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Beyond Recruitment: The University as Conversion Infrastructure for Migrant Students' Well-being in Poland and Slovakia

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Abstract: Semi-peripheral higher education systems in Central and Eastern Europe increasingly compete for international students, and the displacement of Ukrainian students after 2022 has made the stakes both larger and more urgent. Yet success in this arena is still measured largely by enrolment, a metric that says nothing about whether students flourish once inside the institution. This paper develops a conceptual framework, built as a theory synthesis in Jaakkola's (2020) sense, that positions the university as a conversion infrastructure: a structure of conversion factors that turns institutional and destination resources into migrant students' achieved functionings. It argues that migrant well-being, understood as a profile of functionings rather than an aggregate satisfaction score, is the mechanism linking educational practice to the longer-term outcomes of internationalisation. Drawing together the literatures on migration infrastructure, aspirations and capabilities, opportunity structures, and capability pedagogy, the framework distinguishes two opportunity structures a university mediates and separates a well-being dimension of agency from one of belonging. Illustrated through Ukrainian students in Poland and Slovakia, the framework is used to read a recurring pattern in which agency-supporting provision converts more readily than belonging-supporting provision, and it reframes student support as strategic institutional design rather than peripheral welfare.

Keywords: migrant students, capability approach, internationalisation, student well-being, conversion infrastructure.

Introduction

Research problem

Higher education systems across Central and Eastern Europe are under demographic pressure, and their universities have turned outward to compensate. Countries that once sat at the margins of the international student market now recruit actively to fill places left empty by shrinking domestic cohorts. Poland belongs to this group of semi-peripheral destinations, positioned between the exporting periphery and the importing core, and recruitment there has become a policy priority embedded in wider modernisation agendas rather than an administrative afterthought (Sin et al., 2019). Slovakia's turn to foreign enrolment has been driven by a similar mix of demographic decline and outbound domestic mobility (Petríková, 2020).

The scale of that outward turn became impossible to ignore after February 2022. The invasion of Ukraine displaced large numbers of students into neighbouring systems, and Poland absorbed the largest share: by 2023/24, some 46,200 of roughly 107,000 international students in the country were Ukrainian (Barwińska-Maľajowicz et al., 2024). Slovak enrolment rose from 1,822 in 2017/18 to 5,393 by 2021/22 (Berinšterová, 2023). What had been framed as a competition for talent suddenly involved a cohort whose mobility was bound up with displacement, and whose presence was shaped as much by proximity and protection as by any recruitment strategy.

The dominant way of measuring success is enrolment. Universities and the ministries above them count students recruited, programmes offered in English, and mobility flows, and read growth in those numbers as evidence that internationalisation is working (de Wit, 2011). Yet attracting students is only the first stage. Enrolment says nothing about what happens once a student is inside the institution, and for a displaced cohort, whether these students can build a liveable and productive life while studying is the more urgent question and the one the numbers cannot answer.

Research focus

A second literature takes the university seriously as a migration actor rather than a neutral educational container, showing how universities and the systems around them move, sort, condition, and sometimes immobilise the students passing through them (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014; Brooks & Waters, 2026; Sondhi, 2025), with Brunner (2023) going as far as reading them as instruments of state migration control. What it says little about is whether students flourish. The vocabulary is one of flows and extraction, and student welfare appears, when it appears, as secondary to institutional revenue (Sondhi, 2025).

Research aim

This paper argues that the missing element is a mechanism, and that the mechanism is migrant student well-being. The central proposition is that the university functions as a structure of conversion factors, turning the educational and destination resources around a student into what the student can actually be and do, and that the resulting well-being links institutional practice to the longer-term success of internationalisation. Understood this way, student support ceases to be peripheral welfare and becomes strategic institutional design. Crucially, well-being here is treated not as an aggregate satisfaction score but as a profile of achieved functionings, a distinction that matters both conceptually and for the policy conclusions that follow (Robeyns, 2017).

Two clarifications about scope help orient the reader. Firstly, the framework is general but is illustrated throughout with the post-2022 Ukrainian cohort in Poland and Slovakia. Holding the migrant population roughly constant across two comparable semi-peripheral systems lets the institutional side vary. In contrast, the student side does not, which is what an argument about context rather than migrant characteristics requires. Secondly, the paper is a conceptual contribution rather than an empirical test, built as a theory synthesis in Jaakkola's (2020) sense, and its claims take the form of a framework and propositions rather than hypotheses examined against fresh data.

The argument proceeds in four further steps. The next section works through the literatures the framework draws on, marking the precise point at which each stops short of the phenomenon in question. The third builds the framework itself. The fourth illustrates it through the Ukrainian cohort in Poland and Slovakia. The fifth draws out the implications for universities, ministries, and regional policy, and confronts the objection that treating well-being as a strategic asset instrumentalises the students it claims to serve.

Four conversations and what they leave unexplained

The framework draws on four bodies of scholarship, each illuminating part of the phenomenon while stopping short of the whole. This section takes each in turn, states what it contributes, and marks where it reaches its limit. The final subsection sets out what the framework adds beyond their sum.

Universities as migration infrastructure

The first conversation has established that universities are migration actors rather than neutral educational settings. Its anchor is migration infrastructure, defined by Xiang and Lindquist (2014) as the interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility, and captured in their claim that migrants are moved as much as they migrate. Developed for low-skilled labour migration in Asia, the concept has travelled into international education with little friction. Brooks and Waters (2026) treat the third-party providers now prominent in United Kingdom student mobility as an infrastructure of this kind, and Sondhi (2025) reads universities themselves as financial and knowledge infrastructures that moved during the pandemic to protect fee revenue while the students paying it were stranded. Brunner (2023) reads universities as eyes of the state within a compliance regime that enlists them in monitoring the students they enrol.

This literature has settled that the university belongs inside migration analysis, and it supplies a vocabulary of movement, sorting, and control. What it does not supply is an account of whether students flourish, since welfare enters, when it enters at all, as subordinate to institutional revenue (Sondhi, 2025). How a university produces or fails to produce student well-being remains untheorised.

Migration as capabilities and aspirations

The second conversation supplies a way of thinking about what mobility is for. De Haas (2021) sets aside the push and pull and income-maximising models that long dominated migration theory, and understands migration instead as a function of people's aspirations and capabilities to move within perceived opportunity structures. Drawing on Sen, he redefines mobility not as the act of moving but as the freedom to choose where to live, with staying included as a genuine option. He treats the movement itself as the associated functioning. A person enjoys mobility freedom only when remaining was also a real possibility, which makes migration empowering in some cases and a symptom of constrained choice in others (de Haas, 2021).

The framing is especially pointed for a displaced cohort. If mobility is the freedom to choose where to live, then for students displaced by war that freedom is exactly what has been compromised, since

staying was foreclosed by circumstances beyond their control. That gives a principled reason to treat this population separately rather than folding it into the general category of internationally mobile students. The limit lies elsewhere. De Haas theorises the migrant's capabilities and aspirations as they meet an opportunity structure. However, the institution inside that structure stays part of the backdrop rather than an active producer of conversion.

From the migrant to the context

The third conversation corrects the tendency, common across integration research, to locate the explanation of migrant outcomes in the migrant. Phillimore (2021) observes that European policy describes integration as a two-way process while the research that follows almost always measures refugees rather than the societies receiving them, placing responsibility for success or failure on the newcomer. Her corrective specifies the receiving context through opportunity-structure domains such as locality, discourse, relations, and the structure of rights and support, and argues that outcomes vary between places because these configurations vary, not because migrants do.

The value of this conversation is that it makes the receiving context, rather than the migrant, the variable to be explained, which is the epistemic move on which the present framework rests. Its limit is that its domains describe the environment at large without singling out the university as an institutional actor, and without connecting the contextual account to any theory of how resources are converted into capabilities.

Capability and the university

The fourth conversation connects the capability approach directly to higher education. Walker (2006) argues that university teaching should be evaluated by what it enables students to be and to do, offering an alternative to human capital theory centred on freedom and flourishing, and Walker and McLean (2013) extend this into professional education, treating universities as producers of capabilities that serve the public good rather than only economic returns. Underneath both sits Robeyns' account of how resources become achievements. Robeyns (2005) identifies conversion factors as the pivot of the capability approach, distinguishing personal factors such as skills, social factors such as norms and power relations, and environmental factors such as infrastructure, each determining whether a resource yields a functioning.

This conversation supplies the conversion logic the framework needs and locates it inside the university. Its limit is one of direction. Robeyns' apparatus explains why the same resource yields different functionings for different people, and Walker's argues what universities ought to enable. Neither asks why one institutional arrangement converts some capability domains reliably and others hardly at all for the same person, which the next subsection takes up.

What conversion infrastructure adds

The four conversations converge on a single absence, but naming an absence is not the same as showing it matters. A framework that only staples these literatures together would offer a label rather than an argument. The claim made here is narrower, and if it holds, it is harder to dismiss.

Robeyns explains why identical resources yield different functionings across people, running from personal, social, and environmental characteristics to outcomes. The question here runs the other way. Why does a single institutional arrangement convert some capability domains reliably and others hardly at all, for the same student? Consider two Ukrainian students at one Slovak faculty, on the same scholarship, taught by the same staff. Both may navigate administrative systems competently, and both may reach the

end of the year without a single Slovak friend. Conversion factors in Robeyns' sense cannot account for that difference, because those factors are held constant across the two domains. What varies is not the person but the domain, and what needs explaining is the shape of the profile rather than its level.

A mechanism underlies that shift. Some functionings can be produced by an institution acting on its own, since it owns the classroom, the curriculum, the language course, and the administrative procedure. Others cannot, because their production requires the willing participation of someone the institution does not command. Public administration has long recognised that many public outcomes depend on inputs from outside the producing organisation (Parks et al., 1981; Ostrom, 1996; Bovaird, 2007; Brandsen & Honingh, 2016), and economics has a name for goods that arise only through reciprocal interaction between autonomous parties (Uhlener, 1989; Gui & Sugden, 2005). Neither body of literature has been brought to bear on capability conversion inside universities, and this framework contributes by doing so.

That same literature also marks where the present case departs from it. In the standard formulation, the external participant is also the beneficiary, so the patient follows the treatment and the citizen reports the crime. Belonging is stranger. The required participation comes from a third party, the domestic student, who gains no direct benefit and carries no obligation to provide it. Where this problem has been confronted, the solution has been legal, grounding a duty to co-produce in residence and administrative citizenship (Bertelli & Cannas, 2021). That route is closed here. Recognition owed as an administrative obligation would no longer carry the information that makes recognition worth having. What remains available to the university is pedagogy, and the next section is the work of saying what pedagogy can and cannot do.

The university as conversion infrastructure

This section builds the framework in four moves: the two opportunity structures a university mediates, the conversion process that turns them into a profile of functionings, the pedagogical instrument available for functionings the institution cannot produce directly, and the onward links from that profile to the outcomes universities and ministries care about. Table 1 at the close sets the framework out on two dimensions, one running from institutional to national governance and the other from resources a university can produce alone to those it cannot.

Two opportunity structures

The starting point is that migrant student outcomes are better explained by the receiving context than by the students' characteristics (Phillimore, 2021). This paper specifies the university context by dividing it into two opportunity structures. The dividing line is not ownership, since a university influences almost everything to some degree and a criterion built on control would collapse under its own vagueness. It is production. The question is whether the institution can generate the resource by acting alone, or whether generating it requires the willing participation of people the institution does not command.

Stated that way, the distinction is a gradient rather than a clean division. Access to a language course sits at one end, since the university can schedule and staff it without anyone's agreement but its own. Navigational competence sits further along, because the institution supplies the structures but the student must take them up. Recognition by peers sits at the far end, where the university owns the occasion and very little else. Some resources are genuinely mixed: language is taught inside the institution and encountered outside it, and housing may be institutional, municipal, or private. A gradient locates these without pretending the boundary is sharp.

The first is the institutional opportunity structure, comprising everything the university directly provides or withholds: orientation, language provision, peer mentoring, academic supervision, accommodation support, careers services, and the recognition of prior qualifications. These are not a

miscellany of student services but the levers through which an institution shapes whether a student converts enrolment into a functioning academic and social life. Recognition of qualifications, in particular, is a gatekeeping mechanism that determines whether prior education counts at all in the destination system.

The second is the destination opportunity structure, comprising the features of the wider environment that the university cannot create but can help students reach. Affordability, physical safety, the mobility afforded by the Schengen area, and the receptivity of the surrounding society all fall here. De Haas's (2021) account of perceived opportunity structures warrants treating these as part of what shapes a migrant's realised capabilities, and Sin et al. (2019) find that countries such as Poland attract students substantially on assets external to higher education, including proximity and cost, rather than on institutional excellence.

Two points about this second structure matter. Firstly, the university does not sit passively alongside it. An institution that organises regional travel, communicates entitlements, or brokers access to local life is activating destination resources that would otherwise remain latent. Secondly, the destination structure has a negative pole, and receptivity can be hostility. Ukrainian students in Slovakia have reported prejudice framing them as less civilised, reluctance among locals to share housing, and vulnerability to fraud (Berinšterová, 2023). A conversion account that admits only positive resources would misdescribe the environment these students inhabit and would understate how consequential the university's activating role becomes when the surrounding structure is cold rather than warm.

Conversion and the functioning profile

The two opportunity structures supply resources, and whether those resources become part of a student's life depends on conversion. Applied to the university, the claim is that the institution is itself a dense array of the personal, social, and environmental conversion factors Robeyns (2005) identifies. A language course is a resource; whether it converts into participation in academic and social life depends on a student's prior linguistic proximity to the host language, on whether local students are willing to interact, and on whether the institution provides the course at all. The university, on this reading, is not a provider of discrete services but a conversion infrastructure determining the rate at which resources of both structures become functionings.

The output of this process is well-being, and the central conceptual claim concerns what well-being is taken to be. It is tempting to represent it as an aggregate measure of life satisfaction. Robeyns (2017) warns against this at exactly the level of analysis that concerns us here, arguing that reported satisfaction generates perverse policy conclusions where there are systematic differences between groups, and is too crude below national aggregation. Her alternative is to attend to the specific beings and doings that make up a life rather than to a single summary. This paper treats migrant student well-being as a profile of functionings rather than a score.

The framework works with two dimensions of that profile, and their status matters. They are exemplary rather than exhaustive. The capability approach resists fixed lists, and the educational literature on belonging alone identifies domains this paper does not treat, including surroundings and personal space alongside academic and social engagement (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Two are used here because they differ maximally in how far a university can produce them, which is the question the framework is built to examine, and because the available evidence on this population reports both. The first concerns agency and navigation, the capacity to manage the practical business of studying and living and to exercise some control over one's situation. The second concerns belonging and relatedness, the sense of being connected, accepted, and needed by others in the host setting. Other dimensions could be added, and a fuller profile

would need them. The two can diverge rather than rise and fall together in the population this paper illustrates, where agency items score highest and belonging and being needed lowest among Ukrainian students at a Bratislava faculty (Chrancoková & Mitková, 2026).

The finding is one study rather than a body of evidence, but it shows why the profile matters. A single satisfaction score would have registered these students as moderately included and left it there, concealing the very pattern that is analytically and practically decisive. Disaggregated into functionings, the same students appear as people whose agency the institutional structure has converted reasonably well while their belonging has gone largely unconverted. The authors' own recommendation, that universities respond with mixed study groups, peer mentoring, and structured social activity rather than with more digital provision, is in effect a prescription addressed to the institutional opportunity structure (Chrancoková & Mitková, 2026). Two caveats accompany this. Administering a host-language instrument to Ukrainian respondents may have distorted the abstract belonging items, which is precisely where the headline sits, and the scale is largely one-dimensional, so the contrast is a pattern across items rather than a difference between validated subscales (Chrancoková & Mitková, 2026). The finding is an indication, not a settled measurement.

That second caveat generalises and belongs to the argument rather than sitting beside it. Belonging measurement in higher education is fragmented. A systematic review identified 198 instruments across 485 studies, three-quarters used only once, and found none meeting full psychometric standards (Priestley et al., 2026). The most extensively validated instrument dropped its peer-relationship items during development because they would not load, leaving institutional affiliation dominant (Slaten et al., 2018). Where acceptance and recognition are measured separately, they are the least stable items over time, and least stable of all for students with a migration background (Dias-Broens et al., 2026). The dimension this framework treats as hardest to produce is also the one the field measures least securely, and the two are probably related for the same reason.

Pedagogy and the limits of institutional production

If belonging sits at the low-producibility end of the gradient, the obvious inference is that universities can do little about it. The inference is too quick, and correcting it is where the framework becomes an argument about education rather than about administration. A university cannot produce recognition. It can produce the conditions under which recognition becomes more likely, and pedagogy is the instrument through which it does so.

What teaching owns is a set of interactional properties rather than an outcome. A curriculum determines how often particular students encounter one another and for how long; assessment design determines whether one student's result depends on another's contribution; the definition of expertise in a task determines who arrives as competent; and compulsion removes exit, since a student may decline a society but cannot decline a required seminar. What teaching does not own is the interpretation participants place on any of this. It cannot compel liking, respect, or recognition. Pedagogy shapes the distribution of possible outcomes without determining which one occurs.

That is what allows a compulsory arrangement to yield a non-compulsory good. The objection that engineered interaction cannot produce authentic recognition assumes that compulsion travels all the way through, and it does not. Most durable adult relationships begin in settings nobody chose. What matters is not whether the first encounter was voluntary but whether what follows it remains so. The institution obliges the encounter, and the participants decide what it means.

Whether the encounter produces recognition or its opposite is an empirical question, and the default answer is not reassuring. Rafferty (2013) reports domestic MBA students describing assessed group work

with international peers in terms of language difficulty, absent contributors, and work they had to redo, with one group reallocating writing away from the international student and arguing that instructors should account for this in grading. The interaction was compelled and sustained, and what it co-produced was grievance: the arrangement compelled interdependence while leaving the existing competence gradient intact, so every ambiguous moment had an explanation ready to hand in the very difference it was meant to bridge. Cruickshank et al. (2012) show what alters the result. Their redesigned humanities unit used weekly regrouping, structured turn-taking, a cap on native speakers per group, and assessment options crediting different bases of knowledge. Group work then appeared among the best features of the course for thirty-eight of forty-two students, with no adverse comment from domestic participants. The mechanism is not contact but reversal: domestic students could not answer questions about the grammar of their own language, which repositioned international students as the knowledgeable party for the duration of the task.

That yields a proposition sharper than an appeal to well-designed contact. Compelled interdependence should produce recognition where the task distributes expertise across the groups being brought together, which specifies for this population what the contact literature calls equal status (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and should produce resentment where it leaves the prevailing competence gradient undisturbed. Both cases above are consistent with it, and it would be refuted by a case in which the reversal is present, and recognition does not follow.

This is where the university separates from other institutions facing the same production problem. Hospitals, employment offices, and municipalities all depend on inputs they cannot command. What distinguishes a university is that teaching already organises repeated, sustained, structured encounters among autonomous people over long periods. It does so for reasons unconnected to integration, so the relational apparatus is in place before anyone decides to use it for this purpose. Relational scholarship in higher education has argued that connection and mattering belong at the centre of pedagogy (Gravett et al., 2024); the claim here is narrower, that some functionings can be produced by an institution acting alone while others cannot, and that pedagogy is the only lever a university holds over the second kind.

From well-being to sustainable internationalisation

If migrant student well-being is a functioning profile produced by conversion, the framework's final move connects that profile to the outcomes that make it matter to universities and ministries. What the evidence supports must be separated from what it does not, since the credibility of a conceptual framework depends on marking that seam.

The first link, from well-being to the intention to recommend, is empirically supported. Ammigan et al. (2021), on a sample of over thirty thousand international students, show that satisfaction and willingness to recommend have distinct drivers, with recommendation responding more to longer-term value such as employability and language support than to immediate contentment, which indicates that what converts into advocacy is not surface satisfaction but the deeper functionings the profile captures. Le et al. (2019) reinforce the channel, showing that prospective students seek peer testimony on exactly the destination-structure factors this framework identifies, and Pedro et al. (2016) add, more cautiously given inconsistencies in their reporting, that the quality of academic life predicts both loyalty and recommendation.

Beyond this point, the chain becomes a proposition rather than a finding. Recommendation aggregates into reputation, reputation sustains recruitment, and recruitment feeds regional competitiveness as universities become anchors of talent in their localities. The sequence is consistent with the policy rationales Sin et al. (2019) document for semi-peripheral states attaching to internationalisation.

However, the later links have not been demonstrated as clearly as the first. Following the convention that conceptual papers should offer propositions close to testable hypotheses (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015), each is stated below with the conditions under which it should hold and fail, since a proposition that cannot fail is not a proposition.

The first is that institutional conversion of the belonging dimension, and not the agency dimension alone, predicts advocacy and reputation. It should hold most strongly where prospective students rely on peer testimony rather than published indicators (Le et al., 2019), and should weaken where recruitment is mediated by agents paid on enrolment, since the testimony reaching applicants then comes from someone with no stake in what happened after arrival. A human capital account would predict that employability carries advocacy on its own, and the two separate by asking whether belonging adds explanatory power once graduate outcomes are controlled.

The second is that reputation built on lived student experience is more durable than reputation built on recruitment marketing. The scope condition is repeated intake from the same sending communities, so one cohort's account reaches the next. Where intake is dispersed across many origins, or where attractiveness rests on tuition and visa terms, policy can alter overnight; the proposition should fail, and reputation should track price. A rival account would predict that measured rank dominates regardless of experience, testable wherever rank and reported experience move in opposite directions.

The framework drawn together

Drawn together, the framework crosses two dimensions. The first is the level at which a resource is governed, running from the institution to the national context. The second is how far a resource can be produced by an institution acting alone, running from those it generates unilaterally to those requiring participation it cannot command. Crossing these boundaries yields four positions rather than two structures, as set out in Table 1. The central claim follows: systems under recruitment pressure invest heavily wherever production is unilateral, at both levels, and leave the co-produced positions largely to chance.

Table 1

Resources by level of governance and by producibility

	Institutional	National and destination
Produced by the institution acting alone	<i>Institutional provision.</i> Language courses, orientation and information, credential recognition, curricular grouping	<i>Statutory entitlement.</i> Residence rights, tuition and fee rules, permission to work, recognition of prior study
Requires participation the institution cannot command	<i>Recognition on campus.</i> Standing among peers, academic belonging, friendship with domestic students	<i>Societal receptivity.</i> Local acceptance, absence of hostility, ties beyond the campus

Note. The upper row is where provision concentrates in the systems examined here. The lower row is largely left to chance.

The university, as a structure of conversion factors, turns the resources of all four positions at some rate into a profile of functionings whose two principal dimensions can diverge. That profile feeds, through a link the evidence supports, into willingness to recommend, and thereafter, through links proposed for testing, into reputation and recruitment. Setting it out this way locates the analytic action at the conversion step, specifically in the gap between the two dimensions, and keeps the supported and proposed portions of the chain distinct.

Illustrating the framework: Ukrainian students in Poland and Slovakia

The framework developed above is general in form, but it was not built in the abstract. It was developed against the case set out here, which makes this material the framework's point of origin rather than a test of it. This section reads post-2022 Ukrainian students in Poland and Slovakia through the two opportunity structures and the functioning profile, treating the two systems not as an empirical comparison but as material that makes the conversion logic visible.

Why this pairing

The comparative value of Poland and Slovakia rests on what they hold constant and what they allow to vary. Both turned to international recruitment under demographic pressure and the outbound mobility of their own students (Sin et al., 2019; Petříková, 2020), and both received large numbers of Ukrainian students whose mobility after February 2022 was bound up with displacement rather than free choice. Because the student population is broadly similar across the two settings, the pairing holds the migrant side roughly constant while allowing the institutional side to differ. That is useful for a context argument, though it is not a research design and nothing here identifies a causal effect. Institutional architecture is described first and functionings second, so that the framework organises the material rather than confirming a prior expectation about outcomes.

The pairing also bounds the claim. What the framework proposes is that universities embedded in systems which internationalised rapidly, under demographic pressure, and without a comparable expansion of relational infrastructure should develop conversion profiles weighted toward the functionings they can produce alone. That proposition is narrower than a claim about universities in general. It is vulnerable accordingly, since institutions organised around residential learning communities would not be expected to show the same pattern.

Poland

Poland is the larger and more visible case. Its Ukrainian intake by 2023/24 accounted for over forty per cent of all international students in the country (Barwińska-Małąjowicz et al., 2024).

Poland's institutional response was comparatively coherent. Existing legislation and administrative capacity let universities move quickly on tuition exemptions and simplified admission, and earlier experience of internationalisation was converted into English-medium provision, hybrid delivery, and bridging semesters (Knapková, 2025). Read through the framework: a system performs well on the functions it can generate alone.

Slovakia

Slovakia is the smaller case but the more revealing, because the available evidence disaggregates well-being in exactly the way the framework predicts. Ukrainian enrolment grew substantially in the years before the war (Berinšterová, 2023), and the state covers the cost of host-language instruction for foreign students, giving institutions a revenue motive to enrol them (Petříková, 2020) and locating Slovakia within the commodifying logic the critical literature warns against (Lomer et al., 2023).

The institutional opportunity structure in Slovakia converts unevenly, and the pattern is instructive. Balogová and Kovalchuk (2024), surveying 103 Ukrainian students at two universities in eastern Slovakia, find that language assistance is the support service most widely used, that awareness of mentoring and adaptation programmes is much lower, and that 42.7 per cent turn to organisations outside the university when adaptation problems arise. The institution, in other words, converts the legible resource, language, while under-providing the relational supports, and students route around it. A profile of the same shape

appears at a different Slovak institution. Chrancoková and Mitková (2026), in a pilot survey of 85 Ukrainian students at one faculty in Bratislava, report agreement highest on items about agency and lowest on belonging and on being needed by others, only five respondents with close Slovak friends, and messaging platforms serving contact with family in Ukraine far more than the making of new local ties. They read this as inclusion sustained by transnational and co-national ties rather than by host-society embeddedness. Both studies are small and self-selected, and the inclusion scale used in the second is largely one-dimensional, so the contrast between agency and belonging is a pattern across items rather than a difference between validated subscales. The framework draws a distinction that existing belonging instruments were not designed to detect.

The comparative payoff

Read together, the two systems point the same way. In both, universities provide the conversion factor that is easiest to see and fund: language. At the same time, the relational supports are thinner, and students route around the institution toward co-national networks, digital ties to home, or organisations outside it (Balogová & Kovalchuk, 2024; Chrancoková & Mitková, 2026). A comparative study covering both countries reports satisfaction with access and teaching quality, alongside weak social ties to domestic peers, a pattern staff called parallel communities (Knapková, 2025). None of this establishes that institutional design causes the pattern. It shows that the pattern is legible through the framework, and that reading it this way raises questions about provision that a focus on student characteristics would not.

Discussion

The framework carries implications for universities and for the ministries above them. However, implications drawn from a framework are not yet advice, and the subsections that follow keep the two apart.

Implications for institutional and public policy

For universities, the central implication is that student support should be reclassified. Orientation, mentoring, language provision, and the brokering of local life are not peripheral welfare functions but the mechanisms through which enrolment becomes a workable academic and social existence. Because institutions in both Poland and Slovakia convert the legible resource of language while under-providing the relational supports the functionings evidence identifies as decisive (Balogová & Kovalchuk, 2024; Chrancoková & Mitková, 2026), the belonging dimension deserves attention it does not currently receive. The Slovak study recommends mixed study groups, structured peer contact, and social programming (Chrancoková & Mitková, 2026), and the framework supports the direction while attaching a condition. Arrangements of this kind alter the probability of recognition rather than delivering it, and they can move that probability either way. Hence, the design question is not whether students are brought together but whether the task distributes expertise across the groups being brought together. Support understood this way is curricular design rather than welfare provision, and strategic rather than a cost to be minimised.

For ministries, the implication concerns what internationalisation is measured by. Prevailing metrics count students recruited and programmes delivered, treating activity as evidence of success (de Wit, 2011). If well-being is the mechanism linking educational practice to durable outcomes, indicators of student experience and inclusion belong inside the assessment of internationalisation strategy rather than outside it, supplementing enrolment figures so that the stage after arrival becomes visible to those setting national policy.

Running through these implications is a single principle about where responsibility sits. Obligation tracks what an institution can actually do, changing in kind as producibility falls rather than simply weakening. Where a university generates a resource directly, it owes provision, and a shortfall is its own. Where it has delegated production, it owes stewardship, since the decision to delegate was itself an institutional act and does not transfer responsibility with the function. Where the functioning depends on participation the institution cannot command, it owes neither provision nor a guarantee. However, it does owe the design of conditions under which that functioning becomes more likely, together with an account of the choices it has made in doing so.

What the framework does not license

Recommendations drawn from a framework tend to arrive as though institutions were free to act on them, and they are not. Three constraints deserve stating.

The first is scarcity, and it is not always the institution's doing. Where advising hours, hardship funds, and staff attention are fixed, an hour directed toward one cohort is an hour withdrawn from another, and the Polish material records domestic students perceiving exactly that. The framework does not resolve such a conflict and should not pretend to. What it offers is a distinction between two situations that look alike. Where a blockage could be removed by redesign within an institution's existing authority, without creating an equivalent blockage elsewhere, the obligation is to remove it. Where the conflict is real, the obligation is to make the reasoning public and open to challenge, a weaker duty but not a trivial one, since a decision that cannot be contested is not accountable merely because it has been announced. Scarcity is also often manufactured elsewhere: a ministry that expands recruitment without expanding capacity creates competition between legitimate claims and leaves universities to be judged on how they resolve it.

The second is that institutions face incentives the framework cannot alter. Universities operate inside funding formulas, rankings, and reporting regimes that reward what can be counted, and belonging is slow, expensive, and awkward to measure. Work on how measurement reshapes the organisations subject to it suggests the difficulty is not indifference but attention flowing toward the legible. A framework recommending investment in the least legible functioning recommends what the incentive environment discourages.

The third is the least comfortable, because it follows from the framework's own logic. If responsibility tracks authority, an institution can reduce what it answers for by reducing what it holds. Language provision moves to commercial providers, recruitment to agents, accommodation to private operators, advising to platforms. Each decision looks locally rational, and the accumulated effect is a student who meets a sequence of specialised suppliers rather than an institution. In contrast, the relational functionings no supplier can sell are owned by nobody. The earliest work on co-production made the same warning, that a neighbourhood organising its own patrols may simply receive fewer police (Parks et al., 1981). The reply is that constitutional authority survives the delegation of operational authority, because the decision to delegate is itself something the institution did.

The instrumentalisation objection

The framework faces a serious objection, and honesty requires stating it in its strongest form. By treating student well-being as a mechanism producing reputation, recruitment, and competitiveness, the argument appears to value flourishing for what it yields the institution rather than for the student's own sake. Karram (2013) shows how national and institutional discourse recasts international students as a lucrative market while the support literature describing their difficulties rarely challenges the policies producing them, and Lomer et al. (2023) argue that research on international students routinely constitutes them as deficient, so that even well-meaning support framings reproduce that deficit. A

framework positioning well-being as strategically useful risks sliding into this register, in which students become inputs to an institutional objective.

The response is not to deny the tension but to be explicit about the order of priority. Well-being is the end and competitiveness the byproduct, not the reverse. The conversion account is grounded in the capability approach, whose defining commitment is to what people can be and do, evaluated for their own sake rather than as instruments to some further goal (Robeyns, 2005). Reading well-being as a functioning profile reinforces this, since the disaggregation exists to reveal where students are not flourishing rather than to optimise a metric serving the institution. The strategic links to reputation and recruitment are reasons an institution acting in its own interest would have to attend to student flourishing, which is a claim about alignment, not a redefinition of students as means, and surfacing them removes the excuse of indifference.

A second version of the objection deserves the same treatment. If belonging is co-produced and domestic students supply what the institution cannot, then a framework recommending that universities engineer their participation risks treating one group as the means to another's flourishing. The reply has the same structure. Domestic students hold capability claims of equal standing, including a claim on the educational value of what they are asked to do, and an arrangement that cannot be justified to them as education rather than as service is not one this framework supports.

Conclusion

The question this paper began with was not how semi-peripheral universities attract migrant students, but what happens to those students once they have arrived, and whether the systems recruiting them can tell. The answer determines whether internationalisation amounts to anything more durable than a headcount, and it runs through the university itself, understood as a structure that either converts the resources around a student into a life worth living or fails to. Well-being, read as a profile of what students can be and do rather than a single measure of contentment, is where that conversion becomes legible.

The framework offers a way of seeing an institution's ordinary work differently. A language course, a mentoring scheme, an assessment task that makes students depend on one another stop being services to be trimmed and become the machinery through which a displaced student gains a foothold. The pattern in the illustrative cases, where the easily funded resource is provided and the harder relational one left to chance, is not a fixed feature of these systems but a consequence of how the two kinds of resource are produced, and is therefore open to revision.

Two commitments follow, and they pull against each other. A university cannot produce belonging, because the participation it requires belongs to people the institution does not command, including domestic students whose own claims stand on equal footing. And a university is not thereby excused, because pedagogy gives it more purchase on the conditions of recognition than any other public institution holds. Responsibility that tracks capacity is more modest than a promise to make students belong, and more demanding than an admission that nothing can be done.

The task ahead is to test what has been proposed. The propositions live at the level of institutional populations rather than individual cases. Hence, the evidence they require is comparative and longitudinal, measuring both student groups, the organisation of teaching, and perceptions of distributive fairness alongside reported well-being. This paper cannot supply that. The measurement problem is sharper still, since the dimension the framework treats as hardest to produce is also the one existing instruments capture least securely. A university willing to treat these as questions worth answering would already have grasped the paper's central point, that the students it helps to flourish are the measure of its future, not merely its present.

Ethics approval

This study did not involve human participants, human data, or animals. This conceptual paper develops a theoretical framework by synthesising previously published, publicly available scholarship. Ethics committee approval was therefore not required.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study. All sources supporting the arguments are cited in the reference list and are available through their respective publishers.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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