THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Emerging SEM Practices and Perspectives from Beyond the United States

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Strategic enrollment management (SEM) has evolved over the past five decades into a recognized institutional framework for aligning institutional enrollment goals with student success, academic planning, and financial sustainability, beginning in the United States and later expanding to other countries. This mixed-methods study explores the challenges and barriers experienced by enrollment professionals at educational institutions outside the United States as they implement SEM within their respective jurisdictions. Findings indicate that participants across regions increasingly understand SEM as a whole-lifecycle, data-informed, and cross-institutional practice rather than a recruitment function, and that—while shaped by shared challenges such as budget constraints, limited awareness of SEM, and declining international enrollment—its international development depends on adapting common principles to local institutional and regional contexts rather than importing a single model.

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) has evolved over the past five decades into a recognized institutional framework that guides how colleges and universities align enrollment goals with student success, academic planning, and financial sustainability. North American scholarship and practitioner literature consistently positions SEM as an institution-wide approach rather than a standalone recruitment function, emphasizing cross-functional coordination, data-informed decision-making, and lifecycle management from admission through completion (Black 2010; Hossler and Bontrager 2015; Smith and Gottheil 2022). SEM emerged in response to demographic shifts, fiscal pressures, and increased accountability for student outcomes, leading to its integration into senior leadership and institutional planning.

Outside the United States, SEM is evolving from a transactional recruitment model to a comprehensive, data-driven, and relationship-based approach. Driven by global competition in Canada, Australia, and Europe,

institutions are adopting integrated strategies, including marketing, retention and student success, to attract diverse student populations amid shifting demographics. Key aspects of international SEM development include intensified global competition, technology and digital marketing, relationship-based recruitment, holistic institutional alignment, and a focus on student outcomes (Connor and Longoni 2020).

This study addresses a gap in the SEM literature by extending the analysis outside the United States to examine how SEM principles are understood, adapted, and operationalized internationally. By situating international perspectives alongside established North American scholarship, the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of SEM as a global practice.

This study investigated the following research questions:

- What are the enrollment management topics scholars and practitioners beyond the United States have focused on since the founding of SEM?
- What are the enrollment challenges and barriers identified by SEM professionals beyond the United States for developing and implementing SEM—past, present, and future?

Literature Review

The literature review involved systematically searching, evaluating, and synthesizing existing literature to identify trends and highlight gaps. Databases used for the search included ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Scopus, and JSTOR. Search terms included "strategic enrollment management," "student lifecycle and student success," "data-driven enrollment management," and "international and policy context," along with related terms.

The literature review identified six themes: definitions and conceptual foundations of SEM; the historical evolution of SEM; the student lifecycle as the operational core of SEM; assessment phases in data-driven enrollment management; student success and retention as SEM outcomes; and international adaptation of SEM frameworks.

Definitions and Conceptual Foundations of SEM

Strategic enrollment management emerged in North American higher education during the late twentieth century as institutions faced growing competition, shifting demographics, and increased pressure to stabilize student enrollment. In its early stages, enrollment management was primarily recruitment-oriented, focusing on attracting enough students to sustain institutional operations. Over time, however, the concept expanded beyond admissions and marketing into a broader institutional framework that addressed the full student lifecycle.

A key milestone in this evolution was provided by Mike Dolence (1993), who defined SEM as "a comprehensive process designed to help an institution achieve and maintain the optimum recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of students, where optimum is defined in the academic context of the institution" (9). This definition marked a shift from simple enrollment growth toward aligning enrollment goals with institutional mission and academic priorities.

By the early 2000s, SEM had further matured into an organizational and strategic model. Henderson (2005) noted that institutions increasingly established formal enrollment management structures, often through administrative realignment within student affairs divisions, to address recruitment and retention more effectively. These structures were intended to improve student services while allowing faculty to concentrate on teaching and scholarship.

This broader understanding was reflected in the Morehead State University Strategic Enrollment Management Plan (2005–2010), which described SEM as an integrated approach connecting university programs, practices, policies, and planning to achieve optimal recruitment, retention, and graduation outcomes. In this sense, enrollment management becomes truly strategic when it is embedded within institutional planning, ac-

ademic vision, and mission rather than operating as a standalone administrative function.

Historical Evolution of SEM

SEM developed from the 1970s to the present, including the transition from admissions management to integrated, data-driven institutional planning, and the adoption of digital tools and artificial intelligence (AI) integration in enrollment management.

The Student Lifecycle as the Operational Core of SEM

Strategic enrollment management is increasingly conceptualized as a continuous student lifecycle rather than a set of isolated administrative functions. As discussed by Hassanein (2022), effective enrollment management extends from the first point of student contact through application, admission, orientation, academic support, financial support, student services, co-curricular engagement, graduation, and alumni relations. This is illustrated through the "Students' Journey Raceway" model, where faculty and staff act collectively as a "pit crew" providing timely support at each stage of the journey. This perspective emphasizes that SEM is not limited to attracting students, but also focuses on ensuring their satisfaction, persistence, timely completion, and long-term institutional connection. By viewing enrollment through the full lifecycle, institutions can create more coordinated and student-centered strategies that improve both outcomes and experience.

Assessment Phases in Data-Driven Enrollment Management

A second major dimension of modern SEM is the use of assessment and analytics to guide institutional planning and decision-making. Hassanein (2022) explains that data culture and digital systems are essential for making accurate decisions regarding enrollment demand, student behavior, retention risks, and resource allocation. This study builds on a six-phase enrollment management assessment framework consisting of enrollment projections, recruitment, admissions, financial support and funding opportunities, students' journey, and retention. Through these phases, institutions can monitor trends such as new, continuing, readmitted, and withdrawing students, while using evidence to refine recruitment targets, course offerings, scholarship allocation, and support services. This data-driven approach transforms SEM into a proactive strategic function that enables institutions to respond quickly to change and continuously improve performance.

Student Success and Retention as SEM Outcomes

Student success, retention, and completion are central outcomes of contemporary strategic enrollment management. Rather than treating recruitment as the endpoint of enrollment activity, SEM increasingly connects students' entry into an institution with their engagement, persistence, academic progression, and completion. This full-student-lifecycle approach positions student success as a shared responsibility across academic and administrative areas and links enrollment objectives with institutional sustainability (Hassanein 2024; Smith, Gottheil, and King 2022).

Recent research across diverse higher education contexts demonstrates that student retention is influenced by interconnected academic, social, financial, and institutional conditions. A systematic review of 125 studies identified three major areas within retention scholarship: institutional efforts to reduce student departure, institutional activities designed to promote student success, and student-level factors influencing persistence and completion (Gonçalves, *et al.* 2024). Qvortrup and Lykkegaard (2022) similarly found that retention is shaped by students' experiences within overlapping academic, social, and teaching environments. These findings reinforce the importance of coordinating recruitment, advising, financial support, academic programming, student services, and institutional research across the student lifecycle.

Student success should not, however, be measured only through retention and graduation rates. Students may also define success through personal development, well-being, belonging, community contribution, and preparation for future careers (Sundararaman, *et*

al. 2025). Within SEM, combining institutional performance measures with a broader understanding of student experience can support more responsive and equitable strategies. Integrating recruitment, retention, and completion therefore enables institutions to pursue enrollment stability and financial sustainability while remaining focused on student achievement and long-term educational outcomes.

International Adaptation: SEM Frameworks Adopted in Selected Countries

SEM in the Canadian Context

Strategic enrollment management has become increasingly prominent across Canadian colleges, polytechnics, and universities over the past two decades. While early SEM efforts in Canada were influenced by American scholarship and practice, Canadian institutions have adapted SEM to align with their unique governance structures, public funding models, policy environments, and commitments to student access and success (Gottheil and Smith 2011; Smith and Gottheil 2022).

A scan of publicly available strategic plans and enrollment frameworks across Canadian postsecondary institutions reveals growing adoption of SEM principles nationwide. Many institutions (*e.g.*, University of Victoria, University of Manitoba, University of Windsor, Thompson Rivers University, University of the Fraser Valley, Toronto Metropolitan University, Cape Breton University, Algoma University, Red River College Polytechnic, Northwestern Polytechnic, Aurora College, and Yukon University) have developed formal SEM plans, frameworks, or institution-wide enrollment strategies. Although the terminology varies across institutions, common themes consistently emerge, including student success, retention, enrollment intelligence, academic program planning, cross-functional collaboration, institutional sustainability, and evidence-informed decision-making.

These findings suggest that Canadian institutions are increasingly moving beyond viewing enrollment management as a function of recruitment and admissions alone. Instead, SEM is becoming embedded within broader institutional planning processes and is increasingly recognized as a strategic leadership framework that supports institutional viability, adaptability, and long-term sustainability (Black 2010; Smith and Gottheil 2022).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Canadian SEM is the emphasis placed on strategic enrollment intelligence. Black (2010) argues that effective SEM depends upon the systematic collection, analysis, interpretation, and application of enrollment-related data to support institutional decision-making. Rather than focusing solely on recruitment targets, Canadian institutions increasingly use enrollment intelligence to inform academic program planning, retention initiatives, resource allocation, and long-term institutional sustainability. This emphasis on evidence-informed decision-making has become a defining feature of Canadian SEM practice and reflects the increasing role of institutional research and analytics in shaping strategic priorities.

Many institutions are moving beyond traditional SEM terminology. While the principles of SEM remain evident, institutions are increasingly adopting broader and more integrated planning frameworks. A notable example is the University of Alberta's Integrated Enrollment Growth Plan (IEGP), released in 2024. Rather than positioning enrollment management as a recruitment-focused activity, the University of Alberta frames enrollment as a university-wide strategic priority connected to academic planning, governance, infrastructure, workforce planning, student success, financial sustainability, and institutional growth (University of Alberta 2024). The institution describes the IEGP as a roadmap for coordinated growth to approximately 60,000 students through integrated planning, strategic governance, program renewal, recruitment, retention, and capacity-building initiatives (University of Alberta 2024).

Significantly, the University of Alberta's approach reflects a broader shift occurring within Canadian higher education. The IEGP emphasizes that enrollment growth is not simply about increasing student numbers but about creating a sustainable institution capable of expanding access, strengthening research capacity, supporting student success, and ensuring long-term financial sustainability (University of Alberta 2024). This

perspective closely aligns with contemporary Canadian SEM literature, which increasingly positions enrollment management as an institution-wide responsibility rather than a function located solely within admissions or student affairs (Gottheil and Smith 2011; Smith and Gottheil 2022).

There is also growing emphasis on governance and shared accountability. The University of Alberta established an Integrated Enrollment Management Committee (IEMC) to provide strategic oversight, coordinate enrollment planning activities, monitor performance, and ensure alignment between enrollment objectives and institutional priorities (University of Alberta 2024). Similar governance structures are becoming increasingly common across Canadian institutions as leaders recognize that enrollment outcomes are influenced by academic programming, student support services, institutional culture, financial aid, marketing, and executive leadership working collectively across the student lifecycle (Smith and Gottheil 2022).

The scan further revealed that SEM is increasingly linked to broader discussions of institutional sustainability. Historically, enrollment planning focused primarily on achieving recruitment targets and stabilizing student numbers. Contemporary Canadian SEM frameworks increasingly connect enrollment outcomes to financial resilience, academic program vitality, labor market responsiveness, student experience, and institutional viability (Gordon, Henderson, and Wankel 2023). This shift reflects the growing pressures facing Canadian higher education, including demographic change, government funding constraints, labor market demands, technological transformation, and uncertainty surrounding international student enrollment and immigration policy (Smith and Gottheil 2022).

Collectively, these findings suggest that Canada is entering what may be described as a second generation of SEM practice. Early SEM efforts focused primarily on recruitment, admissions, and enrollment stabilization. Contemporary Canadian institutions, however, are increasingly positioning SEM as an integrated institutional planning framework that connects enrollment, student success, academic planning, resource allocation, governance, and long-term organizational sustainability. Although institutions may use different terminology—including Strategic Enrollment Management, Strategic Enrollment Planning, Enrollment Intelligence, Integrated Enrollment Growth Planning, or Student Success Frameworks—the underlying principles remain remarkably consistent.

The Canadian experience demonstrates that SEM functions most effectively when embedded within institutional strategy, supported by strong leadership, informed by reliable data, and integrated across the entire student lifecycle (Black 2010; Gottheil and Smith 2011; Smith and Gottheil 2022). As such, Canada provides an important example of how SEM principles can be successfully adapted within publicly funded and highly regulated higher education systems while maintaining a strong commitment to student success, equity, access, and institutional sustainability. The future of SEM in Canada will likely be characterized by greater integration with institutional strategy, enhanced use of enrollment intelligence, stronger governance structures, and an increasing focus on institutional sustainability and student success as interconnected priorities.

SEM in the Egyptian Context

In Egypt, strategic enrollment management remains an emerging but increasingly important concept as higher education institutions respond to changing student expectations, market competition, economic pressures, and the need for stronger institutional planning. While SEM has traditionally been more established in North American institutions, Egyptian universities are gradually adopting similar approaches that connect recruitment, retention, student success, and data-informed decision-making within broader institutional strategies.

A leading example of this development is The American University in Cairo (AUC), which demonstrates how SEM principles can be adapted to the Egyptian context. As highlighted by Hassanein (2020), AUC established clear enrollment priorities including diversifying recruitment by attracting students not only from Cairo but also from underrepresented Egyptian governorates, international markets, and different school systems,

while also strengthening the connection between academic offerings and labor market needs. Additional priorities included improving customer service culture, optimizing business processes, automating key systems, and enhancing student success initiatives. AUC also embraced a data-driven enrollment culture using business intelligence dashboards and centralized analytics systems. These tools enabled administrators to monitor applications, admissions, yield rates, student progression, retention, and graduation trends. Rather than relying solely on intuition, decisions were increasingly based on evidence and measurable indicators.

Moreover, the evolution of SEM internationally suggests that enrollment management is no longer confined to domestic recruitment and retention goals. It increasingly supports broader institutional priorities such as internationalization, global competitiveness, student mobility, and intercultural campus development. As Hassanein (2024) notes, higher education institutions are increasingly called upon to internationalize, and this process should be embedded within institutional strategy through a systematic and planned approach. For Egyptian universities, this means SEM can also serve as a mechanism to attract international students, strengthen global partnerships, and enhance institutional reputation regionally and globally.

This case suggests that SEM in Egypt is evolving beyond traditional admissions functions toward a more integrated management model. In the Egyptian context, successful SEM implementation requires balancing institutional mission, financial sustainability, student diversity, service quality, academic excellence, and international engagement. As more universities modernize governance systems and invest in analytics capabilities, SEM is likely to play a growing role in shaping the future competitiveness of Egyptian higher education.

Gaps in the Literature

Although strategic enrollment management is an established area of higher education scholarship and practice, its literature remains predominantly grounded in U.S. institutional structures, policies, and practices. Research outside the United States is geographically limited and often focuses on international recruitment, mobility, admissions, and immigration rather than SEM as an institution-wide framework connecting recruitment, retention, student success, completion, academic planning, and financial sustainability.

International SEM publications also tend to present individual institutional cases or practitioner perspectives. Limited comparative research has examined how national policies, funding models, governance structures, organizational cultures, data capacity, and student demographics affect SEM implementation. Consequently, it remains unclear which elements of established SEM models are internationally transferable, and which require adaptation to local contexts.

Further research is also needed to evaluate SEM's long-term effects on enrollment stability, equity, student experience, completion, and institutional sustainability. This study begins to address these gaps by examining how enrollment professionals outside the United States understand, adapt, and implement SEM within their institutional and regional contexts.

Method

This mixed-methods study consisted of an online survey of recent attendees from institutions outside the United States who attended the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) SEM Conference, and interviews of selected survey respondents, along with those they referred to the authors.

The study posed minimal ethical risk because participation was voluntary, data collection focused on professional roles and institutional practices rather than on personal or sensitive information, and findings are reported in aggregate. The research is scholarly and developmental, with the potential to inform future institutional planning, policy development, and professional education in higher education. It was approved by the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board.

Participants

The study sought participation from enrollment professionals at institutions outside of the United States who

attended the 2022 to 2025 AACRAO SEM conferences, using a convenience sample (Zikmund 2003), or who were identified through snowball sampling. Recruitment included an email sent by AACRAO and social media posts from research team members. A total of 42 persons participated in the study, with all respondents completing the online survey and four being interviewed by a member of the research team, including a senior leader from Western Canada, an executive leader from Eastern Canada, an admissions professional from Ghana, and a director-level leader from Egypt. Participants represented different levels of professional experience and held responsibilities spanning admissions, registrarial functions, student affairs, institutional planning, and executive leadership. Most respondents had eleven or more years of experience in SEM-related roles at a public university or community college, serving primarily undergraduate students.

Online Survey

The survey asked respondents about their institutional familiarity with and application of SEM, including where it is utilized in the student journey, with which student types, and by which parts of the institution. It also asked classifying questions about the respondent, such as their role, seniority, and years of experience, as well as about the respondent's institution, type, and student body. At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to further participate in a confidential, recorded interview with a member of the research team.

Interviews

Those survey respondents who indicated interest in being interviewed were contacted by a member of the research team to participate in an online, recorded interview via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Participants were screened for their location (outside of the United States) and paired with an unfamiliar member of the research team for the interview to minimize confirmation bias and support candid discussion. After participation and an opt-out period, participants' names were pseudonymized. The transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Questions focused on participant perceptions of the development of SEM internationally, the current state of SEM in their region, and trends they foresee in the next decade.

Findings

The Present: SEM and the Institution

Survey results suggest that what institutions may internally describe as "SEM" primarily consists of tactical applications. Most institutions explicitly included in SEM recruitment, admissions, registrar's office, marketing, retention/student success, student affairs/services, and, to a lesser extent, international student affairs, academic advising, institutional research/analysis, Indigenous student services, graduate studies, student wellness/counseling, and athletics. Institutions are either minimally or moderately connected to institutional commitments around equity, diversity, and inclusion. Most respondents indicated that SEM is an explicit concept at their campus and that it was initially introduced as a primarily recruitment-focused strategy, although it is now seen as a whole-student-lifecycle strategy. Interestingly, respondents were mostly neutral or disagreed as to whether U.S.-based models influenced early SEM work.

Several factors have driven changes in enrollment management at the institutional level. They include increases and decreases in international student enrollment, student retention and success, strong leadership from an SEM champion at the executive level, budget shortfalls and resource capacity, and senior leadership turnover.

Below are other key findings related to SEM at the institutional level:

- Student populations that are SEM priorities include Indigenous, racialized, first-generation, mature, transfer, low-income, and inadequately represented learners.
- Approximately half of the respondents agreed that SEM units engage in moderate to high levels of cross-functional collaboration, while the other half found low or very low levels of collaboration.

- More than two-thirds commented that their institution has a moderate or high level of analytical capacity to support SEM (*e.g.*, dashboards, predictive models, scenario planning).
- Three-quarters claimed that their institution has a moderate to very high interest in investing additional resources in SEM in the near future.

Interviews focused primarily on the future of SEM and how the profession, its leaders, and roles connected to enrollment management may evolve over the next ten years. Participants were asked to consider the pace of change, emerging challenges and opportunities, and the regional factors likely to affect their work. Questions focused on SEM as an overarching discipline rather than on the mandates, operations, or workforces of individual institutions.

Despite differences in region, role, and experience, seven themes emerged across all or most interviews:

- Sustained rapid change: Pace and complexity of change are expected to remain high or increase.
- Whole student journey: SEM must be understood as extending beyond recruitment to encompass the student journey from admission through graduation.
- Data-informed decisions: Better collection, integration, and analysis of institutional data are needed to understand current challenges and anticipate future needs.
- Technology and systems: AI, automation, predictive modeling, and other technologies are expected to reshape SEM work.
- Cross-institutional ownership: Successful SEM requires coordinated participation across academic and administrative areas.
- Institution-wide benefit: SEM must demonstrate its continuing relevance and value across the institution.
- Institution fit: SEM approaches must reflect each institution's region, mandate, market, and operating environment.

While these themes were widely shared, participants described them through different regional and professional realities. The first two themes reflect how respondents understood the current SEM environment and the expanding scope of the discipline.

Sustained Rapid Change

Respondents were directly asked to reflect on the intensity and speed of change they had experienced over the previous five years and to consider whether that pace would slow, remain steady, or increase during the next ten years. All agreed that the work had become faster and more complex. They also considered a return to slower or more predictable conditions unlikely.

Three respondents clearly anticipated a further increase in the pace and intensity of change, and the fourth expected change to remain at its current high level or become more intense depending on institutional maturity in implementing SEM. Collectively, the interviews suggest that sustained rapid change will define the operating environment for SEM professionals and leaders over the coming decade, although this may not mean continuous acceleration in every region and situation.

Whole Student Journey

SEM continues to be oversimplified by some leaders, staff, and faculty as a recruitment operation. Surmounting this misconception and establishing SEM as a full student lifecycle approach, from admission through graduation, will remain a challenge over the next ten years.

An executive leader from Eastern Canada described the distinction directly: "SEM is not recruitment," and that "everybody needs to make it their priority." Similarly, an admissions professional from Ghana explained that "SEM provides the framework that links admissions, advising, student affairs, retention, and other functions into a coordinated institutional effort."

Together, these comments illustrate two dimensions of the challenge. Institutions must champion a broader understanding of SEM and recognize that responsibility for enrollment outcomes extends across the academic and administrative functions supporting the student's journey. This broader understanding also

TABLE 1 ➤ Top SEM-Related Challenges Faced by Institutions

Most Common	Common	Cited Once
▸ Negative budget capacity; budget driving targets; budget deficits; optimizing enrollment based on government funding priorities ▸ SEM is an unfamiliar concept, especially in the academic areas ▸ Recent enrollment declines and associated revenue drop related to the drop in international student enrollment; the need to increase international student recruitment	▸ Collaboration aversion mindset; collaboration in a decentralized institutional environment; silos feel threatened by institutional approaches ▸ Recruitment competition with other postsecondary institutions recruiting in our primary catchment area ▸ Affordability of higher education ▸ Need to enhance student retention-related services; keeping our focus on the full student lifecycle ▸ Integrated resource planning; allocating time and developing the required expertise to analyze complex data	▸ Aligning priorities across a decentralized institutional environment ▸ Challenges with retention and graduation rates ▸ Creating enrollment targets ▸ Enrollment declines, including low domestic enrollment ▸ Fragmented data ecosystem ▸ Student housing capacity ▸ Lack of a comprehensive SEM plan with measurable goals ▸ Lack of investment in senior staff in key areas ▸ Managing institutional capacity ▸ Perception that SEM work does not pertain to academic departments ▸ Program mix ▸ Rationalizing actions ▸ SEM is not prioritized outside of the direct departments

shapes whether institutions can coordinate their plans, resources, and responsibilities effectively, leading directly into the SEM planning challenges considered next.

SEM Planning

Survey results indicate that institutions face several SEM-related challenges, as shown in Table 1. The most commonly cited challenges are budget constraints, limited awareness of the SEM concept, and the recent decline in international student enrollment. Also receiving top mention are collaboration, recruitment competition, affordability of higher education, adopting a full student lifecycle approach, and the effective use of data in SEM planning. Table 1 also provides other challenges that single respondents identified.

When asked how they see challenges faced by U.S. enrollment professionals that differ from those faced by those working outside the United States, survey respondents commented on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); affordability of higher education; oversight of retention and graduate success; endowment support; and regional considerations. When asked what aspects of U.S.-based SEM models are least transferable to their country, they listed EDI, financial topics (tuition, financial aid), and admissions. One respondent commented that "the US seems to have a better grasp on SEM and how it underscores everything we do in postsecondary." Another wrote, "SEM is set up around the system; therefore, it is challenging to remould the system to be SEM-forward without tearing it down and starting all over (something we can't afford to do in most institutions)." Another said, "I think U.S.-based SEM planning understands and invests in the full student lifecycle."

The interviews reinforced these survey findings and identified four related conditions that shape whether SEM planning can move from aspiration to implementation: actionable data, shared institutional ownership, demonstrated institution-wide benefit, and alignment with institutional context.

Data-Informed Decisions

Interviewees described gaps in the availability, integration, and use of current and actionable institutional data. Such limitations make it more difficult for SEM practitioners to understand existing challenges, describe patterns, and anticipate future needs. Better data collection, centralization, and analysis will become increasingly important as the pace of change accelerates.

A director-level leader from Egypt observed, "We already collect a great deal of data.... The opportunity is to connect this information more effectively and use it to identify patterns." Discussing missing student information, an executive leader from Eastern Canada bluntly explained that their institution cannot undertake predictive analytics because it does not capture the necessary data at the front end.

These comments demonstrate that the challenge is not simply collecting more data. Institutions may already possess substantial information, but disconnected systems, data territorialism, missing inputs, and limited analytical capacity can prevent it from becoming useful and actionable evidence. Strengthening the quality and integration of institutional data will be necessary for SEM to move from reacting to past changes toward anticipating future ones.

Cross-Institutional Ownership

The student lifecycle and development of effective institutional data extend beyond the authority of any single office. Interviewees emphasized that successful SEM depends upon coordinated participation across academic units, admissions, registrarial functions, student affairs, facilities, finance, and other areas that influence enrollment and student success.

One senior leader described what can happen when SEM earns broader institutional support: "It's come to a point with us where it's now central, and people aren't questioning it anymore. They're coming to the SEM committee. They're listening to the SEM committees. They're asking the SEM committees for things." Another leader described the risk when this coordination is absent: "If these offices work separately, we may solve one problem while creating another."

These comments illustrate that effective cross-institutional ownership involves more than inviting representatives to participate in a SEM committee. SEM must become a credible and recognized part of institutional planning, with departments understanding how their decisions affect other stages of the student journey.

Achieving this level of coordination may be difficult within institutions with entrenched structures and distributed authority. One executive leader observed that "universities are like cruise ships that can change direction...just not quickly." The metaphor captures both the possibility and difficulty of institution-wide change. Strong leadership can establish direction, but SEM leaders also require sufficient authority, resources, and time to bring independent areas into a shared institutional approach.

Institution-Wide Benefit

As the cruise ship metaphor suggests, institution-wide adoption of SEM is a gradual process rather than a single planning exercise. Establishing a SEM committee or authoring a plan may happen relatively quickly, but building confidence, changing institutional culture, and demonstrating results can take considerably longer.

One professional from Ghana remarked, "If SEM continues to be viewed only as a corrective measure rather than a long-term institutional strategy, that could limit its broader adoption and effectiveness." This highlights the risk of introducing SEM primarily during enrollment or financial crises. When immediate conditions improve, or when results take longer than expected, institutional attention and support may disappear before the strategy has time to take hold.

Long-term adoption therefore depends upon showing how SEM benefits different parts of the institution. A leader from Western Canada explained, "You have to show the institution the value." Reflecting on a renewed SEM plan, the respondent added that "we were able to show very quickly how we were achieving things, which got people's attention because they were seeing the benefits."

These experiences suggest that SEM leaders must balance patience with visible progress. Institution-wide change may be slow, but early and practical evidence of benefit can build credibility, maintain engagement, and help SEM become a continuing institutional practice rather than a temporary response to crisis.

SEM-Institution Fit

The final planning theme from the interviews returns to the question of institutional context. Although re-

spondents identified many shared challenges and opportunities, they did not describe SEM as a uniform model. Its application is shaped by institutional mandate, student populations, regional conditions, political climate, economic pressures, and the immediate issues facing the institution.

A director-level leader from Egypt stated, "I do not believe SEM can simply be transferred from one country or university to another without considering the institutional and regional context." A senior leader from Western Canada made a similar point: "It has to be flexible enough that institutions can build something that makes sense for their institution."

These comments suggest that the international development of SEM will depend upon adaptation rather than replication. Institutions can draw upon common SEM principles, including institutional coordination, data-informed planning, and attention to the whole student journey, while applying them in ways that reflect their own operating realities. The interviews therefore point toward a shared foundation for SEM, but not a single model for every institution or region. This need for locally responsive planning also frames the future supports and opportunities respondents identified.

The Future

When asked what supports or resources would best help advance SEM goals at their institution, survey respondents identified several key initiatives, outlined in Table 2, most of which focus on funding, leadership, data management, and professional development.

Forward-looking interview findings broadly reinforced the supports identified by survey respondents. Participants connected funding, leadership, data management, professional development, and international collaboration to a larger question: how institutions can prepare SEM professionals and structures for another decade of rapid change. They identified technology as a major driver of that change, but also emphasized the continuing importance of leadership capacity, institutional strategy, professional development, and human judgment.

TABLE 2 ➤ Support and Resources to Advance SEM

Increased government recognition that funding is inadequate to support postsecondary education and budget models that incentivize enrollment
An internal budget to develop a SEM plan, more direct investment in the SEM organization, and an increase in retention resources
Stronger institution-wide understanding of SEM, including SEM education sessions, professional development and training in SEM best practices
More country-specific resources and education programs related to SEM, including a SEM community of practice
A SEM champion to build a clear SEM vision, develop a comprehensive SEM strategy, and ensure its adoption, or an external consultant to help establish a SEM committee and develop a SEM plan
Stronger data management, along with additional funding to build systems, software, programming, and staffing, investment in AI (predictive modeling) and CRM tools and access to advanced data analytics
More top-down focus on SEM and cooperation from independent faculties
Stronger partnerships and benchmarking opportunities with international institutions

Technology and Systems

Closely connected to the need for better data is the technology required to collect, connect, analyze, and act upon it. Respondents viewed development of institutional systems as essential to improving predictive capacity and supporting more responsive SEM operations. They acknowledged that AI has emerged as a transformative technology in recent years. Most respondents anticipated that, during the next ten years, AI will increasingly affect predictive modeling, data analysis, document review, communications, and repetitive administrative tasks. These developments may allow SEM practitioners to spend less time on routine processing and more time interpreting information, supporting students, and addressing complex institutional needs.

Participants did not, however, view technological adoption as an end within itself. One leader from Egypt explained, "the question will not simply be whether we

use AI. I think the more important question is: where should we use it, and where should human judgment remain central?" This distinction is especially important in student-support work, where atypical lived experiences, differing policies, and other circumstances may not fit standardized decision rules.

The recurrence of this theme across regions suggests that technological change represents a global issue for SEM. Its relevance does not appear limited to institutions with mature SEM structures or advanced information systems. Institutions may differ considerably in their readiness, resources, and technological capacity, but they are encountering many of the same questions about how automation and emerging technologies should be used. System maturity will likely shape the pace and form of adoption, but not whether SEM professionals must respond to these developments.

Preparing SEM Leaders

The future of SEM will also require leaders who can interpret data, manage institutional change, and build support across areas they may not directly supervise. One interviewee remarked, "SEM leaders do not necessarily need to become data scientists, but they must know what questions to ask of the data and how to translate findings into action." Analytical literacy will therefore involve more than technical expertise. Leaders must be able to connect evidence with student need, institutional priorities, and academic needs.

Respondents also distinguished between being responsible for SEM and having the capacity or the authority to implement it. Reflecting on a previous role with a broad institutional portfolio, one executive leader summarized the problem flatly: "I had all the power and no capacity." Dedicated SEM positions may face the opposite challenge, with sufficient time and expertise but limited authority over the academic and administrative areas that influence enrollment.

Successful SEM leadership will require a workable balance of accountability, resourcing, and cross-institutional support. Executive champions can help establish SEM as a shared priority, but leaders across the institution will also need professional development and a clearer understanding of how their work contributes to enrollment and student success. Future SEM leaders will be expected to bring teams through technological and organizational change while maintaining confidence in the purpose behind that change.

SEM as Critical Enabler

Interviewees also saw an opportunity for SEM to become more closely connected to academic and institutional planning. One respondent observed, "the greatest opportunity is for SEM to become a much stronger strategic partner within the university."

Enrollment professionals have access to information about student demand, application patterns, offer acceptance, enrollment, retention, and student progression. When this information is analyzed effectively, it can help institutional and academic leaders identify changing program demand, emerging student populations, barriers in the student journey, and gaps between applications and actual enrollment.

This strategic role moves SEM beyond reporting enrollment numbers or responding to short-term recruitment pressures. It positions enrollment professionals to help institutions make decisions about academic offerings, student support, resource allocation, and future areas of growth. Realizing this opportunity will depend upon the data, systems, authority, and cross-institutional relationships identified throughout the interviews.

International Growth and Collaboration

The next decade may also create opportunities for SEM to expand in regions where the discipline remains less established, building on the themes of this article. One professional observed, "I see significant opportunities for SEM to expand globally, particularly in regions where awareness remains limited."

The respondent noted that formal SEM education and training remain uncommon among many student-facing professionals in Africa. Professional development, outreach, international collaboration, and communities of practice could help institutions build local SEM knowledge while adapting established principles to their own educational systems and operating conditions.

International expansion should not be understood as transferring a single SEM model from one country to another. Instead, it creates an opportunity for institutions and practitioners in emerging SEM regions to contribute their own experiences, priorities, and approaches to the continuing development of the discipline. International partnerships can support shared learning, but successful implementation will still depend upon local institutional and regional realities.

Taken together, the interviews suggest that the future of SEM will depend upon more than adopting new technologies or expanding existing practices. Institutions will need to connect technological capacity with capable leadership, reliable data, institutional strategy, local context, and student needs. As one interviewee concluded, "I think the future of SEM internationally is about bringing all of these elements together: data, technology, institutional strategy and human judgment."

Conclusion

Research Question #1

What enrollment management topics have scholars and practitioners beyond the United States focused on since the founding of SEM?

Topics mentioned by research participants included sustained rapid change, whole student journey, data-informed decisions, technology and systems, cross-institutional ownership, institution-wide benefit, institution fit, support and resources to advance SEM, preparing SEM leaders, SEM as a critical enabler, and institutional growth and collaboration.

Research Question #2

What are the enrollment challenges and barriers identified by SEM professionals beyond the United States for developing and implementing SEM—past, present, and future?

The most commonly cited challenges are budget constraints, limited awareness of the SEM concept, and the recent decline in international student enrollment. Also receiving top mention are collaboration, recruitment competition, affordability of higher education, adopting a full student lifecycle approach, and the effective use of data in SEM planning.

When asked how they see challenges faced by U.S. enrollment professionals that differ from those faced by those working outside the United States, survey respondents commented on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); affordability of higher education; oversight of retention and graduate success; endowment support; and regional considerations. When asked what aspects of U.S.-based SEM models are least transferable to their country, they listed EDI, financial topics (tuition, financial aid), and admissions.

The interviews reinforced these survey findings and identified four related conditions that shape whether SEM planning can move from aspiration to implementation: actionable data, shared institutional ownership, demonstrated institution-wide benefit, and alignment with institutional context.

Study Limitations

Research participants were from a small set of countries, with most coming from Canada, which represents SEM Conference attendance patterns. However, to get a more comprehensive sense of how SEM plays out globally, a wider set of participants is needed.

Future Research Topics

This study opened the door to how SEM has been implemented outside of the United States. However, comparative research is needed to learn more about how SEM is used globally and whether national culture impacts SEM development.

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