

CULTURAL IMPRINTING AND LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EMERGING COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how cultural imprinting, values internalized during early socialization, shapes leadership orientations and strategic leadership practices in higher education, particularly in emerging-country contexts. A systematic literature review (SLR) of peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 was conducted following PRISMA guidelines to synthesize leadership, cross-cultural, and imprinting scholarship. The review identifies three thematic domains: (1) cultural imprinting and leadership orientation, (2) contextual variations between Western and emerging-country leadership practices, and (3) strategic implications for internationalization, digital transformation, and graduate reputation. Building on these insights, this study proposes an integrative conceptual framework, the *Cultural Imprinting Leadership Framework*, synthesizing imprinting theory, cross-cultural leadership perspectives, and strategic leadership in higher education. The study contributes theoretically by extending leadership theory through the integration of cultural imprinting, contextually by highlighting leadership dynamics in emerging countries, and practically by informing culturally grounded leadership development strategies. However, the findings are conceptual and require empirical validation through future cross-cultural and longitudinal research.

Keywords: Cultural imprinting, higher education leadership, systematic literature review, emerging countries, strategic leadership, internationalization.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana cultural imprinting, yaitu nilai-nilai yang terinternalisasi selama proses sosialisasi awal, membentuk orientasi kepemimpinan dan praktik kepemimpinan strategis di pendidikan tinggi, khususnya dalam konteks negara berkembang. Tinjauan pustaka sistematis (Systematic Literature Review/SLR) terhadap studi bereputasi yang dipublikasikan antara tahun 2020–2025 dilakukan dengan mengikuti pedoman PRISMA untuk mensintesis kajian tentang kepemimpinan, lintas budaya, dan teori imprinting. Hasil tinjauan mengidentifikasi tiga domain tematik utama: (1) cultural imprinting dan orientasi kepemimpinan, (2) variasi kontekstual antara praktik kepemimpinan Barat dan negara berkembang, serta (3) implikasi strategis bagi internasionalisasi, transformasi digital, dan reputasi lulusan. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, penelitian ini mengusulkan sebuah kerangka konseptual integratif, yaitu Cultural Imprinting Leadership Framework, yang mensintesis teori imprinting, perspektif kepemimpinan lintas budaya, dan kepemimpinan strategis dalam pendidikan tinggi. Kontribusi penelitian ini bersifat teoretis melalui perluasan teori kepemimpinan dengan mengintegrasikan cultural imprinting, kontekstual dengan menyoroti dinamika kepemimpinan di negara berkembang, serta praktis dengan memberikan landasan bagi pengembangan kepemimpinan yang berakar pada budaya. Namun demikian, temuan penelitian ini masih bersifat konseptual dan memerlukan validasi empiris melalui penelitian lintas budaya dan longitudinal di masa mendatang.

Kata kunci: Cultural imprinting, kepemimpinan pendidikan tinggi, tinjauan pustaka sistematis, negara berkembang, kepemimpinan strategis, internasionalisasi.

1. Introduction

Universities today are tasked not only with advancing knowledge, but also with producing graduates who can navigate globalized, unequal, and hyper connected labor markets. In such a landscape, leadership in higher education becomes pivotal for aligning missions, mobilizing resources, and orchestrating international partnerships that elevate institutional and graduate reputation (Jones et al., 2021; Macfarlane, 2024).

Leadership in higher education plays a critical role in shaping institutional strategies, global engagement, and graduate outcomes in increasingly complex and globalized educational ecosystems. Universities today operate under intense pressures related to internationalization, digital transformation, global rankings, and graduate employability. These pressures demand leadership approaches that are both globally responsive and locally legitimate.

Yet, much of the leadership literature in higher education remains rooted in Western centric paradigms such as transformational, servant, and distributed leadership. While these models offer valuable insights, they often assume cultural neutrality and overlook the deeply ingrained cultural factors that shape leaders' orientations and strategic choices (Nguyen et al., 2021; Macfarlane, 2024). This presents a critical theoretical gap, particularly in the context of emerging countries, where leadership practices are profoundly shaped by cultural values of collectivism, hierarchy, and communal responsibility (Zander et al., 2020; Mynbayeva et al., 2024). Emerging countries, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, operate within distinct cultural logics characterized by collectivism, hierarchical social structures, and communal responsibility. Such cultural contexts fundamentally shape how leaders think, decide, and act.

One underexplored dimension in this regard is cultural imprinting, the enduring influence of cultural values internalized

during childhood. Cultural imprinting suggests that early experiences within family, community, and local traditions leave a lasting mark that continues to shape leaders' behavior and decision-making well into adulthood (Kitt et al., 2024). While imprinting theory has been widely applied in organizational and HR studies, its application to higher education leadership remains limited. This gap becomes particularly salient in emerging countries, where leaders' personal histories and cultural backgrounds often intersect with institutional strategies for internationalization, digital transformation, and graduate reputation (de Wit & Jones, 2022; Jing et al., 2025).

In an era where universities face growing global competition, the question is no longer whether leadership matters, but how it is formed and shaped by cultural roots. If leadership is understood only through imported models, there is a risk of overlooking the contextual realities of universities in emerging countries realities where cultural imprinting plays a pivotal role. Evidence from the 6th IAU Global Survey confirms that while more institutions have formal internationalization policies, implementation often lags behind ambition, highlighting the critical role of leadership in translating policy into practice (IAU, 2024).

This systematic literature review addresses this gap by synthesizing recent scholarship on leadership, culture, and imprinting in higher education. Specifically, the study aims to integrate imprinting theory with cross-cultural leadership and strategic leadership frameworks to develop a culturally grounded conceptual framework for higher education leadership in emerging countries.

The review also engages emerging evidence on culture-change mechanisms (Kezar et al., 2025) and digital academic leadership (Jing et al., 2025), offering practice-oriented pathways for contexts outside the West.

This SLR contributes to the literature and practice of higher education leadership

in three important ways. First, the study advances theoretical understanding by integrating the concept of cultural imprinting into leadership theory. While existing frameworks such as transformational or distributed leadership have illuminated many aspects of leadership practice, they often overlook how early-life cultural experiences shape leaders' orientations. By bridging cultural imprinting with higher education leadership, this review extends current theory and highlights the lasting influence of childhood socialization on decision-making and strategic choices (Liden et al., 2022).

Second, the research provides contextual nuance, particularly for universities in emerging countries where leadership cannot be divorced from cultural roots. In these contexts, leaders' strategies for internationalization, global outreach, and reputation building are deeply shaped by cultural norms such as collectivism, hierarchy, and communal responsibility. By focusing on non-Western settings, the study challenges the dominance of Western-centric leadership paradigms and offers insights that resonate more strongly with the lived realities of higher education leaders in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Macfarlane, 2024).

Third, the study contributes practical implications by providing actionable guidance for both policymakers and institutional leaders. The findings emphasize the importance of designing leadership development programs, policy reforms, and internationalization strategies that are culturally grounded yet globally competitive. In doing so, the study positions cultural imprinting not as a barrier to modernization but as a valuable resource for crafting leadership practices that align local traditions with global agendas. This threefold contribution strengthens both academic theory and institutional practice, situating the *Cultural Imprinting Leadership Model* as a relevant framework for higher education in a globalized era.

In line with this objective, the study formulates the following research questions.

- RQ1. How has *cultural imprinting* been conceptualized in the higher education leadership?
- RQ2. In what ways do cultural values internalized from early childhood influence leadership orientations (e.g., decision-making, relational style, authority use) in higher education?
- RQ3. How are leadership practices in emerging countries shaped by cultural imprinting, and how do they differ from Western centric models of higher education leadership?
- RQ4. What strategic implications does cultural imprinting have for higher education leadership in relation to internationalization, digital transformation, and graduate reputation?
- RQ5. What theoretical gaps and practical opportunities can be identified from the existing literature, and how can these inform the development of a *Cultural Imprinting Leadership Model* for higher education?

2. Literature Review

This study integrates three strands of scholarship: imprinting theory, cross-cultural leadership theories, and strategic leadership in higher education. Imprinting theory explains how early cultural environments shape enduring values and behavioral orientations (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Cross-cultural leadership theories demonstrate how cultural contexts influence leadership styles, authority relations, and organizational practices (Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2004). Strategic leadership literature highlights the role of leaders in shaping institutional direction, internationalization strategies, and graduate outcomes (Jones et al., 2021; Jing et al., 2025).

Leadership in higher education has been examined through various theoretical lenses, most notably transformational

leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), and distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011). These models emphasize inspiration, service, and shared responsibility, and have been widely adopted in studies across universities worldwide. However, they are often rooted in Western-centric paradigms, assuming leadership is culturally neutral and transferable across contexts. Recent scholarship has challenged this assumption, highlighting that leadership practice is deeply embedded in socio-cultural environments (Macfarlane, 2024; Zander et al., 2020).

To address this gap, the present study draws on *imprinting theory* (Stinchcombe, 1965; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013), which argues that individuals and organizations carry lasting marks from their early environments that continue to shape behaviors and strategies over time. In the context of leadership, cultural imprinting refers to the values, norms, and worldviews internalized during childhood that influence leadership orientations in adulthood. These imprints, such as collectivism, respect for hierarchy, or communal responsibility, affect how leaders make decisions, build relationships, and adopt strategies in higher education institutions.

2.1 Cultural Imprinting and Leadership Orientation

The literature consistently demonstrates that values internalized during early socialization significantly influence leadership orientations in higher education. Cultural imprints such as collectivism, respect for hierarchy, religiosity, and communal responsibility shape leaders' decision-making styles, relational behaviors, and authority usage (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Kitt et al., 2024). Leaders from collectivist contexts tend to prioritize consensus-building, relational trust, and harmony, whereas leaders from individualistic contexts emphasize autonomy and performance-driven outcomes (Zander et al., 2020) continue to

influence leadership orientations well into adulthood.

For instance, leaders who grew up in collectivist cultural contexts often demonstrate a preference for consensus-building and relational trust as the foundation of strategic choices (Zander, Mockaitis, & Butler, 2020; Kitt, Sender, Reiche, & Harzing, 2024). Such orientations are markedly different from the more individualistic and autonomy-driven leadership styles common in Western higher education systems.

2.2 Contextual Divergence Between Western and Emerging-Country Leadership

A second thematic domain highlights systematic differences between Western-centric leadership models and leadership practices in emerging countries. Western frameworks often emphasize individual agency, distributed leadership, and innovation-driven change (Bolden, 2011), whereas emerging-country contexts reflect hierarchical governance structures, relational legitimacy, and culturally embedded authority structures (Mynbayeva et al., 2024; Macfarlane et al., 2024). These contextual divergences challenge the universal applicability of dominant leadership theories.

In Kazakhstan, for example, leadership styles remain closely tied to hierarchical traditions, emphasizing authority, respect, and institutional stability (Mynbayeva et al., 2024). Similarly, Macfarlane (2024) argues that leadership in Asian higher education must be understood not only in terms of managerial functions but also through cultural frames that prioritize legitimacy and collective responsibility. These insights demonstrate that the transplantation of Western-centric models such as transformational or distributed leadership does not fully capture the cultural logics at play in emerging countries.

2.3 Strategic Leadership Implications of Cultural Imprinting

The literature further indicates that cultural imprinting shapes strategic leadership choices in higher education. Leaders influenced by collectivist and hierarchical cultural values prioritize long-term partnerships, institutional stability, and relational governance in internationalization strategies (Jones et al., 2021; de Wit & Jones, 2022). Cultural imprinting also influences digital transformation leadership, where relational negotiation and collective adaptation are emphasized over rapid technological disruption (Jing et al., 2025). These findings suggest that cultural imprinting mediates strategic leadership adoption in global outreach, digital initiatives, and graduate reputation building.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The framework for this study integrates three core theoretical pillars:

1. *Imprinting Theory* : Imprinting theory explains how early cultural environments shape enduring values and behavioral orientations (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013)
2. *Cross-Cultural Leadership Theories*: Cross-cultural leadership theories demonstrate how cultural contexts influence leadership styles, authority relations, and organizational practices (Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2004).
3. *Strategic Leadership in Higher Education* : Strategic leadership literature highlights the role of leaders in shaping institutional direction, internationalization strategies, and graduate outcomes (Jones et al., 2021; Jing et al., 2025).

By synthesizing these perspectives, this research proposes the Cultural Imprinting Leadership Model, which links cultural imprinting with leadership orientations (decision-making, relational style, authority use) and strategic choices in higher education. The model assumes that while global pressures, such as internationalization and digitalization, push universities toward convergence, the

strategies chosen by leaders remain strongly influenced by their cultural roots.

Thus, the theoretical framework positions cultural imprinting as a missing link between leadership theory and practice in higher education. It extends existing leadership models by embedding them in socio-cultural contexts, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how leaders in emerging countries navigate the intersection of local traditions and global expectations.

The theoretical framework guiding this study is illustrated in Figure 2. It integrates three major strands of scholarship: Imprinting Theory, Cross-Cultural Leadership Theories, and Strategic Leadership in Higher Education. Together, these perspectives provide the foundation for understanding how cultural imprinting shapes leadership orientations and, ultimately, strategic leadership adoption in universities.

Imprinting Theory (Stinchcombe, 1965; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) explains that individuals carry enduring marks from their early environments, which continue to shape their orientations and behaviors throughout life. In this study, imprinting is conceptualized as the internalization of cultural values during childhood, such as respect for hierarchy, communal responsibility, and collectivism. These values form the foundation of what is referred to here as *cultural imprinting*.

Cross-Cultural Leadership research (Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2004) further demonstrates that leadership practices are strongly influenced by cultural contexts. Leadership is not enacted in a vacuum; rather, it reflects societal norms regarding power, authority, and social relations. By linking imprinting with cross-cultural leadership theory, this framework highlights how cultural values internalized early in life shape leaders' approaches to decision-making, relational styles, and authority use.

Strategic Leadership in Higher Education (Jones et al., 2021; Jing et al., 2025) emphasizes the role of university

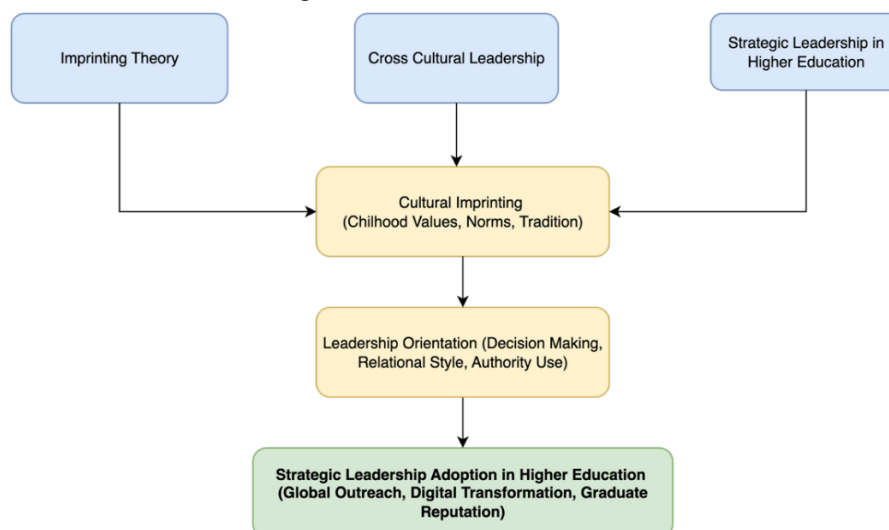
leaders in navigating global pressures such as internationalization, digital transformation, and the pursuit of graduate reputation. These challenges require leaders to mobilize resources, build international collaborations, and balance global competitiveness with local cultural legitimacy.

At the center of this framework lies *Cultural Imprinting*, which acts as the connecting bridge between theory and practice. Childhood values and traditions inform Leadership Orientation, influencing how leaders think, decide, and interact. This orientation then shapes the way leaders in higher education institutions adopt

strategies related to global outreach, digital initiatives, and graduate employability.

In summary, the theoretical framework positions cultural imprinting as a missing link in existing leadership theories. It extends conventional models by embedding them within socio-cultural realities, offering a more nuanced explanation of why leadership in emerging countries often diverges from Western-centric paradigms. This model provides both a theoretical foundation and a practical guide for examining leadership strategies in higher education that are culturally grounded yet globally responsive.

Figure 2. Theoretical Frameworks



3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) design following PRISMA guidelines (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Xiao & Watson, 2019). Although scoping principles informed the initial mapping of the literature, the review follows systematic procedures to ensure transparency, replicability, and analytical rigor. The methodology used in this SLR is as follows:

1) Formulation of Research Questions

The first step was to formulate guiding research questions, focusing on how cultural imprinting influences leadership in higher education, particularly in the context of emerging countries. The

review also explored which leadership frameworks have been applied, how cultural values are embedded in leadership strategies, and what gaps remain in the literature.

2) Identification of Relevant Studies

Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed journal articles published in English, focused on higher education leadership, and examined cultural, social, or imprinting-related dimensions.

The search strategy combined Boolean operators and keywords:

- 1) (“higher education leadership” OR “academic leadership” OR “university

leadership”)

AND

- 2) (“cultural imprinting” OR “childhood values” OR “cultural roots” OR “socio-cultural background”)
- AND
- 3) (“strategic leadership” OR “internationalization” OR “graduate reputation” OR “global outreach”).

The review covered studies published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure the most recent and relevant evidence was captured.

3) Study Selection and Screening

The screening process followed a three-stage procedure; title screening, abstract screening, and full-text review. The PRISMA flow diagram was used to document the selection process and ensure transparency. After screening, a final set of studies was retained for thematic synthesis.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- a) Peer-reviewed journal articles published in English.
- b) Studies focusing on leadership in higher education.
- c) Research addressing cultural, social, or imprinting factors related to leadership.

Exclusion criteria included non-peer-reviewed sources, publications prior to 2020, studies outside higher education contexts, and studies without cultural or strategic leadership relevance

4) Data Extraction

Data extracted included author(s), year, context, research design, theoretical framework, key findings, and implications for leadership and culture. A thematic synthesis approach was used to identify recurring patterns, conceptual themes, and emergent insights across the literature.

The extracted data were synthesized thematically to identify key trends and

knowledge gaps. The review highlighted three major thematic clusters:

- 1) The role of cultural imprinting in shaping leadership orientation.
- 2) The contextual variations of leadership in emerging vs. Western settings.
- 3) Strategic implications for internationalization, digital transformation, and graduate reputation.

3.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The search was conducted using Dimensions AI (www.dimensions.ai), an online scientific research platform that integrates content from multiple academic publishers such as Frontiers, Springer, and Taylor & Francis. To ensure the rigor and relevance of the systematic literature review, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied (see Table 1).

Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025, written in English, and focused on leadership or management within the context of higher education. In particular, the review targeted studies that examined strategic leadership practices, cultural influences, and institutional strategies related to internationalization and the attraction of international students. Articles that provided theoretical, empirical, or review-based insights into the relationship between culture, leadership orientation, and higher education strategy were retained for further analysis.

By contrast, studies were excluded if they were outside the temporal scope (before 2020), not peer-reviewed (e.g., reports, dissertations, or opinion papers), or published in languages other than English. In addition, literature that focused solely on leadership in primary or secondary education, corporate organizations, or political institutions was excluded, as were studies that emphasized operational or administrative management without addressing cultural or strategic dimensions.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference papers indexed in Scopus/Web of Science.	Grey literature (blogs, magazines, theses, reports without peer review).
Publication Years	2020 – 2025	Publications prior to 2020.
Language	English	Non-English publications.
Focus of Study	Leadership in higher education (university/college settings).	Leadership in primary/secondary education, corporate, or political domains.
Cultural Dimension	Studies addressing cultural imprinting, cultural values, socio-cultural background, or cross-cultural leadership.	Studies without discussion of culture or cultural influences.
Leadership Strategy	Research examining strategic leadership adoption (e.g., internationalization, digital transformation, graduate reputation).	Studies focusing solely on operational/administrative management without cultural or strategic perspective.

3.2 Systematic Search Protocol

The author applied restrictions in searching for journals on Dimensions.ai (www.dimensions.ai), limiting the period to the years 2020–2025, which initially resulted in 1,184 articles. To increase focus, the search was refined by limiting the results to source titles most relevant to leadership, cultural studies, and higher education management, which reduced the number to 276 articles.

From this pool, the researcher identified and selected 12 core journals with higher relevance and academic credibility in the field, including: *Frontiers in Education (Q2)*, *Frontiers in Psychology (Q1)*, *Higher Education (Q1)*, *Higher Education Research & Development (Q2)*, *Journal of Studies in International Education (Q1)*, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management (Q2)*, *Tertiary Education and Management (Q3)*, *Journal of Leadership in Education (Q2)*, *Oxford Review of Education (Q1)*, *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education (Q2)*, *International Journal of Educational Management (Q2)*, and *Education Sciences (Q2)*.

Narrowing the search to these journals resulted in 168 articles. The researcher then conducted a three-stage screening process:

- 1) Title screening (removing studies not related to leadership or higher education).
- 2) Abstract screening (eliminating studies without cultural or strategic dimensions).
- 3) Full-text review (assessing methodological rigor and relevance to

cultural imprinting and leadership strategy).

After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1), 128 articles were excluded for reasons such as focus on non-higher-education contexts, lack of cultural dimension, or methodological weaknesses. This process yielded 40 final articles that were judged relevant and of sufficient quality for synthesis.

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram summarizing the search and screening process, conducted on 12th September 2025.

3.3 Quality Appraisal and Finding Extraction

According to Xiao and Watson (2019), scoping reviews are designed to map the breadth of available studies rather than to exclude research based on strict quality thresholds. In this sense, quality assessment is not always treated as a decisive inclusion criterion, but rather as a way for reviewers to acknowledge differences in rigor across studies. In contrast, the present review places particular emphasis on selecting empirical articles published in reputable journals, identified through a systematic search using Dimensions AI. After a series of in-depth content analyses, the pool of studies was progressively narrowed until only eight core articles remained. Each of these articles was carefully validated to

ensure both methodological soundness and relevance to the research objectives.

For the data extraction stage, all selected articles were first organized in Microsoft Excel using a customized template for metadata collection. At this point, general bibliographic details that were less relevant were replaced with a structured set of key research aspects. These included publication year, author(s), article title, abstract, journal outlet, research context, central themes, theoretical framework, research questions or assumptions, methodological approach, key findings, and recommendations for future research. Each article was systematically coded according to these categories, allowing for thematic synthesis across the dataset. The results of this coding and synthesis process are presented in the following section.

4. Result and Discussion

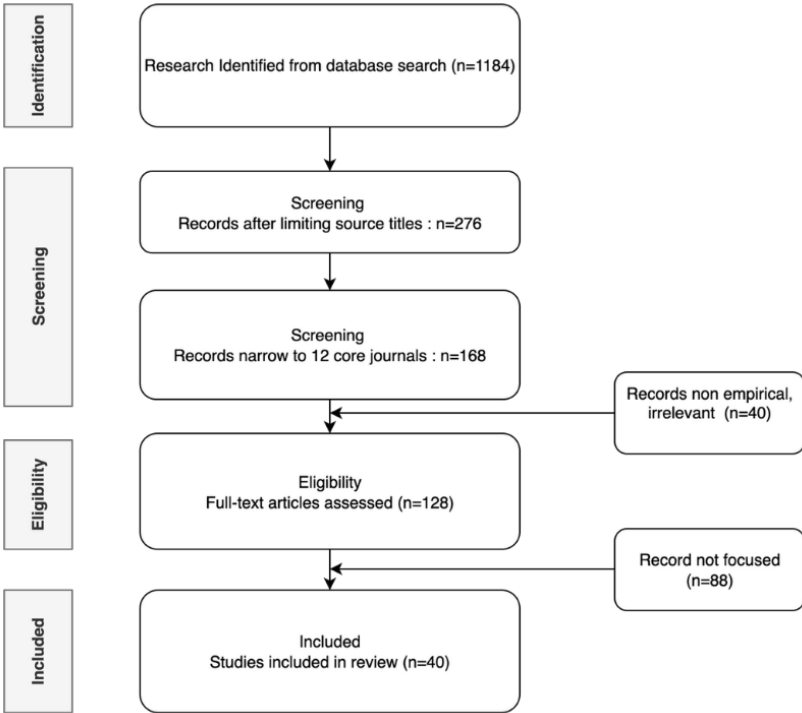
This section provides an overview of the analysis and results. To establish a foundation for the discussion, Table 2 summarizes the set of eligible articles identified through the systematic search. The table presents essential bibliographic

information, such as the year of publication, author(s), and article title together with the corresponding research questions. This overview not only clarifies the scope of the reviewed studies but also highlights the thematic focus that guided the subsequent synthesis and interpretation.

The PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the systematic process undertaken for this review. The initial search on Dimensions.ai yielded 1,184 records. After refining the results by limiting them to relevant source titles, the number was reduced to 276. To further ensure relevance and quality, the search was then focused on 12 core journals in the fields of education, leadership, and management, narrowing the pool to 168 articles.

From there, a three-stage screening process covering titles, abstracts, and full-text reviews was conducted. During this stage, 128 articles were excluded because they did not meet the established inclusion criteria, such as a lack of cultural or strategic dimensions or insufficient methodological rigor. Ultimately, 40 studies were deemed eligible and included in the final synthesis.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart of SLR



Source: Petticrew and Roberts (2006)

Data Extraction Table

Table 2. Result of the SLR

No	Year	Author	Title	Research Questions/Assumption	Research Theme	Theoretical Anchor
1	2021	Jones, E.; Leask, B.; Brandenburg, U.; de Wit, H.	Global social responsibility and the internationalisation of higher education for society	How should internationalisation advance social responsibility beyond mobility metrics?	Internationalisation; Strategy; Society	Internationalisation of HE; University social responsibility
2	2022	de Wit, H.; Jones, E.	A new view of internationalization: From a Western, competitive paradigm to a global cooperative strategy	What paradigm shift is needed from competitive to cooperative internationalisation?	Policy shift; Cooperation; Global strategy	Critical/transformational internationalisation
3	2024	Macfarlane, B.	Three perspectives on leadership in higher education	How do traditionalist, reformist, pragmatist lenses frame HE leadership?	Leadership perspectives; Conceptual analysis	HE leadership theory
4	2024	Mynbayeva, A.; et al.	Examining leadership styles in higher education management in Kazakhstan	What leadership styles prevail in Kazakhstan's HE and why?	Cross-cultural leadership; Emerging context	Cross-cultural leadership; Contextualism
5	2025	Jing, M.; Wang, H.; Zhang, X.	Higher education digital academic leadership: Perceptions and practices from Chinese university leaders	How do leaders perceive/enact digital academic leadership (DAL)?	Digital transformation; Leadership practice	UTAUT; Digital leadership
6	2025	Kezar, A.; Hallett, R. E.; Corwin, Z. B.	Moving toward institutional culture change in higher education: Cross-functional PLCs	How do PLCs enable culture change across units?	Institutional culture; Change leadership	Organisational change; PLCs
7	2024	Kitt, A.; Sender, A.; Reiche, B. S.; Harzing, A.-W.	Imprinting in HR process research: A systematic review and research agenda	How has imprinting been studied in HR and what gaps exist?	Imprinting; HR processes; Review	Imprinting theory
8	2020	Zander, L.; Mockaitis, A. I.; Butler, C. L.	Interpersonal leadership across cultures	How do cultural contexts shape interpersonal leadership?	Cross-cultural leadership; Interpersonal	Cross-cultural leadership theory
9	2025	Riza, M. F.; et al.	Fostering high-performing organizations in higher education: Participative leadership, culture, and innovation	Do participative leadership and culture predict performance/commitment?	Participative leadership; Innovation; Performance	Leadership: performance linkage
10	2023	Caingcoy, M. E.	Culturally responsive leadership in higher education milieu: A scoping review	What is the state and direction of culturally responsive leadership in HE?	Culturally responsive leadership; Review	Culturally responsive leadership
11	2024	Le Fevre, D. M.	Navigating senior leadership in higher education	What helps/hinders senior leaders (incl. gendered/cultural factors)?	Senior leadership; Identity; Barriers	Leadership identity; Gender/culture lenses
12	2023	Carvalho, T.	Digital transformation, state HEI performance and leadership style	How do cybernetic/shared leadership interact with DT to affect performance?	Digital transformation; Performance	Shared/cybernetic leadership

13	2023	Maheshwari, G.	A bibliometric analysis of leadership styles in higher education	What leadership styles dominate HE and with what impacts?	Bibliometrics; Leadership styles	Multi-theory mapping of styles
14	2024	Etomes, S. E.	Transformational leadership for sustainable productivity in HEIs (Cameroon)	Can transformational leadership drive sustainable productivity in HEIs?	Transformational leadership; Sustainability	Transformational leadership theory
15	2024	Ellis, R. A.	The education leadership challenges for universities in a postdigital/GAI era	How should executive leaders respond to rapid GAI-driven disruption?	Postdigital leadership; AI strategy	Postdigital theory; Change leadership
16	2023	Liu, W.	The international comparative approach to HE leadership development (China)	What impacts do leadership development programs have on Chinese HE leaders?	Leadership development; International comparison	Adult learning; Leadership development
17	2024	Katsumoto, S.	Internationalizing international students' experiences: Curriculum, campus, and mobility	How do on-campus vs. study-abroad curricula shape outcomes?	Internationalisation; Student experience	Internationalisation of Curriculum (IoC)
18	2024	Grecic, D.	The Epistemological Chain: An agenda for guiding transnational education interactions	Can the EC framework improve transnational education design?	Transnational education; Curriculum; Strategy	Epistemological Chain framework
19	2024	Şahin, N.; Bilir, F. P.	The effect of transformational leadership and personal cultural values on creating a learning organization	Do leaders' cultural values amplify TL effects on learning org outcomes?	Cultural values; TL; Learning org	Transformational leadership; Cultural values
20	2024	Lizier, A.	Middle leaders in higher education: the role of social networks and contexts	How do social networks/context shape middle leadership practice?	Middle leadership; Networks	Social capital; Contextual leadership
21	2024	Caliskan, O.; et al.	Science Mapping the Knowledge Base (1929–2022) on Internationalisation of HE	What are the thematic clusters and trends in IHE research?	Internationalisation; Science mapping	Bibliometric mapping; IHE scholarship
22	2024	Grogan, M. (Ed.)	Insights in leadership in education: 2022 (Editorial collection)	What post-pandemic issues shape educational leadership research?	Educational leadership; post-pandemic	Editorial synthesis; Leadership discourse
23	2022	Kasalak, G.; et al.	The relation between leadership styles in HEIs and academic staff job satisfaction: A meta-analysis	How do leadership styles correlate with job satisfaction in HEIs?	Meta-analysis; Leadership styles; Satisfaction	Meta-analytic leadership model
24	2022	Schiffecker, S.; et al.	Leading the way – Understanding women's university presidents' crisis leadership (COVID-19)	How did women university presidents enact crisis leadership?	Crisis leadership; Gender; HE	Feminist Educational Leadership (FEL)
25	2022	Elo, J.	Theorising pedagogical dimensions of higher education leadership	How should HE leadership be theorised vis-à-vis pedagogy and society?	HE leadership theory; Pedagogy	Pedagogical leadership; Multilevel analysis
26	2021	Agostinelli, A. V.; et al.	Culturally Engaging Campus for International Students: A multiple case study	How culturally engaging is a US campus for international students?	Campus culture; International students	Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE)

27	2021	Alharbi, E.; et al.	Academic satisfaction of international students at Irish universities	What factors shape international students' academic satisfaction?	Internationalisation; Student outcomes	Student engagement; Satisfaction models
28	2024	Vargas, J. H.	Eradicating dominant ideologies in higher education	How can leadership challenge dominant ideologies in HE?	Leadership and ideology; Change	Critical leadership; Cultural mismatch
29	2025	Köpsell, S.; et al.	Digitalization attempts in higher education: the role of leadership and governance	How do leadership/governance configurations shape digitalisation outcomes?	Digitalisation; Governance; Leadership	Change leadership; Socio-technical systems
30	2025	Tesfaye, D.; et al.	Exploring multifaceted leadership concepts in public universities in Ethiopia	What leadership concepts operate in Ethiopian public HEIs?	Leadership concepts; Emerging context	Contextual leadership
31	2022	Boche, L.	Giving a lot of ourselves: Mother leaders in higher education during COVID-19	How does motherhood intersect with HE leadership in crisis?	Identity; Crisis leadership; Gender	Feminist leadership; Identity work
32	2024	Kufaine, N.	Leadership Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education	What leadership framework supports HE internationalisation?	Internationalisation leadership; Framework	Strategic leadership; Internationalisation
33	2022	Knight, J.; de Wit, H.	Internationalization of higher education: Looking back and looking ahead	What are the evolving meanings and practices of IHE?	Internationalisation; Strategy	IHE frameworks; Policy analysis
34	2024	Whittaker, J. A.	Advancing a cultural change agenda in higher education	How can leaders enact cultural change agendas in HE?	Culture change; Leadership	Organisational culture change
35	2023	Nguyen, Q.; Tran, L.; Le, T.	Distributed leadership in higher education: A literature review	How is distributed leadership theorised/applied in HE?	Distributed leadership; Review	Distributed leadership theory
36	2023	Altbach, P. G.; de Wit, H.	Internationalization and geopolitics: Implications for HE leadership	How do geopolitical shifts reshape HE leadership strategies?	Internationalisation; Geopolitics	Global HE; Policy leadership
37	2024	Mok, K. H.; et al.	From response to resilience: Asian HE leadership after the pandemic	What leadership shifts occurred in Asian HE post-pandemic?	Resilience; Asian HE leadership	Resilience theory; Adaptive leadership
38	2021	Brandenburg, U.; et al.	The future of internationalisation in higher education for society (IHES)	How can IHES align with societal needs and leadership roles?	IHES; Strategy	Internationalisation for society (IHES)
39	2024	Leask, B.; Beelen, J.	Internationalisation of the curriculum: New directions for leaders	What are leaders' roles in IoC post-pandemic?	IoC; Leadership; Pedagogy	IoC framework; Curriculum leadership
40	2022	de Gayardon, A.; et al.	Reframing equity and inclusion through internationalisation leadership	How can internationalisation leadership advance equity/inclusion?	Equity; Inclusion; IHE leadership	Equity-oriented internationalisation

According to RQ1. How has cultural imprinting been conceptualized in higher education leadership? The literature conceptualizes cultural imprinting as the process through which individuals

internalize cultural values, norms, and social expectations during early stages of life, which later shape cognitive frameworks and leadership behavior. Imprinting theory suggests that early

experiences leave enduring marks on individuals' decision-making patterns and organizational behavior (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Within higher education leadership, cultural imprinting manifests through leaders' attitudes toward authority, collaboration, and institutional governance.

Several studies emphasize that leadership practices in universities are not purely managerial or technical but are deeply embedded in cultural contexts. Leaders bring with them culturally rooted assumptions about hierarchy, collectivism, and social responsibility that influence how they interpret institutional challenges and formulate strategies (Schein, 2010; Yukl, 2013). In this sense, cultural imprinting provides an explanatory framework for understanding why leadership practices in higher education vary across different cultural environments.

RQ2. In what ways do cultural values internalized from early childhood influence leadership orientations in higher education? The literature indicates that cultural values formed through early socialization significantly influence leadership orientations in several key dimensions. First, cultural imprinting shapes decision-making styles. Leaders socialized in collectivist societies tend to prioritize consensus-building and relational harmony, while those influenced by more individualistic contexts often emphasize autonomy and rapid decision-making (Hofstede, 2001).

Second, cultural imprinting influences relational leadership styles. In many emerging countries, leadership tends to emphasize trust-building, interpersonal relationships, and communal responsibility. These relational orientations often reflect broader societal norms that value social cohesion and collective well-being (House et al., 2004).

Third, cultural values affect how leaders exercise authority and hierarchy. In high power-distance cultures, leadership often relies on formal authority structures, whereas in lower power-distance contexts

leaders may adopt more participatory and distributed governance models (Hofstede, 2001). These patterns demonstrate that leadership orientations in universities are not solely shaped by professional training but are also deeply influenced by culturally embedded cognitive frameworks developed early in life.

RQ3. How are leadership practices in emerging countries shaped by cultural imprinting, and how do they differ from Western-centric models of higher education leadership? Leadership practices in emerging countries often reflect culturally embedded governance approaches that differ from Western-centric leadership models. Western leadership frameworks typically emphasize managerial efficiency, performance metrics, and individual leadership agency. However, in many emerging contexts, leadership is shaped by broader socio-cultural considerations such as community relationships, collective identity, and social legitimacy.

University leaders in emerging countries frequently operate within institutional environments where cultural traditions and social expectations strongly influence decision making processes. As a result, leadership practices tend to emphasize relational governance, negotiation, and adaptive collaboration rather than purely managerial rationality (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

This suggests that dominant Western leadership theories may not fully capture the complexities of leadership in universities within emerging regions. Cultural imprinting therefore offers a valuable lens for understanding leadership behaviors that are shaped by historically embedded cultural values.

RQ4. What strategic implications does cultural imprinting have for higher education leadership in relation to internationalization, digital transformation, and graduate reputation? Cultural imprinting has important strategic implications for how university leaders approach institutional transformation.

Leaders culturally embedded values influence how they interpret and implement strategic initiatives such as internationalization and digital transformation.

RQ5. What theoretical gaps and practical opportunities can be identified, and how can these inform the development of a Cultural Imprinting Leadership Model? For example, leaders influenced by collectivist cultural traditions may frame international partnerships as opportunities for collaborative knowledge exchange and national development rather than purely competitive positioning in global rankings. Similarly, digital transformation initiatives may be implemented through participatory processes that emphasize stakeholder engagement and institutional consensus.

In addition, cultural imprinting shapes leaders' perspectives on graduate reputation and societal impact. Universities led by culturally grounded leadership often emphasize producing graduates who contribute to societal development and community welfare, reflecting broader cultural values regarding social responsibility (Altbach et al., 2009). Thus, strategic leadership in higher education cannot be separated from the cultural frameworks that guide leaders' interpretations of institutional goals.

4. Conclusion

This systematic literature review synthesizes recent scholarship on cultural imprinting and leadership in higher education, with a focus on emerging-country contexts. The findings demonstrate that cultural imprinting significantly shapes leadership orientations and strategic leadership practices (Kitt et al., 2024; Zander et al., 2020). By integrating imprinting theory, cross-cultural leadership theories, and strategic leadership frameworks, this study proposes the Cultural Imprinting Leadership Framework as an integrative conceptual model.

The study contributes theoretically by extending leadership theory through

cultural imprinting, contextually by highlighting leadership dynamics in emerging countries, and practically by informing culturally grounded leadership development strategies (Jones et al., 2021).

While dominant frameworks such as transformational, servant, and distributed leadership provide useful insights (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bolden, 2011), they often overlook the role of cultural roots in shaping leadership practice. The findings of this review show that in non-Western contexts, leadership is often driven by collectivist values, hierarchical traditions, and communal responsibility (Mynbayeva et al., 2024; Macfarlane, 2024). By integrating insights from imprinting theory, cross-cultural leadership studies, and higher education strategy, this study introduces the *Cultural Imprinting Leadership Model*, which offers a contextually relevant explanation of leadership in higher education.

The contributions of this review are threefold. Theoretically, it extends leadership theory by embedding cultural imprinting as a determinant of leadership orientations (Liden, Antonakis, & Day, 2022). Contextually, it enriches understanding of leadership in emerging-country universities, where leaders must balance global competitiveness with cultural legitimacy (de Wit & Jones, 2022). Practically, it offers guidance for policymakers and institutional leaders in designing leadership development programs that are both culturally grounded and globally responsive (Jing, Wang, & Zhang, 2025).

Although this review provides meaningful insights into the role of cultural imprinting in higher education leadership, it also highlights several areas that require further exploration. Future research should empirically test the proposed framework and explore cross-cultural and longitudinal leadership dynamics.

First, future studies should focus on the empirical validation of the proposed *Cultural Imprinting Leadership Model*.

Quantitative methods such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) or mixed-method approaches could help establish and test the causal pathways between cultural imprinting, leadership orientations, and strategic outcomes (Hair et al., 2021).

In addition, there is significant potential for comparative cross-country research. Studies contrasting Western and non-Western higher education institutions would provide a clearer picture of how cultural differences shape leadership orientations and strategic choices (Zander, Mockaitis, & Butler, 2020; Jones, Leask, Brandenburg, & de Wit, 2021).

Beyond cross-sectional comparisons, longitudinal research is needed to trace how cultural values embedded in childhood evolve across leaders' professional

trajectories, and how these interact with changing institutional and global demands (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Another promising avenue lies in adopting intersectional perspectives, examining how cultural imprinting intersects with gender, religion, or socioeconomic background in shaping leadership identity and practice (Estrada et al., 2024). Finally, greater attention should be devoted to policy and practice-oriented research. Specifically, studies should investigate how leadership development programs and higher education policies can integrate cultural imprinting insights, ensuring that leadership preparation is not only globally relevant but also locally resonant (Kezar, Hallett, & Corwin, 2025).

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