



Supporting International Students' Success: How can we further enhance policies for facilitating the academic transition of international students?

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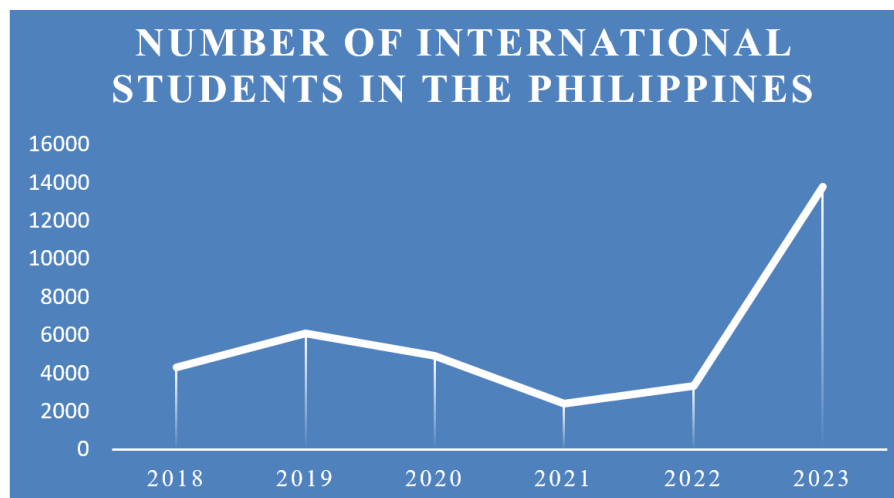


Figure 1. Number of International Students in the Philippines

Source. Raw data are published in the Freedom of Information provided by the Bureau of Immigration (2023)

This policy brief provides recommendations for supporting international students' success and easing their academic transition while studying in the Philippines. Recognizing international students' significant role in fostering economic, cultural, and diplomatic growth, this policy brief outlines actionable recommendations aligned with CHED Memorandum Order No. 55 series of 2016. Private universities dominate international student enrollment from 2018 to 2023. Popular programs include graduate degrees in education, management, and physical education, and undergraduate programs, such as English education and early childhood education. Chinese, Indian, and Nigerian students constitute most enrollees. This policy brief offers recommendations following the RAPID framework that include establishing accessible services such as language adaptation programs, comprehensive orientation sessions, and International Student Centers to address holistic needs. It emphasizes the importance of quality assurance mechanisms, culturally sensitive instruction, and psychosocial support frameworks to foster inclusion and engagement. Additionally, it calls for a review of current policies to align internationalization efforts with national goals and capacities, ensuring the Philippine higher education system remains globally competitive. This policy brief ultimately aims to contribute to the sustainable development of Philippine higher education while addressing the socio-political and economic realities of the sector.

Recommended Citation:

Castulo, N.J., et al. (2025). Supporting International Students' Success: How can we further enhance policies for facilitating the academic transition of international students?. *Policy Brief Series* 9 (1), pp. 1-6. Philippine Normal University Educational Policy Research and Development Office.



The inclusion of international students in higher education institutions fulfills multiple objectives, encompassing academic, economic, cultural, and diplomatic aims. Host institutions are essential for achieving these goals by providing excellent education, robust support systems, and opportunities for engagement with faculty, counselors, and local students (Arthur, 2017). International students play a crucial role in enhancing the economic landscapes of their host countries. Their involvement strengthens public diplomacy and improves global competitiveness (Carswell, 2010). Furthermore, international students' rivalry compels nations to enhance their educational infrastructure, which, in turn, elevates the overall standard of education (Gündüz et al., 2019). Moreover, international education promotes significant cultural exchange and facilitates social integration. Engaging in activities that involve both international and local students plays a crucial role in bridging cultural divides, fostering mutual understanding, and enabling the acknowledgment of diverse perspectives (Gündüz et al., 2019). From a diplomatic and strategic perspective, international education acts as a mechanism of soft power and public diplomacy, influencing positive perceptions of the host nation and spreading its social values worldwide (Atamanenko et al., 2021).

Global university rankings include factors related to global engagement, such as the proportion of international students and faculty, which directly impact a university's standing (Engwall, 2023; McAleer et al., 2019). Institutions with a greater number of international students often achieve higher rankings, as these figures are seen as indicators of a diverse and inclusive academic setting. Furthermore, rankings play a significant role in shaping a university's image and status, thereby boosting its reputation and attractiveness to students worldwide. According to recent data from 2021, there are approximately 6.4 million international students worldwide (UNESCO, 2023).

The Context of International Students in the Philippines

Some scholars have observed that the educational system in the Philippines adheres to the neoliberal paradigm (Ruiz, 2014; Sannadan & Lang-ay, 2021). Nevertheless, owing to the implementation of the free tuition tertiary education law for public universities and colleges (Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, 2017), private universities and colleges are experiencing a decline in enrollment rates (Bayudan-Dacuycuy et al., 2023), resulting in a shift in attracting international student enrollees to fulfill the needs of the institutions. Moreover, according to data provided by the Bureau of Immigration (2023), as shown in Figure 1 above, there has been a slight decrease in the number of international students in the Philippines from 2019 to 2021, followed by an increase from 2022 to 2023. Ortega (2018) suggested that the colonial legacy of the Philippines has influenced the reputation of its higher education system, making it an appealing destination for

international students. Recently, the Philippines implemented a new law to attract international students to participate in the internationalization process (Republic Act 11448, 2019). Additionally, the Philippines' quality education, enhanced by migration and the colonial past, attracts international students because of its low tuition fees and the use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education (Killingley & Ilieva, 2015; Ortega, 2018).

Table 1 illustrates the number of international students enrolled in the top universities in the Philippines from 2018 to 2023, highlighting the yearly totals and regional distributions. A notable trend is the fluctuation in enrollment numbers over the years, with a steady increase from 2018 (1,073 students) to 2019 (1,718 students) and 2020 (1,680 students), followed by a significant decline in 2021 (765 students), which is likely due to the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. All universities in the top 10 are private higher education institutions.

Table 1
Top Universities with Highest Number of International Students Between 2018 and 2023

University	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Region
A	136	279	312	90	310	1,712	NCR
B	97	179	171	56	126	517	NCR
C	54	115	273	191	169	287	Region VII
D	155	156	126	139	212	283	Region XI
E	113	143	187	134	154	303	Region I
F	25	108	94	9	71	722	NCR
G	162	214	143	48	55	343	Region IV
H	164	167	178	52	96	307	CAR
I	46	89	69	7	42	659	NCR
J	121	268	127	39	90	248	NCR
Total	1,073	1,718	1,680	765	1,325	5,381	

Source. Raw data were published in the Freedom of Information provided by the Bureau of Immigration (2023).

Table 2 highlights the top five graduate programs in education with the highest number of international students between 2018 and 2023, categorizing them as doctorate and master's degree programs. Doctor of Philosophy in Education ranks first for doctorate programs, indicating that it is the most popular choice among international students pursuing advanced education degrees. This is followed by the 'Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Management,' which ranks second, and 'Doctor of Education,' which ranks third.



Table 2

Top 5 Graduate Programs in Education with the Highest Number of International Students between 2018 and 2023

Degree Program (Doctor)	Rank
Doctor of Philosophy in Education	1
Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Management	2
Doctor of Education	3
Doctor of Philosophy in Physical Education	4
Doctor of Philosophy in Physical Education and Sports	5
Degree Program (Master)	Rank
MAEd in Educational Management	1
MAEd in Physical Education	2
MAEd Educational Administration	3
MA Music Education	4
MAEd Physical Education and Sports	5

Source. Raw data were published in the Freedom of Information provided by the Bureau of Immigration (2023).

In the master's degree category, the 'Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) in Educational Management ranks first, showcasing a strong interest in leadership and management in education among international students. This is followed by the 'MAEd in Physical Education' in second place and the 'MAEd in Educational Administration' in third.

Table 3 highlights the top five undergraduate education programs with the most international students between 2018 and 2023. Ranking first is the 'Bachelor of Secondary Education in English,' demonstrating a strong international interest in teaching English at the secondary level, which aligns with the global demand for English language educators. Following this is the 'Bachelor of Elementary Education,' reflecting the popularity of training for teaching at the primary school level. The 'Bachelor of Physical Education ranks third, showcasing the appeal of programs focused on physical fitness and sports education.

Table 3

Top 5 Undergraduate Programs in Education with the highest Number of International Students between 2018 and 2023

Degree Program (Doctorate)	Rank
Bachelor of Secondary Education in English	1

Bachelor of Elementary Education	2
Bachelor of Physical Education	3
Bachelor of Music in Music Education	4
Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	5

Source. Raw data were published in the Freedom of Information provided by the Bureau of Immigration (2023).

Table 4 presents the top five nationalities with the highest number of international students enrolled in universities in the Philippines between 2018 and 2023. Chinese International students led with 10,169, making them the largest group of international enrollees during this period. Following this, Indian students ranked second, totaling 7,433, indicating a strong representation from South Asia. Nigerian students come third, with 3,238 enrollments, reflecting a significant interest in Africa.

Table 4

Top 5 Nationalities with the highest Number of International Students between 2018 and 2023

Nationality	Grand Total
China	10,169
India	7,433
Nigeria	3,238
Korea	2,054
United States of America	903

Source. Raw data were published in the Freedom of Information provided by the Bureau of Immigration (2023).

Implications for Policy and Practice

This policy brief is an extension of our two published articles (Castulo, 2025; Xu et al., 2025) and the CHED Memo Order (CMO) 55 (CHED, 2016), which explored the context of international students in non-Western discourse. Using the RAPID framework proposed by the World Bank (2022), it outlines recommendations for higher education institutions (HEIs) to enhance their recruitment and support of international students.

Reach All International Students. HEIs must ensure accessible and inclusive services for all international students. To address language barriers, institutions should provide language adaptation programs, including English courses and resources, to enhance communication skills before joining local students. Comprehensive orientation programs are essential to help international students navigate their new academic and



cultural environments, fostering a sense of belonging and readiness for success.

Assess Learning. For quality assurance, only institutions with established credentials, such as Centers of Excellence (COE), Centers of Development (COD), State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) Levels 3 and 4, or CHED-autonomous recognition, should recruit international students. This ensures adherence to international standards, which strengthens the reputation of a country's HEIs. Additionally, institutions must establish mechanisms to enforce compliance with the key provisions of CMO 55 (2016), including Articles 5, 10, and 11, while implementing strict monitoring and reporting systems to track progress and accountability. It is important to establish strict quality checks to avoid tagging for diploma mills or 'Fast PhDs' and watered-down PhDs, which recently some Philippine universities labeled as a warning by the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE) (Wang, 2024).

Prioritize the Fundamentals. In compliance with CMO 55 (2016), HEIs should establish International Student Centers as one-stop hubs for institutional support, regardless of whether students come from the Global North or the South. These centers should provide access to essential services such as housing, healthcare, and financial assistance. In the absence of such centers, HEIs must designate counselors to provide immigration advice, academic support, and psychosocial care to address the holistic needs of international students.

Increase the Efficiency of Instruction. HEIs should review degree programs and courses to identify and address potential disadvantages for international students due to cultural and contextual factors, such as mandatory graded courses on local history and literature. Faculties with international backgrounds, such as those with degrees or teaching experience earned abroad, should be assigned to courses involving international students. Furthermore, scholarships should be offered to students from the Global South to align with Sustainable Development Goal 4. b Promoting equitable access to higher education (UN, 2015).

Develop Psychosocial Health and Well-Being. A robust framework for psychosocial support should be established in International Student Centers to address the wellness and well-being of both graduate and undergraduate students. Multicultural counseling should be implemented to mitigate misunderstandings and cultural appropriation, while psychosocial health and well-being education programs can enhance students' awareness of their roles and rights in multicultural environments. Systematic student development activities, including participation in student organizations, should be organized with monitoring and reporting mechanisms as part of the internationalization outcomes. Additionally, career planning and preparation services should be offered to international undergraduate students, focusing on creating a

gender-, race- and language-responsive environment that aligns with global standards.

CONCLUSION

This policy brief provides recommendations for supporting international students' success and facilitating academic transition when they study in the Philippines. International student recruitment comes with a different agenda; in Canada, international students follow the 'designer migration' approach before integrating into Canadian society, providing them with a pathway for migration (Hawthorne, 2012). Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States follow international students as economic assets, focusing on the financial benefits they bring to the higher education sector as a form of neoliberal approach (Harun & Durden, 2024; Lomer, 2017; Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018). In contrast, China offers international students massive free-of-cost international education to the least developed countries towards social justice, enhancing global image and soft power through the internationalization of higher education (Wu, 2018; Yuan, 2022). This raises a critical question: What path should Philippine universities take? Should we play the same rules as our colonial master, or should we be cautious with the rules set for internationalization? Internationalization undoubtedly comes with costs, but how could "we" play the rules they set if the government gives a low budget? Moreover, Philippine higher education has been described as a "failed system" (Second Congressional Commission on Education, 2024). In addition to the issue of the toxification of politics towards international students, Philippine higher education should review the CMO no. 55 series 2016 for the holistic development of international students and align with national capacities and goals that carve out a distinctive role in the global academic community—one that reflects its values while addressing the realities of its socio-political and economic context.

Basis on this Policy Brief:

Castulo, N. J. (2025). Toward learning recovery: Challenges of international students in China during COVID-19 online learning experience. *Quality Education for All*, 2(1), 100–113. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QEA-07-2024-0057>

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