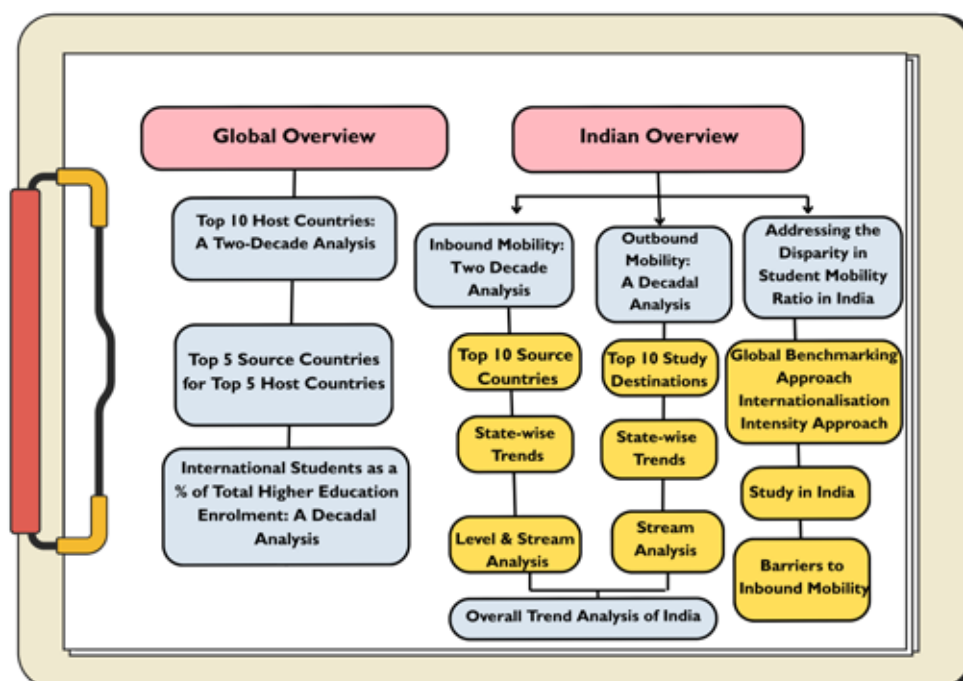


Chapter

3

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENT
MOBILITY**



3.1 OVERVIEW

International student mobility has become a pivotal feature of global higher education in the 21st century. As per the 2019 UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, mobility refers to the “physical or virtual movement of individuals outside their country for the purpose of studying, researching and teaching”. This movement of students and scholars across borders not only reflects the aspirations of individuals seeking quality education and career prospects but also embodies the growing interdependence among educational systems worldwide.

This chapter provides a comprehensive temporal analysis of international student flows, examining both global trends and India’s patterns. Through systematic data analysis from the year 2000 to 2024, it traces the shifts in inbound and outbound student flows, host-source dynamics, enrolment percentages and disciplinary preferences. Comparative metrics such as growth rates, percentage share of international students, inbound-outbound ratios and net flow of students have been used to interpret trends.

3.2 INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY: GLOBAL OVERVIEW

Over the past two decades, the global landscape of higher education has witnessed a remarkable surge in international student mobility, reflecting the rising demand for globally competitive education. Table 3.1 depicts that there has been a 3x increase in the number of internationally mobile students worldwide, from 22 lakh in 2001 to 69 lakhs in 2022. This upward trajectory underscores the increasing importance of cross-border education in shaping transnational education and fostering international collaboration.

Table 3.1: International Student Mobility (2001-2022)

| Year | No. of Students (in lakhs) | Year | No. of Students (in lakhs) |
|------|----------------------------|------|----------------------------|
| 2001 | 22 | 2012 | 41 |
| 2002 | 25 | 2013 | 43 |
| 2003 | 26 | 2014 | 45 |
| 2004 | 27 | 2015 | 48 |



| Year | No. of Students (in lakhs) | Year | No. of Students (in lakhs) |
|------|----------------------------|------|----------------------------|
| 2005 | 28 | 2016 | 51 |
| 2006 | 29 | 2017 | 54 |
| 2007 | 31 | 2018 | 57 |
| 2008 | 33 | 2019 | 61 |
| 2009 | 35 | 2020 | 66 |
| 2010 | 38 | 2021 | 64 |
| 2011 | 40 | 2022 | 69 |

Source: Migration Data Portal, International Organisation on Migration (IOM)¹

Note: The data reflects stock figures over the specified time period.

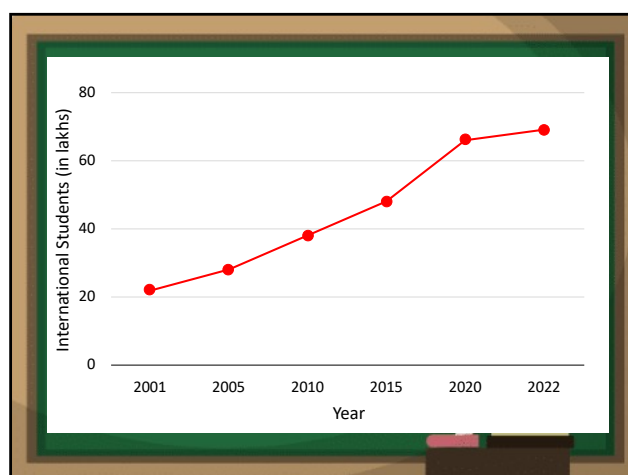


Figure 3.1: International Student Mobility (2001-2022)

Figure 3.1 depicts the number of international students globally between 2001 and 2022, reflecting a 214% rise over 22 years. Between 2001 and 2010, the number rose from 22 to 38 lakhs, an increase of approximately 73%, driven by the early 2000s wave of globalisation and the expansion of higher education systems. From 2010 to 2015, growth continued steadily, reaching 48 lakhs in 2015, a 26% increase over five years aligned with the internationalisation strategies at the government and institutional levels. The period from 2015 to 2020 saw further growth, with numbers rising from 48 to 66 lakhs, a 37.5% increase over five years, reflecting continued global demand.

During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), the growth rate slowed from 66 to 64 lakhs, indicating a minor decline due to travel restrictions, health concerns and campus closures. However, 2022 marked a strong recovery with student numbers rising to 69 lakhs, a 7.8% increase from the previous year. This is one of the sharpest annual increases of the entire period and can be attributed to pent-up demand, resumption of cross-border mobility and universities adopting hybrid and flexible models.

3.2.1 Top 10 Host Countries for International Students: A Two-Decade Analysis

International student mobility has undergone significant transformation with shifts in the global higher education landscape influencing where students choose to study. Host countries play a crucial role in this dynamic shaped by factors such as quality of education, immigration policies, cultural openness, affordability and employment opportunities. Traditional education destinations have faced growing competition from emerging players that have strategically positioned themselves as attractive alternatives. As students increasingly weigh long-term prospects alongside academic and research quality, the global map of top host countries continues to evolve, reflecting broader political, economic and social trends.

¹ Migration Data Portal. (2022). Internationally mobile students. https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stud_in_&t=2022