

The Influence of Country Branding on Student's mobility: An Academic Perspective

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Background: Country branding has emerged as a crucial factor in shaping a nation's reputation, cultural appeal, and competitive positioning in the global academic landscape. **Aims:** This paper explores the relationship between country branding and student mobility, investigating how the branding of a country impacts international student enrollment and higher education attractiveness. **Methods:** This study employs a qualitative multiple case study design to explore how country branding influences international student mobility in four selected national contexts of Finland, China, the United Kingdom, and Germany. **Results.** This study points out in the "Cross-Case Comparison" based on published studies, the approach of four selected countries in terms of using their own brand, campaigns, strategies and policies in relation to attracting students' interest in higher education. **Conclusions:** The findings highlight the need for strategic alignment between national branding efforts and higher education policies, recommending future research into the interplay between both. **Implications:** The study examines key factors such as the reputation of academic institutions, visa policies, economic conditions, and cultural perception, arguing that effective country branding enhances a nation's ability to attract and retain global talent.

Keywords: Country Branding, Student Mobility, Higher Education, Internationalization, National Image

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Introduction

In an era of globalization, the international mobility of students has increased significantly, with millions of students seeking higher education opportunities abroad (Knight, 2024). Country branding has become an essential tool for nations aiming to attract international students, as it shapes the perception of academic excellence, cultural openness, and career prospects (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Countries with strong education brands, such as the United States, the United Kingdom (Moscovitz, 2024), and Australia, continue to dominate student mobility trends due to their well-established reputations for academic excellence and career opportunities (UNESCO, 2021).

This paper explores the influence of country branding on student mobility. Through an analysis of the role of national identity, academic reputation, and international perception, it examines how country branding initiatives can create favorable conditions for universities to attract global talent (Hong & Hardy, 2022). It also investigates how policy measures, including visa regulations and post-study work opportunities, contribute to a nation's academic appeal.

Theoretical background

Country branding in the context of higher education refers to the strategic efforts undertaken by governments, academic institutions, and national agencies to promote a country's education system as attractive to international students. Dinnie (2008) defines country branding as the use of marketing, policy frameworks, and cultural assets to enhance a country's reputation in the global education market.

Anholt's (2010) Nation Brand Hexagon framework conceptualizes country branding as a multidimensional construct encompassing six interrelated dimensions: tourism, exports, governance, investment, culture, and people. These dimensions collectively shape international perceptions of a country and contribute to its overall attractiveness as a study destination. While the model does not explicitly include education as a distinct dimension, the higher education sector is often closely interwoven with several of these elements.

A country's education system serves as both a reflection and a projection of its cultural identity and economic competitiveness, thereby influencing the decision-making processes of prospective international students (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). The reputation of academic institutions, the quality of governance and infrastructure supporting education, as well as cultural openness and societal values, all interact to form a comprehensive national image that influences student mobility choices. International students often consider multiple factors when selecting a study destination, including not only reputation of the considered institution.

International student mobility is influenced by a combination of interrelated factors. A primary determinant is the reputation of academic institutions. Countries that host globally renowned universities, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, consistently serve as preferred destinations for international students, largely due to the global prestige associated with their higher education institutions (QS World Rankings, 2022). Closely linked to institutional reputation are economic opportunities, particularly the prospects for employment following graduation, which serve as significant incentives in the decision-making process (Knight, 2012). In addition to academic and economic considerations, cultural appeal and inclusivity play a substantial role in attracting international students. Countries that project an image of cultural diversity, social openness, and inclusiveness are often perceived as more desirable study destinations, as these characteristics contribute to a supportive and enriching student experience (Altbach & de Wit, 2015). Furthermore, visa and immigration policies critically shape mobility patterns. Favorable regulations that enable post-study employment or simplified pathways to residency have been shown to exert considerable influence on international students' destination choices (OECD, 2020).

A strong national brand enables a country to position itself as an academic hub, attracting students seeking high-quality education and global career opportunities. Countries with well-established education brands, such as Germany and Canada, have successfully leveraged their reputations for academic excellence and innovation to increase international student enrollment (UNESCO, 2021). For

instance, Germany's "Study in Germany" campaign highlights its tuition-free education model, advanced research opportunities, and strong employment prospects for graduates. Similarly, Canada's nation branding emphasizes multiculturalism, high-quality education, and post-graduation employment opportunities, making it one of the most sought-after destinations for students globally (OECD, 2020).

Visa regulations and post-study work opportunities significantly impact student mobility. Countries with streamlined visa policies and favorable employment prospects for graduates tend to attract higher numbers of international students. For example, Australia's Post-Study Work Visa scheme has played a crucial role in enhancing the country's attractiveness to international students (Australian Government, 2022). Similarly, the UK's Graduate Route visa allows students to stay and work in the country for two years after graduation, reinforcing its appeal as a long-term study destination (British Council, 2022).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative multiple case study design to explore how country branding influences international student mobility in four selected national contexts: Finland, China, the United Kingdom, and Germany. These countries were purposefully chosen due to their diverse approaches to nation branding, their active participation in global higher education markets, and the availability of relevant data sources.

The multiple case study approach enables an in-depth investigation of real-world phenomena within their national contexts (Yin, 2018). This design is particularly suitable for the research objective, which requires examining complex policy environments, branding strategies, and student mobility patterns across countries with distinct political, economic, and cultural settings. The case study approach offers several methodological advantages for this research. It enables a context-sensitive understanding of real-world phenomena, capturing the specific political, cultural, and economic conditions shaping each country's branding strategy. Furthermore, it allows for the integration of multiple data sources through triangulation, enhancing the robustness and credibility of the findings. The design is particularly well-suited to capturing the inherent complexity of nation branding, where multiple actors, narratives, and policy instruments interact. Additionally, the case study method is flexible and adaptive, permitting the incorporation of emerging insights as the research progresses and as new data become available.

For each case, being the subject of the study conducted and presented, the analysis focuses on the following dimensions: the nation branding strategies employed, student inflow statistics reflecting mobility trends, the effectiveness of branding campaigns, and the range of policy support mechanisms implemented to attract international students. Data from the studies chosen are drawn from a variety of sources, including official government reports, agency publications, media coverage, and policy documents, ensuring a comprehensive and multi-perspective examination. The case study method is particularly well-suited for this research due to the context-dependent nature of country branding, where national strategies, strengths, and challenges vary significantly across countries. This approach facilitates the exploration of the real-world application of nation branding within the domain of student mobility, allowing for the integration of both qualitative and quantitative data sources. Moreover, the case study design enables the identification of complex causal mechanisms and policy interactions that may not be fully captured through purely quantitative methods, thereby offering richer insights into the multifaceted relationship between country branding and international student mobility.

The four countries were selected based on the following rationale:

- Finland: A smaller nation with highly values-based branding emphasizing innovation, equality, and sustainability.
- China: A unique case as both a major sender and increasingly prominent receiver of international students, characterized by strong government-led nation branding.
- United Kingdom: A traditional global leader in higher education facing significant shifts in branding and policy following Brexit.

- Germany: A highly attractive host country offering tuition-free education for many international students, with a strong reputation in technical and scientific fields.

The data obtained from respective research papers were analyzed in two stages, as a "Within-Case Analysis" and as a "Cross-Case Comparison". Each country was analyzed independently to reconstruct the nation branding narrative related to higher education, the policy instruments employed to support student mobility and the evolution of international student enrollment over the last two decades. By conducting both within-case and cross-case analyses, the study seeks to identify patterns, contrasts, and context-dependent mechanisms in how country branding strategies relate to the attraction of international students. The diverse sample enables exploration of multiple models of higher education branding and policy, enhancing the study's theoretical contribution.

The primary data collection method involved systematic document analysis of official nation branding materials (websites, campaigns, slogans), National education agency reports (e.g., DAAD, British Council, CSC, EDUFI), government policy documents on higher education internationalization, statistical data on student mobility from UNESCO, OECD, and national statistics agencies and secondary academic literature relevant to each case.

Following Yin's (2018) cross-case synthesis approach, findings from individual cases were systematically compared to identify shared patterns across different branding models, context-specific factors shaping branding effectiveness and contradictions or tensions between national policies and branding messages. A coding scheme was developed to classify data along key dimensions such as brand personality traits (Yousaf et al., 2020), pull factors in student mobility (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), and national branding strategies (Anholt, 2007).

Despite its strengths, the case study approach presents several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the findings may have limited generalizability, as case studies do not provide statistically representative results applicable to all contexts. Second, data accessibility may vary across countries, depending on the availability of official documents, transparency of agencies, and willingness of participants to engage in interviews. Third, there is a potential risk of researcher bias in case selection and interpretation, particularly if the selection process is not sufficiently systematic or transparent. Finally, case study research is often time-intensive, requiring extensive data collection, analysis, and iterative refinement to ensure the depth and accuracy of the findings.

Future research could explore how digital marketing strategies influence country branding in higher education and the role of student testimonials in shaping perceptions of study destinations. Longitudinal studies assessing the long-term impact of branding initiatives on student enrollment trends would also provide valuable insights.

To complement the documentary analysis, semi-structured expert interviews could be conducted with key stakeholders, including officials from national education agencies, administrators from university international offices, academic experts specializing in higher education internationalization, and, where feasible, international students themselves. The interview protocol should be designed to elicit insights on perceptions of branding effectiveness, challenges encountered in the implementation of branding strategies and observed patterns in international student mobility.

To strengthen the validity of the findings, data triangulation could be employed by integrating evidence from multiple sources, including official documents, interview data, and statistical records. This multi-perspective approach would facilitate a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the country branding processes and their influence on student mobility.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of Finland's strengths, challenges and focus in attracting students to live and study in Finland.

Table 1. Finland

| Country | Key Features | Strengths | Challenges | Focus |
|---------|---|--|--|--|
| Finland | Small country with a highly distinct brand emphasizing innovation, equality, and sustainability, substantial investment in international education branding (e.g., Study in Finland). | Clear values-based branding, widely recognized for innovation and social equality. | Limited global visibility: introduction of tuition fees for non-EU students reduced non-EU enrollment. | Examining whether soft values (equality, happiness, sustainability) serve as effective pull factors compared to hard factors (cost, career opportunities). |

Source: Schatz et al. (2015)

In Finland, national interest in branding education intensified notably following the country's strong performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which significantly enhanced the international reputation of its basic education system. This authors further explore how that reputation has been strategically transformed into a broader Finnish education brand, drawing on the narratives presented in Finland's official Country Brand Report in 2010 called "Mission for Finland," focused on leveraging the country's strengths to address global challenges. The report identified functionality, nature, and education as key elements of Finland's national identity and brand. The authors argue that the governmental discourse reflects a deliberate fusion of education and nation branding, prompting them to conceptualize the emerging brand as "Finnish Education®."

The study by Schatz et al. (2015) critically examines how Finland's exceptional performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has been strategically transformed into a central component of the country's nation branding efforts. Education, in this context, is positioned as a core element of Finland's international image, associated with high quality, social equality, and innovation. Central to their analysis is the concept of "Finnish Education®", which the authors describe as a deliberately constructed brand. This brand presents Finland's education system not only as efficient and equitable, but also as a moral and intellectual model on the global stage. The study underscores how this branding process reflects a commodification of education, framing it as a product that can be marketed and exported under the umbrella of national identity. A key discourse identified is that of "ethno-preneurialism". Drawing on Finland's Country Brand Report from 2010, the authors argue that Finnish citizens are implicitly encouraged to act as entrepreneurial ambassadors for the nation. In this framework, promoting the Finnish education system internationally becomes part of a broader narrative that links personal and national success to proactive global engagement. However, the authors also identify a fundamental tension within this branding strategy. Although the public narrative emphasizes values such as equity, sustainability, and social cohesion, the underlying mechanisms are deeply embedded in market logic. This creates a paradox where the egalitarian ethos of the Finnish education system is potentially undermined by its instrumental use for international prestige and economic gain. Finally, the study cautions against the risks of cultural essentialism. By portraying Finland as a homogeneously successful and idealized educational utopia, the branding discourse may obscure the internal complexities, regional differences, and social challenges within the Finnish education system. This simplification could lead to misleading perceptions, both internationally and within domestic policy debates.

Schatz et al. (2015) provides a critical perspective on how Finland's international educational reputation has been strategically harnessed for nation branding purposes. By conceptualizing Finnish Education® as a state-driven brand, the authors highlight both the strengths and contradictions of this approach. While the brand capitalizes on values such as equity, innovation, and trust, it also risks oversimplifying national identity and commodifying education. This study ultimately calls for a more reflective and ethically grounded dialogue on the role of education in national image construction.

Table 2 provides a brief characteristic on China being unique because it is both a sending country and increasingly a receiving country. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a state-led global development and foreign policy strategy launched by the Chinese government in 2013. According to BRI Investment Report 2024, more than 140 countries had formally joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), collectively representing nearly 75 % of the global population and over half of the world's GDP (<https://greenfdc.org>, 2024). Its essence is a strong government led nation branding consisting of international education as part of its soft power diplomacy under the BRI umbrella. China offers thousands of scholarships to students from BRI countries through programs like the China Scholarship Council (CSC). Many universities in China have launched joint programs, branch campuses, and partnerships with institutions in BRI regions.

Table 2. China

| Country | Key Features | Strengths | Challenges | Focus |
|---------|---|--|---|---|
| China | Simultaneously a major sender and growing host country, strong government-led nation branding integrated with soft power strategies (e.g., Belt and Road Initiative). | Centralized strategic governance, expansive scholarship programs, active global soft power projection. | Limited cultural appeal among some Western student groups, ongoing political concerns may affect perceptions. | Evaluating whether state-driven nation branding is as effective as market-driven models, assessing the geopolitical dimensions of student mobility (Belt & Road influence). |

Source: Yousaf et al. (2020)

Yousaf et al. (2020) provide an insightful examination of the relationship between China's nation branding efforts and international students' perceptions and behavioral intentions. Their study, based on empirical data collected from 547 international students representing 41 nationalities and enrolled at 18 universities across seven major Chinese cities, offers a detailed account of the factors influencing China's national image and its attractiveness as a destination for higher education. Contrary to conventional expectations, the study identifies cultural and economic distance not as barriers but as strategic assets for China's internationalization strategy. While traditional models often suggest that greater cultural or economic dissimilarity between host and sending countries deters international student mobility, Yousaf et al. find that, in China's case, larger cultural and economic distances positively shaped international students' perceptions. For students, particularly from Europe and North America, China's distinct cultural heritage and its expanding global economic influence generated cultural curiosity and a desire for unique educational experiences. China's position as a rising global power served to reinforce its appeal as an emerging center for higher education. The study also highlights the close interdependence between China's national image and the brand equity of its higher education institutions (HEIs). A positive perception of China's political stability, economic growth, cultural richness, and international engagement contributed directly to enhancing the perceived quality, prestige, and attractiveness of its universities. This positive national image fostered brand loyalty toward Chinese HEIs, increasing both the willingness of international students to choose Chinese universities and their satisfaction with their educational experience. Importantly, Yousaf et al. (2020) emphasize the role of international education as a component of education diplomacy. Students who develop favorable perceptions of China during their studies are more likely to engage in long-term behaviors that support China's broader soft power objectives. These include intentions to promote Chinese products and tourism, sustain personal and professional connections with China, and serve as informal ambassadors for Chinese culture and society upon returning to their home countries. This aligns with China's broader state-led strategy to embed international education within its global public diplomacy and nation branding agenda. The study further identifies regional variations in student perceptions. Students from regions characterized by greater cultural and economic distance from China (e.g., Europe, North America) generally held more favorable views of the country than students from regions geographically or administratively closer to China. Interestingly, administrative or geographical proximity was found

to have limited influence on students' perceptions, suggesting that perceived cultural difference may, in certain contexts, enhance rather than hinder China's attractiveness as a study destination.

Overall, Yousaf et al. (2020) illustrate how China's state-led nation branding, which integrates higher education with soft power diplomacy and global economic positioning, shapes international student mobility patterns in distinctive ways. The study challenges conventional assumptions about cultural distance as a deterrent and underscores the complex interplay between national image formation, higher education branding, and international students' long-term behavioral intentions. In the context of this research, China emerges as a unique case where centralized branding efforts, strong state coordination, and education diplomacy converge to advance both educational and geopolitical objectives.

The study concluded that China's efforts to position itself as a key destination for international education, coupled with strategic nation branding, are yielding positive outcomes in terms of international perception and soft power. However, continued improvements in the quality of higher education and greater unification of institutional identity are recommended to enhance long-term results (Yousaf et al., 2020).

Table 3 describes UK as a global higher education hub with long tradition. After Brexit UK's repositioning efforts reflect a coordinated, multi-faceted approach, combining policy reform, visa facilitation, marketing investment, mobility program redesign, and institutional agility. In 2019 the Departments of Education and International Trade released a new strategy aimed to raise the value of UK education exports - from app. £20 billion to £35 billion by 2030 - and increase international student numbers by 30%, targeting 600,000 by that year (UK Government, 2019). It emphasized attracting students from ASEAN, MENA, and Latin America and committed to support UK universities in developing global partnerships and transnational education. Following Brexit, the UK launched the Turing Scheme in 2021, a £100 million/year alternative to Erasmus+, supporting outbound study/work experiences for UK students globally. It also aims to support international recruitment through global partnerships. Building on the broader "Britain is GREAT" campaign, the "Education is GREAT" initiative (launched in 2015) was expanded to include higher education with the "Study UK: Discover You" deployment across over 65 countries - initially focusing on China, India, Malaysia, Turkey, and Thailand.

Table 3. United Kingdom

| Country | Key Features | Strengths | Challenges | Focus |
|---------|---|---|---|--|
| UK | Long-standing global higher education hub, highly commercialized sector, ongoing post-Brexit repositioning efforts. | Prestigious world-class universities, strong global brand recognition, extensive international alumni networks. | Brexit-related policy changes, increasing tuition fees, visa uncertainty for EU students post-Brexit. | Analyzing post-Brexit repositioning and the effectiveness of visa liberalization measures (e.g., Graduate Route) in maintaining international competitiveness. |

Source: Lomer et al. (2016)

Lomer et al. (2016) provide a comprehensive analysis of the United Kingdom's national higher education branding strategy and its role in attracting international students within the broader framework of soft power diplomacy. Their study, based on a thematic analysis of over 100 policy documents produced between 1999 and 2014, traces the evolution of the UK's international education narrative and identifies the key mechanisms through which higher education branding has been integrated into national identity construction, economic strategy, and global influence. One of the central features of the UK's branding strategy, as identified by Lomer et al., is the promotion of elite institutions as emblematic of British educational excellence. Prestigious universities such as Oxford and Cambridge are routinely presented as iconic symbols of the UK's academic tradition, serving as powerful

representations of the country's broader higher education system. The branding strategy leverages the global recognition of these elite institutions to elevate the reputation of the entire sector, even though only a small proportion of international students ultimately attend these universities. This selective emphasis contributes to the global perception of British higher education as synonymous with world-class academic quality. The UK's national branding efforts also focus on enhancing the student experience and employability outcomes, recognizing these as major drivers of international student decision-making. British policy narratives frequently highlight the combination of rigorous academic training with a vibrant student life, multicultural campuses, and extensive career opportunities. The promise of strong employment prospects, both in the UK and internationally, serves as a key selling point for the brand, appealing particularly to ambitious international students seeking to maximize the long-term return on their educational investment. Beyond the direct educational benefits, Lomer et al. emphasize the economic and political significance of international student recruitment. International students are framed not only as substantial contributors to institutional revenue streams but also as long-term assets to the UK's global influence. The presence of international alumni networks, ongoing cultural exchanges, and durable professional ties contribute to the UK's broader soft power objectives. International graduates often serve as informal ambassadors for British values, culture, and institutions, extending the UK's influence beyond conventional diplomatic channels. The UK's higher education branding has also been closely integrated with national identity construction. Branding initiatives such as Education UK and later the more comprehensive Britain is GREAT campaign link the appeal of British higher education with broader national narratives of cultural heritage, historical prestige, innovation, and global leadership. This fusion of education with national branding reinforces the UK's image as a center of excellence, creativity, and tradition, further enhancing its competitive position in the global education market. However, Lomer et al. (2016) also caution that this market-driven, elite-focused branding approach carries certain risks. The overemphasis on elite institutions may marginalize the diversity and breadth of the UK's higher education sector, potentially overshadowing the contributions of newer or less prestigious universities. Furthermore, the commodification of higher education through aggressive branding risks reducing education to a transactional product, potentially undermining the academic, cultural, and civic dimensions of internationalization. This tension reflects broader debates on the balance between higher education's economic instrumentalization and its role as a public good.

In summary, the study by Lomer et al. (2016) demonstrates how the UK's higher education branding strategy has effectively positioned the sector as a central component of national soft power and economic policy. Through a carefully constructed narrative that combines academic prestige, employability, cultural identity, and economic benefit, the UK has successfully maintained its position as one of the world's leading destinations for international students. However, the findings also point to critical questions regarding the sustainability and inclusiveness of this branding approach within an increasingly competitive global higher education landscape.

Table 4 provides key data on Germany's main characteristics and focus on higher education. The basis is a free tuition model for internationals. Its focus remains on quality and reputation and driven branding via DAAD and Land of Ideas. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) remains the linchpin of internationalization. DAAD's "Strategy 2025" articulates a vision to expand academic exchange, reinforce institutional international networks, and elevate scientific leadership through international cooperation.

Table 4. Germany

| Country | Key Features | Strengths | Challenges | Focus |
|---------|--|--|---|--|
| Germany | Tuition-free higher education model for internationals, quality- and reputation-driven branding supported by DAAD and Land of Ideas initiatives. | Tuition-free access, strong technical and engineering reputation, consistent global presence through DAAD. | Limited institutional capacity, housing shortages in major student cities, occasionally rigid administrative systems. | Assessing the comparative strength of tuition-free policies versus active international marketing in attracting global talent. |

Source: Wächter (2008)

Wächter's (2008) study portrays Germany as one of the most systematically engaged and strategically organized actors within the broader European internationalization agenda. His analysis emphasizes the multifaceted and policy-driven nature of Germany's internationalization efforts, positioning them as a model of coordinated national and institutional branding within higher education. At the core of Germany's approach lies policy-driven internationalization, which has been prioritized by both federal and state governments as a national strategic objective. This political commitment has materialized in a series of well-funded programs—most notably through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and initiatives of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)—designed to enhance the international visibility and competitiveness of German higher education institutions. Germany's policies are deliberately aligned with the Bologna Process and broader European Higher Education Area (EHEA) objectives, using internationalization not only as an educational strategy but also as a mechanism for strengthening Germany's soft power and global reputation. Within this framework, the DAAD emerges as a central operational actor, playing a pivotal role in both implementing internationalization policies and projecting Germany's academic brand globally. DAAD's responsibilities extend well beyond the administration of scholarships; it actively coordinates international marketing campaigns - such as the Study in Germany initiative - and fosters institutional partnerships worldwide. As such, DAAD serves simultaneously as a facilitator of academic mobility and as a global ambassador for German higher education. An important feature of Germany's strategy, as Wächter notes, is the expansion of English-taught programs, particularly at the master's level. This development directly addresses linguistic barriers that previously limited Germany's accessibility to non-German speaking students and reflects an adaptive response to increasing global competition for international talent. Another significant competitive advantage identified in Wächter's analysis is Germany's tuition-free model for higher education. The absence of tuition fees (or the imposition of only minimal administrative charges) functions as a powerful pull factor for prospective international students, especially when combined with Germany's high academic standards and research excellence. This policy framework stands in contrast to the tuition-dependent models prevalent in key competitor countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Wächter further highlights the increasing professionalization of German higher education institutions in their internationalization efforts. Universities have developed more structured international offices, formulated comprehensive internationalization strategies, and implemented monitoring mechanisms to assess progress using specific indicators. This reflects a systematic and data-informed approach to managing international engagement at the institutional level. Finally, Germany demonstrates a balanced mobility approach, effectively managing its dual role as both a major destination for inbound international students and a significant source of outgoing student mobility, particularly within the Erasmus+ program and other bilateral exchange frameworks. Wächter emphasizes that Germany's internationalization strategy seeks not only to attract foreign students but also to ensure that German students gain international experience, contributing to the broader objectives of cultural exchange and global competence.

In sum, Wächter's findings position Germany as a state-coordinated yet institutionally professionalized model of higher education internationalization and branding. The integration of national policy support, institutional strategic capacity, and internationally oriented marketing initiatives constitutes a comprehensive and coherent national branding approach. These dimensions are directly relevant to examining Germany's role within broader research questions concerning the effectiveness of policy support mechanisms, the alignment of institutional and national branding strategies, and the influence of tuition policies on international student mobility.

The Cross-Case comparative analysis in Table 5 summarizes the main findings from all four research papers. Based on the six identified dimensions, it supports the comparison of the specifics of individual countries and highlights the differences in the communication of each country's national branding strategy.

Table 5. Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

| Dimension | Finland | China | UK | Germany |
|---------------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Branding Model | Values-based, emphasis on innovation, equality, sustainability | State-led, tightly integrated with soft power diplomacy | Market-driven, elite institutions as flagship symbols | Policy-driven, highly coordinated state-institutional collaboration |
| Core Branding Message | Innovation, social equality, safety, sustainability | Global rise, cultural uniqueness, economic opportunity | Academic prestige, employability, global networks | Free tuition, technical excellence, global partnerships |
| Primary Pull Factors | Safe society, strong research reputation, work permits | Scholarships, global power status, cultural curiosity | Elite university reputation, post-study work, cultural heritage | Free tuition, strong STEM fields, DAAD global support |
| Main Challenges | Fee introduction for non-EU students, limited global visibility | Political concerns, Western student skepticism | Brexit uncertainty, rising tuition, visa restrictions | Housing shortages, capacity limits, administrative complexity |
| Soft Power Role | Moderate: promotes Nordic model and wellbeing society | High: education integral to foreign policy (Belt & Road) | High: education as economic soft power and cultural diplomacy | High: education supports European integration and scientific diplomacy |
| Policy Support Structure | National branding agency (Study in Finland), EDUFI | Centralized government control, CSC scholarships | British Council, Education UK, GREAT campaign | DAAD as central agency, federal & state coordination |

Source: Own processing based on presented research papers

Conclusion and discussion

While nation branding offers considerable benefits in enhancing a country's attractiveness as a destination for international students, several persistent challenges complicate efforts to sustain and expand academic appeal in an increasingly competitive global higher education landscape.

First, economic and political instability remains a significant vulnerability. Countries facing political unrest, governance crises, or economic downturns often experience corresponding declines in international student enrollment (Fidler et al., 2022). Uncertainty regarding political stability, personal safety, or economic viability may deter prospective students who prioritize secure and predictable environments for their studies and future employment prospects. Even countries with well-established academic brands are not immune to sudden shifts in political climate, which can undermine long-standing reputational advantages.

Second, the alignment between national branding narratives and the actual quality of academic provision is crucial. When nation branding efforts present aspirational images that exceed the realities experienced by international students - whether in terms of academic rigor, campus infrastructure, student support services, or living conditions - the risk of reputational damage grows. Negative word-

of-mouth, critical media coverage, or alumni dissatisfaction can quickly erode carefully cultivated national images, as international student communities increasingly share experiences through global digital platforms (Girardin et al., 2023).

Third, the intensifying global competition for international students places constant pressure on emerging academic destinations. Countries with well - established higher education brands - such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and parts of Western Europe - continuously innovate their policies, visa regimes, scholarship programs, and institutional partnerships to sustain their competitive edge. For newer entrants seeking to strengthen their global position, keeping pace with these developments requires sustained investment, coordinated policy frameworks, and adaptive institutional strategies (Shadiyev, 2025). The dynamic nature of international student flows means that even successful branding campaigns must be regularly updated to address shifting student priorities, new competitors, and changing global economic conditions.

Collectively, these challenges underscore the complex, fragile, and context-dependent nature of country branding in higher education. While successful nation branding can enhance a country's visibility and appeal, maintaining credibility, policy coherence, and authentic alignment with students' lived experiences is essential to ensure long-term sustainability in the global education market.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of country branding efforts depends on sustained policy support, investment in higher education, and a student-friendly regulatory environment (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Country branding plays a pivotal role in shaping student mobility by enhancing national reputation, promoting academic institutions, and influencing policy measures. Countries that successfully align branding efforts with visa policies, employment opportunities, and cultural appeal are more likely to attract international students. However, maintaining a strong national education brand requires ongoing investment in higher education quality, student services, and global engagement.

The findings derived from the case study analysis have the potential to make several significant contributions. From a theoretical perspective, the study may offer refinements to existing nation branding models by extending their application to the field of higher education. In terms of policy implications, the results may inform governments and national agencies in developing more effective branding strategies to attract international students. Furthermore, the study may yield practical recommendations for university-level marketing strategies, particularly concerning the alignment of institutional branding efforts with broader national branding objectives to enhance international competitiveness.

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