

Educational Integration, Social Inclusion and Transition to Work: A Scoping Review of Conceptual Frameworks

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Abstract: This study examines frameworks that describe educational integration, social inclusion, and the transition to working life among students with immigrant backgrounds in higher education. A scoping review of 14 studies identified three framework clusters: social inclusion, educational support, and transition to working life. The findings show overlap but limited integration, particularly in linking pedagogy to labour market outcomes. A multi-level model (micro, meso, macro) is proposed, interpreted through the lenses of educational integration, social inclusion, and knowledge management, highlighting the need for more integrated approaches.

Keywords: Educational integration, Social inclusion, Knowledge management, Higher education, Immigrant students, Transition to working life

1. Introduction

International mobility has increased the diversity of student populations in higher education (OECD 2025a), placing pressure on institutions to respond to labour market demands and support the integration of students with immigrant backgrounds into both working life and academic communities (OECD 2025b). This paper examines conceptual frameworks describing educational integration, social inclusion, and transition to work, aiming to develop a multi-level understanding across individual, institutional, and structural levels.

Existing research has addressed these perspectives separately, with limited attention to their interconnections. In previous research, education integration, social inclusion, and the transition to working life have often been examined from the perspectives of different disciplines. While educational research has primarily focused on student integration and retention, as an example Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration, sociological studies have emphasized social inclusion, social capital, and inequality, as an example Bourdieu's (1977) theory of capital. Research on labour market integration has examined employability and transition-to-work processes, often grounded to human capital theory by Becker (NBER 2020). A central challenge, therefore, lies in balancing scalable institutional strategies with the need for flexible, student-centered support that promotes equitable inclusion and meaningful labour market integration for students with immigrant backgrounds.

This scoping review maps conceptual frameworks describing educational integration, social inclusion, and knowledge management and identifies key concepts, theoretical approaches, and knowledge gaps (Pollock et al. 2024). The review indicates that the primary conceptual and practical challenge concerns how higher education institutions can reconcile institutional efficiency and standardized integration practices with equitable, context-sensitive, and student-centered inclusion strategies.

2. Conceptual Background

In this study, educational integration, social inclusion, and knowledge management are understood as complementary and interconnected concepts (Figure 1). Educational integration provides a framework for examining how students with immigrant backgrounds become academically and socially attached to higher education institutions. Social inclusion broadens this perspective by highlighting how access to cultural, social, and economic capital influences students' opportunities for participation, belonging, and success in both higher education and the labour market. Knowledge management contributes an organisational perspective by explaining how higher education institutions can identify, create, share, and utilise knowledge to develop effective support services, guidance practices, and stakeholder collaboration.

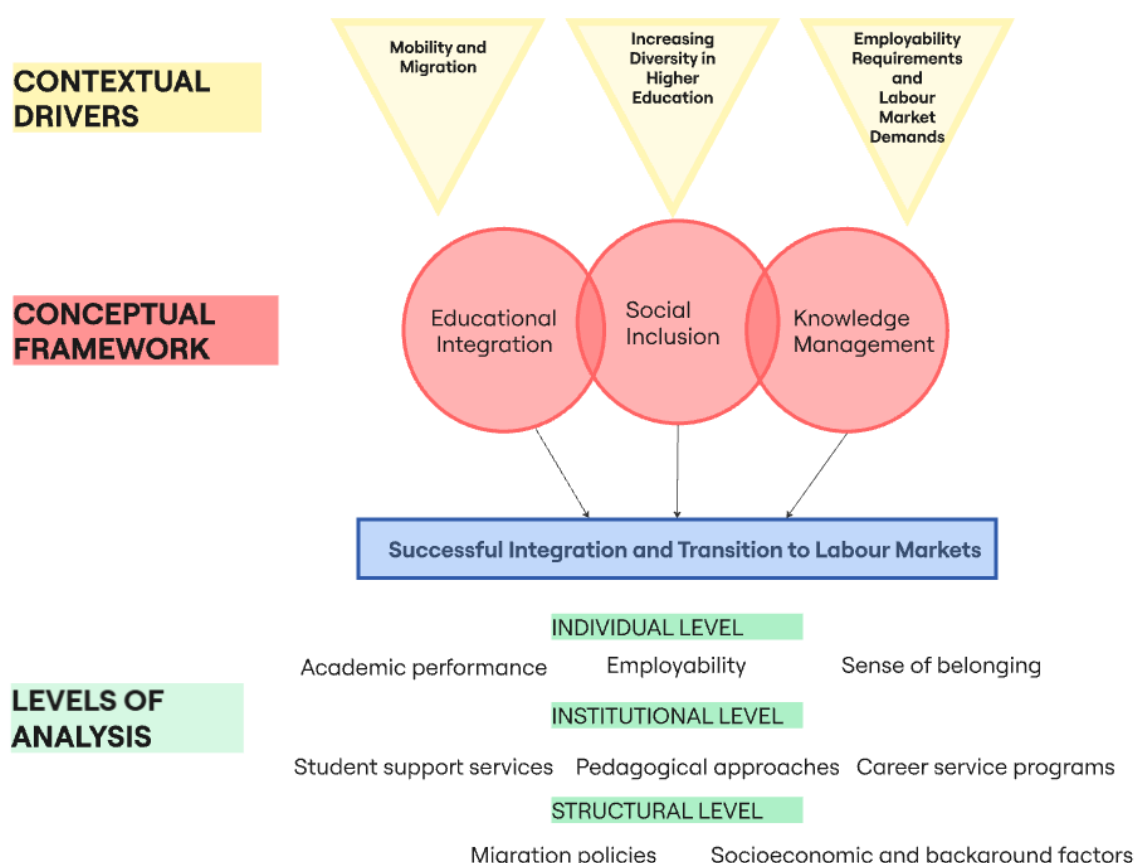


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Educational integration is understood as a process in which a student becomes attached to a higher education institution both academically and socially. Tinto's (1975) classical theory conceptualises student integration as a framework in which academic and social integration influence students' attachment to their studies. Higher education institutions should promote integration through various support mechanisms, such as early-stage orientation, the development of academic advising services, mentoring, and fostering participation in social activities (Samoila & Vrabie, 2023). Tinto's framework focuses primarily on students' academic and social engagement within higher education institutions; broader structural and societal factors also shape integration processes. Globalisation, increasing international mobility, and growing student diversity have transformed education approaches worldwide, creating new demands for education policies and institutional practices. Research suggests that international organisations, particularly the OECD, have played a significant role in shaping educational governance through policy recommendations, performance indicators, and standardised approaches aimed at improving migrant students' educational outcomes (Hajisoteriou and Neophytou 2022).

Social inclusion in Bourdieu's (1977) theory is defined by three forms of capital: cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital. Cultural capital includes, for example, language skills, education, and behavioral norms; social capital refers to networks and relationships; economic capital consists of resources and wealth. Students with immigrant background may face unequal access to these forms of capital. It may influence their integration into higher education and their transition to the labour market. When comparing these two theoretical perspectives: educational integration and social inclusion, it can be argued that educational integration explains student persistence as a function of academic and social integration, whereas social inclusion highlights how unequal access to cultural and social capital shapes students' ability to integrate into higher education. Together, these two perspectives provide an understanding of how higher education institutions and employers can support inclusion, belonging, educational success, and successful transition into employment among students with immigrant background.

Knowledge management focuses on how organizations create, utilize, and share knowledge to develop their practices and decision-making. In the higher education context, knowledge management is reflected in the

development of student support services based on student individual needs, which emphasizes the heterogeneity and diversity of students, and collaboration between stakeholders (Alisaari et al. 2025). Successful integration also requires higher education institutions to effectively manage and apply knowledge. Collaboration between universities and employers can facilitate students' transition to working life (Tzavidas et al. 2020).

3. Methods

3.1 Study Design

This study was conducted as a scoping review to map research on conceptual frameworks describing educational integration and social inclusion in higher education, and their role in supporting students with migration backgrounds in the transition to working life. Scoping reviews are suitable for examining complex or unclear phenomena, providing a broad overview of existing knowledge (Pollock et al. 2024). They address broader questions and apply more inclusive criteria, enabling the identification of diverse evidence (Munn et al. 2018). The review followed the relevant reporting principles of PRISMA 2020, to ensure transparency in study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (see Figure 2).

3.2 Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included if they explicitly referred to integration and/or social inclusion and focused on the higher education context and transition to working life. Studies needed to be peer-reviewed journal articles. Studies were excluded if they did not include a conceptual or theoretical framework, were purely descriptive without analytical contribution, or focused on context unrelated to higher education.

3.3 Information Sources and Search Strategy

The search strategy combined keywords related to integration, inclusion, education, labor markets, and conceptual frameworks. The literature search was conducted in the Scopus database. The search-query reads as: (immigrant* OR migrant* OR refugee* OR "international student*" OR "ethnic minorit*" OR "minority student*" OR "culturally diverse") AND ("higher education" OR universit* OR "tertiary education" OR "postsecondary education") AND (integration OR inclusion OR "social inclusion" OR belonging OR participation OR acculturation) AND (employ* OR employability OR "transition to work" OR "school-to-work" OR career* OR "labour market" OR "labor market") AND (approach* OR intervention* OR strateg* OR program* OR support* OR model* OR framework* OR practice* OR pedagog* OR curriculum). The search was limited to peer-reviewed publications, which were published between 2016 and 2026 to ensure the inclusion of recent and accessible research. This limitation was also motivated by the aim to capture contemporary pedagogical approaches and developments, especially those influenced by the increasing role of digitalization and the digital leap in higher education, including the expansion of digital learning environments and hybrid pedagogies. The included studies were published in journals published by Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, and Springer Nature. These publishers were selected because they are among the leading international academic publishers in the fields of education, social sciences, and migration studies, and their journals maintain rigorous peer-review standards and broad international visibility. Publisher was not used as an independent quality criterion; instead, studies were assessed against the predefined eligibility criteria, including peer-review status, and relevance to the research question. Only publications written in English were considered.

3.4 Selection Process

The article selection process followed PRISMA guidelines. Through database searches, a total of 2673 records were identified. After the removal of 794 duplicate records, 1,879 records remained. The titles of these records were screened against the eligibility criteria, resulting in the exclusion of 1,614 records and the retention of 265 records for abstract screening. Following abstract screening, 46 articles were retained for full-text assessment. All 46 full-text articles were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. During this stage, 32 articles were excluded for reasons including the lack of a higher education context, insufficient relevance to transition to working life and the absence of a pedagogical, integration, or social-inclusion perspective. Screening was conducted by the first author. Any disagreements concerning eligibility were resolved through discussion with a second author. The complete study-selection process is presented in Figure 2.

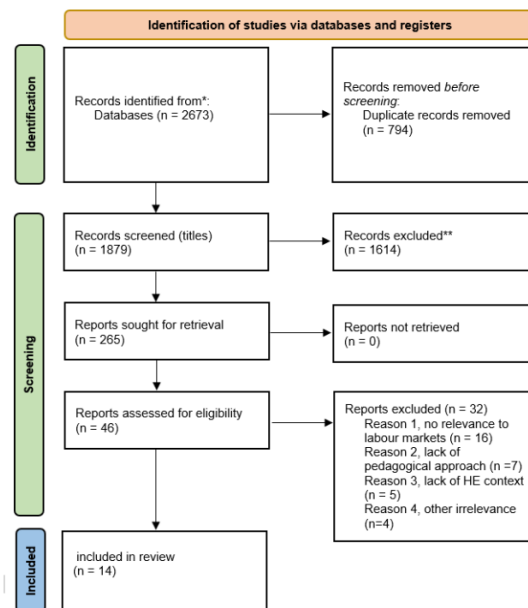


Figure 2: PRISMA flow diagram of the study-identification and selection process. Source: Authors' own elaboration

3.5 Data Analysis

The 14 included articles were systematically coded using a predefined analytical framework comprising the following categories: definitions of integration into culture and/or working life, definitions of inclusion, conceptualizations of pedagogy, research methods, study type, theoretical or conceptual frameworks, and key findings. The coded data were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008), whereby concepts and findings were compared across studies and grouped into descriptive themes. Through an iterative process of constant comparison, these themes were further refined and organized into higher-order conceptual clusters. This enabled the development of an analytical synthesis that identifies common patterns and differences in how higher education, inclusion, integration, and transitions to working life are conceptualized within the reviewed literature.

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics of the Included Studies

The 14 included articles (see References, list of included articles) were conducted across diverse geographical regions worldwide. A structured data-charting form was used to record information consistently across the included studies. They included immigrant and international students facing barriers to participation in higher education and employment. Exchange students were excluded from the study because their integration into the labour market of the host country was not relevant. The articles were coded for definitions of integration into education, culture, or working life; definitions of inclusion: definitions related to pedagogy; and key findings, based on which the main characteristics and key concepts were identified (Table 1). In addition, the population, and the country in which each study were coded. Of the included studies, seven were qualitative, three were quantitative, three used mixed methods, and one was a comparative analysis.

Table 1: Main characteristics and key concepts of the included articles. Source: Authors' own synthesis based on the reviewed studies.

Author (Year)	Country	Method	Context/population	Key Concepts
Lin, Yuqi (2025)	Australia/China	Comparative analysis	International graduates	Opportunities, participation
Zhang et. al (2025)	Malaysia	Quantitative	Immigrant students	Language and cultural training, provider of skills
Chiu et. al (2025)	UK	Qualitative	Immigrant students	Belonging, participation in academic life

Author (Year)	Country	Method	Context/population	Key Concepts
Hun Debo (2023)	Norway	Quantitative	Immigrant students	Social integration, participation in labour markets
Hu, Lue (2025)	United States	Qualitative	Immigrant students	Belonging, participation, equal opportunities for engagement in studies
Coustere et. al (2024)	Canada	Qualitative	Immigrant students	Migration policies, career pathways, participation in on campus
Brotherhood et al. (2024)	Japan	Mixed methods	Immigrant students	Participation in on-campus, participation in academic society, social integration
Ennerberg, Economou (2022)	Sweden	Qualitative	Migrant teachers	Migration policies, career pathways, participation in labour markets, opportunities
Chen (2022)	Japan	Qualitative	International University faculty members	Participation, belonging, social integration
Hsu, Chen (2021)	Taiwan	Quantitative	Immigrant working students	Participation, language and culture training during studies, migration policies, access to labour markets
Cerna, Chou (2023)	Global	Literature review	Literature review	Mobility opportunities, transition to working life, migration policies, participation in academic society
Rosvall et al. (2022)	Sweden	Qualitative	Immigrant students, immigrant employers, education, and employment professionals	Participation, belonging, participation in academic society, migration policies, access to education and labour markets, language, and culture learning
Samaluk (2025)	Slovenia	Qualitative	Immigrant workers from different career stages	Access to labour markets from education, participation in labour markets
Mathies, Karhunen (2021)	Finland	Quantitative	Immigrants' graduates follow -up.	Belonging, opportunities, participation in labour markets, adapting

Identified Frameworks and Models

The synthesis identifies three framework categories describing educational integration, social inclusion, and transition to work. Many studies included concepts from multiple frameworks, so articles were not confined to a single category.

Social Inclusion Frameworks: This framework identifies the social factors that influence an individual's integration into society. It emphasizes the importance of belonging, participation, and social integration (Chen 2022; Chiu et al. 2025; Hsu & Chen 2021; Hundebø 2023; Rosvall et al. 2022; Xu & Lue 2025; Zhang et al. 2025). Social inclusion is facilitated by individuals' ability to interact and communicate effectively, highlighting the importance of learning the local language (Brotherhood & Patterson 2024; Rosvall et al. 2022; Zhang et al. 2025). Acceptance by members of the academic and/or work community is considered essential for successful inclusion (Chen 2022; Coustere et al. 2024). Together, these factors support individuals' adaptation to institutional and organizational requirements.

Educational Support Frameworks: This framework identifies the needed actions from higher education institutions to support individuals' integration to social inclusion, transition into the labour market, and integration. It emphasizes the importance of individuals' participation both on campus and within the broader academic community (Hu & Lue 2025; Chen 2022). Higher education institutions are viewed as a provider of essential skills and support, including language and cultural training during studies (Hsu & Chen 2021; Hu & Lue 2025; Lin 2025; Zhang et al. 2025). The recognition of competencies, mobility opportunities, and equal opportunities for engagement in academic activities play a crucial role in supporting successful studies and facilitating the transition into working life (Chiu et al. 2025; Hu & Lue 2025; Hundebø 2023; Rosvall et al. 2022).

Transition-to-working-life Frameworks: The framework identifies the factors required for a successful transition into the labour market. It emphasizes the importance of access to and participation in both higher education and working life. Individuals' opportunities for inclusion are shaped by migration policies and the availability of educational and employment opportunities (Cerna & Chou 2023; Coustere et al. 2024; Ennerberg & Economou 2022; Hundebø 2023; Li 2025; Rosvall et al. 2022; Samaluk 2025). Labour market participation and adaptation in work environments are viewed as a key factor in supporting the development of meaningful career pathways and facilitating long-term social and economic integration (Cerna & Chou 2023; Coustere et al. 2024; Ennerberg & Economou 2022; Hsu & Chen 2021; Mathies & Karhunen 2021). Conceptual clustering of identified frameworks is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Conceptual clustering of identified frameworks. Source: Authors' own synthesis based on the reviewed studies

Study	Key Concepts	Framework Category
Lin, Yuqi (2025)	Opportunities, participation	Social inclusion, Transition -to-working-life
Zhang et. al (2025)	Language and cultural training, provider of skills	Educational support
Chiu et. al (2025)	Belonging, participation in academic life	Social inclusion, educational support
Hundebø (2023)	Social integration, participation in labour markets	Social inclusion, educational support
Hu, Lue (2025)	Belonging, participation, equal opportunities for engagement in studies	Educational support
Coustere et. al (2024)	Migration policies, career pathways, participation in on campus	Transition-to-working life, educational support
Brotherhood et al. (2024)	Participation in on-campus, participation in academic society, social integration	Educational support, social inclusion
Ennerberg, Economou (2022)	Migration policies, career pathways, participation in labour markets, opportunities	Transition-to-working-life
Chen (2022)	Participation, belonging, social integration	Social inclusion
Hsu, Chen (2021)	Participation, language and culture training during studies, migration policies, access to labour markets	Educational support, transition-to-working-life
Cerna, Chou (2023)	Mobility opportunities, transition to working life, migration policies, participation in academic society	Transition-to-working life, educational support
Rosvall et al. (2022)	Participation, belonging, participation in academic society, migration policies, access to education and labour markets, language, and culture learning	Social inclusion, educational support, transition-to-working-life
Samaluk (2025)	Access to labour markets from education, participation in labour markets	Educational support, transition-to-working-life
Mathies, Karhunen (2021)	Belonging, opportunities, participation in labour markets, adapting	Social inclusion, transition-to-working-life.

5. Discussion

The discussion synthesizes the findings by examining how the identified framework clusters contribute to understanding the integration of students with immigrant backgrounds. It outlines three key dimensions (social inclusion, educational support, and transition to working life) and explores how they intersect to shape integration. It also considers disciplinary perspectives and their convergence, and identifies key gaps, particularly in linking educational practices, labour market outcomes, and long-term integration processes.

5.1 Findings

Social inclusion frameworks examined the integration of students with an immigrant background as a process of belonging, inclusion, and participation/engagement. These frameworks emphasize the individual's opportunities to participate in academic and professional communities, as well as their ability to communicate and be an active member of society.

Educational support frameworks focused on the factors that can promote the integration of students with an immigrant background into the higher education environment, learning culture, and collaboration with working life during their studies. These frameworks highlighted the importance of various support services, the creation of learning environments that foster pedagogy tailored to students with immigrant backgrounds, as well as mentoring, guidance, and language support.

In addition, other mechanisms were identified, such as the use of artificial intelligence in education (Zhang et al. 2025), which can support students' academic success, inclusion, and engagement with their studies. Although educational support was often considered a prerequisite for successful integration, clear pedagogical models linking teaching methods to broader integration outcomes were rarely identified in the research data.

Transition-to-working-life frameworks extended the analysis beyond education, while at the same time bringing together the significance of educational and societal integration during the transition to working life. These frameworks emphasized the importance of access to the labour market, which was seen as achievable when collaboration with working life was established during studies and when national immigration policies supported the employment of individuals with an immigrant background. Additionally, the importance of the social environment, such as family reunification, was also highlighted within these frameworks as a factor that facilitates commitment to work. In these frameworks, structural conditions and integration into workplace communities were particularly emphasized.

5.2 Multi-Level and Interdisciplinary Integration of the Findings

When examined together, the reviewed frameworks revealed considerable conceptual overlap, but only limited theoretical and practical integration across disciplines. Social inclusion frameworks emphasize belonging and participation at the societal level. Educational support frameworks emphasize various education-related factors that facilitate inclusion and integration. However, a clearly pedagogical framework or pedagogical approach that systematically connected to these factors was absent from the literature. Frameworks describing the transition to working life extended these processes by focusing on access to labour markets, labour market participation, and the factors that support individuals in establishing themselves within working life.

Based on this synthesis, the findings can be integrated into a multi-level conceptual model comprising micro, meso, and macro levels. At the **micro level**, integration is understood as individual experiences of belonging, and participation. Students' abilities to participate and later engage in social, academic, and professional environments are factors that contribute to successful integration. At the **meso level**, higher education institutions are key facilitators of integration. Employers, in collaboration with higher education institutions, also play a significant role in the transition to the labour market. Institutional pedagogical practices, guidance, mentoring, language support, career services, and employer collaboration form interconnected parts of the student integration process. Knowledge management is particularly relevant at this level because it can support the collection, sharing, and application of knowledge across institutional units and external stakeholder networks. At the **macro level**, structural conditions, such as labour market policy, immigration systems, qualification-recognition practices, anti-discrimination measures, and national education policies, create a broader context. Access to employment and supportive policy environments is critical for enabling long-term integration and commitment to society, education, and working life.

Integration depends on alignment across the three levels; weak coordination may undermine the integration process. This highlights the need for more comprehensive models that explicitly connect to these levels.

Across disciplines, the findings revealed shared conceptualizations of integration. From a sociological perspective, integration was framed through inclusion, participation, and societal belonging, which is connected to Bourdieu's (1977) theory of three forms of capital. Educational research emphasized academic integration, learning environments, and student support mechanisms, which aligns with the findings of Samoila & Vrabie (2023) regarding the role of higher education institutions in promoting student support mechanisms. Labour market-oriented studies focused on access to employment, employability, and integration into workplace communities. These aspects can also be understood as part of effective knowledge management.

The analysis indicates that integration is understood across disciplines as a multidimensional, relational, and processual phenomenon. Social environments, educational factors, and structural conditions, such as migration and labour-market policies, interact across the identified frameworks. An interdisciplinary approach is needed to connect sociological understandings of inclusion and inequality, educational perspectives on

student engagement and institutional support, labour-market perspectives on employability and access to work, and knowledge-management perspectives on organisational learning and stakeholder collaboration.

5.3 Gaps and Implications

A notable gap concerns the limited integration of pedagogical approaches with transition to work models. While educational support mechanisms were discussed, their relationship to employment outcomes was not addressed.

Another notable gap concerned leadership and its role in supporting the transition of individuals with immigrant backgrounds into working life and their long-term integration within the workplace. Furthermore, there was limited discussion of collaboration between higher education institutions and employers, despite its potential importance in facilitating successful transitions from education to employment as can be seen in connection with education-related factors and transition to working life factors.

From a research perspective, the results highlight the need for more interdisciplinary frameworks. Studies should focus on developing conceptual models that explicitly connect pedagogical practices with integration processes and employment outcomes. From a practice perspective, higher education institutions should develop pedagogical approaches that support students' integration and facilitate the rapid adoption of higher education culture, thereby enabling a successful transition to working life. These aspects should also be explicitly considered in curriculum design. In addition, knowledge management practices within higher education institutions should support mentoring, language learning, and collaboration with working life during studies to enhance students' opportunities for societal participation and their sense of cultural belonging. From a policy perspective, findings emphasize the importance of bridging higher education and employment systems. This requires policies that promote cooperation between higher education institutions and employers, as well as structural conditions that support labour market access and long-term integration for individuals with migrant backgrounds.

5.4 Strengths and Limitations

This paper provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing conceptual frameworks related to social inclusion, educational support, and transition to working life. The study offers an integrative perspective across disciplinary boundaries. A key strength of this paper is its interdisciplinary perspective, which integrates concepts from higher education, sociology approaches, labour market approaches, and knowledge management. The scoping review approach captures a broad range of perspectives and identifies key patterns across literature. The study addresses the research question by clarifying how different conceptual frameworks have been used to describe integration processes and their interconnections.

However, limitations are acknowledged. First, the review is limited to a single bibliographic database, Scopus, as well as the specified publication period and eligibility criteria, which may have excluded relevant studies. Second, while the study identifies conceptual patterns, it does not test the relationships between integration processes and outcomes. Third, the limited availability clearly defines pedagogical models in the literature and constrains the ability to draw firm conclusions about effective educational practices. Finally, the geographical and institutional diversity of the studies may limit direct comparison because concepts such as integration, inclusion, and employability are shaped by different national and regional contexts.

6. Concluding Remarks

The aim of this study was to examine what conceptual frameworks have been used to describe the educational integration, social inclusion, and transition to working life of students with immigrant backgrounds in higher education. The findings indicate that, although these phenomena have been addressed across different disciplines, they remain fragmented across disciplines. Three main framework clusters were identified: social inclusion frameworks, educational support frameworks, and transition-to-working-life frameworks. The synthesis revealed conceptual overlaps between the frameworks, but only limited integration between them. Pedagogical approaches, institutional support, and concrete models of collaboration between higher education institutions and working life were often insufficiently addressed.

The multi-level conceptualisation developed in this study can be interpreted through the combined lenses of educational integration, social inclusion, and knowledge management. At the micro level, Tinto's (1975) concept of educational integration helps explain students' academic and social attachment, while Bourdieu's (1977) theory of capital highlights inequalities in the resources that shape participation and outcomes. At the meso level, knowledge management explains how higher education institutions can collect, share, and apply

knowledge to develop pedagogical support, guidance services, and stakeholder collaboration. At the macro level, immigration policies, labour-market structures, and education systems shape students' opportunities for long-term inclusion and employment. Effective integration therefore depends on coordination and alignment across all three levels.

A central challenge in the existing literature is the trade-off between institutional efficiency and equitable inclusion. Higher education institutions aim to implement scalable and efficient integration models that support students' transition into working life, yet standardized institutional practices do not always respond adequately to the diverse social, cultural, linguistic, and labor-market realities faced by students with immigrant backgrounds.

Future research should focus on developing and empirically testing integrated models that connect pedagogical practices, institutional strategies, and labour market outcomes, as well as examining how knowledge management can be operationalised to support these processes and how pedagogical development can better respond to and support student diversity. Overall, the study demonstrates that integration is a multi-level phenomenon requiring coordinated development across individual, institutional, and structural dimensions.

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Ethics Declaration: This study did not involve human participants, personal data, or ethical risks requiring formal ethical approval. Therefore, ethical clearance was not required.

AI Declaration: The author used generative AI tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI) to support language refinement, structuring, and condensation of the manuscript. All content, interpretations, and final decisions remain the responsibility of the author.

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