

# Educational Leadership and Learning Shaping Students' Perceptions of Mobility Programs in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

## ABSTRACT

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Higher education mobility programs have grown steadily alongside broader internationalization initiatives, yet students' learning experiences within these programs remain shaped by a range of academic, institutional, and leadership-related challenges. Much of the existing literature addresses learning issues, educational leadership, or student perceptions separately, which limits a comprehensive understanding of how these elements interact within higher education settings. This study therefore examines challenges in learning and educational leadership alongside students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programs in higher education. Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, a systematic literature review was conducted using the Scopus and Web of Science databases. A total of 34 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 were analyzed using a narrative thematic approach. The findings indicate that students' mobility experiences are influenced by interrelated academic, cultural, institutional, and structural factors, with educational leadership playing a mediating role in shaping learning environments and student perceptions. While mobility programs offer opportunities for intercultural learning, personal development, and emerging leadership capacity, their educational value depends strongly on leadership quality, institutional support, and inclusive learning practices. Effective educational leadership can mitigate learning challenges. The study contributes an integrated leadership, learning, perception perspective to mobility research and highlights implications for higher education leadership and mobility programs.

**Keywords:** educational leadership, student perceptions, learning challenges, higher education; mobility programs.

## 1. Introduction

Higher education has undergone significant transformation as institutions respond to increasing international connectivity, student mobility, and global interdependence. Universities across different regions have expanded mobility programs and international initiatives to enhance learning experiences, promote intercultural engagement, and prepare graduates for complex global environments. However, the expansion of these initiatives has also revealed persistent challenges related to learning processes, institutional capacity, and student experiences within diverse educational contexts (Guo and Guo, 2022; Pearson et al., 2022). These challenges suggest that internationalization in higher education is not uniformly experienced and requires closer examination.

The prior studies show that students engaged in higher education mobility often encounter difficulties that affect their academic engagement and overall learning outcomes. Differences in language use, pedagogical practices, assessment expectations, and academic cultures can complicate students' adjustment to new learning environments (Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023; Aksezer et al., 2023). These challenges are not limited to international students alone but also affect local students and educators who participate in internationally oriented programs. As a result, learning within higher education mobility contexts involves ongoing negotiation between academic expectations and students' prior educational experiences.

In addition to learning related challenges, the literature highlights the important role of educational leadership and institutional practices in shaping student experiences. Universities vary in their ability to provide coherent support structures, inclusive policies, and effective leadership approaches that respond to increasing diversity and international engagement (Correia Monteiro et al., 2021; Monteiro et al., 2025). Recent research further emphasises that effective educational leadership in higher education is underpinned by a set of core competencies, including communication, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and digital proficiency, which are essential in managing complex and diverse learning environments (Saidi & Abd Aziz, 2025). Leadership decisions influence how mobility programs are implemented, how students are supported, and how learning environments are structured. When institutional responses are fragmented or unclear, students may experience uncertainty and reduced engagement with their academic and social environments.

Students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programs further shape participation and outcomes in higher education. Research indicates that students often associate mobility with personal development, cultural exposure, and future career opportunities, while also expressing concerns related to cost, access, and institutional support (Guo et al., 2019; Pearson et al., 2021). These perceptions influence decision making before participation and satisfaction during and after mobility experiences. Understanding how students interpret and experience mobility programs is therefore essential for evaluating their educational value and effectiveness.

The literature on higher education mobility has generated valuable insights into students' learning experiences, institutional practices, and leadership roles. However, this body of research remains fragmented, with many studies examining learning challenges, educational leadership, or student perceptions of mobility programmes in isolation. Consequently, there is limited integrative understanding of how learning-related challenges and leadership practices together shape students' experiences and interpretations of mobility within higher education. In addition, much of the existing research is situated within specific regional, institutional, or programme contexts, which restricts broader insights into recurring patterns across diverse settings. These limitations point to the need for a systematic synthesis that brings together learning challenges, leadership and institutional factors, and student perceptions to develop a more comprehensive understanding of mobility programmes in higher education.

Addressing this gap, the present study synthesises recent scholarly evidence to examine how challenges related to learning and educational leadership interact to shape students' understanding and perceptions

of mobility programmes. By adopting an integrative perspective, this review conceptualises mobility as an educational process embedded within institutional leadership practices and learning environments.

Previous systematic reviews on student mobility have predominantly examined specific dimensions such as academic adjustment, intercultural learning, or internationalisation outcomes in isolation (King et al., 2010; de Wit & Hunter, 2015; Vande Berg et al., 2009). For instance, existing reviews have explored students' learning experiences and adaptation challenges without explicitly incorporating the role of educational or institutional leadership in shaping these processes. Similarly, other syntheses have focused on mobility outcomes, including employability and intercultural competence, yet have not sufficiently addressed how leadership practices and institutional structures influence these outcomes within higher education contexts. As a result, current systematic literature remains fragmented and offers limited explanatory power in understanding how learning challenges, educational leadership, and students' perceptions interact as an integrated system. This lack of integration constrains a more comprehensive conceptualisation of mobility as an educational process embedded within institutional practices. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by providing an integrative systematic review that examines how learning-related challenges and educational leadership jointly shape students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programmes in higher education.

### **1.1. Research Question and Objectives**

Despite the growth of higher education mobility programmes, existing research provides limited integrated insight into how learning challenges and educational leadership jointly influence students' understanding and perceptions of mobility. While prior studies have documented academic and cultural adjustment issues and explored student experiences of mobility, fewer studies conceptualise educational leadership as a mediating structure shaping learning environments and student perceptions within mobility contexts. This lack of integration constrains the ability of higher education leaders and policymakers to design mobility programmes that are educationally coherent, inclusive, and responsive to diverse student needs.

To address this problem, this study is guided by the following research question:

How do challenges related to learning and educational leadership shape students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programmes in higher education?

In line with this question, the study pursues four objectives:

1. To synthesise learning-related challenges experienced by students participating in higher education mobility programmes.
2. To examine how educational leadership and institutional practices influence learning environments within mobility contexts.
3. To analyse patterns in students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programmes reported in the literature.
4. To develop an integrated perspective linking learning challenges, educational leadership, and student perceptions in higher education mobility.

### **1.2. Conceptual Framework: Educational Leadership, Learning, and Student Perceptions in Mobility Programmes**

This study is underpinned by an integrative conceptual framework that positions educational leadership as a mediating structure linking learning environments and students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programmes. In higher education, educational leadership extends beyond formal managerial roles to include leadership practices that shape institutional culture, curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and student support systems. Within mobility programs, leadership plays a critical role in determining how internationalisation is enacted in practice and how students experience learning across diverse academic and cultural environments.

Drawing on inclusive and distributed leadership perspectives, educational leadership is understood as a collective and relational process that involves academic leaders, programme coordinators, lecturers, and professional staff working collaboratively to support student learning. This perspective is also aligned with broader leadership theories in higher education, including transformational leadership, which emphasises vision, change, and the development of shared goals, as well as organisational learning perspectives that highlight institutional adaptability and continuous improvement in complex and dynamic environments. Inclusive leadership emphasises responsiveness to diversity, equity, and student voice, while distributed leadership highlights the shared responsibility for decision-making and programme implementation across institutional actors. These perspectives are particularly relevant to mobility programmes, which operate across institutional, cultural, and national boundaries and require coordinated leadership to ensure coherence and inclusivity.

From a learning perspective, mobility programmes create complex educational environments characterised by linguistic diversity, varied pedagogical traditions, and differing academic expectations. Leadership practices influence how these environments are structured, including the alignment of curricula, clarity of assessment practices, availability of academic guidance, and provision of intercultural learning opportunities. Effective educational leadership can mitigate learning challenges by fostering inclusive pedagogies, supporting staff development, and ensuring that learning environments are responsive to the needs of mobile and international students. In this study, inclusive learning practices refer to pedagogical approaches that accommodate diverse linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds, including differentiated instruction, accessible academic support, and student-centred engagement strategies.

Students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programmes are shaped through their interaction with these leadership-influenced learning environments. Institutional communication, programme design, and the quality of academic and social support signal to students the value and purpose of mobility experiences. When leadership practices promote transparency, inclusivity, and student-centred approaches, students are more likely to perceive mobility programmes as meaningful educational opportunities rather than as administratively complex or peripheral activities.

While the framework is presented in a linear form, it also acknowledges potential reciprocal relationships, whereby students' experiences and perceptions may influence institutional responses and leadership practices over time. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding this systematic literature review. The framework positions educational leadership as a mediating structure between broader structural and contextual conditions and students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programmes. Leadership practices shape learning environments through curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, academic support, and intercultural learning opportunities, thereby influencing how students experience and interpret mobility. Students' perceptions are thus understood not solely as individual responses, but as outcomes embedded within institutional leadership practices and learning contexts. This framework provides an integrative lens for interpreting the themes identified in the review.

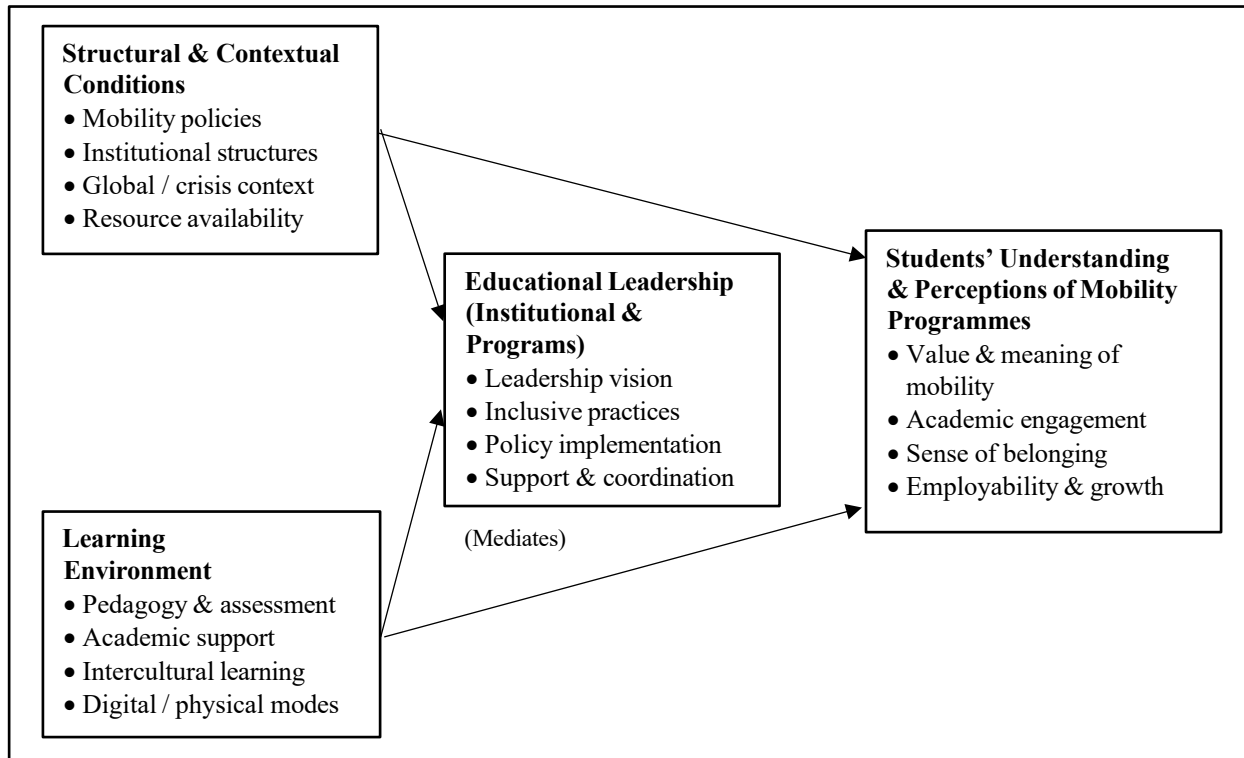


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Mediating Role of Educational Leadership in Shaping Learning Environments and Students' Understanding and Perception of Mobility Programmes in Higher Education

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design, Data Sources and Search Strategy

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The literature search was conducted between October and November 2025 using Scopus and Web of Science to identify peer-reviewed journal articles related to higher education mobility, learning challenges, educational leadership, and student perceptions. These databases were selected due to their comprehensive coverage of high-quality journals in education and the social sciences.

The search strategy employed predefined keyword combinations reflecting the core concepts of the review. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included to ensure scholarly quality and consistency. As this study is a systematic literature review, no empirical research instruments were employed; data were derived exclusively from published journal articles relevant to the review focus.

The conceptual framework developed for this study informed both the search strategy and the analytical process. The core domains of learning challenges, educational leadership, and students' perceptions were translated into keyword combinations for database searches and subsequently operationalised as initial coding categories during thematic synthesis. This alignment ensured that the analysis remained theoretically grounded and systematically linked to the study's conceptual foundation.

The literature search was conducted using Scopus and Web of Science databases. The search was performed on 15 November 2025 using predefined keyword combinations reflecting the core concepts of mobility, higher education, programmes, and student experiences. The search strategy employed

Boolean operators (AND, OR) and field-specific queries (TITLE-ABS-KEY for Scopus and TS for Web of Science). The keywords used in the search string were as follows:

Table 1. Search String

|  |
|--|
| TITLE-ABS-KEY ("student mobility" OR mobility OR "study abroad" OR exchange)<br>AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("higher education" OR university OR "tertiary education")<br>AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (programme OR program OR initiative OR scheme)<br>AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (learning OR perception OR experience OR outcome)<br>AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2026<br>AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar"))<br>AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")) |
|--|

## 2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were identified through a structured search process using Scopus and Web of Science. The search began with broad keywords related to mobility and higher education, which were subsequently combined with programme-related and experience-related terms using Boolean operators. Filters were applied to limit results to peer-reviewed journal articles in English published between 2015 and 2025 within relevant social science and education subject areas. This stepwise approach ensured a comprehensive yet focused identification of studies aligned with the review objectives.

Table 2. Core Search Concepts and Keywords

| Concept                 | Keywords  |
|-------------------------|---|
| Mobility                | Mobility, exchange, study abroad, transfer                      |
| Higher education        | Higher education, tertiary education, university, postsecondary |
| Programme               | Programme, initiative, scheme, project                          |
| Experience & perception | Experience, opportunity, benefit, impact                        |

\*Database-specific search string and filters were applied within Scopus and Web of Science and are available upon request

Table 2 shows the criteria used to guide article selection and ensure methodological rigour and relevance. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included to maintain scholarly quality, while conference papers, books, and reports were excluded due to differences in review standards. The review was limited to English-language publications to ensure consistency in analysis. Articles published between 2015 and 2025 were selected to capture contemporary research reflecting current higher education and mobility contexts. Studies were further restricted to higher education, education, and related social science fields, and only those focusing on learning, educational leadership, or student mobility were included. These criteria ensured that the final selection of articles aligned closely with the objectives of the review and supported an integrated synthesis of the literature.

Table 3. Article Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

| Criteria         | Inclusion                                    | Exclusion   |
|------------------|--|---|
| Publication type | Peer reviewed journal articles               | Conference papers, books, book chapters, reviews, reports |
| Language         | English                                      | Non-English   |
| Publication year | 2015- 2025                                   | Published before 2015                                     |
| Subject area     | Higher education, education, social sciences | Non-related fields  |
| Study focus      | Learning, leadership, or student mobility    | Unrelated topics  |

## 2.3. Article Screening and Selection Process (PRISMA)

The study selection process followed the PRISMA guidelines to ensure a systematic and transparent approach to article screening and inclusion. The screening process was conducted in two stages, namely

title and abstract screening followed by full-text review. To enhance the reliability of the selection process, a second reviewer cross-checked a subset of the screened articles. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus to ensure consistency in study selection. Figure 2 presents the PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies in this systematic literature review. Records were identified from Scopus ( $n = 3,993$ ) and Web of Science ( $n = 494$ ), yielding a total of 4,487 records after database-level filtering. Following the removal of duplicate records ( $n = 1,272$ ), 3,215 records were screened based on titles and abstracts.

During the eligibility stage, 620 full-text articles were assessed for relevance against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. After full-text screening, 586 articles were excluded due to insufficient alignment with the review objectives. The final sample comprised 34 peer-reviewed journal articles, which formed the basis for data extraction and subsequent thematic synthesis.

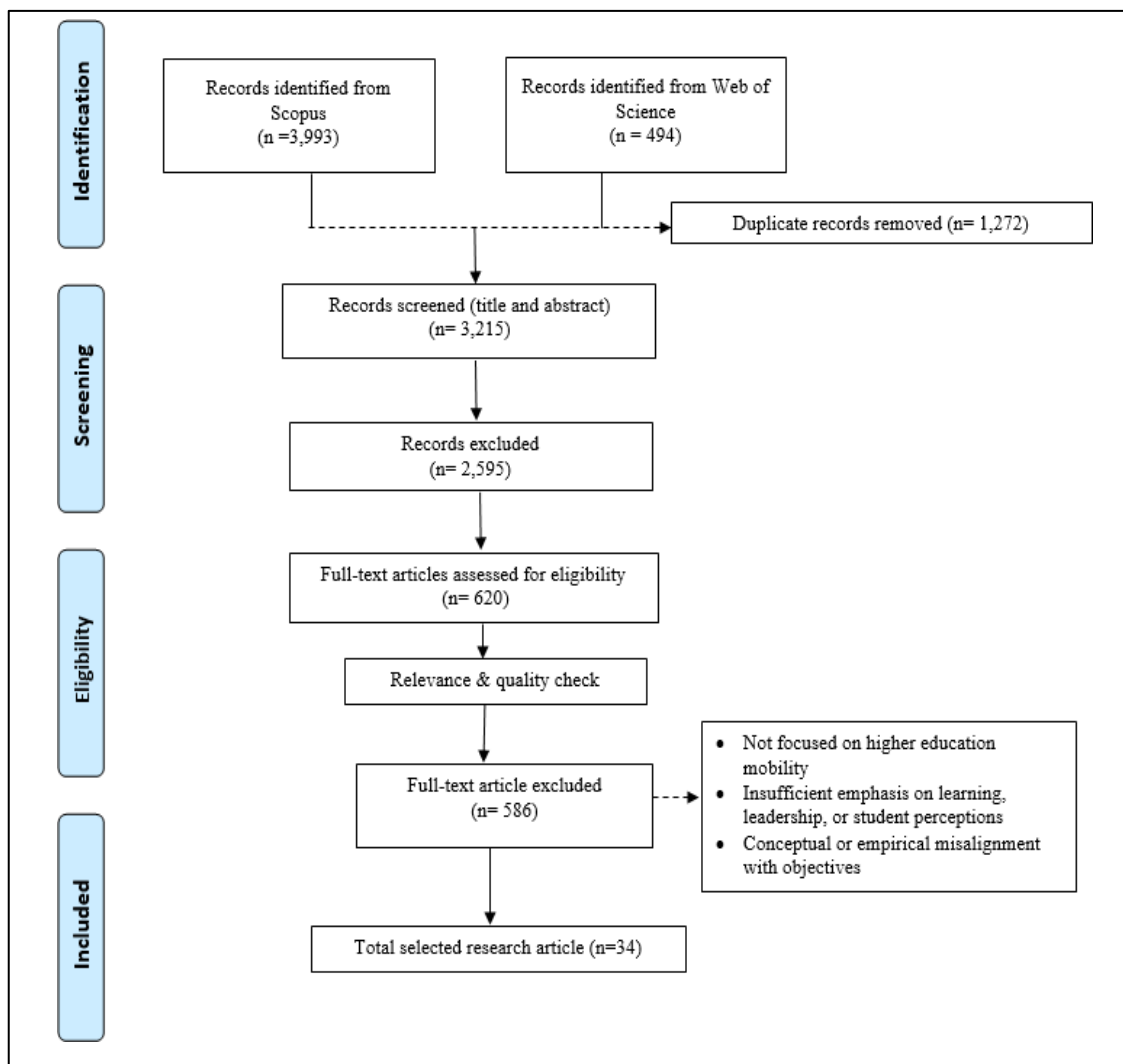


Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Article Selection Process

During the full-text screening stage, articles were excluded based on predefined criteria to ensure alignment with the review objectives. The main reasons for exclusion included studies not focused on higher education contexts, lack of relevance to student mobility, absence of discussion on learning or leadership dimensions, and articles that were conceptual or lacked empirical evidence. A summary of exclusion reasons and corresponding counts is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Reasons for exclusion at full-text screening

| Reason for Exclusion  | Number of Articles |
|---|--------------------|
| Not focus on higher education                                   | 150                |
| Not related to student mobility                                 | 120                |
| No discussion of learning or leadership                         | 110                |
| Conceptual papers/ lack of empirical data                       | 90                 |
| Irrelevant outcomes (e.g., policy only, no student perspective) | 116                |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>586</b>         |

## 2.4. Quality Appraisal

To ensure the robustness and credibility of the synthesis, all included studies were subjected to a quality appraisal process. Articles were assessed based on their relevance to the review objectives, clarity of research focus and methodology, and contribution to understanding learning challenges, educational leadership, or students' perceptions within higher education mobility contexts. Only peer-reviewed journal articles meeting these criteria were retained for inclusion. This appraisal approach ensured that the final synthesis was grounded in methodologically sound and conceptually relevant literature.

## 2.5. Sampling Strategy, Data Extraction, and Analytical Approach

The final sample of 34 articles constituted the analytical corpus for this review. Sampling at this stage was purposive, focusing on studies that explicitly addressed learning challenges, educational leadership, or students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programmes in higher education. Data extraction focused on key study characteristics, research context, and findings relevant to the review objectives. A structured data extraction form was developed to systematically record key information from each study, including authorship, year of publication, country, research design, sample characteristics, mobility type, and key findings relevant to the review objectives.

The quality of the included studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. This tool was selected due to its suitability for evaluating qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies. The appraisal criteria included clarity of research aims, appropriateness of methodology, data collection procedures, rigor of analysis, and validity of findings. Each study was systematically evaluated to ensure the inclusion of methodologically sound evidence in the synthesis. The appraisal results indicated that the majority of the included studies were of moderate to high quality, with only a small number of studies exhibiting minor methodological limitations. No studies were excluded solely based on quality appraisal, but the appraisal informed the interpretation of findings.

An inductive narrative thematic synthesis was employed to analyse the extracted data. This review adopts an interpretive epistemological stance, acknowledging that the synthesis of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies requires analytical judgement in identifying patterns and meanings across diverse forms of evidence. This approach enables the integration of heterogeneous findings while maintaining conceptual coherence in the interpretation of themes.

Initial codes were generated through repeated reading of the included studies and subsequently clustered into broader themes based on conceptual similarity and relevance. The coding process followed an iterative approach, beginning with open coding to identify initial concepts, followed by axial coding to group related categories, and finally selective coding to develop overarching themes.

**Table 5.** Sample Coding Framework

| Code                  | Description                       | Example                                  |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Language barriers     | Difficulties in academic language | Students struggled to follow lectures    |
| Cultural adjustment   | Adaptation challenges             | Students faced social integration issues |
| Academic adaptation   | Differences in pedagogy           | Unfamiliar assessment methods            |
| Institutional support | Availability of support           | Mentoring improved adjustment            |
| Leadership practices  | Role of leadership                | Leadership shaped programme delivery     |

Theme refinement involved iterative comparison across studies to identify recurring patterns and relationships. To enhance the credibility of the thematic analysis, the coding process was reviewed and refined through iterative comparison and peer discussion. This process ensured consistency in coding and interpretation of themes across the included studies. Educational leadership was analysed both as a distinct analytical dimension and as a cross-cutting influence shaping learning environments and student perceptions across themes. This approach enabled an integrated interpretation of how learning challenges and leadership practices interact within higher education mobility contexts. Greater interpretive weight was given to studies with stronger methodological rigor, as identified through the quality appraisal process, while findings from studies with limitations were interpreted with caution. The final sample of 34 studies was considered sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, as no substantially new themes emerged during the later stages of analysis.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Figure 3 presents a concise overview of the key challenges influencing learning, educational leadership, and mobility programs in higher education. The figure highlights academic barriers related to language, pedagogy, and learning adaptation, alongside cultural adjustment challenges involving social integration and emotional wellbeing. Leadership gaps reflect institutional and governance limitations that affect the provision of inclusive support and effective management of mobility initiatives. Mobility constraints emphasise structural barriers such as financial limitations and administrative procedures, while mobility perceptions capture how students interpret and value mobility experiences. Crisis disruptions illustrate the impact of large-scale events that interrupt learning and mobility, and developmental gains recognise the positive outcomes that can emerge despite these challenges. Collectively, these dimensions illustrate the complex and interconnected nature of challenges within higher education mobility contexts.

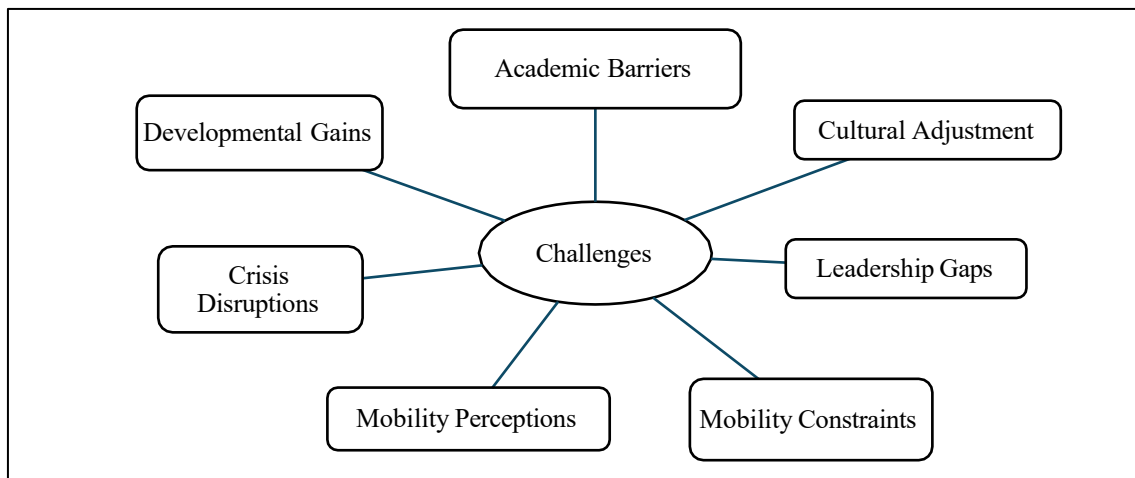


Figure 3. Key Dimensions of Challenges in Higher Education Mobility

Table 6. Key Dimensions of Challenges in Higher Education Mobility

| Theme               | Description  | References   |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Academic Barriers   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language difficulties hinder comprehension, participation, and performance</li> <li>• Misalignment with new pedagogical styles, curricula, and academic expectations</li> <li>• Limited academic guidance, research opportunities, and support structures</li> <li>• Difficulties adapting to online/virtual learning, including technology and time-zone issues</li> </ul> | Rodríguez Marconi et al (2023); Guo & Guo (2022); Aksezer et al. (2023); Monteiro et al. (2025); Pearson et al. (2022); Correia Monteiro et al. (2021); Pearson et al. (2021); Guo et al. (2019); Aksay Aksezer et al. (2023); Pearson et al. (2015); McNamara et al. (2018); Demiryontar et al. (2023); Rodríguez et al. (2020); Aksezer & Demiryontar (2021); Monteiro & Margarida (2017); Pearson & McMichael (2018); Guo (2016); Correia Monteiro (2014); Pearson et al. (2011); Aksezer et al. (2020); Guo & Guo (2019); Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2020); Monteiro et al. (2018); Pearson et al. (2017); Guo (2015); Aksezer et al. (2018); Correia Monteiro et al. (2019); Pearson et al. (2006)   |
| Cultural Adjustment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students experience culture shock, marginalization, and limited social integration</li> <li>• Racism, discrimination, and eurocentrism affect belonging and engagement</li> <li>• Emotional strain from isolation, homesickness, and transitioning into unfamiliar environments</li> </ul>  | Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2023); Guo & Guo (2022); Aksezer et al. (2023); Pearson et al. (2022); Monteiro et al. (2025); Correia Monteiro et al. (2021); Pearson et al. (2021); Guo et al. (2019); Aksay Aksezer et al. (2023); Pearson et al. (2018); McNamara et al. (2017); Rodríguez et al. (2020); Aksezer & Demiryontar (2021); Monteiro & Margarida (2016); Guo (2015); Pearson et al. (2014); Correia Monteiro (2011); Aksezer et al. (2020); Pearson et al. (2019); Guo & Guo (2018); Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2020); Monteiro et al. (2017); Pearson et al. (2015); Guo (2016); Aksezer et al. (2018); Correia Monteiro et al. (2019); Pearson et al. (2006); McNamara et al. (2018); Rodríguez et al. (2014); Guo (2011); Monteiro et al. (2018) |
| Leadership Gaps     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutions lack capacity for multicultural, inclusive, and global responsive leadership</li> <li>• Eurocentric structures and weak support systems constrain learning and internationalization</li> <li>• Bureaucratic barriers, inconsistent policies, and resources limitations impede leadership effectiveness</li> </ul>  | Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2023); Aksezer et al. (2023); Pearson et al. (2022); Monteiro et al. (2025); Correia Monteiro et al. (2021); Guo et al. (2019); Pearson et al. (2021); Rodríguez et al. (2020); Aksezer & Demiryontar (2021); Guo (2018); Monteiro & Margarida (2017); Pearson et al. (2015); Correia Monteiro (2014); Aksezer et al. (2020); Guo & Guo (2019); Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2020); Pearson et al. (2018); Monteiro et al. (2016); Guo (2015); Aksezer et al. (2018); Correia Monteiro et al. (2019); Pearson et al. (2006); McNamara et al. (2017); Rodríguez et al. (2011); Guo (2016); Monteiro et al. (2018)  |

|                             |   |  |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| <p>Mobility Constraints</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial constraints remain the strongest deterrent for mobility participation</li> <li>• Administrative, legal, and visa complexities limit access and continuity</li> <li>• Insufficient preparation for linguistic, academic, and intercultural demands</li> <li>• Limited opportunities for internships, work placements, and post-study pathways</li> </ul>  | <p>Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2023); Guo &amp; Guo (2022); Aksezer et al. (2023); Pearson et al. (2022); Correia Monteiro et al. (2021); Guo et al. (2019); Pearson et al. (2021); Rodríguez et al. (2020); Aksezer et al. (2021); Guo (2018); Monteiro et al. (2017); Pearson et al. (2015); Aksezer et al. (2020); Guo &amp; Guo (2019); Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2020); Pearson et al. (2018); Monteiro et al. (2016); Guo (2015); Correia Monteiro et al. (2019); Pearson et al. (2006); Monteiro et al. (2018)</p>  |
| <p>Mobility Perceptions</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students equate internationalization primarily with physical mobility experiences</li> <li>• Mobility perceived as enhancing employability, cultural intelligence, and professional growth</li> <li>• Experiences and perceptions vary based on institutional support, inclusivity, , and destination image</li> <li>• Mismatch exists between official programme objectives and student expectations</li> </ul> | <p>Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2023); Guo &amp; Guo (2022); Aksezer et al. (2023); Pearson et al. (2022); Correia Monteiro et al. (2021); Pearson et al. (2021); Guo et al. (2019); Rodríguez et al. (2020); Aksezer et al. (2021); Guo (2018); Monteiro et al. (2017); Pearson et al. (2015); Aksezer et al. (2020); Guo &amp; Guo (2019); Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2020); Pearson et al. (2018); Monteiro et al. (2016); Guo (2015); Correia Monteiro et al. (2019); Pearson et al. (2006); McNamara et al. (2017); Rodríguez et al. (2011); Guo (2016); Monteiro et al. (2018)</p> |
| <p>Crisis Disruptions</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COVID-19 created major disruptions: travel bans, campus closures, online transition</li> <li>• Conflicts and crises damaged institutions, reduced access, and destabilized academic pathways</li> <li>• Reduced enrolment, emotional stress, and compromised learning quality observed</li> </ul>  | <p>Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2023); Aksezer et al. (2023); Pearson et al. (2022); Monteiro et al. (2025); Correia Monteiro et al. (2021); Pearson et al. (2021); Rodríguez et al. (2020); Aksezer et al. (2021); Guo (2018); Monteiro et al. (2017); Pearson et al. (2015); Aksezer et al. (2020); Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2020); Pearson et al. (2018); Monteiro et al. (2016); Pearson et al. (2006)</p>   |
| <p>Development Gains</p>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobility builds intercultural competence, cultural intelligence, and global mind-set</li> <li>• Enhances leadership, autonomy, adaptability, and reflective learning</li> <li>• Support career readiness and professional development despite existing challenges</li> </ul>   | <p>Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2023); Guo &amp; Guo (2022); Aksezer et al. (2023); Pearson et al. (2022); Correia Monteiro et al. (2021); Pearson et al. (2021); Rodríguez et al. (2020); Aksezer et al. (2021); Guo (2018); Monteiro et al. (2017); Pearson et al. (2015); Aksezer et al. (2020); Rodríguez Marconi et al. (2020); Pearson et al. (2018); Monteiro et al. (2016); Pearson et al. (2006); Monteiro et al. (2018)</p>   |

### 3.1. Integrative Discussion

The findings of this review indicate that student mobility experiences are shaped by a complex interaction of learning challenges, institutional practices, and leadership dynamics. This integrative framework extends existing approaches by revealing how educational leadership functions as a mediating mechanism linking structural conditions and student experiences, thereby offering a more comprehensive explanation of mobility as a systemic educational process rather than isolated individual experiences. The results further demonstrate that leadership plays a critical role in shaping both learning environments and students' perceptions of mobility programmes. Viewed through the proposed conceptual framework, the findings of this review highlight educational leadership as a mediating force that shapes how learning challenges within mobility programmes are experienced and interpreted by students. Across the themes, learning-related difficulties, cultural adjustment processes, and perceptions of programme value do not emerge as isolated issues, but are embedded within leadership-influenced learning environments and institutional practices. Leadership decisions related to curriculum alignment, pedagogical support, communication, and the provision of academic and social resources consistently frame students' engagement with mobility and inform how such experiences are understood as either enriching or disruptive. This integrative perspective underscores that students' perceptions of mobility programmes are not solely individual responses to unfamiliar contexts, but are outcomes shaped by leadership practices that structure learning conditions, signal institutional priorities, and mediate the relationship between mobility participation and educational outcomes. This broader interpretation is further supported by research demonstrating that experiential engagement through structured programmes enhances students' readiness, active participation, and developmental outcomes, thereby reinforcing the role of practice-based learning within higher education contexts (Saidi & Abd Aziz, 2025; Saidi et al., 2025).

### 3.2. Theme 1: Academic Barriers

Academic and pedagogical challenges are among the most frequently discussed issues in the literature on higher education mobility and international learning. Across the prior studies, learning difficulties are not limited to subject knowledge alone but are closely linked to language use, teaching approaches, assessment practices, and students' ability to adapt to unfamiliar academic cultures. These challenges shape how students engage with learning environments and influence their academic confidence, participation, and overall educational experience.

A recurring concern highlighted in the literature is language-related difficulty, particularly for students studying in a second or third language. Several studies report that limited academic language proficiency affects students' ability to follow lectures, participate in discussions, complete written assignments, and engage critically with course content (Guo & Guo, 2022; Pearson et al., 2022; Correia Monteiro et al., 2021). Even when students possess conversational language skills, academic writing and discipline-specific terminology remain significant obstacles. These language challenges often result in reduced classroom interaction and increased reliance on surface learning strategies rather than deep engagement.

Another major academic challenge relates to differences in pedagogical styles and learning expectations. Students frequently struggle to adapt to teaching approaches that emphasise independent learning, critical thinking, and self-directed study, particularly when coming from more structured or teacher-centred educational systems (Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023; Aksezer et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2021). Assessment methods such as continuous evaluation, group work, and reflective assignments are often unfamiliar and can create uncertainty about academic standards and performance expectations.

The prior studies also highlight limited academic guidance and support as a persistent issue. Many students report uncertainty about academic norms, feedback processes, and research expectations, particularly at postgraduate level (Monteiro et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2019). In some cases, insufficient supervision, unclear communication with lecturers, or lack of structured academic mentoring

contributes to confusion and reduced learning confidence. These challenges are amplified when institutional support mechanisms are not clearly communicated or easily accessible.

With the expansion of online and blended learning, especially during periods of disruption, digital and virtual learning challenges have become more visible. Students face difficulties related to time zone differences, reduced interaction, technological limitations, and a lack of immediate feedback in virtual classrooms (Pearson et al., 2022; Aksezer et al., 2023). While online learning offers flexibility, several studies indicate that it can also intensify feelings of academic isolation and hinder collaborative learning, particularly for students unfamiliar with digital learning platforms.

The literature further suggests that academic challenges are not experienced equally by all students. Background factors such as prior educational experience, cultural capital, and socioeconomic position influence how well students adapt to new learning environments (Correia Monteiro et al., 2021; Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023). Students from underrepresented or non-traditional backgrounds often face greater difficulty navigating academic systems that assume prior familiarity with dominant educational norms.

In summary, the prior studies demonstrate that academic and pedagogical challenges are complex and interconnected. Language barriers, unfamiliar teaching methods, limited academic support, and the demands of digital learning collectively shape students' learning experiences. Addressing these challenges requires not only individual student effort but also institutional awareness and pedagogical responsiveness to diverse learning needs across higher education contexts.

### **3.3. Theme 2: Cultural Adjustment**

Social, cultural, and emotional adjustment challenges emerge as one of the most prominent themes in the literature on higher education mobility and international learning. Across the prior studies, students' academic experiences are closely intertwined with their ability to adapt socially and culturally to new environments. These challenges extend beyond the classroom and shape students' sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and overall engagement with higher education institutions.

A widely reported issue is difficulty in social integration, particularly among international and mobile students. Many studies describe feelings of isolation, loneliness, and exclusion, especially during the early stages of transition (Guo & Guo, 2022; Pearson et al., 2022; Correia Monteiro et al., 2021). Limited interaction with local students, weak peer networks, and unfamiliar social norms often prevent meaningful social connections from forming. As a result, students may remain within small cultural or linguistic groups, which restricts broader intercultural engagement.

Closely linked to social adjustment are cultural differences and misunderstandings. Several studies highlight how unfamiliar academic cultures, communication styles, and social expectations can lead to discomfort and uncertainty (Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023; Aksezer et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2021). Students often struggle to interpret classroom behaviours, staff–student relationships, and informal interaction norms, which can affect their confidence and willingness to participate. These challenges are intensified when institutions do not explicitly address cultural orientation or intercultural learning.

Experiences of discrimination, racism, and Eurocentrism are also frequently reported in the literature. Some students describe feeling marginalised due to language accent, nationality, race, or cultural background, which negatively affects their emotional well-being and sense of safety (Correia Monteiro et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2019). Eurocentric curricula and dominant cultural practices can further reinforce feelings of exclusion, particularly for students from non-Western contexts. Such experiences may discourage participation and weaken students' identification with the institution.

Emotional challenges such as homesickness, anxiety, and stress are common across mobility experiences. Separation from family and familiar support systems, combined with academic pressure and cultural adaptation, creates emotional strain for many students (Pearson et al., 2022; Monteiro et

al., 2025). Several studies note that these emotional difficulties are often hidden and underreported, as students may be reluctant to seek help or may be unaware of available support services.

The literature also shows that crisis contexts, particularly during periods of disruption, amplify social and emotional challenges. Reduced face-to-face interaction, limited campus activities, and reliance on online communication increase feelings of isolation and emotional fatigue (Aksezer et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2021). In such situations, students report a weakened sense of community and reduced opportunities for informal social learning, which are central to intercultural experiences.

Overall, the prior studies demonstrate that social, cultural, and emotional adjustment challenges play a critical role in shaping students' higher education experiences. Difficulties in social integration, cultural understanding, and emotional well-being can undermine both academic engagement and personal development. Addressing these challenges requires intentional institutional efforts to foster inclusive environments, strengthen peer interaction, and provide accessible emotional and intercultural support for diverse student populations.

### **3.4. Theme 3: Leadership Gaps**

Institutional and educational leadership challenges form a central strand in the literature on higher education mobility and internationalisation. The prior studies consistently show that students' learning and mobility experiences are strongly shaped by how institutions are organised, led, and governed. Rather than individual shortcomings, many difficulties faced by students are linked to institutional structures, leadership priorities, and the capacity of higher education systems to respond to increasing diversity and global engagement.

One major challenge identified across the literature is the limited institutional readiness to support diverse student populations. Several studies point out that universities often promote internationalization rhetorically, yet lack coherent strategies to support multicultural learning environments in practice (Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2022; Correia Monteiro et al., 2021). This gap is reflected in inconsistent support services, fragmented policies, and unclear communication channels, which leave students uncertain about where and how to seek academic or personal assistance.

Closely related to this issue is the persistence of Eurocentric institutional cultures and curricula. Many studies highlight how dominant educational norms continue to privilege Western perspectives, teaching methods, and knowledge systems, limiting meaningful inclusion of diverse epistemologies (Guo et al., 2019; Aksezer et al., 2023). Educational leaders face challenges in reconceptualizing curricula and pedagogical approaches to reflect multicultural realities, particularly within institutions shaped by long-standing traditions and regulatory constraints.

The literature also draws attention to bureaucratic and administrative barriers within higher education institutions. Complex procedures, rigid regulations, and slow decision-making processes often hinder effective implementation of internationalization and mobility initiatives (Monteiro et al., 2025; Pearson et al., 2021). From students' perspectives, administrative inflexibility can translate into delays, confusion, and frustration, particularly in areas such as course registration, credit recognition, and academic progression.

Leadership capacity and vision emerge as another critical concern. Several studies emphasize that educational leaders are increasingly required to manage multilingual, multicultural, and transnational contexts, yet may lack adequate training or institutional support to do so effectively (Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023; Aksezer et al., 2023). Leadership approaches that prioritise compliance or rankings over student experience may further weaken the ability of institutions to respond to learners' diverse needs.

Resource constraints represent an additional institutional challenge highlighted in the prior studies. Limited funding, staffing shortages, and uneven allocation of resources restrict the development of

inclusive programmes, staff training, and student support mechanisms (Guo et al., 2019; Correia Monteiro et al., 2021). These constraints are particularly evident in institutions operating within unequal global partnerships, where power imbalances can shape priorities and limit local agency in decision-making.

In summary, the literature indicates that institutional and leadership challenges play a decisive role in shaping higher education experiences. Weak support structures, Eurocentric practices, bureaucratic complexity, and limited leadership capacity collectively constrain effective internationalisation and student engagement. Addressing these challenges requires strategic leadership that prioritises inclusivity, flexibility, and responsiveness to the realities of an increasingly diverse higher education landscape.

### **3.5. Theme 4: Mobility Constraints**

Structural and systemic barriers are widely identified as key constraints shaping participation in mobility programs in higher education. Across the prior studies, these barriers operate beyond individual motivation and are embedded within financial systems, administrative arrangements, legal frameworks, and institutional policies. As a result, access to mobility opportunities is uneven, and students' experiences are often shaped by constraints that lie outside their direct control.

One of the most consistently reported barriers is financial constraint. Many studies highlight the high costs associated with mobility, including tuition fees, living expenses, travel costs, and insurance, which discourage participation or limit the duration of mobility experiences (Guo & Guo, 2022; Pearson et al., 2022; Correia Monteiro et al., 2021). Even when scholarships or funding schemes are available, they are often insufficient or highly competitive, creating unequal access for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Alongside financial issues, administrative and legal complexities emerge as major systemic challenges. Students frequently encounter difficulties related to visa procedures, documentation requirements, credit recognition, and institutional regulations (Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2021). These processes are often described as time-consuming, unclear, and inconsistently applied across institutions. Such bureaucratic barriers can delay mobility participation, create stress, and in some cases discourage students from engaging in mobility programs altogether.

The literature also points to limited opportunities for work, internships, and post-study pathways as a significant structural constraint. Several studies note that restrictions on employment during or after studies reduce the perceived value of mobility programs, particularly for students who prioritise employability and career development (Guo et al., 2019; Monteiro et al., 2025). When mobility experiences are not clearly linked to professional opportunities, students may question their long-term benefits despite personal or cultural gains.

Another systemic issue concerns unequal institutional capacity and global power imbalances. Some studies highlight how partnerships between institutions are shaped by unequal resources, regulatory frameworks, and decision-making power, often privileging institutions from more developed contexts (Correia Monteiro et al., 2021; Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023). These asymmetries can limit reciprocity in mobility programs and restrict opportunities for students from less-resourced institutions.

Preparation and access to information also emerge as structural barriers. Several studies report that students receive insufficient guidance before departure, particularly regarding academic expectations, legal procedures, and cultural adaptation (Pearson et al., 2022; Aksezer et al., 2023). Inadequate preparation increases uncertainty and places additional pressure on students to navigate complex systems independently, often relying on informal networks rather than institutional support.

In summary, the prior studies show that structural and systemic barriers significantly shape who can participate in mobility programs and how those experiences unfold. Financial limitations, bureaucratic

complexity, restricted employment opportunities, and institutional inequalities collectively constrain access and outcomes. Addressing these barriers requires coordinated policy action, clearer administrative processes, and institutional commitment to making mobility programs more inclusive and accessible across higher education systems.

### **3.6. Theme 5: Mobility Perceptions**

Understanding and perceptions of mobility programs play a crucial role in shaping students' decisions to participate and their overall experiences in higher education. Across the prior studies, mobility is commonly understood not merely as an academic activity but as a personal, cultural, and professional journey. Students' perceptions are shaped by expectations, lived experiences, and the level of institutional support they receive before, during, and after mobility.

A dominant perception identified in the literature is the strong association between internationalisation and physical mobility. Many students equate internationalisation primarily with studying abroad or participating in exchange programmes, often overlooking virtual or non-traditional forms of mobility (Guo & Guo, 2022; Pearson et al., 2022). This narrow understanding influences how students evaluate the value of mobility programs and can limit interest in alternative international learning opportunities.

Mobility programs are frequently perceived as pathways to personal growth and cultural exposure. Several studies report that students value opportunities to experience different cultures, develop intercultural awareness, and broaden their worldviews (Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023; Aksezer et al., 2023; Correia Monteiro et al., 2021). These experiences are often described as transformative, contributing to greater self-confidence, independence, and openness to diversity.

At the same time, perceptions of mobility are closely linked to employability and career development. Many students view participation in mobility programs as a way to enhance their future job prospects, acquire transferable skills, and gain international experience valued by employers (Guo et al., 2019; Monteiro et al., 2025). When mobility is perceived to align with professional goals, students tend to report higher levels of satisfaction and motivation.

However, the literature also highlights mismatches between expectations and realities. Some students enter mobility programs with idealised expectations, only to encounter academic, cultural, or administrative challenges that alter their perceptions (Pearson et al., 2021; Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023). When institutional support is weak or communication is unclear, these mismatches can lead to disappointment and reduced perceived value of the mobility experience.

Institutional context plays a significant role in shaping perceptions. Studies emphasise that positive perceptions are reinforced when institutions provide clear guidance, inclusive environments, and meaningful academic integration (Correia Monteiro et al., 2021; Aksezer et al., 2023). Conversely, limited support, weak recognition of mobility outcomes, or lack of connection to academic programmes can diminish students' appreciation of mobility initiatives.

In summary, the prior studies demonstrate that students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programs are multifaceted and shaped by personal aspirations, cultural experiences, and institutional practices. While mobility is widely viewed as beneficial for personal and professional development, its perceived value depends on realistic expectations, effective support structures, and clear alignment with academic and career pathways within higher education.

### **3.7. Theme 6: Crisis Disruptions**

Global crises have had a profound impact on learning and mobility in higher education, reshaping how students engage with academic environments and international opportunities. The prior studies show that crises, particularly large-scale disruptions, expose vulnerabilities within higher education systems and significantly affect students' academic progression, mobility participation, and overall well-being.

These impacts extend beyond temporary disruption and have lasting implications for how learning and mobility are organised. One of the most visible effects of global crises is the disruption of physical mobility. Travel restrictions, border closures, and institutional shutdowns have directly limited students' ability to participate in exchange programmes and study abroad initiatives (Pearson et al., 2022; Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023). Several studies note a sharp decline in mobility participation, with students either postponing or cancelling planned international experiences. For many, these disruptions altered academic pathways and delayed graduation timelines.

The transition to online and remote learning emerges as a central response to crisis conditions. While digital platforms enabled continuity of instruction, many students experienced difficulties adapting to fully online environments (Aksezer et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2021). Challenges included reduced interaction with lecturers and peers, limited opportunities for collaborative learning, and increased cognitive and emotional fatigue. The absence of face-to-face engagement also weakened the intercultural dimension of mobility experiences, which is often considered a core benefit of international education. Emotional and psychological challenges are strongly emphasised across the studies. Students reported heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, particularly when crises disrupted both academic routines and personal lives (Monteiro et al., 2025; Correia Monteiro et al., 2021). Feelings of isolation were intensified by campus closures and social distancing measures, especially for students who were separated from family or support networks. These emotional pressures often affected concentration, motivation, and academic performance.

The prior studies also highlight institutional challenges in crisis response. Several studies suggest that universities were unevenly prepared to manage large-scale disruptions, leading to inconsistent communication, unclear policies, and unequal access to support services (Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2021). Students' experiences during crises were shaped not only by the severity of the disruption but also by how effectively institutions responded to emerging needs. Despite these challenges, some studies identify adaptive practices and learning opportunities arising from crisis conditions. Hybrid models combining online and physical mobility, increased flexibility in assessment, and expanded use of virtual collaboration tools were viewed positively by some students (Aksezer et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2022). However, these adaptations were generally seen as complementary rather than substitutes for in-person mobility and interaction.

In summary, the prior studies demonstrate that global crises significantly disrupt learning and mobility in higher education. Restrictions on movement, rapid shifts to online learning, emotional strain, and uneven institutional responses collectively shape students' experiences. While adaptive strategies have mitigated some impacts, the findings suggest a need for more resilient, flexible, and student-centred approaches to managing future crises within higher education systems.

### **3.8. Theme 7: Development Gains**

Opportunities for leadership development emerge as an important, though less uniformly discussed, outcome of mobility experiences in higher education. Across the prior studies reviewed, mobility is not only associated with academic or cultural exposure but also with the development of personal and professional capacities that are closely linked to leadership. These opportunities are shaped by students' engagement with unfamiliar environments, responsibility-taking, and reflective learning during mobility experiences.

A recurring theme in the literature is the development of intercultural competence and global awareness as foundational leadership attributes. Several studies note that exposure to diverse cultural contexts encourages students to develop sensitivity, adaptability, and cross-cultural communication skills (Guo & Guo, 2022; Pearson et al., 2022). Through interaction with peers from different backgrounds, students learn to navigate differences, manage misunderstandings, and engage constructively in multicultural settings, all of which are essential for leadership in globalised contexts.

Mobility experiences are also linked to increased autonomy and self-efficacy. Students frequently report gaining confidence through managing daily challenges such as independent living, academic decision-making, and problem-solving in unfamiliar systems (Rodríguez Marconi et al., 2023; Aksezer et al., 2023). These experiences contribute to a stronger sense of responsibility and initiative, qualities commonly associated with emerging leadership capacity. Several studies highlight the role of mobility in fostering reflective and critical thinking. Encountering different educational practices and social norms encourages students to question assumptions and reflect on their own values and behaviours (Correia Monteiro et al., 2021; Pearson et al., 2021). This reflective process supports personal growth and enhances students' ability to lead with empathy and awareness, particularly in culturally diverse environments.

Leadership development is also connected to career orientation and professional identity formation. Some studies suggest that mobility helps students clarify career goals, develop transferable skills, and strengthen professional networks (Monteiro et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2019). When mobility experiences are aligned with academic programmes or professional pathways, students are more likely to recognise their leadership potential and apply acquired skills in future roles. However, the literature also indicates that leadership development through mobility is not automatic. Opportunities vary depending on programme design, duration, institutional support, and students' level of engagement (Pearson et al., 2022; Aksezer et al., 2023). Without structured reflection, mentoring, or intentional leadership-oriented activities, the developmental benefits of mobility may remain implicit or unevenly realised.

In summary, the prior studies show that mobility programs offer meaningful opportunities for leadership development through intercultural learning, autonomy, reflection, and professional growth. While not all students experience these outcomes to the same extent, mobility can serve as a powerful platform for nurturing future leaders when supported by intentional programme design and institutional commitment within higher education.

## **4. Implications**

### **4.1. Implications for Educational Leadership**

The findings of this review suggest that educational leadership plays a critical role in shaping the quality and educational value of higher education mobility programmes. Leaders at institutional and programme levels influence how learning challenges are anticipated, addressed, and communicated to students through decisions related to curriculum alignment, pedagogical support, and academic coordination. Effective leadership is therefore essential in ensuring that mobility programmes are not positioned solely as internationalisation initiatives, but are embedded within coherent learning structures that support diverse student needs. This highlights the importance of leadership practices that are inclusive, responsive, and attentive to the academic and developmental dimensions of student mobility.

### **4.2. Implications for Institutional Practice**

At the level of institutional practice, the review underscores the need for mobility programmes to be supported by structured academic guidance, clear communication of learning expectations, and accessible support mechanisms for mobile students. Institutions should ensure that teaching staff and programme coordinators are equipped to work with students from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, and that assessment practices are transparent and aligned across contexts. Institutions should implement structured academic support mechanisms such as pre-departure academic orientation, early-stage mentoring programmes, and continuous academic advising throughout the mobility period. Strengthening coordination between academic units and mobility offices may enhance students' learning experiences and reduce uncertainty during mobility, thereby contributing to more positive student perceptions of programme value.

### 4.3. Policy Implication

The findings of this study also carry important implications for higher education policy. At the national and institutional policy levels, there is a need to move beyond viewing student mobility as a purely administrative or internationalisation agenda, towards recognising it as a structured educational process that requires coherent leadership and academic integration. Policymakers, including ministries of higher education and accreditation bodies, should develop comprehensive frameworks that ensure the quality and inclusivity of mobility programmes. This includes establishing clear guidelines for academic credit transfer, standardising support structures for incoming and outgoing students, and embedding student wellbeing considerations within mobility policies.

In addition, funding agencies should prioritise equitable access to mobility opportunities by addressing financial barriers and supporting underrepresented student groups. Policies that encourage collaboration between institutions, strengthen leadership capacity, and promote inclusive practices are essential to ensure that mobility programmes deliver meaningful educational outcomes rather than merely symbolic internationalisation goals.

### 4.4. Implications for Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the review was limited to articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, which may have resulted in the underrepresentation of relevant studies published in other databases or regional journals. This may bias the findings towards perspectives from more established research contexts. Second, the restriction to English-language publications may have excluded important contributions from non-English-speaking regions, particularly in areas with high levels of student mobility such as Asia and parts of Europe. As a result, the findings may reflect a disproportionate emphasis on Anglophone perspectives and institutional contexts.

Third, the use of an interpretive narrative synthesis approach introduces a degree of subjectivity in the coding and interpretation of themes, despite efforts to ensure analytical rigor through systematic procedures. While this approach enables the integration of diverse forms of evidence, it may also influence how findings are synthesised and interpreted. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted with caution, particularly when generalising across different institutional and cultural contexts. Future research may benefit from including a broader range of databases, multilingual sources, and complementary methodological approaches to enhance the comprehensiveness and robustness of the evidence base.

## 5. Limitations

This systematic literature review is subject to several limitations. The analysis was limited to studies indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, which, although comprehensive, may not capture all relevant literature from other databases or regional sources. In addition, only English-language journal articles were included, which may restrict the representation of perspectives from non-English-speaking contexts. The review also employed a narrative thematic synthesis approach, which is appropriate for integrating diverse studies but relies on interpretive judgement and does not seek to establish causal relationships or quantify effects. These limitations notwithstanding, the review provides a coherent and conceptually grounded synthesis of how educational leadership shapes learning environments and students' understanding and perceptions of higher education mobility programmes.

## 6. Conclusion

This systematic literature reviews synthesised evidence on learning challenges, educational leadership, and students' understanding and perceptions of mobility programmes in higher education. The findings show that academic barriers, cultural adjustment processes, institutional support structures, and

students' interpretations of mobility experiences are closely interconnected. Across these themes, educational leadership emerges as a central factor shaping how learning challenges are experienced and how mobility programmes are understood, highlighting that mobility outcomes are not determined solely by individual student characteristics or programme design.

Through an integrative leadership perspective, the review demonstrates that leadership actions at institutional and programme levels mediate learning environments and influence students' perceptions of mobility. Decisions related to curriculum alignment, pedagogical support, assessment clarity, and coordination of academic and support services play a critical role in determining whether mobility is experienced as educationally coherent and developmentally meaningful. By positioning educational leadership as a mediating force across learning challenges and student perceptions, this study contributes a conceptual understanding of mobility as an educational process embedded within leadership and institutional practices, offering a foundation for strengthening the quality and impact of higher education mobility programmes.

## **7. Ethic Statement**

This study is a systematic literature review and did not involve human participants, primary data collection, or identifiable personal data. As such, formal ethics approval was not required.

## **8. Data Availability Statement**

The data analysed in this study were derived from publicly available peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. No new datasets were generated or analysed.

## **9. Generative AI Statement**

During the preparation of this manuscript, AI-based tools were used to support specific aspects of the writing and analytical process. ChatGPT 4.0 assisted in refining language clarity and improving overall readability, while Elicit was used to help organise and interpret thematic patterns emerging from the reviewed studies. All outputs generated through these tools were carefully reviewed, critically evaluated, and substantively revised by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the published work.

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