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Beyond a single answer: Student leaders' perspectives on essential leadership skills and leadership development in Malaysian higher education

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ABSTRACT

Student leadership programs are more justifiable if the learning outcomes are aligned with the student leaders' own conception of effective leadership. In this qualitative descriptive study, we explored the leadership competencies that student leaders believed were most important and actions they proposed to develop those competencies. During a leadership camp in July 2022, two open-ended survey questions were answered by seventy-eight students holding formal leadership positions from one Malaysian public university. Responses were analysed using inductive qualitative content analysis. The two questions were analysed separately and frequencies of categories were only used to describe the prominence of the coded content. Seven competency categories were identified; communication skills (28 coded respondent-category occurrences), responsibility and integrity (25), emotional intelligence (24), leadership and team management (19), decision-making and problem solving (13), resilience and work ethic (13), organization and time management (8). Proposed developmental activities were coded into three domains: personal leadership character (35 action occurrences), interpersonal competence (35), and leadership performance skills (17). The findings suggest student leadership is more of a constellation of relational, ethical, intrapersonal, and execution-oriented capacities than one dominant skill. They also observe an important difference between what participants valued and how they thought those capacities should be developed. Universities should thus incorporate reflective practice, ethical and relational learning and applied

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leadership tasks in coherent programs. The study used short answers from one institution so the framework should be seen as a starting point for interpretation of program design and further testing, not as a validated sequence of development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions develop leadership not only through formal curriculum but also through student organisations, representative bodies, clubs and campus programs. These settings require students to coordinate peers, communicate across organisational boundaries, manage competing priorities, act on behalf of others. Thus, leadership is best understood as a relational and goal-oriented process, rather than a property of a formal title (Wilson, 2023). In the student context, it is about self-leadership and the ability to influence and coordinate collective action (Wang, 2023).

Research on effective leadership consistently shows multiple, interacting competencies. Communication allows leaders to express direction and negotiate shared understanding, ethical conduct fosters trust, emotional intelligence enables self-regulation and responsiveness to others, and problem solving, delegation, resilience and time management enable plans to be implemented under practical constraints (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Harms & Crede, 2010; Mumford et al., 2000). Similarly, higher education studies highlight communication, relational competence, emotional intelligence, and the capacity to organise collaborative work (Gonzalez et al., 2024; Haber-Curran & Williamson, 2023; Plantin Ewe & Fjelkner Pihl, 2024). In theory these competencies are separable, but in practice they rarely function independently of each other.

Moreover, scholarship on leadership development distinguishes between enhancing individual capabilities and developing the relational processes through which leadership occurs . Leader development is defined as an increase in individual human capital and leadership development as an increase in social capital that allows for collective work (Day et al., 2014). Likewise, the Leadership Identity Development model suggests that students' views of leadership can move from position-based assumptions to collaborative and integrated practice (Komives et al., 2006). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that effective programs need to link reflection and personal responsibility to communication, collaboration and opportunities to exercise judgement in authentic tasks.

The Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026-2035 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2026) offers a contemporary policy context for the cultivation of graduate capability and preparing students for volatile social and professional environments. However, program design can be too provider-centred, with institutions dictating competencies without considering how student leaders conceptualise leadership based on their own experience. Previous studies have suggested competency lists and theoretical models, but fewer studies have compared students' perceptions of essential competencies with the specific actions that they perceive as helping them develop as leaders (Al-Omari & Al-Mughairi, 2023; Gigliotti & Spear, 2022; Saidi & Abd Aziz, 2025). The distinction is important because perceived importance does not necessarily equate with perceived route to development.

Thus, the study explored the student leaders' own conceptions of effective leadership, rather than a universal definition. It addressed two questions: (1) What leadership competencies do student leaders view as most important? and (2) What do they believe is most important to the development of great leaders? The study provides an empirically grounded framework for matching leadership program content with the

expressed priorities of participants through separate analysis of the two response sets and subsequent comparison, whilst also acknowledging the limitations of a qualitative survey within a single institution.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study design and setting

The survey was administered to student leaders who participated in a leadership camp at a Malaysian public university. Students in formal roles were intentionally recruited through the student development department. A qualitative descriptive design was used to explore the student leaders' responses to two open-ended questions. The questions were distributed to students attending a leadership camp at one Malaysian public university through Google Forms. The participants were in formal leadership positions and were purposefully selected through the student development department. The analysis focused on their perceptions of what were critical leadership skills and what they were proposing to do to develop themselves as leaders.

2.2 Participants and recruitment

Participants were selected purposively from students holding formal leadership roles. Recruitment was coordinated through the university's student development department, using its record of student leaders. All 78 respondents were included in the analysis. Reported roles were president (n = 23), vice-president (n = 15), treasurer (n = 13), secretary (n = 12), secretariat or ordinary member (n = 8), committee member or executive (n = 4), vice-secretary (n = 1), student-council delegate (n = 1), and deputy student-council representative (n = 1). Faculty labels recorded in the survey were Applied Sciences (n = 21), Accountancy (n = 20), Computer and Mathematical Sciences (n = 20), Built Environment Studies and Technology (n = 12), Art and Design (n = 4), and Quantity Surveying (n = 1). These descriptors characterise the sample; the study was not stratified, and no subgroup comparisons were conducted.

2.3 Data collection

Data were collected in English through Google Forms. Participants were asked to list three skills that they believed a leader should possess and to describe what they could do to become a good leader. The first question elicited perceived leadership competencies, whereas the second elicited proposed development actions. Participation was voluntary. Participants were informed of the study purpose, consented before responding, and were told that responses would be anonymised, treated confidentially, and used for the stated research purpose. No names are reported; quotations are identified only by participant codes (P01-P78).

2.4 Data analysis

The two questions were analysed separately with conventional inductive qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The process involved several readings, identifying meaning-bearing expressions, assigning concise descriptive codes, comparing similar and dissimilar codes, and grouping related codes into broader analytic categories. Both authors analysed and validated the final framework.

In the first case synonymous or closely related expressions were merged, while conceptual distinctions were kept. For example, 'communication', 'talking skills' and 'public speaking' were grouped as communication skills, while 'responsible', 'integrity' and 'trustworthy' were grouped as responsibility and integrity. Listening was coded as communication when the focus was on exchanging information and understanding and empathy as emotional intelligence when the focus was on recognising or responding to others' feelings and perspectives.

The reporting unit for the first question was a respondent-category count. Even if the idea was repeated, a participant could only provide one count in the same competency category in a single response. Responses could be grouped in several categories, although participants were asked to provide up to three competencies, and some elaborated beyond three. Thus, category totals may exceed the number of participants and should not be interpreted as scale scores or as statistically independent observations.

Coding for the second question was informed by the difference between a personal attribute and a proposed action. Thus, phrases such as 'learn from a mistake' were coded as personal leadership development, 'be a good listener' as interpersonal development and 'delegate well' as leadership performance. Closely related actions were clustered into specific action codes and then into three higher order domains. The domain totals are sums of coded action occurrences within the constituent codes. The same participant can contribute to more than one code within a domain.

Where it was possible that an expression could fit more than one category, the category boundaries were checked against the whole response. Then definitions and sample excerpts were compared across the dataset to ensure internal coherence of each category and meaningful differences from other categories. Frequencies were calculated post-categorisation to show descriptive prominence only. They were not used for hypothesis testing, claims of statistical significance, or inference to the population.

In the last phase the competency categories were compared with the development domains, to develop an integrative interpretive schema. The arrows in the framework represent conceptually plausible connections based on common meanings of codes. They do not reflect observed transitions, temporal ordering, causal effects, or statistically tested pathways.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Participant profile and analytic overview

The 78 participants represented a range of formal leadership positions and academic fields. Their responses led to seven competency categories for the first research question and three action domains for the second. Counts are presented to indicate the relative visibility of coded content; they do not indicate the proportion of participants with a measured competency or the effectiveness of a proposed action.

3.2 Perceived leadership competencies

Communication skills were the most prominent category (n = 28), followed by responsibility and integrity (n = 25) and emotional intelligence (n = 24). Leadership and team management (n = 19), decision-making and problem-solving (n = 13), resilience and work ethic (n = 13), and organisation and time management (n = 8) completed the framework. Table 1 defines each category and presents representative evidence.

Table 1. Inductive content analysis of perceived leadership competencies

Theme	Theme description	Initial codes	Example excerpts (Respondent ID)	Frequency (number of codes mentioned)
1. Emotional intelligence	Many participants emphasized the capability to manage emotions, understand others, respect different opinions, optimist and remain patience while effectively resolve conflicts and influence others' emotions as essential leadership skills.	Empathy, regulate emotion, active listening, understanding, openness, positivity, putting others first, accepting criticism, patience	"Empathy" (P06, P27, P43, P47, P65, and P75), "Self-awareness" (P45), "Handling emotions" (P74, also discussed by P28), "Accepting others' opinions" (P44), "Open-minded" (P23, P64, P70, and P75), "Understanding" (P21, P30, and P49), "Good listener" (P25, P32, P61, and P76), "Accepting criticism to improve myself" (P73), "Positive thinking" (P10), and "Teamworking skill and emotional intelligence skill" (P66)	24
2. Communication skills	Communication emerged as the most frequently mentioned skills. Participants described the leaders' ability to clearly convey ideas and information. The communication goes beyond the speaking, it involves the tone, body language and thoughtful while at the same time persuade others.	Communication, public speaking, persuade, motivating others, talking skills, fluent speaking, explaining ideas	"Communication" (P02, P03, P04, P07, P17, P18, P20, P21, P25, P26, P28, P34, P36, P42, P44, P48, P55, P56, P58, P59, P62, P66, P71, P73, P74, P75, and P76), "Active listening" (P06, P43, and P65), "Ability to share message or information to make everyone understand easily" (P06), "Able to communicate publicly" (P15), "Talk and motivate" (P31), "Communication skill" (P04, P17, P42, P44, P58, and P66), "Fluently speaking skill" (P52), and "Social skill and talking skill" (P78)	28
3. Leadership and team management skills	Participant described leaders' ability to guide, inspire and organize team members towards the same goals. The leaders can influence others with clear vision and includes effective work delegation.	Leadership, delegation, teamwork, organizing, managing teammates, inspiring others, facilitating, leading members	"Leading" (P05; P28), "Managing teammates" (P38), "Leadership skills" (P04 and P67), "Delegating tasks" (P32 and P55), "Good in dividing the task" (P69), and "Set a projection to my team" (P46)	19
4. Responsibility and integrity	Many participants highlighted responsibility, honesty, trustworthiness, and integrity as essential skills that support effective leadership skills. The action of the leaders is aligned with the moral.	Responsibility, integrity, honesty, trustworthy, reliability, transparency, accountability	"Responsibility" (P07, P11, P18, P19, P25, P35, P53, P63, and P72), "Integrity" (P22 and P45), "Responsible" (P10, P12, P14, P16, P29, P30, P33, P38, P47, P55, P59, P61, and P77), "Trustworthy and reliable" (P16), "Honest" (P19 and P35), "Transparent" (P72), "Responsibility, patient" (P07), and "Persistence and responsibility" (P63)	25
5. Decision-making and problem-solving skills	Participants frequently referred to the leaders' ability to identify challenges, analyse the cause critically and select the best solution from multiple options while remain rational under pressure.	Decision making, critical thinking, problem solving, rational thinking, thinking skills	"I can make a decision" (P60, whose original wording was "Can make decisions"), "Can make great decision" (P37), "Decision making" (P13, P42, P56, P59, and P71), "Wisely solve problem" (P11), "Critical thinking" (P52, P70, and P78), "Thinking skill" (P04 and P40), and "Rational" (P50)	13

Theme	Theme description	Initial codes	Example excerpts (Respondent ID)	Frequency (number of codes mentioned)
6. Resilience and work ethic skills	This theme related to the ability to maintain the consistency, dedication and determination to achieve goals even under pressure.	Hardworking, perseverance, confidence, resilience, working under pressure, never give up, determination	"Hard-working" (P01, P39, P49, and P51), "Strong mental" (P52), "Persistence" (P63), and "Confident" (P08, P51, P60, P72, and P74).	13
7. Organization and time management skills	Several participants stated that the leader's ability to plan in detail and manage time effectively to ensure tasks are completed successfully.	Time management, punctuality, organization, planning, detail-oriented	"Time management" (P03 and P65) and "Punctual" (P12, P33, and P69), "Firm, organized, punctual" (P12, P13, P14, P33, P34, and P69)	8

The communication was described as expressive and receptive. The participants discussed speaking to an audience, sharing information, inspiring others and listening. Accountability, honesty and trustworthiness, marked by responsibility and integrity, captured the moral expectations associated with student leadership. Emotional intelligence involved the capacity to empathise, manage emotions, exhibit patience and be receptive to criticism or alternative viewpoints. Overall the three most salient categories suggest that participants considered relational and ethical conduct to be central to leadership.

The other categories concern the organization and execution of collective work. Leadership and team management required delegation, motivation, and coordination. Decisions and problem solving required critical judgement to come up with workable responses to challenges. Resilience and work ethic dealt with sustained effort and confidence under pressure, whereas organization and time management dealt with planning, punctuality and completion. Their lower counts mean less prominence in this dataset, not less practical importance.

3.3 Action domains for leadership development

The actions suggested by participants were grouped into three domains. Each of the leadership performance skills had 17 coded action occurrences, and personal leadership character and interpersonal competence had 35 coded action occurrences. These totals are the aggregate of constituent action codes and do not represent number of unique participants.

Personal leadership character consisted of reflection, learning from mistakes, seeking feedback, responsibility, confidence, and participation in leadership activities. Interpersonal competence included open communication, active listening, teamwork, relationship building, understanding, and empathy. Leadership performance skills included activities that turn intentions into structured work, such as planning, time management, decision making, and problem solving.

Table 2. Inductive content analysis of proposed leadership development actions

Theme	Theme description	Initial codes	Example excerpts (Respondent ID)	Frequency (number of codes mentioned)
1. Building personal leadership character	This theme reflects participants' belief that leadership begins with personal development. Student leaders highlighted the act of self-reflection, learning from mistakes, seeking feedback, participating in leadership programmes, and taking responsibility for their own growth.	Self-reflection	"I always reflect to myself after what I did and always learn to improve myself" (P05), "Evaluate mistake" (P30), "Learn from a mistake" (P23), "Always reflect myself to improve to be better" (P64), and "Take advice as a lesson" (P24).	6
		Continuous learning	"Learn new things" (P08 and P26), "Polishing my leadership skill and learn new things" (P08), "Reading books" (P24, whose original wording was "reading a books"), "Read" (P31), "Learn more about leader skill" (P53), "Always practice makes perfect" (P12) "Improve myself" (P05, P27, and P73), "I will attend all leadership program to learn" (P06), "Improve every leadership skill" (P15), "Participate in various events and programs" (P66), and "Try to apply the skills and qualities…" (P29).	11
		Feedback seeking	"Invite feedback from my team" (P32), "Be self aware and ask for advice" (P45), "Always ask a feedback from group" (P59), and "I'll have a feedback from all my team and my superiors…" (P73).	4
		Responsibility	"Improve communication skills and be responsibility" (P18), "Being responsibility" (P58), "Always tell myself that I have a responsibility to the club" (P47), "Be confident and hold the responsibility well" (P72), "Be willing to put in the extra hours" (P20), and "I must not fail it" (P47).	6
		Confidence	"Always stand for myself" (P19), "Make myself more confident and brave" (P51), "Confidence, calm and strong in mental and physical" (P54), "Be confident" (P72), and "Be more confident and strict at the same time" (P74).	5
		Participation in leadership programmes	"I will attend all leadership program" (P06), "Join more program organized by UKP and others" (P40), and "I will always join any club or organisation…" (P48).	3
2. Strengthening interpersonal leadership competencies	This theme reflects participants' belief that leadership depends on strong interpersonal relationships. They emphasised the act of open communication, active listening, empathy, trust, and teamwork to achieve shared goals.	Communication	"Always communicate with other members" (P07), "Improve my communication skills" (P18, P33, and P56), "Have two-way communication" (P60), "Good interactions with team members" (P02), "Reach people under me" (P01), "Communicate interactively with group" (P59), "Communicate more with others" (P62), and "Convey a complex message into simpler words" (P33).	8
		Active listening	"Always be a good listener to teammate" (P25), "Listen to others" (P22, P39, P50, and P68), "Hear their thought" (P62), "Take advice as a lesson" (P24), "Be a	8

Theme	Theme description	Initial codes	Example excerpts (Respondent ID)	Frequency (number of codes mentioned)
			good listener" (P25, P32, and P76), "Listen to others' ideas" (P68), "Received other judgement" (P46), and "Always listen to others and make a firm decision…" (P22).	
		Teamwork	"Teamwork" (P39), "Being a great team" (P44), "Always work together" (P67), and "Bring the best out of everyone" (P75).	4
		Relationship building	"Have more bonding with teammates" (P37), "Create a strong bonding with my team" (P52), "Be a trusted person among the team" (P38), "Be friendly with everyone" (P42), "Help the one who needs" (P41), "Unite my team" (P46), and "Good interactions with team members" (P02).	7
		Empathy and understanding	"Understand the consequences of my members" (P35), "Be fair to all" (P35), "Know the problem that the people below us" (P61), "Help them in every situation" (P61), "Accept others' differences" (P63), "Understand their limits" (P63), "Patience…people from different backgrounds" (P42), and "Make sure everyone is comfortable with you" (P42).	8
3. Enhancing leadership perfomance skills	This theme reflects participants' belief that leadership is demonstrated through the act of planning, time management, decision-making, and problem-solving to achieve organisational goals.	Planning	"Delegate well" (P55), "Plan the program well" (P11), "Good in planning" (P14), "Able to plan and predict the journey of a project" (P46), "Schedule our group's work on time" (P34), and "Always be prepared for any consequences" (P49).	5
		Time management	"Better time management" (P03), "Improve my timeline schedule" (P24), and "Meeting deadlines" (P34).	3
		Decision-making	"Good in decision making" (P13), "Make a firm decision" (P22), "Make a wise decision" (P68), and "Capable of giving ideas and receiving other judgement" (P46).	4
		Problem-solving	"Find a way for the problems" (P11), "Resolve any issues with my members" (P35), "Handle and settle any problem" (P70), "Learn how to handle failure" (P32), and "Help every member of my team who is in trouble" (P11).	5

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 A relational and ethical centre of student leadership

The analysis showed that student leaders did not reduce leadership to authority, charisma or task completion. The three most prominent categories were communication, responsibility and integrity, and emotional intelligence, which constituted a relational and ethical core of their understanding of leadership. In theory, this combination makes sense. Communication enables coordination, ethics enables trust, and emotional intelligence affects how leaders respond to people and conflict. This pattern supports the notion of leadership enacted through relationships and responsible influence rather than attached to a position alone (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Plantin Ewe & Fjelkner Pihl, 2024; Wilson, 2023).

Responses included communication outside of public speaking. It was about listening, explaining, motivating and customising a message for others to understand. The breadth is important in student organisations where leaders often act as mediators between peers and university units but operate without formal authority over the members. Communication is therefore both a separate competency and a means by which other competencies become visible. Integrity is demonstrated by transparent decisions and consistent behaviour, while empathy is partly a matter of good listening. The interdependence helps account for why competency categories should not be seen as competing variables simply because one drew more coded occurrences.

Responsibility and integrity were right behind communication. Participants' emphasis on accountability, honesty and trustworthiness is consistent with ethical leadership research, which links credible role modelling and fair conduct to positive follower attitudes and ethical behaviour (Bedi et al., 2016; Brown & Treviño, 2006). In a student context this is relevant in practical terms. Leaders may deal with money, speak on behalf of others, distribute opportunities and make decisions that impact fellow students. Leadership programs should thus include ethical reasoning and accountability mechanisms rather than relying on experience in event management to create responsible leadership.

Emotional intelligence added another layer of relationality. Participants pointed to empathy, patience, emotional regulation, openness, and acceptance of criticism. These are valuable qualities for student leaders, who have to negotiate disagreement and balance organisational needs with the different circumstances of peers. This finding is consistent with models of leadership education that see self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and relationship management as skills that can be developed (Gonzalez et al., 2024; Haber-Curran & Williamson, 2023). However, the data presented here reflect perceived importance, not an observed relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness.

4.2 Execution-oriented competencies

Leadership and team management, decision-making and problem-solving, resilience and work ethic, and organization and time management were less often coded, but still necessary for translating relational intentions into collective outcomes. Delegation and coordination share the work. Leaders use judgement to deal with ambiguous problems. Resilience allows adaptation under pressure. Time management makes implementation possible. Research on team leadership also shows that task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviours both contribute to effectiveness, although their importance varies with the context (Burke et al., 2006).

Decision-making and problem solving is an integrative competence, as it draws on information, ethics, communication, and emotional awareness. Leadership has been viewed as a complex social problem-solving rather than a straightforward choice between fixed options (Mumford et al., 2000). Similarly, resilience should not be a code word for taking on an unreasonable workload. It concerns adaptation, recovery and learning, ideally aided by reflection and social resources (Ledesma, 2014). The lowest coded occurrences were for organization and time management, but this might imply that participants considered these as enabling conditions rather than defining aspects of leadership. The inclusion of time management in program design is supported by evidence of its association with performance and well-being (Aeon et al., 2021).

4.3 How student leaders believe leadership should be developed

The second analysis adds a contribution that a list of competencies alone cannot provide. Participants recommended actions in three areas which were personal leadership character, interpersonal competence, and leadership performance skills. Actions related to the person and the interpersonal dimension were equally frequent in the coded data, and actions related to performance were less frequent. This difference is akin to the distinction made by Day et al. (2014) between individual leader development and development of relational leadership capacity. It also corresponds to the Leadership Identity Development model in which students' conceptions of leadership become more relational and collaborative (Komives et al., 2006).

The domains should be, however, regarded as interconnected fields of practice, not as a demonstrated sequence. The survey did not track participants over time, test program effects or establish that one domain must precede another. A student might gain confidence through public speaking, learn ethical responsibility in managing a team budget, and enhance problem solving by reflecting on a failed activity. So, the conceptual correspondences between what participants valued and what they proposed doing are mapped in Figure 1, not developmental causality.

One interesting pattern is the difference between the two questions. Communication, integrity and emotional intelligence were cited by participants as important leadership qualities. In explaining development they distributed attention across personal and interpersonal actions, with a smaller but distinct performance domain. This implies that students may recognise relational and ethical outcomes while also recognising that these outcomes require conscious self-work, feedback, participation and repeated application. The practical implication is that leadership programs should not teach competencies as standalone modules. They should link reflection, relationships and performance around authentic responsibilities.

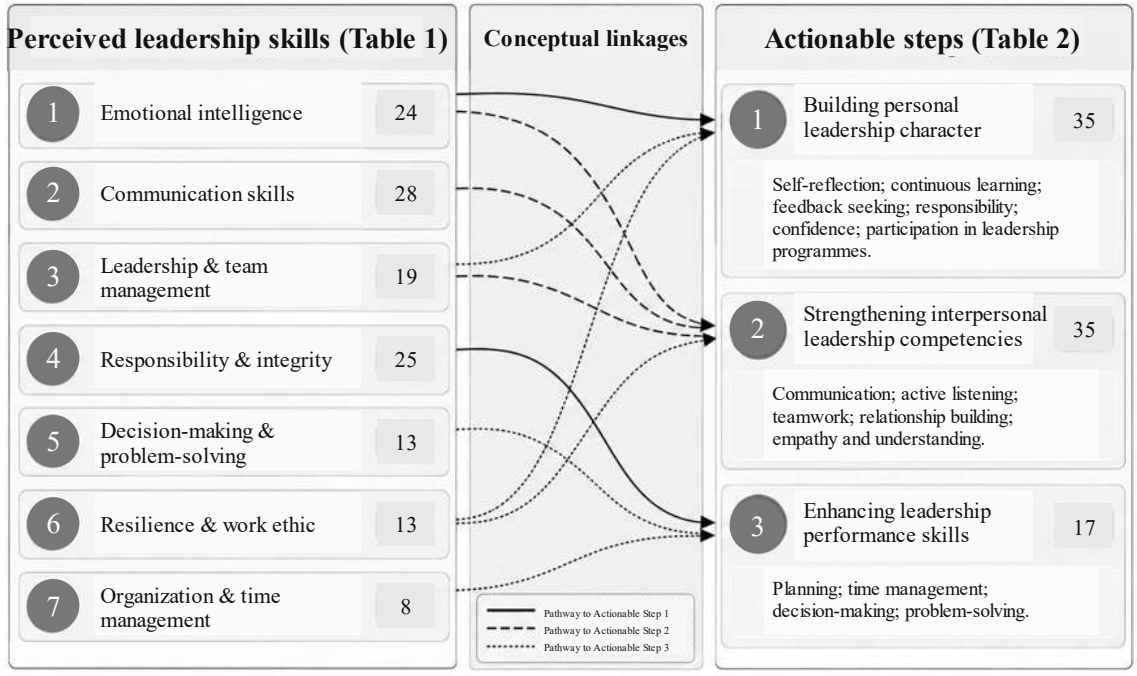


Fig. 1. Integrated thematic framework linking perceived leadership skills and actionable steps for cultivating strong leadership skills among student leaders in higher education

Note. Frequencies indicate coded mentions. Themes are shown in their original order, and arrows indicate conceptual linkages between perceived leadership skills and corresponding actionable steps

4.4 Implication for higher education

The findings support a three-strand program architecture. A personal strand could include guided reflection, feedback, values clarification and learning journals. An interpersonal strand might include active-listening practice, difficult-conversation simulations, peer coaching, and collaborative tasks requiring empathy and negotiation. For a performance strand, you might want to use scenario-based planning, ethical decision cases, delegation exercises, time-bounded projects, and structured after-action reviews. After experiential activities there needs to be feedback and reflection so that participation becomes learning and not just attendance.

Program evaluation should extend beyond satisfaction surveys. Institutions could reflect on shifts in behavioural indicators like clarity of communication, quality of delegation, inclusiveness of team processes, justification of decisions and follow-through on commitments. Multiple sources including self-assessment, peer feedback, facilitator observation and project evidence would provide a more credible account of development than a single self-report measure. The present categories may be instructive for locally relevant learning outcomes but will need to be validated across institutions and student populations before they can be used as a standardised framework.

The study provides a contextual account to policy-level aspirations and existing competency reviews for Malaysian higher education (Ministry of Higher Education, 2026; Saidi & Abd Aziz, 2025). Its value

lies not so much in making a claim to national representativeness but in demonstrating how program design can start with student voice and then be connected to established leadership scholarship. This approach may enhance relevance whilst maintaining theoretical justification of institutional programs.

4.5 Limitation and future research

The findings are limited by the study design. The categories are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable as the participants were purposively selected student leaders from one Malaysian public university. The participants' responses were collected from two open-ended survey questions and were often brief. This method did not allow the opportunity to follow-up or clarify the participants' intended meanings as would be possible with interviews or focus groups. The study captured perceptions, and proposed actions, not observed competencies, leadership behaviour or program effectiveness.

The frequencies are coded content and are not intended to be interpreted as independent measurements or population estimates. Counts are of the number of times a respondent fell into a category for the first question, and sums of constituent action codes for the second, which can include more than one contribution from the same respondent. The integrated framework is interpretative and requires empirical testing. The findings do not provide a basis for making claims about Generation Z as a group because participant age and other demographic variables necessary to support generational comparisons were not available.

Future studies need to include student leaders from public and private institutions in different regions, use interviews or focus groups to explore the meanings of prioritised competencies and examine differences in perceptions across leadership roles and organisational contexts. Longitudinal and mixed-method designs could examine whether programs based on the three development domains produce observable changes and whether those changes are sustained. Future work should also examine how institutional culture, language, discipline, and prior leadership experience shape students' definitions of effective leadership.

5. CONCLUSION

Student leaders in a public university in Malaysia perceived effective leadership as a combination of integrated competencies which include relational, ethical, emotional, managerial and self-management competencies. Specifically, communication, responsibility and integrity, and emotional intelligence were highlighted, with team management, judgement, resilience and organization allowing these qualities to be put into collective work. Proposed development actions by participants fell into three broad categories: personal character, interpersonal competence, and performance skills If these domains are viewed as interrelated fields of practice rather than as an established sequence, they provide a useful framework for program design. Therefore, leadership education should combine reflection and ethical accountability with relational learning and real opportunities for planning, deciding, delegating, problem solving, and learning from outcomes.

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7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed to conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, validation, writing of the original draft, and review and editing of the manuscript.

9. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for limited language editing and improvement of clarity. The authors subsequently reviewed and revised the manuscript as necessary and take full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

10. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

11. ETHICS STATEMENT

This study involved human participants through an online questionnaire survey. Formal ethics committee approval was not obtained for this study. Participation was voluntary, and electronic informed consent was obtained from all respondents before they proceeded with the questionnaire. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time before submitting their responses. No personally identifiable information was collected. All responses were maintained anonymously and confidentially and were used solely for research purposes.

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