Revista de Estilos de Aprendizaje / Journal of Learning Styles
ISSN: 1988-8996 / ISSN: 2332-8533

Academic travel as a formative educational experience: pedagogical design and impact on learning

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Received: 16 April 2026 / Accepted: 24 June 2026

Abstract
Academic travel has been increasingly incorporated into higher education as part of active methodologies aimed at fostering meaningful learning. However, its formative value largely depends on pedagogical design and its integration into the curriculum. The aim of this study is to analyse the conditions under which academic travel can be understood as an educational experience with an impact on learning, as well as to explore its influence on student–faculty relationships and teaching–learning processes. A mixed-methods study was conducted at a European university using survey data and open-ended responses from 253 undergraduate students and 45 faculty members participating in curriculum-integrated academic travel. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis. Results indicate that academic travel generates greater impact when structured through a pedagogical design that integrates preparation, faculty guidance during the experience, and post-travel reflection linked to assessment. Under these conditions, participants report higher academic engagement, strengthened student–faculty relationships, and positive effects on learning processes.

Keywords: academic travel; experiential learning; pedagogical design; student–faculty interaction; higher education

[en] El viaje académico como experiencia formativa: diseño pedagógico e impacto en el aprendizaje

Resumen
El viaje académico se ha incorporado progresivamente a la educación superior como parte de metodologías activas orientadas a favorecer un aprendizaje significativo. Sin embargo, su valor formativo depende en gran medida de su diseño pedagógico y de su integración en el currículo. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar en qué condiciones el viaje académico puede entenderse como una

experiencia formativa con impacto en el aprendizaje, así como explorar su influencia en la relación entre estudiantes y profesorado y en los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Se realizó un estudio de métodos mixtos en una universidad europea con datos de encuesta y respuestas abiertas de 253 estudiantes y 45 profesores participantes en viajes académicos integrados en asignaturas. Los datos cuantitativos se analizaron mediante estadística descriptiva y los cualitativos mediante análisis temático. Los resultados muestran que el viaje académico genera mayor impacto cuando se articula mediante un diseño pedagógico que integra preparación, acompañamiento docente y reflexión posterior vinculada a la evaluación. En estas condiciones, se observa mayor compromiso académico, fortalecimiento de la relación estudiante-profesor y efectos positivos en los procesos de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: viaje académico; aprendizaje experiencial; diseño pedagógico; interacción estudiante-profesor; educación superior.

Sumario: 1. Introduction. 2. Literature review. 2.1 Academic travel and short-term study abroad as learning environments in higher education. 2.2. Experiential learning and pedagogical design of high-impact learning environments. 2.3. Relational learning environments: student–faculty interaction and learning communities. 2.4 Research gap: academic travel as a pedagogically designed learning environment. 3. Method. 3.1 Research design. 3.2. Context and setting 3.3. Participants. 3.4. Instruments. 3.5. Procedure. 3.6. Data Analysis. 3.7. Ethical considerations. 4. Results. 4.1. Pedagogical design conditions for academic travel. 4.2. Relational outcomes. 4.3. Instructional spillover effects. 5. Discussion. 5.1. Summary of key findings. 5.2. Academic travel as a design-oriented high-impact practice. 5.3. Relational mechanisms: why student–faculty bonds may matter. 5.4. Instructional spillover effects: beyond the trip itself. 5.5. Practical implications for educators and institutions. 5.6. Limitations and future research. 6. Conclusion. References

1. Introduction

Academic travel is increasingly incorporated into higher education programmes as part of active and experiential methodologies aimed at fostering meaningful learning and curriculum innovation. Within contemporary higher education, there is growing interest in educational approaches that place the student in an active role in the learning process and that connect academic knowledge with meaningful contexts for learning and application. Short-term study abroad and travel-based courses have been associated with gains in intercultural competence, personal development and global awareness (Hadis, 2005; Stone & Petrick, 2013; Peifer et al., 2023). However, evidence suggests that their educational impact varies considerably depending on how these experiences are pedagogically structured and integrated within degree programmes. In some cases, travel functions mainly as an enrichment activity; in others, it is intentionally designed as a formative educational experience aligned with learning objectives and assessment processes.

Experiential learning theory emphasises that meaningful learning requires structured preparation, guided engagement and reflective integration within intentionally designed educational contexts (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Morris, 2020). From this perspective, learning does not result merely from exposure to experience, but from pedagogical design that guides the formative educational experience and enables students to interpret, relate and apply knowledge. Similarly, research on high-impact educational practices highlights that activities such as study abroad produce deeper and more equitable learning outcomes when they are embedded within coherent programme design, connected to assessment and supported by sustained faculty involvement (Kuh, 2008; Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Finley, 2011). Despite this body of work, much of the literature has concentrated on developmental outcomes, particularly intercultural competence, with comparatively less attention to the pedagogical design conditions that shape the learning impact of travel-based formative experiences.

Moreover, the relational dimension of academic travel remains underexplored. Educational experiences are shaped not only by content and methodology, but also by the quality of interaction between participants and by the climate in which the formative experience takes place. Travel-based formative experiences create intensified contexts of interaction between students and faculty, potentially reshaping classroom climate, student engagement and teaching practices beyond the

duration of the experience itself. Research consistently underscores the importance of student–faculty interaction and learning communities for academic engagement and persistence (Tinto, 1997; Kuh & Hu, 2001). However, there is limited empirical evidence examining how pedagogically designed academic travel influences these relational dynamics and subsequent teaching–learning processes at programme level.

To address this gap, the present study conceptualises academic travel as a curriculum-embedded formative educational experience grounded in intentional pedagogical design and investigates the conditions under which it operates as a high-impact educational practice. Drawing on a mixed-methods study conducted at a European university, the research examines (i) the design features associated with meaningful learning, (ii) the perceived impact on student–faculty relationships and group cohesion, and (iii) reported effects on teaching practices and learning processes following participation in travel-based programmes.

By combining quantitative and qualitative data from both students and faculty, this study contributes applied evidence to inform institutional decision-making regarding the design, implementation and integration of academic travel as a formative educational experience in higher education. Rather than focusing solely on developmental outcomes, it advances a pedagogically oriented perspective that identifies transferable principles for enhancing teaching quality, relational learning and the learning impact of formative educational experiences in university contexts.
The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What pedagogical design conditions enable academic travel to function as a sustained high-impact learning practice?
2. How does participation in academic travel influence student–faculty relationships and group cohesion?
3. What perceived effects does academic travel have on subsequent teaching practices and classroom learning processes?

2. Literature review

2.1 Academic travel and short-term study abroad as learning environments in higher education

Travel-based educational initiatives—such as study tours, short-term study abroad and faculty-led international courses—have been increasingly incorporated into higher education curricula as part of efforts to promote active and contextualised learning. These experiences are often presented as opportunities to connect academic knowledge with real-world settings, enabling students to engage with disciplinary content in complex and situated contexts. Research has associated these experiences with intercultural competence development (Hammer et al., 1978; Peifer et al., 2023), increased academic focus (Hadis, 2005), and broader educational benefits linked to transformative learning (Stone & Petrick, 2013).

However, evidence suggests that the educational value of academic travel varies considerably depending on programme design and pedagogical framing. Bergsteiner and Avery (2008) highlight the importance of deep-level learning structures in study tours, arguing that surface exposure to contexts does not necessarily generate meaningful learning processes. Similarly, Quezada (2004) cautions against reducing travel-based learning to forms of educational tourism, emphasising the need for intentional pedagogical orientation that connects experience with academic reflection.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that travel does not automatically function as a learning experience; rather, its educational potential depends on how the experience is structured, scaffolded and connected to disciplinary inquiry. When academic travel is integrated into curriculum design, it can provide a learning environment that supports observation, dialogue and interpretation of reality in ways that complement classroom-based learning. A recent systematic review of faculty-led study abroad programs highlight substantial variability in programme design and reported outcomes, reinforcing the need for research that explicitly examines pedagogical design conditions and their influence on student learning processes (Bradly & Iskhakova, 2023).

Taken together, the literature suggests that academic travel should not be understood primarily as mobility, but as a pedagogically mediated learning environment whose educational value depends on the coherence between objectives, activities and processes of reflection.

2.2. Experiential learning and pedagogical design of high-impact learning environments

Experiential learning theory provides a conceptual foundation for understanding travel-based learning as a process shaped by structured educational design. Kolb and Kolb (2017) describe learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Morris (2020) further refines this model, underscoring the importance of reflective integration in higher education contexts. Within this perspective, the characteristics of the learning environment play a relevant role in shaping engagement and learning processes, particularly when pedagogical conditions support active participation, inquiry and the meaningful connection between experience and conceptual understanding.

Recent contributions emphasise the importance of pedagogical dynamics that stimulate curiosity, promote active knowledge seeking and foster cooperative learning environments as conditions that enhance students' attention and engagement in academic contexts (Catalá Pérez & Botello-Morte, 2025). These approaches highlight the relevance of designing learning situations that encourage students to adopt an active role in constructing knowledge, rather than remaining passive recipients of information.

This perspective is consistent with research on learning environments that emphasises the interaction between students' learning styles, contextual conditions and pedagogical design. Loor Dueñas (2016) argues that educational innovation requires moving beyond the mere diagnosis of learning preferences towards the creation of learning environments that actively support student engagement, participation and knowledge construction. From this viewpoint, the educational value of an experience depends not only on its content but also on the design of the conditions that make meaningful learning possible.

Design features such as structured preparation, guided reflection and post-experience integration are widely recognised as central elements of experiential learning processes. From this standpoint, learning emerges not simply from participation in an activity but from the pedagogical mediation that helps students interpret, connect and apply their experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Morris, 2020). Experiential learning has also been framed as a practical pedagogy capable of connecting academic knowledge with lived experience and enhancing student engagement when supported by intentional educational design (Cantor, 1997). Within applied higher education research, the framework of high-impact practices (HIPs) has been influential in explaining why certain pedagogical activities enhance engagement and deep learning. HIPs are characterised by sustained effort, meaningful interaction, exposure to diverse perspectives, feedback and reflection (Kuh, 2008; Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Finley, 2011). Study abroad is frequently included among HIPs, yet its effectiveness depends on the quality of programme design and equitable access.

Nayar and Surabhi (2020) emphasise the transition toward experiential classrooms in contemporary higher education, highlighting structured engagement and contextual learning as central to meaningful educational reform. Collectively, these frameworks converge in emphasising that travel-based initiatives are more likely to function as high-impact learning environments when they are embedded within coherent programme design and supported by structured preparation, active engagement and post-experience reflection.

2.3. Relational learning environments: student–faculty interaction and learning communities

Interaction with faculty contributes not only to cognitive development but also to motivation, belonging and classroom climate. Scholarship shows that sustained faculty engagement predicts academic integration and success, which resonates with relational outcomes in academic travel (Kuh & Hu, 2001). From a pedagogical perspective, educational processes also involve participation in shared learning contexts that contribute to the development of common understanding and collective meaning within educational communities (Venceslao et al., 2022).

Travel-based programmes create contexts of shared experience and informal interaction between students and professors that differ from conventional classroom settings. Ornstein and Nelson (2006) note the role of emotional and relational competencies in international travel courses, suggesting that interpersonal dimensions contribute significantly to learning processes. Research on cooperative learning in higher education similarly highlights the relevance of interaction between students and

instructors as a factor influencing engagement and learning outcomes. Such relational environments may influence both group cohesion and subsequent classroom dynamics.

Despite this, empirical research examining academic travel as a relational and community-building intervention remains limited. Existing studies often focus on intercultural or individual development outcomes, with less attention to how travel reshapes teaching practice and student–faculty relationships within institutional contexts.

2.4 Research gap: academic travel as a pedagogically designed learning environment

Existing scholarship consistently shows that travel-based outcomes are contingent on pedagogical design and curricular integration (Bergsteiner & Avery, 2008; Hadis, 2005), that experiential and high-impact frameworks emphasise scaffolding, reflection and integration as conditions for deep learning and that student–faculty interaction plays a central role in academic engagement and persistence (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Tinto, 1997).

However, these strands are seldom examined in combination to clarify how curriculum-embedded academic travel may operate as a sustained high-impact learning environment within institutional contexts. In particular, limited empirical attention has been given to how specific pedagogical design conditions shape relational dynamics and, in turn, influence subsequent teaching practices and classroom learning processes at programme level. The present study addresses this gap by examining (i) the pedagogical design conditions under which academic travel functions as a sustained high-impact learning environment, (ii) its influence on student–faculty relationships and group cohesion, and (iii) its perceived effects on subsequent teaching practices and classroom learning processes through a mixed-methods approach.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design combining quantitative survey data with qualitative open-ended responses. The integration of both strands allowed for a comprehensive analysis of design conditions, relational dynamics and perceived instructional effects associated with academic travel.

The design followed a convergent approach: quantitative and qualitative data were collected within the same institutional context and analysed separately before being integrated at the interpretation stage. This approach enables triangulation of findings and strengthens the applied validity of the results.

3.2. Context and setting

The study was conducted at a European university where academic travel is embedded within undergraduate degree programmes as part of curriculum-based experiential learning initiatives. Travel activities were faculty-led and formally integrated into course structures, including preparatory sessions and post-travel assessment components. Academic travel in this context refers to short-term educational trips formally integrated into course structures and designed to complement learning objectives through structured academic, cultural and reflective activities.

3.3. Participants

The study included:

- 253 undergraduate students who participated in academic travel activities.
- 45 faculty members involved in designing and accompanying travel programmes.

Participation was voluntary. Data were collected after completion of the travel experience and subsequent course integration.

3.4. Instruments

The survey instrument was developed following a preliminary exploratory phase conducted during earlier academic travel programmes. In this initial phase, open-ended reflections from participants were collected and analysed to identify recurring dimensions related to pedagogical design, relational dynamics and perceived learning impact. These inductively derived categories informed the construction and refinement of the questionnaire used in the present study.

Student questionnaire

The student instrument included Likert-scale items (1–6) measuring perceived post-trip improvements across four dimensions: (i) group relationships, (ii) student–faculty relationships with accompanying professors, (iii) learning in courses taught by accompanying professors, and (iv) learning in courses taught by other professors. These items were designed to capture relational and instructional spillover effects following participation in academic travel. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The four-item student scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .82$; $n = 253$ complete cases), indicating satisfactory internal coherence among the items.

Faculty questionnaire

The faculty questionnaire included Likert-scale items (1–6) assessing perceived improvements in teaching experience with the accompanied group (e.g., increased attention and participation), perceived improvements in student learning, and the extent to which these improvements were attributed to the travel experience. The three-item faculty scale showed strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$; $n = 38$ complete cases), supporting its use as a coherent measure of perceived instructional impact.

In addition to the closed-ended items, both questionnaires incorporated open-ended questions designed to capture nuanced experiential dimensions not reducible to predefined response categories. These qualitative responses allowed for deeper exploration of design conditions, relational processes and perceived instructional change.

3.5. Procedure

Data collection took place following the completion of the academic travel programmes and their subsequent integration into regular coursework. Surveys were distributed electronically to participating students and faculty members. Participation was voluntary and responses were collected anonymously.

Students were invited to complete the questionnaire after the post-trip academic phase had concluded, ensuring that responses reflected not only immediate impressions but also perceived effects on subsequent classroom experiences. Faculty members were likewise surveyed after completing the teaching cycle associated with the travel experience.

No incentives were provided for participation.

3.6. Data analysis

Quantitative analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to examine central tendencies and response distributions across the main dimensions. Reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was conducted prior to descriptive analysis to assess the internal consistency of the student and faculty scales.

The student four-item scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$; $n = 253$), while the faculty three-item scale showed strong reliability ($\alpha = .85$; $n = 38$).

Descriptive results are presented in the Results section.

Table 1

Characteristics of professors participating in the sample

Gender	*n*	*%*
Female	23	51.11%
Male	22	48.89%
Total	45	100.00%

Faculty	*n*	*%*
Communication	3	6.67%
Polytechnic	5	11.11%
Experimental Sciences	4	8.89%

Law	8	17.78%
Business (BAM, Economics, etc.)	11	24.44%
Health and Medicine	6	13.33%
Psychology and Education	7	15.56%
Other	1	2.22%
Total	45	100.00%

Note. Source: the authors.

Table 2

Characteristics of students participating in the sample by gender and degree programme

Gender	*n*	*%*
Female	165	65.22%
Male	86	33.99%
Prefer not to answer	2	0.79%
Total	253	100.00%

Degree Programme	*n*	*%*
BAM	11	4.35%
Architecture	14	5.53%
Biomedicine	32	12.65%
Biotechnology	55	21.74%
Sports Sciences	4	1.58%
Law	7	2.77%
Education	12	4.74%
Nursing	6	2.37%
Engineering (Systems, Mathematics…)	30	11.86%
Medicine	19	7.51%
Journalism	15	5.93%
Psychology	14	5.53%
International relations	16	6.32%
Other degrees	18	7.11%
Total	253	100.00%

Note. Source: the authors.

Qualitative analysis

Open-ended responses were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Joffe, 2011). An inductive coding approach was adopted to allow themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than imposing predefined categories.

Two researchers independently coded a subset of responses to enhance reliability. Inter-coder agreement reached 84%, after which discrepancies were discussed, and a shared coding framework was established. The final thematic structure was then applied to the full dataset.

Illustrative quotations are included in the Results section to support interpretation of the main themes.

3.7. Ethical considerations

The study complied with institutional research ethics standards. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' institution (Approval No. 33/2025; June 24, 2025). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no identifying personal data were collected. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the use of data for academic publication prior to completing the survey.

4. Results

4.1. Pedagogical design conditions for academic travel

Faculty responses indicate strong agreement regarding the pedagogical conditions that contribute to academic travel being perceived as an educational experience. Table 3 presents professors' evaluations of several dimensions associated with the formative value of academic travel, including disciplinary learning, interdisciplinary dialogue, knowledge transfer and group cohesion.

Table 3

Faculty perceptions of the conditions that contribute to academic travel as an educational experience

	The selected destination helps me deepen my understanding of the discipline I teach in my degree programme.			We discover that reality encompasses a variety of different disciplines and the need for dialogue between different fields of knowledge			The reflection on reality based on the input of professors invites the transfer of knowledge to other fields of one's personal life			The group is more cohesive and with better relationships with professors participating in the trip		
	M	*Median*	*SD*	*M*	*Median*	*SD*	*M*	*Median*	*SD*	*M*	*Median*	*SD*
Men	4.95	5	1.13	5.09	6	1.06	5.45	6	0.91	5.68	6	0.65
Women	5.04	5	0.98	5.60	6	0.58	5.82	6	0.49	5.3	5	0.82
Total	5.00	5	1.04	5.36	6	0.88	5.64	6	0.74	5.49	6	0.76

Note. Source: the authors.

As shown in Table 3, faculty members reported high levels of agreement that:

- The selected destination deepened disciplinary knowledge (M = 5.00).
- The experience fostered interdisciplinary dialogue (M = 5.36).
- Reflection guided by professors facilitated knowledge transfer beyond the academic context (M = 5.64).
- The group became more cohesive and strengthened bonds with participating professors (M = 5.49).

These findings suggest that faculty perceive academic travel as an educational experience when it is academically grounded, promotes interdisciplinary understanding, encourages reflection and transfer, and contributes to stronger relational dynamics within the group.
Gender differences were minimal and do not substantially alter the overall pattern.

4.2. Relational outcomes

Student perceptions

Students reported notable improvements in group cohesion and in bonds with professors participating in the trip.

Table 4

Perception of students on the impact of the trip on relationships

	Improvement in group relationships			Improvement in bonds with professors participating in the trip		
	M	*Median*	*SD*	*M*	*Median*	*SD*
Men	5.41	6	0.91	5.26	6	1
Women	5.58	6	0.76	5.53	6	0.82
Total	5.52	6	0.82	5.44	6	0.89

Note. Source: the authors.

As shown in Table 4, the overall mean for improvement in group relationships was 5.52, while improvement in bonds with professors reached a mean of 5.44. Median values of 6 in both variables indicate strong agreement.

Faculty perceptions

Faculty perceptions corroborate these findings.

Table 5

Perception of professors on the impact of the trip on relationships

	Greater group cohesion and bonds with professors		
	M	*Median*	*SD*
Men	5.68	6	0.65
Women	5.30	5	0.82
Total	5.49	6	0.76

Note. Source: the authors.

Table 5 shows that professors reported greater group cohesion and strengthened bonds (M = 5.49), suggesting alignment between student and faculty perceptions regarding relational outcomes.

4.3. Instructional spillover effects

Faculty perceptions of teaching impact

Faculty members reported perceived improvements in teaching experience and student learning following the travel experience.

Table 6

Perception of professors on the impact of the trip on teaching

	Rate the improvement in your teaching experience with the group (greater attention and participation in class)			Rate the improvement in student learning due to the trip (interest in study, improved learning outcomes)			If there has been an improvement in your teaching experience and student learning, to what extent can that be attributed to the educational experience of the trip?		
	M	*Median*	*SD*	*M*	*Median*	*SD*	*M*	*Median*	*SD*
Men	4.85	6	1.62	4.52	5	1.50	4.54	5	0.91
Women	5.06	6	1.64	4.41	5	1.84	4.89	5	1.24
Total	4.95	6	1.61	4.47	5	1.64	4.71	5	1.08

Note. Source: the authors.

As shown in Table 6:

- Improvement in teaching experience (attention and participation) reached a mean of 4.95.
- Improvement in student learning reached a mean of 4.47.
- Attribution of these improvements to the travel experience averaged 4.71.

These values indicate moderate to high perceived instructional impact, though slightly lower than relational indicators.

Student perceptions of instructional impact

Students similarly reported perceived improvements in learning outcomes.

Table 7
Perception of students on the impact of the trip on teaching

	Improved learning outcomes in classes with professors on the trip			Improved learning outcomes with other professors		
	M	*Median*	*SD*	*M*	*Median*	*SD*
Men	5.07	6	1.03	4.77	5	1.21
Women	5.29	6	1.05	5.00	5	1.28
Total	5.21	6	1.05	4.92	5	1.26

Note. Source: the authors.
Table 7 shows:

- Improved learning outcomes in classes with professors on the trip (M = 5.21).
- Improved learning outcomes with other professors (M = 4.92).

These findings suggest potential spillover effects beyond the immediate instructional context of the trip.

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of key findings

This study examined the conditions under which academic travel functions as a meaningful educational experience and explored its perceived influence on relational and instructional processes. Overall, the results indicate that academic travel operates as a high-impact practice when it is academically grounded, dialogical and supported by structured facilitation and post-experience integration. Participants associated educational value with clear disciplinary alignment, interdisciplinary dialogue and professor-guided reflection that enabled knowledge transfer beyond the immediate travel context (Table 3). Convergent evidence from students and faculty further indicates strengthened group cohesion and student–faculty bonds (Tables 4 and 5). Finally, both groups identified extended instructional influence following the experience, including enhanced classroom participation and perceived learning gains within and, to a lesser extent, beyond the courses directly linked to the trip (Tables 6 and 7).

Taken together, these findings support a design-centred and relational view of academic travel: the experience appears most educationally consequential when it is embedded in intentional pedagogy and when interactional dynamics strengthen engagement and classroom climate beyond the travel period.

5.2. Academic travel as a design-oriented high-impact practice

The findings align with experiential learning theory, which posits that educational value derives not from experience alone but from structured cycles of engagement, reflection and integration (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Morris, 2020). Participants in this study explicitly associated impact with professor-led reflection that supported transfer beyond the immediate setting (Table 3), underscoring the centrality of guided meaning-making within travel-based learning.

Beyond experiential theory, the results also resonate with the high-impact practices (HIPs) literature, which highlights quality of implementation, meaningful effort, substantive interaction and structured feedback as defining features of deep learning environments (Kuh, 2008; Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Finley, 2011). In this study, indicators that are typically associated with HIPs—such as sustained engagement and substantive student–faculty interaction—appear to be embedded in what participants perceived as the most educationally valuable aspects of travel-based learning.

Importantly, the pattern observed here supports a shift from an "outcome-only" framing (e.g., intercultural competence gains) to a "design conditions" framing. While study abroad research often reports positive outcomes with considerable variability (Stone & Petrick, 2013; Peifer et al., 2023), the present study adds applied evidence about which pedagogical conditions participants associate with meaningful educational impact in curriculum-embedded academic travel. Empirical work on field-based learning suggests that curriculum integration predicts sustainable learning outcomes (Linder & Peters, 2022).

5.3. Relational mechanisms: why student–faculty bonds may matter

A central contribution of this study is the identification of community-building and interactional processes as mechanisms of educational impact. Student and faculty responses converged on strengthened relationships and cohesion (Tables 4 and 5). Academic travel plausibly intensifies these relational opportunities by creating extended shared time, informal interactions and collaborative experiences beyond conventional classroom routines.

The strong relational indicators observed may help explain why participants also reported instructional spillover effects upon return (Tables 6 and 7). A plausible interpretation—consistent with engagement and learning community literature—is that strengthened bonds and cohesion improve classroom climate, participation and motivation, thereby supporting more active learning dynamics and perceived learning gains. This mechanism is also consistent with applied accounts of travel courses that stress relational and emotional competencies as part of effective international learning experiences (Ornstein & Nelson, 2006).

From an applied perspective, these findings imply that the interpersonal dimension of academic travel is not incidental. Instead, relational processes may be a key pathway through which travel-based learning affects subsequent teaching and learning.

5.4. Instructional spillover effects: beyond the trip itself

Faculty reported moderate-to-high perceived improvements in classroom participation and teaching experience and a meaningful attribution of these improvements to the travel experience (Table 6). Students reported improved learning outcomes with accompanying professors and, notably, reported some improvement with other professors as well (Table 7). While these extended instructional effects should be interpreted cautiously given the self-report nature of the measures, they suggest that travel-based learning may influence broader academic processes beyond the immediate trip and the specific courses directly associated with it.

One interpretation is that academic travel functions as a concentrated developmental episode that reshapes students' academic dispositions—such as engagement, participation norms and disciplinary interest—which may subsequently generalise across learning contexts. This interpretation is compatible with research emphasising "deep-level learning" conditions in study tours (Bergsteiner & Avery, 2008) and cautions against travel as "educational tourism" without pedagogical structure (Quezada, 2004). In other words, when academic travel is designed as an integrated learning intervention, it may generate effects that extend into ordinary teaching settings.

5.5. Practical implications for educators and institutions

The findings provide applied guidance for programme-level planning and faculty practice. Rather than treating academic travel as a standalone initiative, institutions may enhance educational impact by adopting design principles that ensure curricular alignment, pedagogical facilitation and structured integration. Based on the evidence from this study, the following implications are suggested:

Implications for course and programme design

- Clarify academic purpose and alignment: Ensure that travel objectives are explicitly linked to course outcomes and disciplinary content and communicate expectations clearly to students.
- Embed structured learning tasks: Incorporate observation guides, reflective prompts and integrative activities that connect sites and experiences to academic concepts (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).
- Link post-trip reflection to assessment: Use assessment-linked reflection to consolidate learning and support transfer, rather than treating reflection as optional or purely personal. Implications for faculty involvement
- Active accompaniment as pedagogical facilitation: Faculty roles should go beyond logistics to include guided interpretation, questioning and facilitation of dialogue during the trip.
- Intentionally support relational learning: Build learning community practices that leverage the intensified interaction of travel to strengthen trust, participation and classroom climate upon return (Tinto, 1997).

Implications for institutional implementation

- Plan academic travel as a curriculum-embedded intervention: Treat travel as part of programme coherence and quality assurance, not as an isolated initiative.
- Support scalability through design frameworks: Institutions can develop shared templates (preparation → accompaniment → integration) to support consistent quality across trips and reduce dependence on individual faculty preferences.
- Monitor equity and access: If academic travel is positioned as a high-impact practice, institutions should consider accessibility and inclusion to avoid reinforcing opportunity gaps (Kuh, 2008).

5.6. Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be considered. First, the study is based on a single institutional context, which may limit generalisability. However, the contribution of this research is design-oriented: it identifies pedagogical conditions and relational processes that are structurally transferable to other higher education settings. Second, outcomes are based on participants' self-reported perceptions, which may be subject to social desirability or recall bias. Future research should complement perception-based evidence with additional indicators (e.g., learning analytics, performance measures, behavioural engagement indicators, or longitudinal follow-up).

Third, although the study includes both student and faculty perspectives and integrates qualitative and quantitative evidence, the quantitative analysis reported here is primarily descriptive. Further studies could test specific design features more formally (e.g., comparisons across programme models, pre/post designs, or multi-institutional samples). Finally, future research should examine how different disciplinary contexts, trip duration and destination characteristics interact with design and facilitation processes to shape outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This study provides applied evidence that academic travel can function as a high-impact learning practice when it is intentionally structured and integrated within programme frameworks. Findings underscore three interrelated elements: academically grounded design conditions, strengthened student–faculty relationships and group cohesion, and perceived extended effects on teaching and learning processes beyond the trip itself. By shifting attention from travel as exposure to travel as pedagogically structured intervention, the study offers analytically transferable principles to inform institutional implementation and improve the educational quality of travel-based learning in higher education.

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Conflicto de intereses

No existe conflicto de intereses por parte de lo autores.

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