credited for building resilience, courage and validation. Other authors agreed with this sentiment (Erichsen, 2009; Ito, 2004; Qin & Lykes, 2006).

#### *The negative study experience.*

Descriptions of international study being punctuated by negative experiences were more frequent in the literature than were the positive accounts (see Creamer, 2004; Kashyap, 2011; Li, 2011; Sumer, 2009; Zhang, 2008). In some cases, international study experiences were overwhelmingly negative (Akiko, 2001; Gregory, 2014; Hashim & Zhiliang, 2003; Heberle, 2009; Lefdahl- Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). Some

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studies intentionally sought to uncover negative experiences (Hashim & Zhiliang, 2003), and/or posed interview questions that included items on difficulties, barriers or negative experiences (Gregory, 2014; Heberle, 2009; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015).

Struggles with language proficiency were noted as a contributing factor to a negative study experience for international students (Gregory, 2014; Hashim & Zhiliang, 2003; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; McDermott-Levy, 2011; Matsui, 1995; Wang & Lethbridge, 1995). Multiple issues ranging from being unable to understand the instructions of teaching staff (Gregory, 2014), paying for private English tuition despite a tight budget (Akiko, 2001), anxiety about speaking in public (McDermott-Levy, 2011), difficulty understanding local dialects (Li, 2011), and cultural misunderstandings such as confusion about slang or colloquial language (Kashyap, 2011; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015), all had negative repercussions for students.

Guilt was another reported feature of the female international study experience, particularly in relation to family. Akiko (2001, p. 119) noted that several study participants “appeared to be seriously suffering with guilt” about the financial support provided by parents, and Gregory (2014) and Bamber (2014) echoed this sentiment. The guilt of not being present to care for family was also a recurring theme for female international students, both in relation to their studies and their post-study obligations. This was attributed to the lack of care for parents whilst studying (Jeyabalasingam, 2011), taking time away from children whilst studying (Alandejani, 2013; Qin & Lykes, 2006; Wang & Lethbridge, 1995), or the desire for a rewarding career post-graduation alongside concerns about parental wellbeing (Lu, Zong & Schissel, 2009; Takeuchi, 2008).

Acculturation for international students was a recurring theme in both positive and negative contexts (Erichsen, 2009; Heberle, 2009; Jeyabalasingam, 2011; Lefdahl-Davis

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& Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Marginson, 2014; Sumer, 2009). Acculturation is the process of adaptation to a new country, culture and/or environment and can be viewed as a positive experience: that is, an opportunity for growth (Heberle, 2009, p. 6). Acculturation as a negative experience was a more common theme, with acculturative stress highlighted as a dominant and undesirable facet of the international student experience (Heberle, 2009; Jeyabalasingam, 2011; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Seda, 2009). Acculturative stress occurs when the negative aspects of this process outweigh the benefits and can also be known as culture shock (Alandejani, 2013; Heberle, 2009; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015).

The literature in this theme attributes acculturative stress to language difficulties, discrimination and cultural differences (Heberle, 2009; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015, McDermott-Levy, 2011). If unaddressed, these studies reveal that the resulting stress can lead to depression, social isolation and anxiety. The literature asserts that female students are less likely to experience acculturative stress if they live with a host family, have previously experienced living in a similar culture, have a support group, and/or are proficient in the local language (especially in a social context) (Gregory, 2014; Heberle, 2009; McDermott-Levy, 2011).

### ***Post study experiences and intentions.***

The third theme concerns the experiences of international students when returning home after completing their studies. This was a specific focus for several authors (Alandejani, 2013; Lu et al., 2009; Takeuchi, 2008). However, there is little research on the intentions and expectations of graduating international students and only one publication made reference to what students might “prefer” to do as graduates rather than what they

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“expected” to do (Takeuchi, 2008, p. 117). The available literature in this theme exposed recurring themes related to gender-specific and/or cultural-specific issues.

With reference to gender, several publications noted issues that are unique to females when discussing the actual or envisaged post-study intentions of international students. In comparing international male and female students’ post-study intentions, Lu et al. (2009) found that females were more driven by emotional connectedness and that this significantly influenced whether they returned home to be with family on completion of their studies.

In general, the literature aligns females with more affective-type variables such as wanting to align with family expectations and wanting to feel supported (Lu et al., 2009). This differs from males, where academic performance and parents’ educational levels were noted as significant indicators of whether students returned home at the conclusion of their undergraduate studies. Several sources noted that female students were particularly likely to encounter parental pressure to return home. This was exacerbated if they were only children or if all other siblings had left home (Jeyabalasingam, 2011; Lu et al., 2009; Takeuchi, 2008).

Culture and home country were determinants of post-study intentions for female students, and new themes emerged when grouping responses according to a particular cultural group or country. In the year 2016, China had the largest number of students enrolled in OECD countries (OECD, 2016, p. 328). For female students returning home to China, the one child policy has implications on the dynamics of the family and the real or perceived need for female students to be near their parents (Bamber, 2014; Lu, et al., 2009). Chinese daughters may also feel particularly responsible for bringing prestige to the family, especially if parents have funded their education (see Jayabalasingam, 2011;

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Matsui, 1995). Qin and Lykes (2006, p. 185) described social and parental expectations, the opinions of peers and comments about families as “invisible webs of power” that exert control over the actions and decisions of female Chinese international students. Motivated by responsibility, obligation or a sense of duty, female Chinese international students were found to frequently return home on completion of studies.

In the patrifocal Indian society, male students were observed to experience more pressure or responsibility to return home and care for family, whilst females were encouraged to seek out opportunities that may add prestige and improve upward social mobility, such as obtaining a higher degree, travel and respected employment (King & Sondhi, 2016). Female Japanese students did not seem to experience the same forms of pressure as their Chinese peers, especially with reference to post-study intentions.

Several authors note that Japanese women are more driven by post-study career opportunities. If deemed necessary for career advancement, Japanese women are prepared to remain in the host country or to travel to a new destination (Creamer, 2004; Heberle, 2009; Hines, 1994). One explanation for this was that the desire to experience newfound freedom applies to Japanese women in general and not just to women who are international students (Creamer, 2004; Heberle, 2009; Hines, 1994; Takeuchi, 2008). Similarly, Takeuchi (2008) found that only 40% of Japanese students expected to return home post-study compared to 73% of Thai students. Thai students also ranked the opinions of their family’ and obligations to their family as more important than Japanese students, reinforcing that familial duty is less of an influence for Japanese students.

Holloway, O’Hara and Pimlott-Wilson (2012) observe that the post-study intentions of female Kazakhstani students may be driven by cultural norms, given that in this largely Muslim country the ‘ideal’ life-path for women is to marry a husband with a

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higher earning capacity than herself. Patriotic loyalty also sees many international students return to Kazakhstan in order to contribute to their country and to “bring my experience back to the country” (Holloway et al., 2012, p. 2284). Of all the OECD countries, Korea had the highest proportion of females (at 52%) within the overall number of inbound international students (OECD, 2016), and yet none of the studies in the scoping literature were based in Korea. Three outbound South Korean students were featured as participants in literature that focussed on the study experience (Erichsen, 2009) and Kashyap (2011), but there remains a dearth of research concerning inbound and outbound Korean international students. This paucity of research accords with the findings of King and Sondhi (2016, p. 7), who identify a “lack of gendered analysis of international student migration.”

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This review identified gaps in the literature, with few studies focussing on the post-study intentions of female international undergraduate students; indeed, there is relatively little published evidence considering the size of the sample population and the implications of this enquiry. Of particular relevance in this context is the differentiation between what students hope to do and what they expect they will do, post-graduation. The available evidence suggests that many female international students are influenced by what others expect of them as opposed to their own expectations of self (Bamber, 2014; Jayabalasingam, 2011; Qin & Lykes, 2006). Although this is to be expected at the point of entering higher education, the dichotomy of students’ aspirations or intentions and what others expect of them warrants further investigation.

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In addition to the paucity of studies in this area, there is the paradox of inconsistent definitions relative to international student mobility. Take, for example the definition of a foreign student – one who does not hold citizenship for the country in which s/he is enrolled. In a world of increasing global mobility across many domains, citizenship is not necessarily an appropriate marker and it is likely that the fluidity that accompanies a borderless world will render the term increasingly outdated (Teichler, 2015).

A case in point would be students who travel with parents who are employed in a ‘foreign’ country that subsequently grants the family citizenship. This does not necessarily make the students ‘international’ by definition, as they did not travel specifically for the purpose of study; neither are they foreign students as they hold citizenship within the country of study. Furthermore, students who hold dual or multiple citizenships may face difficulty in identifying their ‘home country’. At a time when many higher education students have experiences of living in multiple countries, it is important to acknowledge the changing demographics of international students and to develop more responsive ways for defining internationally mobile students, so that meaningful data can be captured to support the needs of this cohort.

The literature on the intentions and expectations of female international students signals the need for higher education institutions to take note of the large pool of evidence that cites predominantly negative experiences for female students. Given the wide acknowledgement of the economic, social, academic and cultural benefits of international students (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; OECD; 2016), institutions need to invest appropriately in enhancing the experience of international students, perhaps conducting thorough local assessments into the needs of students and establishing best

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practice guidelines that seek to reduce or eliminate the factors contributing to negative experiences. Sadly, the lack of such an approach is keenly felt by international students:

...nobody has ever asked me to find out what kind of special needs I have as an international student, I don't think that financially, nobody has ever reached to say how can we help to make this easier. I think the university's main concern is that students are paying their bill. (Student quoted by Mtika, 2009, p.65).

Whilst the negative experiences of female international students will not be representative of all higher education settings, future research might seek to better understand the lived experience of this population. Failure to do so might result in decreasing numbers of female international students choosing to enrol on campus. This has already been noted by Kibelloh and Bao (2014), who found that the situational, dispositional and institutional barriers associated with studying internationally were so overwhelming for some females, they chose online or distance transnational education.

In the same vein, higher education bodies need to offer educational programs and initiatives that take into account globalization from the perspective of inbound and outbound mobility within a global world economy. Initiatives to support inbound student mobility may include opportunities for work integrated learning, employment opportunities and programs that are individually responsive to the needs of students rather than assumptive or compartmentalising. In developing countries, outwardly bound students might be encouraged to return home with initiatives such as attractive employment conditions, opportunities for research, scholarships, and economic

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incentives such as taxation subsidies in setting up a business. Issues that summarise the findings in this domain are as follows:

- (1) There is a considerable amount of evidence on factors that influence students' choice of an international education;
- (2) Sources describing negative experiences of female international students outweigh those describing positive experiences;
- (3) Gender and culture are significant variables in influencing post-study intentions;
- (4) Global mobility is increasing across other sectors;
- (5) Females currently comprise of 48% of the international student population;
- (6) A proportionately small amount of females are internationally employed (20%);
- (7) Gender differences in the post-education expectations of women still exist and can be stifling; and
- (8) There is a paucity of research on the post-study intentions of female international students.

The review indicates the need for further research on female international students, particularly in the realm of post-study intentions and transition into the workforce, and taking into account any differences between aspirations and expectations. Such research could improve understanding of the expectations and endeavours of this group of females with a potential to enhance their experiences in international education and its outcomes.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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