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ARTICLES

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Mapping the characteristics of the ideal college student: A bibliometric analysis (1971-2023)

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Abstract: This bibliometric analysis examined the attributes of the ideal College student from 1971 to 2023. It mapped the research landscape, identified influential entities, and revealed trends and gaps in the literature. The findings indicated three phases of research growth: stagnation, growth, and peak production, with a surge of interest in the past decade. The findings suggested that research on the ideal student literature were concentrated in countries with robust resources, research infrastructure, and educational opportunities, such as the US, UK, Italy, Germany, and Australia. However, there was a noticeable underrepresentation of perspectives from countries that historically faced systemic barriers, potentially limiting a holistic understanding of the ideal student. This study uncovered diverse views on the concept of the ideal student, highlighting concerns about the exclusion of specific student groups based on race, gender, social class, or age. It underscored the necessity of developing a comprehensive definition of the ideal student that embraced diversity and promoted equitable educational approaches.

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I. Introduction

Higher education stands as a crucial force in nurturing students' growth and endowing them with the essential knowledge and skills for success (Amirnudin and Saleh 2020). Increasingly, individuals from a wider range of backgrounds are entering higher education. Given the increasing diversity of students, a profound comprehension of the desired traits in university students proves pivotal for effective teaching, learning interactions, and the cultivation of strong student-teacher relationships (Wong and Chiu 2021; Safronova and Klyukina 2021). This understanding not only fosters personal development but also contributes to alleviating anxiety and enhancing learning outcomes. Consequently, there is an escalating emphasis on elucidating expectations in higher education (Wong and Chiu 2021).

The ideal student can be conceptualized as a dynamic space where diverse and desirable characteristics are identified across different groups of students (Wong et al. 2021). This evolving construct has emerged as a central theme in higher education, reflecting how student success is imagined, evaluated, and contested within increasingly diverse academic contexts. In this study, the term "college student" is used in a broad sense, referring to students within higher education more generally. This usage reflects the conventions in the literature, where "college" and "university" students are often discussed interchangeably in relation to the Ideal Student (IS) construct.

I.1. The concept and challenges of IS

First introduced to higher education literature by Katz and Arbib in 1971, the IS concept addresses a significant research gap – the necessity for a clear definition of the student's role. Despite its initial introduction, the IS concept remained largely absent from academic literature for several decades. Over the decades, this concept has evolved and regained scholarly attention. Scholars argue that it significantly influences higher education perspectives. Faculty members, policymakers, the media, and even students themselves are influenced by notions associated with the IS (Brooks, Gupta, Jayadeva et al. 2023). This influence extends beyond academic qualities and encompasses aspects like involvement in social and extracurricular activities. However, as

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Gregersen and Nielsen (2023) suggest, higher education institutions have a responsibility to challenge the existing norms and ideals about students. The aim of elucidating the qualities of the Ideal Student is to promote transparency and clarity regarding desirable attributes so that students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, are not disadvantaged by unfamiliarity or inability to navigate the intricacies of higher education (Holmegaard and Johannsen 2023; Esmaeeli et al. 2024).

Alturki and Stuckenschmidt (2021) delineate key traits of the IS, including academic proficiency, motivation, self-directed learning, critical thinking, communication skills, adaptability, time management, and a willingness to learn. Conversely, Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars, and Dingwall (2021) argue that prevailing IS discourses marginalize minority groups, perpetuating exclusion and failure among non-conforming students. Nieminen (2022) research supports this argument, highlighting the role of the research field in constructing the IS image and the corresponding "non-ideal student" label, particularly affecting students with disabilities. Chen (2022) examines the experiences of Chinese rural students who face a lack of clarity regarding expectations, leading to feelings of "unbelonging" and being positioned as "others" by peers and higher education staff. Similarly, Levin, Viggiano, López Damián et al. (2017) explore the challenges faced by community college students, particularly adult students and students with disabilities, within the context of IS discourse. These studies highlight the IS concept's influence on equity and opportunities for student success (Wong et al. 2023). The utilization of capital concepts has been prevalent in explaining differences in participation and success in higher education. Bourdieu's exploration of diverse "capitals" offers a fitting and enlightening theoretical foundation (Thomas 2020).

I.2. The Role of cultural and social capital in constructing the ideal student

Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital provides a useful framework for understanding how the Ideal Student (IS) construct is formed and sustained. Cultural capital—such as language fluency, academic dispositions, and critical thinking—is often rewarded by institutions, positioning students who possess these attributes as "ideal" (Baker 2019; Wong and Chiu 2021; Archer, Dawson, DeWitt et al. 2015). At the same time, social capital—including peer networks, mentorship, and relationships with faculty—plays a crucial role in shaping students' ability to navigate higher education successfully. Students from privileged backgrounds are

more likely to accumulate both cultural and social capital, enabling them to embody IS characteristics more easily. In contrast, students from marginalized or underrepresented groups may lack access to these forms of capital, leaving them structurally disadvantaged in meeting IS expectations (Thomas 2020).

Thus, linking cultural and social capital directly to the IS concept demonstrates how educational ideals can reproduce social inequalities, while also pointing to the importance of redefining IS in more inclusive ways. This integration illustrates that the IS construct is socially situated rather than neutral, reinforcing the need to critically re-examine its role within higher education (Brooks et al. 2023).

This review encompasses both explicit definitions and implicit characteristics of the Ideal Student (IS), tracing the evolution of these attributes over time. However, navigating the extensive IS literature poses challenges for researchers and educators, given its vast and scattered nature. Considering the multifaceted nature of the IS concept, it is essential to adopt a systematic approach that not only explores this construct comprehensively but also maps its evolving definitions and patterns across the literature.

I.3. A Bibliometric analysis of the ideal student concept

As Tinzl (2016) points out, the vast scope of IS literature makes it nearly impossible for individual scholars to comprehensively review all relevant publications. In this context, bibliometric analysis provides a structured and quantitative method that complements traditional reviews. It enables the identification of patterns of knowledge accumulation and dissemination, highlighting the most influential contributions, authors, institutions, and countries (Brika, Algamdi, Chergui et al. 2021; Donthu, Kumar, Mukherjee et al. 2021). By systematically mapping dispersed and complex literature, bibliometric analysis also facilitates the examination of related terms such as "competent," "qualified," "excellent," and "desirable," allowing for a more comprehensive and representative picture of how the IS construct has been defined and has evolved across disciplines, regions, and time periods.

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, this bibliometric review seeks to examine how implicit norms embedded in academic research may reflect and reinforce dominant forms of capital. Bourdieu's framework is used here because it offers a critical lens through which to interpret bibliometric patterns, helping to explain not only what the literature reveals about IS but also how these constructions may perpetuate

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systemic inequalities in higher education. Mapping the evolution of IS-related scholarship allows for a deeper understanding of how this concept may both mirror and reproduce structural inequities within higher education.

The formulation of the following research questions guides the outcomes of the bibliometric analysis:

RQ1. What is the overall volume, growth trajectory, and distribution of IS literature across countries?

RQ2. Which documents and authors have had the most significant influence on IS literature?

RQ3. Across the selected publications, what co-authorship, co-citation, and co-word patterns exist?

RQ4. What are the key clusters or themes in IS literature research?

RQ5. What are the potential avenues for future research on IS?

RQ6. What is the concept and what are the characteristics of IS in the selected relevant manuscripts?

II. Methods

This study employs a quantitative approach, specifically bibliometric methods, to analyze research related to the IS concept. It is important to note that this study focuses on documenting and synthesizing overarching trends in the academic literature on the IS concept. Bibliometric analysis allows for a comprehensive overview of the field, highlighting its evolution and key contributors, rather than providing an in-depth evaluation of single research outcomes (Hallinger and Chatpinyakoop 2019). Figure 1 depicts the stages of performance analysis and science mapping using bibliometric methods.

II.1. Data collection

The data collection process for this study relied on the Scopus citation index database. Scopus was selected as the main source due to its widespread use in bibliometric analysis and its comprehensive coverage of academic fields associated with IS (Hallinger and Chatpinyakoop 2019). Moreover, Scopus provides access to essential bibliographic data required for bibliometric software.

Stage1 Research design		• Aims and scope of the study • Keyword strings and data sources • Appropriate bibliometric methods
Stage2 Data collection	Research strategy	TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“Ideal Student” OR “Good Student” OR “Well Student” OR “Convenient Student” OR “Suitable Student” OR “Desirable Student” OR “Distinguished Student” OR “Qualified Student” OR “Competent Student” OR “Acceptable Student” OR “Appropriate Student” OR “Symbolic Student” OR “Excellent Student” OR “Great Student” OR “Desired Student”) AND (“Higher education” OR university OR college OR academy)) AND (INCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 1971-2023)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”))
	Time span	1971-2023
	Languages	English
	Doc types	Article
Stage3 Data analysis		• Bibliometric analysis – Performance analysis: Publication- related metrics(TP, NCA, SA, CA, NAY, PAY) , Citation-related metrics (TC, AC), Citation-and-publication- related metrics (CI, CC, NCP, PCP, CCP, h, g) – Network Analysis: Co-citation analysis, Co-word analysis, Co-authorship analysis • Content analysis
Stage4 Conclusion		• Analysis and report on the findings • Conclusions and future research directions

Figure 1

The stages of the bibliometric method

The search process followed the PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews (Hallinger and Chatpinyakoop 2019). On February 20, 2023, a search query was executed within the Scopus database using the designated search terms outlined in Figure 1. The search encompassed publications from 1971 to 2023 in the English language. The initial search yielded 2,293 records. Ultimately, a final sample of 475 articles and reviews was selected

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for bibliometric analysis to ensure the focus remained on well-established, peer-reviewed research (Figure 2).

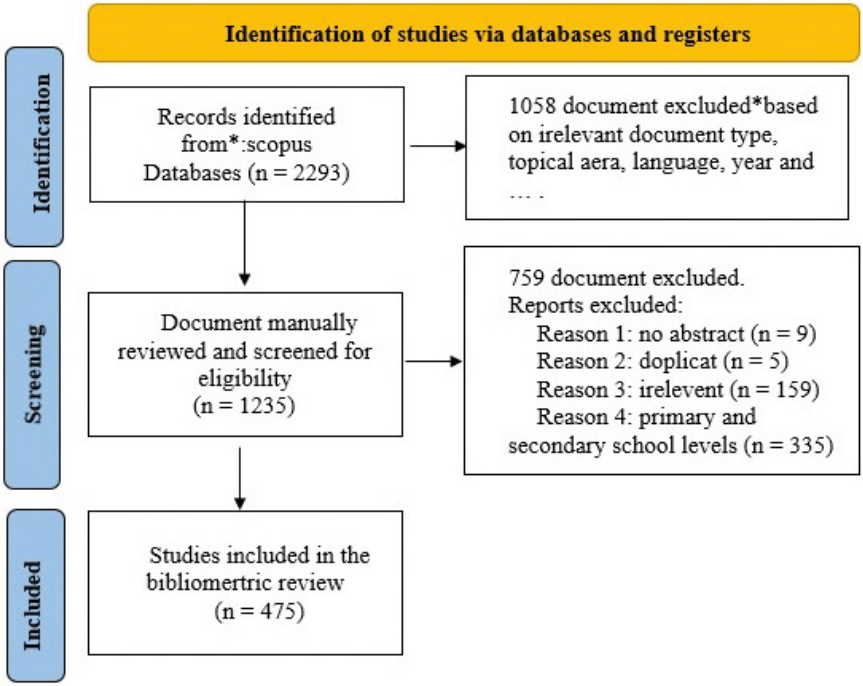


Figure 2

PRISMA diagram describing the collection of IS documents (Hallinger and Chatpinyakoop, 2019)

II.2. Data analysis

During the data extraction process, the downloaded file included metadata for each manuscript in IS literature, such as author names, affiliations, titles, sources, references, keywords, abstracts, and citation counts. We applied descriptive statistics to present an overview of the IS knowledge base. Citation analysis was employed to identify the most influential manuscripts and authors within IS literature by tracing citation networks, which helped pinpoint key works and leading researchers. Additionally, co-citation analysis was used to uncover the intellectual structure and clusters of related manuscripts in the field, thereby revealing central themes in the discourse.

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For these analyses, we used a suite of analytical tools, including R, Biblioshiny, VOSviewer, Mendeley, MaxQDA, and MS Excel. Collectively, these tools facilitated a comprehensive and in-depth mapping of the IS literature.

III. Results

III.1. RQ1. What is the overall volume, growth trajectory, and distribution of IS literature published across countries?

III.1.1. General output and authorship

Table 1 presents the results of a comprehensive analysis of 475 research studies drawn from 347 distinct journals across various fields and disciplines. This dataset includes 1,464 authors, with 111 single-authored documents and 1,353 multi-authored documents.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of IS

Description	Results
MAIN INFORMATION ABOUT DATA	
Timespan	1971:2023
Sources (Journals)	347
Documents	475
Annual Growth Rate %	2.7
Document Average Age	8.93
Average citations per doc	24.13
References	19762
Keywords Plus (ID)	1202
Authors' Keywords (DE)	1664
Authors	1464
Authors of single-authored docs	111
Single-authored docs	111
Co-Authors per Doc	3.14
International co-authorships %	11.58
Article	475

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On average, each document in the dataset had 3.14 co-authors. Collectively, the documents contained 1,202 indexed keywords and 1,664 author keywords. The average citation per document was 24.13, underscoring the overall scholarly impact of the IS literature. International collaboration was also notable, with an average of 11.58 international co-authorships per document. Finally, the publication trends indicate a significant increase in IS research output in recent years (Figure 3).

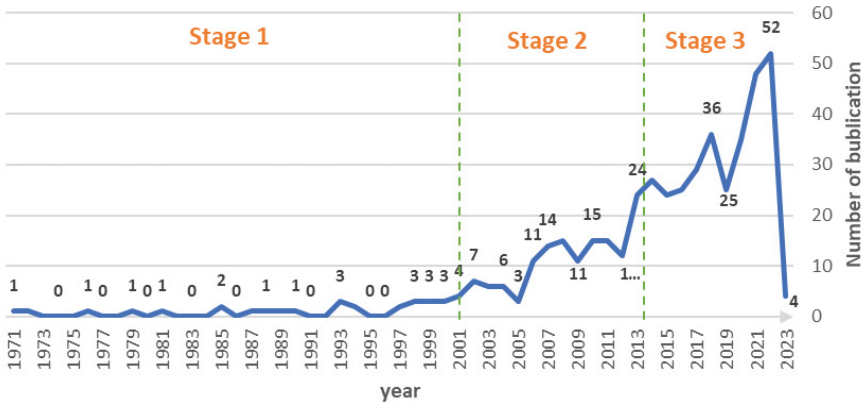


Figure 3

Annual scientific production

III.1.2. Publication trends over time

An examination of publication trends spanning 52 years provides valuable insights into the evolving interest in the IS concept. Remarkably, the majority of publications (69.32%) have appeared within the last decade (2013-2023). This temporal categorization allows for the identification of three distinctive phases in scholarly activity:

Stagnant Phase (1971-2001): The initial three decades witnessed a limited volume of research, with only 24 manuscripts published, reflecting a relative dearth of scholarly exploration.

Phase of Growth (2001-2012): In this period, there was an upswing in research output, with 121 manuscripts published. This phase marked a significant expansion of scholarly interest in the IS concept.

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Peak Exploration (2013-2023): The most remarkable phase, characterized by a surge in research, saw the publication of 330 manuscripts. This phase aligns with the present decade, where IS gained considerable prominence, drawing substantial scholarly attention. The surge in research during this period signifies a substantial transformation in the academic landscape. IS has become a central and globally recognized academic topic.

III.1.3. Geographic distribution of research

Figure 4 illustrates the global distribution of IS publications among countries and regions. Countries marked in darker shades of blue on the map are the more productive ones. Notably, North America, South America, Europe, Australia, and South Asia have made significant contributions to IS.

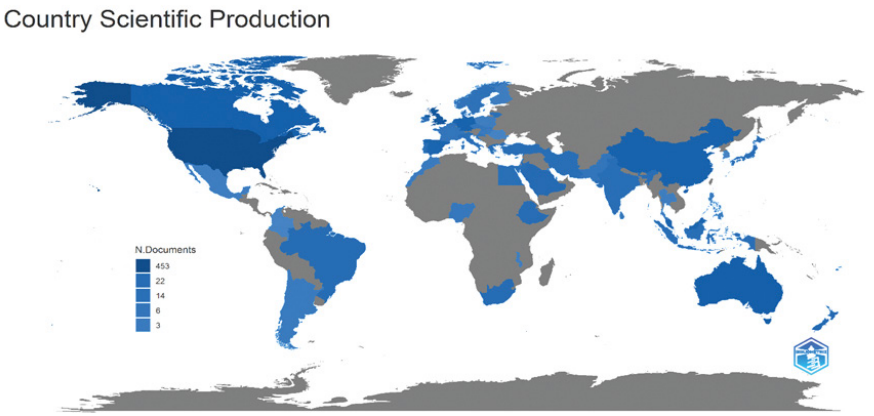


Figure 4

Global geographic distribution of publications

III.1.4. Most productive countries

Table 2 presents the ten most productive countries, highlighting their total publications (TP), total citations (TC), and average citations per manuscript. The United States leads with 453 publications, followed by the United Kingdom and Australia in second and third place, respectively, in terms of TP. In terms of citations, the US (3549), the UK (659), and Italy (465) rank highest.

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Although the US records the largest number of publications and citations, Italy (155.00), Georgia (64.80), and France (43.80) show notably higher average citations per manuscript among the top ten countries/territories. Based on research productivity, the US, the UK, and Australia stand out as the largest contributors. Strong performances are also observed in Canada, China, Germany, and Malaysia.

When considering research impact as measured by average citations, Italy emerges as the most influential, followed by Georgia (64.80), France (43.80), the US (32.60), Belgium (23.00), and the Netherlands (21.70). These findings point to the dominance of Western, high-income countries alongside the relative underrepresentation of other regions, which reflects systemic disparities in research capacity and visibility.

Table 2

Top 10 countries/regions most cited

Country	TP	TC
USA	453	3549
United Kingdom	155	659
Italy	12	465
Canada	70	343
Australia	80	331
Georgia	-	324
China	62	230
Netherlands	45	195
France	6	175
Spain	45	118

TP = Total Publication TC = Total Citations.

III.2. RQ2. What documents and authors have had the most significant influence on IS literature?

III.2.1. Most influential manuscripts in IS literature

Table 3 presents the top ten highly cited manuscripts (each with 89 or more citations), identified from a citation analysis of 268 selected manuscripts with five or more citations. Among these, eight had multiple authors, with a median of three authors per paper.

The three most cited works are: Self-explanations: How students study and use examples in learning to solve problems by Chi et al. (1989), cited 1,761 times. Knowledge tracing: Modeling the acquisition of procedural knowledge by Corbett and Anderson (1994), cited 1,149 times. What Makes a Good Student? How Emotions, Self-Regulated Learning, and Motivation Contribute to Academic Achievement by Mega, Ronconi, and De Beni (2014), cited 459 times.

Table 3

Top 10 References by Citation

Year	Title	Author	TC	TCY
1989	Self-explanations: How students study and use examples in learning to solve problems	Chi et al.	1761	50.31
1994	Knowledge tracing: Modeling the acquisition of procedural knowledge	Corbett and Anderson	1149	38.30
2014	What Makes a Good Student? How Emotions, Self-Regulated Learning, and Motivation Contribute to Academic Achievement	Mega et al.	459	45.90
2010	Linguistic Features of Writing Quality	McNamara et al.	296	21.14
2005	Tracking student behaviour, persistence, and Achievement in online courses	Morris et al.	258	13.58
2015	Modelling Course-Based Undergraduate Research Experiences: An Agenda for Future Research and Evaluation	Corwin et al.	201	22.33
2016	Early Engagement in Course-Based Research Increases Graduation Rates and Completion of Science, Engineering, and Mathematics Degrees	Rodenbusch et al.	196	24.50
2006	Health Information Literacy and Competencies of Information Age Students: Results from the Interactive Online Research Readiness Self-Assessment	Ivanitskaya et al.	173	9.61
2017	Student perceptions of themselves as 'consumers' of higher education	Tomlinson	169	24.14
2013	Digital literacy and informal learning environments: an introduction	Meyers et al.	166	15.09

TCY = Total citations per year.

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The exceptionally high citation counts of Chi et al. (1989) and Corbett and Anderson (1994) can be explained by two factors. First, both were published during the stagnant phase (1971–2001), when only 24 IS-related manuscripts existed, which amplified the influence of individual contributions. Second, their earlier publication dates provided a longer timespan to accumulate citations compared to more recent works.

III.2.2. *Most influential authors in IS literature*

Table 4 presents an overview of the most prolific authors and their citation impact within IS literature. In higher education, Chiu and Wong emerge as the most prolific contributors, each with six publications. Their works from 2020 alone received 50 citations, with four publications indexed in both the h-index and g-index.

Dolan is another highly influential figure, making a substantial impact with three publications in 2015 that collectively amassed 418 citations. All three of Dolan's works are included in both the h-index and g-index.

Atta, though less prolific, has contributed two publications (2018) that together received 10 citations, with both works also recognized in the h-index and g-index (see Table 4).

Table 4

Top 10 most productive authors

	h_index	g_index	TC	NP
Chiu	4	6	50	6
Wong	4	6	50	6
Dolan	3	3	418	3
Atta	2	2	10	2
Charlebois	2	2	5	2
De Jong	2	2	111	2
Finnegan	2	2	296	2
Graham	2	2	254	2
Hermes-Lima	2	2	35	2
Kalauskas	2	2	17	2

NP = Number of publication

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In terms of overall citation influence, Reimann takes the lead, with 1,789 citations attributed to works co-authored with Bassok, Chi, Glaser, Lewis, and Anderson. Corbett also stands out, with two highly cited works (1,761 and 1,149 citations, respectively).

This citation analysis highlights both foundational contributions (e.g., Chi et al. 1989; Corbett and Anderson 1994) and more recent influential works (e.g., Mega et al. 2014; Wong and Chiu 2020), while also underscoring the central role of prolific scholars such as Wong, Chiu, and Reimann in shaping the IS discourse.

III.3. RQ3 and RQ4. Across the selected publications, which co-authorship, co-citation, and co-word patterns exist? What are the key clusters or themes of IS literature research?

III.3.1. Co-authorship patterns

Figure 5 visualizes international co-authorship patterns in IS research, highlighting both the relationships and the intensity of collaboration among countries. In this network, the size of each node represents the number of publications, with larger nodes indicating higher research output (Tao et al. 2021).

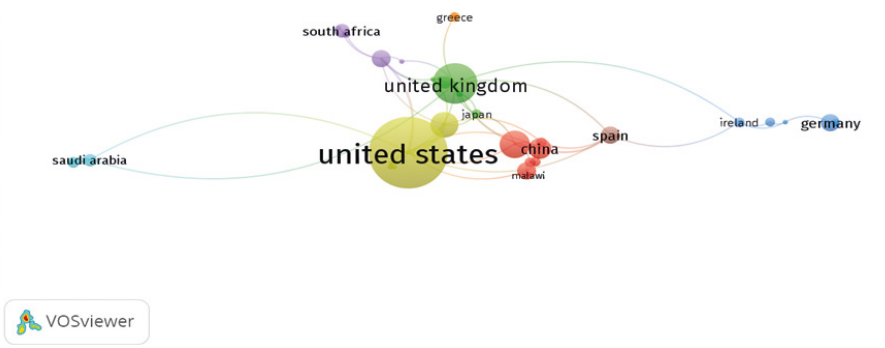


Figure 5

Co-authorship collaboration of the top countries

The analysis shows that the USA and the UK are the most active countries, forming a strong collaborative cluster particularly with Spain and China. A secondary circle of collaboration is observed among countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Malaysia, Ireland, Saudi Arabia,

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Germany, South Africa, and Greece, reflecting their growing engagement in international research networks.

The co-authorship landscape is concentrated around a few central hubs (e.g., USA, UK, Canada, China, and Germany) that dominate collaborative activity. In contrast, other countries—including Greece, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Italy, and Denmark—display more limited participation. These patterns suggest that, although IS research has become increasingly global, collaboration remains uneven, with a relatively small number of countries playing a disproportionately influential role.

III.3.2. Co-citation patterns

Frequently co-cited authors tend to align in their perspectives or pursue similar lines of inquiry within a particular field of study (Hallinger and Chatpinyakoop, 2019). Co-citations represent the frequency with which two documents are jointly cited by a third source, often indicating shared conceptual or thematic affinity.

In this context, the co-citation analysis discerns specific models within the IS literature and provides insight into the thematic foci of these models. The resulting authors' co-citation map, as depicted in Figure 6, exhibits three discernible clusters, each denoted by a distinct color. These clusters encapsulate the various conceptual and thematic dimensions of the IS concept and the characteristics associated with it within the relevant literature.

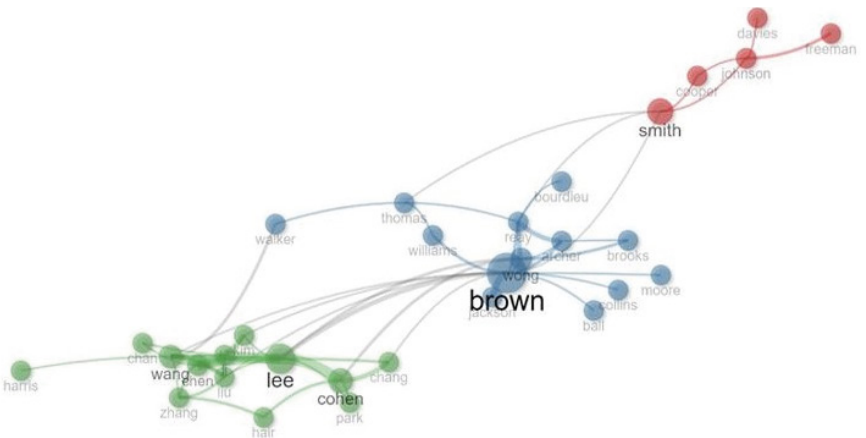


Figure 6

Authors' co-citation map

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By examining the co-citation network and the clustering of authors, it becomes possible to identify and explore the central concepts and characteristics of the IS concept as perceived and elaborated upon by the most relevant manuscripts in the field. These insights facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the evolving IS discourse.

Cluster 1 (Green): Student experiences

As illustrated in Figure 6, Cluster 1—led by Lee and supported by prominent authors such as Chen, Zhang, Liu, Wang, Bowman, and Park—engages with a broad range of topics related to higher education and student experiences. This cluster explores subjects such as the evolving perceptions of IS (Chen 2023), the development of academic self-concept in competitive educational environments, self-assessment processes, curriculum enhancement in engineering education, diversity interactions, online course dynamics, technology-enhanced learning, and language proficiency improvement.

Common threads across these studies show the pivotal role of technology in higher education, the influence of interpersonal relationships on student outcomes, the significance of pedagogical alignment and the continuing need for faculty support. This cluster emphasizes the importance of understanding student motivations and early experiences in shaping career choices and teaching effectiveness. It also highlights variations in participation and outcomes within technology-enhanced learning environments.

Cluster 1 is interconnected with the blue cluster, which concerns the definition and characteristics of IS. This enhances the overall understanding of student experiences, learning outcomes, and both the challenges and opportunities within diverse educational settings.

Cluster 2 (Red): Medical students and education

Cluster 2, under Smith's leadership and featuring contributions from authors such as Johnson, Freeman, Cooper, Davies, and Park, centers on innovative approaches to medical education and clinical training for medical students (Figure 6). This cluster explores themes such as enhancing the quality of learning and student participation in medical education, integrating technology into healthcare education, implementing effective assessment strategies, and emphasizing evidence-based practices and experiential learning.

While Cluster 2 shares an affinity with the blue cluster, which focuses on defining IS characteristics, it extends the concept by emphasizing that

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medical students, in addition to embodying general IS traits, must also acquire specific healthcare skills and clinical training. Consequently, the ideal medical student encompasses both academic excellence and healthcare expertise.

Cluster 3 (Blue): Defining and characteristics of IS

As depicted in Figure 6, Cluster 3 concentrates on the definition and core characteristics of the Ideal Student (IS). Led by Brown and supported by a diverse group of contributors—including Wong, Brooks, Bourdieu, Walker, Moore, Collins, Archer, Reay and others—this cluster brings together two major strands of inquiry. The first adopts a positive perspective, outlining the desirable attributes associated with the Ideal Student, while the second takes a critical stance, interrogating the social and educational implications of constructing such an ideal. The co-citation patterns within the blue cluster accentuate the significance of researchers such as Bourdieu, Brooks, Wong, Reay, and Archer, who have made substantial contributions to the study of IS characteristics. Notably, Wong—identified as one of the most prolific authors in this field—is also located within this cluster (see Table 4). This cluster plays a fundamental role in shaping our understanding of the definition and characteristics of IS, serving as a crucial reference point in the discourse on the Ideal Student.

III.3.3. Co-word patterns

III.3.3.1. *Keyword clusters*

To analyze the co-citation and co-occurrence patterns of keywords in IS literature, the study employed VOSviewer software, enabling a comprehensive analysis. The findings are visualized in a knowledge-domain map that categorizes knowledge into four distinct clusters, each offering insights into different facets of IS research (see Figure 7A).

Cluster 1 (Purple): Higher education focus

This cluster emphasizes higher education and includes keywords such as academic performance (Wong and Chiu 2020), ideal student (Davies 2016; Gregersen and Nielsen 2023; Katz and Arbib 1971; Koutsouris et al. 2021; Obrien, Hirsh, Krupat et al. 2016; Schmitt and Bradburn 2018; Siivonen and

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Filander 2020; Wong et al. 2022), identity (Koutsouris et al. 2021), student experience (Wong and Chiu 2020), student satisfaction (Thomas 2020), and personality (Schmitt and Bradburn 2018; Wong and Chiu 2020). This cluster delves into the multifaceted aspects and characteristics of IS.

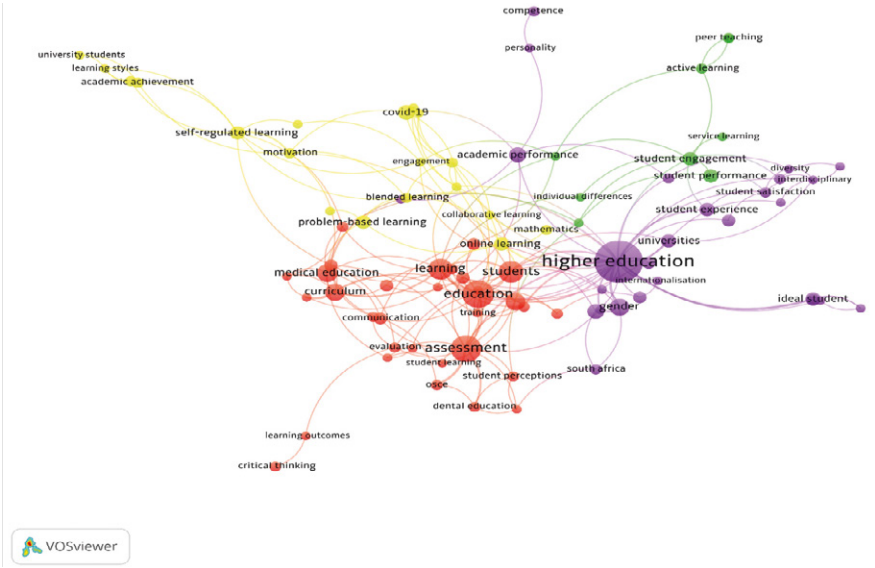


Figure 7A

Keyword co-occurrence network: Network visualization map based on article weights

Cluster 2 (Red): Education and curriculum

This cluster highlights keywords such as assessment, education, learning, curriculum, training, medical education, dental education, collaboration, and critical thinking. These terms reflect the educational and collaborative dimensions of IS literature, with a particular focus on professional and medical education.

Cluster 3 (Yellow): Learning styles

This cluster centers on keywords such as self-regulated learning, problem-based learning, online learning, e-learning, collaborative learning, academic achievement, and COVID-19. It explores the relationship between

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learning styles and academic success, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cluster 4 (Green): Teaching and engagement

This cluster focuses on teaching and includes keywords such as classroom management, individual differences, student performance, student engagement, technology, and active learning. It primarily addresses classroom dynamics and the factors influencing teaching effectiveness and student learning experiences.

Together, these keyword clusters contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted IS literature, illuminating its various dimensions and the interconnections between them (see Figure 7A).

III.3.3.2. *Temporal evolution of keywords*

Figure 7B presents a temporal co-word map that illustrates the frequency and recency of topics within the IS literature. The color-coded visualization highlights shifts in research trends, offering a dynamic perspective on how IS research has evolved over time.

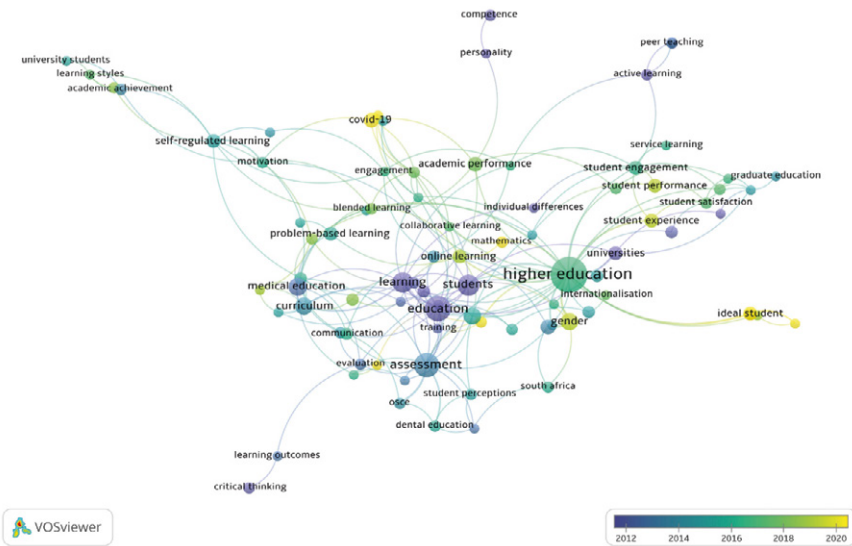


Figure 7B

Keyword co-occurrence network: Temporal overlay on a co-word

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The map shows a transition from deep blue hues to vibrant yellows between 2010 and 2020, reflecting substantial changes in the thematic landscape of IS studies. Dark blue areas indicate the early, foundational focus on university, students, curriculum, teaching, and learning, which formed the core of initial IS research.

Around 2015, the map shifts toward the green spectrum, signaling the growing prominence of themes such as motivation, critical thinking, identity, problem-solving, attitude, self-regulation, and performance. These emerging themes reflect increasing attention to the nuanced characteristics and competencies associated with the Ideal Student.

This temporal analysis vividly demonstrates how IS research has evolved over time, underlining shifting priorities and the emergence of new domains of inquiry, while reinforcing the continued expansion of IS discourse in response to changing educational contexts.

III.3.4. The key clusters or themes of IS literature research

Building on the results of the co-citation and co-word analyses, seven major thematic clusters can be identified in IS research. From the co-citation analysis, three clusters emerged: (1) Student Experiences, focusing on identity, self-concept, and technology-enhanced learning; (2) Medical Students and Education, highlighting clinical training and professional competencies; and (3) Defining IS, balancing positive attributes with critical perspectives rooted in cultural capital and equity. From the co-word analysis, four additional clusters were revealed: (4) Higher Education, emphasizing performance, satisfaction, and personality; (5) Education and Curriculum, focusing on assessment, training, and collaboration; (6) Learning Styles, covering self-regulation, online learning, and responses to COVID-19; and (7) Teaching and Engagement, addressing classroom management, active learning, and technology use.

Together, these clusters illustrate the breadth and evolution of IS research, ranging from definitional debates and student experiences to specialized contexts such as medical education and pandemic-related learning. They highlight both the holistic aspirations of the IS construct and the structural challenges that shape its application across diverse educational settings.

III.4. RQ5. What are the potential avenues for future research on IS?

The analysis of IS literature reveals several promising directions for future inquiry. First, the geographic distribution of publications (Table 2,

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Figure 4) demonstrates a strong concentration of research in high-income Western countries, with limited contributions from underrepresented regions. This imbalance highlights the need for comparative and cross-cultural studies that capture diverse student experiences worldwide.

Second, the keyword evolution (Figure 7B) illustrates a thematic shift from early emphases on curriculum, teaching and learning toward more recent concerns with motivation, self-regulation and identity. Building on this development, future studies could explore how these attributes are shaped by the structural conditions of different higher education contexts. Such conditions include unequal access to institutional resources, variations in academic support systems, socioeconomic disparities and differences in language proficiency, all of which can influence students' opportunities to develop or demonstrate the characteristics associated with the Ideal Student. Examining how these contextual inequalities interact with motivation, identity and self-regulation would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how IS attributes are formed, constrained or enabled across diverse learning environments.

Third, the co-authorship and co-citation analyses (Figures 5 and 6) indicate that a relatively small number of prolific authors and institutions dominate IS discourse. Expanding collaboration networks to include underrepresented scholars and institutions would diversify perspectives and broaden both theoretical and practical contributions to the field.

Finally, the clustering of themes (Figures 7A and 6) suggests that, within the set of publications retrieved through our keyword strategy, explicitly critical perspectives on equity, inclusivity and social justice appear less visible. This pattern should be interpreted with caution, as these concepts were not included among the original search terms and relevant critical work may therefore have been omitted. Future studies would benefit from integrating such perspectives more deliberately to ensure that emerging conceptualisations of the Ideal Student reflect the experiences and challenges of increasingly diverse student populations.

III.5. RQ6. What is the concept and characteristics of IS in the selected relevant manuscripts?

III.5.1. Thematic classification and content analysis

The manuscripts in purple cluster, particularly the most significant ones, underwent comprehensive content analysis[5] to distill key insights and

[5] The qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA 2020 was utilized for the analysis and categorization of these keywords

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objectives related to the definition and characteristics of IS (see Table 5). A clear trend emerged, showing a marked increase in research on this topic between 2018 and the present. Of the 24 manuscripts included in this study, 17 were published during this period. Among them, 20 employed qualitative research methods, while 4 used quantitative approaches.

This analysis delves deeply into IS exploration, shedding light on the evolving discourse surrounding its definition and characteristics. The predominance of qualitative research within this cluster underscores the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the IS concept, reflecting the need for in-depth qualitative examination to fully capture its complexity.

Table 5

Thematic classification of the most significant manuscripts

Central Theme	Theme	Subtheme
Ideal Student	Personality characteristics	Ambitious
		Effort and participation
		Organization and order
		Reflection and innovation
		Thinking
		Progressing
		Being critical
		Reflective
		Engagement and commitment
		Self-awareness
		Positive view
		Self-esteem
		Self-efficacy
		Self-presentation
		Self-regulating
		Caregiver
		Motivated
		Personality attributes

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Central Theme	Theme	Subtheme
		Personal interaction
		Worthy
		Hardworker
		Passionate
	Leadership characteristics	leadership activities
		Strategic approach
		Impression management
		Performer
		Information receiver
		Planner
	Academic characteristics	lifelong learning
		Scientific and research literacy
		Being a student
		Reflective learner
		Active contributor
		Academic skills
		Preparation
		Learner
		practitioner
		learning role model
		Teaching facilitator
		Teacher's mentor
		Curriculum evaluator
		Student involvement
		Learning Skill
	Social characteristics	Employability
		Professional development
		Citizenship

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Central Theme	Theme	Subtheme
		Global participation
		Engaging in social
		Co-creator
		Support others
		Employment skills
		Team player
		Communicatively
		Social involvement
		Conformity to institutional requirements

III.5.1.1. *Positive characteristics of IS*

Manuscripts advocating the positive concept of the IS portray a well-rounded and multifaceted individual (Chiu, Wong and Charalambous 2021; Karakitsiou, Markou, Kyriakou et al. 2012; Kelly, Fair, and Evans 2017; Koutsouris et al. 2021b; Schmitt and Bradburn 2018; Wong et al. 2022; Wong and Chiu 2021). This IS is not merely academically successful but also embodies a wide array of characteristics and skills that extend beyond traditional learning (Gregersen and Nielsen 2023).

Table 6

The most significant articles within cluster3

Authors	Year	Authors	Year
Wong and Chiu	2021	Nieminen	2022
Dzimińska	2022	Koutsouris et al.	2021
Wong et al.	2022	Siivonen and Filander	2020
Wong Betal	2021	Handler et al.	2019
Chiu et al	2021	Madden	2018
Wong and Chiu	2020	Levin et al.	2017
Schmitt and Bradburn	2018	Gregersen and Nielsen	2022
Kelly et al.	2017	Obrien et al.	2016

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Authors	Year	Authors	Year
Karakitsiou et al.	2012	Tomlinson	2017
Brooks et al.	2023	Naidoo and Williams	2015
Wong et al.	2022	Walker et al.	2006
Pawley	2019	Pearce, Down and Moore	2008

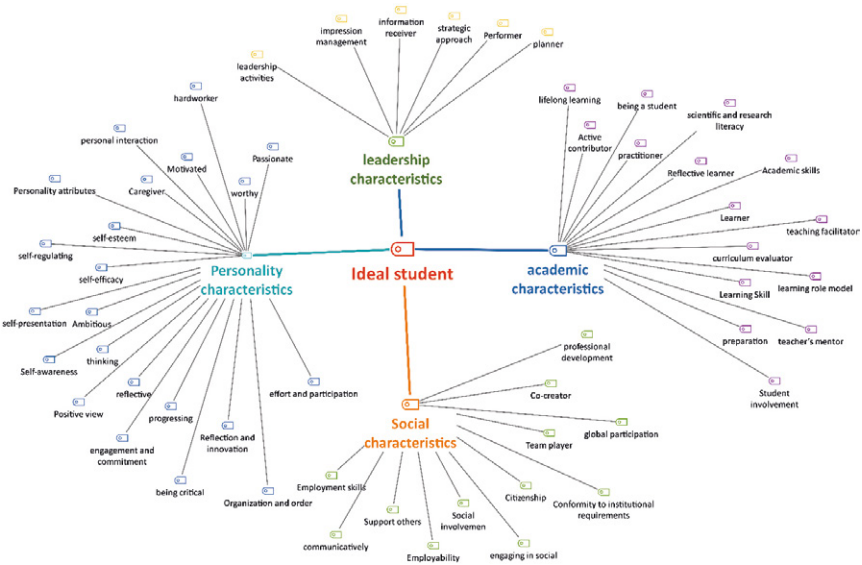


Figure 8

Characteristics of IS based on content analysis

In the content analysis of the 24 referenced manuscripts (See Table 6), 57 initial codes were identified. To provide a comprehensive overview, these codes were grouped into four domains—personality, social, leadership, and academic traits—representing the core dimensions of the Ideal Student (Table 5, Figure 8). Within these domains, personality traits such as resilience, adaptability, and self-motivation appeared most frequently, highlighting the importance of individual persistence and growth. Social traits, including collaboration, communication, and intercultural competence, were also strongly emphasized, reflecting the need for students to engage effectively in diverse educational environments. Leadership traits, such as initiative,

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responsibility, and the ability to inspire peers, appeared less frequently but remained significant in shaping the IS construct. Finally, academic traits such as intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and achievement orientation were consistently identified as foundational, though often discussed alongside non-academic competencies.

Together, these themes illustrate the multidimensional nature of the IS and point to the growing expectation that higher education should cultivate students who are not only academically capable but also socially engaged, adaptable and prepared for leadership roles.

III.5.1.2. *Critical perspective on IS*

Within this body of literature, the traditional Ideal Student is typically portrayed as academically successful, self-disciplined, reliable, motivated, and able to navigate institutional expectations with ease. This formulation often aligns with dominant cultural and behavioural norms in higher education and assumes consistent educational trajectories and familiarity with academic conventions.

A number of manuscripts adopt a critical stance toward this formulation, suggesting that predefined models of the Ideal Student may produce unintended consequences (Brooks et al. 2023; Handler et al. 2019; Gregersen and Nielsen 2023; Levin et al. 2017; Madden 2018; Nieminen 2022; Pawley 2019; Pearce, Down and Moore 2008; Siivonen and Filander 2020). These studies argue that such expectations can be more difficult for some students to embody, depending on their social positions, educational histories or access to institutional resources. From this perspective, defining the Ideal Student through a narrow or fixed set of traits may overlook the ways in which students from different backgrounds encounter higher education. Critical studies show that such expectations can be more difficult to embody for students whose identities or trajectories do not align with dominant academic norms—for example, those positioned along lines of race, gender or social class (Pawley 2019), students from non-traditional backgrounds (Siivonen and Filander 2020), those with diverse sexual orientations (Handler et al. 2019) or students with disabilities (Nieminen 2022).

The concern raised in this body of work centres on how conventional assumptions about the Ideal Student may privilege particular forms of academic performance and participation, potentially placing some students at a structural disadvantage. Taken together, these critical contributions complicate the optimistic narrative that associates the Ideal Student with personal growth and positive values. They broaden the discussion by drawing

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attention to the diverse ways in which students engage with higher education and by questioning whether traditional assumptions risk perpetuating educational and social inequalities.

IV. Discussion

The comprehensive analysis of 475 research studies focusing on the IS concept offers profound insights into the continually evolving IS research landscape. This discussion explores the key discoveries and their implications:

Temporal evolution of IS research: The analysis spans five decades, from 1971 to 2023, revealing IS literature's dynamic and intricate nature. Notably, the bulk of publications, encompassing 330 manuscripts, have been concentrated within the last decade (2013-2023), signifying a substantial surge in scholarly activity. This surge in research signifies the existence of three distinct phases: the Stagnant Phase (1971-2001), the Phase of Growth (2001-2012), and the Peak Exploration (2013-2023), underscoring the emergence of IS as a central topic of interest for scholars across the globe.

Global interest in IS: The geographic distribution of IS research (Figure 4) shows strong contributions from North America, Europe, Australia, and South Asia, with the United States leading (453 publications), followed by the UK and Australia. However, these patterns are not only about volume. The international co-authorship map (Figure 5) demonstrates that collaboration is also concentrated within a few dominant hubs—particularly the USA and the UK—often working closely with countries like Spain and China. A second circle of collaboration includes regions such as Japan, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, and Malaysia, while large areas of the world—especially much of Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and parts of Southeast Asia—remain only loosely connected to these networks.

This uneven distribution reflects systemic barriers that shape global knowledge production. Regions with limited research funding, constrained access to high-impact journals, higher publication costs, fewer doctoral training opportunities, and weaker integration into English-medium academic networks often face challenges in disseminating their work internationally (Abouzeid et al. 2022; Scheiner et al. 2024). These structural conditions reduce research visibility and citation impact, even when high-quality scholarship exists within these contexts.

As a result, perspectives from these contexts risk being marginalized, leaving global debates on the Ideal Student concept shaped primarily by high-income countries. Addressing these disparities is therefore essential to

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ensure a more inclusive understanding of student roles and expectations in higher education worldwide (Tomlinson 2008).

Highly cited manuscripts: The top 10 highly cited manuscripts within the IS research field provide valuable insights into the most influential works in this domain. These manuscripts encompass various facets of education, including self-explanatory learning (Chi et al. 1989), knowledge tracing (Corbett and Anderson 1994), and emotional and motivational factors contributing to academic achievement (Mega et al. 2014). Recent years, particularly from 2018 onwards, have witnessed a shift towards exploring student performance, identity, and experiences, thus enriching the discourse surrounding the IS concept.

Prolific authors: The top ten most productive authors in IS literature have made significant contributions to this field. Authors like Wong and Chiu are particularly prolific, each boasting six publications and 50 citations. The number of publications, h-index, and g-index of these authors indicate their considerable influence and impact within the field. Their work, prominently featured in the blue cluster of co-citation analysis (Figure 6), has substantially shaped the discussion surrounding the characteristics and expectations associated with the IS concept.

Keyword analysis: An analysis of keywords co-occurrence has generated a knowledge domain map comprising four distinct clusters, each representing specific dimensions of the IS concept: (1) higher education and student performance, (2) education and curriculum with emphasis on assessment and collaboration, (3) learning styles and online education, and (4) teaching and classroom engagement. These clusters form interconnected hubs of knowledge, where authors and keywords collaboratively shape the thematic landscape. Notably, authors such as Brown, Wong, Chiu, Brooks, and Archer, prominently featured within the blue co-citation cluster, emerge as pivotal figures significantly influencing thematic trends and keyword patterns in the IS research field. Their contributions converge on recurring themes such as student identity, motivation, academic performance, cultural capital, and inclusivity, which mirror the core attributes and critical debates surrounding the Ideal Student construct.

Dynamic research focus and emerging configurations of IS: The thematic evolution of IS research, illustrated in Figure 7B, shows a clear transition across time. Earlier work centred on foundational elements of higher education—university structures, curriculum, teaching and learning—reflecting a primarily cognitive and achievement-oriented view of the Ideal Student. From around 2015 onward, however, a broader set of concerns gained prominence, including identity, motivation, self-regulation, problem-

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solving, and performance. This shift indicates that IS scholarship is responsive to changing educational landscapes and expanding student needs.

These temporal changes are tied closely to a reconceptualization of the Ideal Student itself. Influential authors clustered in the blue co-citation network (such as Wong, Chiu, Brooks, Archer and Brown) have played a key role in extending IS beyond academic capability. Their work links the Ideal Student to constructs such as identity formation, inclusivity, student satisfaction, well-being and the development of personal and interpersonal competencies. The rise of keywords such as academic performance, IS identity, student satisfaction, personality, critical thinking and intercultural competence suggests that contemporary configurations of the Ideal Student combine cognitive benchmarks with social, emotional and behavioural attributes.

Together, these developments show that the Ideal Student is no longer conceived solely as a high-achieving academic performer but increasingly as an adaptable, reflective and socially engaged learner—mirroring broader shifts toward diversity, equity and inclusion within higher education.

Positive and critical perspectives: The academic research landscape of IS is structured around two prevailing themes that also appear in the blue co-citation cluster (Figure 6): a positive perspective and a critical perspective.

The positive perspective emphasizes defining IS and clarifying its roles and attributes. Based on our content analysis of the selected papers, four domains were identified—personality, social, leadership, and academic traits (Table 5)—highlighting the aspiration to nurture well-rounded individuals beyond narrow academic achievement (Gregersen and Nielsen 2023). By contrast, the critical perspective—grounded in Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital—interrogates how IS norms can inadvertently reproduce structural inequalities. Educational institutions tend to reward forms of cultural capital (e.g., academic dispositions, language proficiency) that align with dominant middle-class norms, while social capital (e.g., networks and relationships) facilitates navigation of academic settings (Baker 2019; Archer et al. 2015). Students from underrepresented racial, gender, socioeconomic, or non-traditional backgrounds may have less access to these resources, placing them at a structural disadvantage in meeting IS expectations.

This reading aligns with the co-citation map (Figure 6), where authors such as Bourdieu, Brooks, Wong, Archer, and Reay anchor the critical strand, and with the temporal co-word map (Figure 7B), which shows a shift toward identity, self-regulation, and motivation—terms closely tied to capital-based (in)equalities. Empirically, this critical strand foregrounds the

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risks of marginalization for students who do not conform to predefined IS standards—across race, gender, social class, disability, sexual orientation, and non-traditional educational backgrounds (e.g., Handler et al. 2019; Kawas and Wong 2019; Pawley 2019; Madden 2018; Pearce et al. 2008; Nieminen 2022; Siivonen and Filander 2020).

Our findings therefore show the coexistence of an aspirational view (personal growth, broad skill sets, positive values) and a critical view (capital-based exclusions). This duality mirrors our results: Table 5 consolidates the four domains, while Figures 7A–7B and 7 reveal how the field's intellectual structure and keyword evolution have increasingly problematized the neutrality of IS. These domains express the holistic aspirations of higher education—resilience, collaboration, responsibility and intellectual capability—yet, when defined too narrowly or aligned with dominant cultural codes, they risk privileging students who hold accumulated cultural and social capital, such as access to high-quality schooling or dense networks that support leadership and social performance.

Interpreting the findings through a Bourdieusian perspective offers a useful way to understand how structural advantages shape the production and circulation of IS-related knowledge. While the bibliometric data do not directly measure cultural or social capital, the observed patterns—such as the dominance of high-income countries, the concentration of influential authors within particular institutional networks and the uneven visibility of different regions—resonate with Bourdieusian arguments about unequal access to valued academic resources. In this sense, Bourdieu's concepts serve not as variables captured in the dataset, but as a conceptual lens for making sense of how institutional prestige, linguistic advantage and established research networks can influence whose voices shape the Ideal Student debate. Viewed this way, the theory does not claim that the dataset contains capital, but that the global structure revealed by the bibliometric patterns can be interpreted in light of how capital operates in academic fields. This approach allows the discussion to connect empirical patterns with broader sociological concerns about inequality and recognition in higher education research.

A critical implication of our findings is the need to realign the IS construct with principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). While traditional definitions of IS often privilege students who already possess dominant cultural and social capital, a more inclusive framing would emphasize adaptability, intercultural competence, resilience, and collaboration—attributes accessible to students from diverse backgrounds. Embedding DEI principles into the IS discourse would not only mitigate the risks of marginalization but also ensure that higher education recognizes and

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values multiple pathways to success. In this sense, the Ideal Student should be reconceptualized as a flexible, context-sensitive framework that embraces the richness of diverse student identities and experiences, rather than as a fixed benchmark reflecting middle-class norms.

V. Conclusion and directions for future research

The Ideal Student (IS) is a complex, multifaceted construct that shapes how success is imagined and evaluated in higher education. Our bibliometric mapping shows that scholarly interest in this construct has surged in the past decade and that it is defined across four broad domains—personality, social, leadership, and academic traits—reflecting expectations that extend beyond narrow academic attainment.

Anchoring these findings in Bourdieu's theory helps illustrate why IS is not a neutral descriptor. While our data do not provide student-level evidence, prior sociological research shows that institutions tend to reward forms of cultural capital (e.g., language proficiency, academic dispositions) and social capital (e.g., mentoring, networks) that are more accessible to students embedded in well-resourced educational contexts. Interpreted through this lens, the structural patterns we observed—particularly the dominance of high-income systems and well-connected academic networks—align with broader arguments about how unequal access to valued resources can influence whose experiences and expectations become most visible in IS discourse. In this theoretical sense, students from under-represented racial, gender, socioeconomic, age or non-traditional backgrounds may be located within institutions that have fewer opportunities to shape dominant definitions of the Ideal Student. This perspective also helps explain the post-2015 shift in keywords toward identity, self-regulation, motivation, and student experience, indicating a growing interest in how institutional and structural conditions shape expectations of the IS.

Our results also document a geographic imbalance: output is concentrated in high-income, largely Western systems, while underrepresented regions face barriers (e.g., funding, access to networks and outlets) (Mahdi et al. 2023). This skew limits the visibility of perspectives such as rural, low-income, minority, mature-age, and disabled students in the IS discourse and risks narrowing the construct around dominant norms. Addressing these gaps is necessary for IS to reflect the realities of diverse higher-education contexts.

Implications for policy and practice. The unequal opportunities evidenced in our results (Figures 4–5, Table 2) highlight the need for concrete institutional responses and research agendas that reduce imbalances in

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visibility, collaboration, and access. Institutions should (i) make expectations explicit and culturally legible, (ii) broaden criteria and supports so that valued IS attributes are developed rather than merely presupposed, and (iii) attend to differential access to capital (mentoring, networks, high-impact practices) when designing curricula, assessment, and student-support systems. For instance, the four domains identified in Table 5—personality, social, leadership, and academic traits—can guide universities in designing curricula, mentoring programs, and student-support systems that deliberately foster these attributes across diverse student groups.

Directions for future research.

- Diversify geographies and voices: comparative, cross-regional studies that deliberately include underrepresented systems and student groups.
- Operationalize capital: mixed-methods work that links cultural/social capital to the four IS domains identified here, testing where and how exclusions arise.
- Track change over time: longitudinal designs that connect earlier cognitive emphases with newer identity- and experience-focused strands revealed in our temporal maps.
- Broaden collaboration networks: build co-authorship ties that include scholars and institutions outside dominant hubs to enrich theory and application.

By recognizing multiple pathways to success, the IS can be redefined in ways that better reflect the realities of increasingly diverse student populations. IS is best treated as a contested construct whose meaning is shaped by the distribution of cultural and social capital. Recognizing this shift helps move the field from static ideals toward context-sensitive definitions that widen participation and better reflect the diversity of contemporary higher education.

VI. Limitations

Like any research, this study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the subjective nature of the Ideal Student (IS) concept means that its definition may vary across stakeholders and cultural contexts, potentially affecting the reliability and generalizability of the findings. Second, the exclusive focus on academic literature may have overlooked valuable perspectives from students, educators, and policymakers, whose insights are essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the IS

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construct. Third, methodological constraints—including the possibility of sampling bias and reliance on predefined search criteria—may have limited the breadth and depth of the analysis. Finally, the overrepresentation of research from resource-rich countries introduces a geographical imbalance that may skew the global understanding of the IS concept. These limitations show that adopting more inclusive, participatory and context-sensitive approaches in future research is essential for achieving a fuller and more equitable representation of diverse perspectives.

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