



Exploration of External Factors Influencing University Student Leadership Development in China's Context

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

This study explores the critical factors influencing university student leadership development, focusing on external environmental variables and their impact. Leadership development has been a pivotal element in higher education for over four decades, shaping student learning outcomes, competitiveness, and self-identity. Through a review of 92 articles published in the last decade and a theoretically based quantitative study involving 813 Chinese university students from Shandong and Henan provinces, this research identifies four primary external factors affecting leadership development: leadership development activities, social environment, learning environment, and organizational interpersonal relationships. Unlike previous research, which treated external factors as a holistic influence, this study analyzes these variables individually, providing a novel perspective on their distinct contributions to student leadership development. The findings validate these factors as positive contributors to leadership growth, offering robust evidence for the significance of tailored leadership initiatives. This paper also underscores the dynamic interplay between leadership development and external environments, reinforcing their role as key success factors for leadership practices. By refining and deepening the understanding of these external factors, this research offers valuable insights for scholars and practitioners, paving the way for future studies to further enhance leadership development strategies in higher education.

Introduction

Student leadership development has been around for over 40 years since the emergence of university leadership education in the last century (Komives et al., 2011). Exploring beliefs and implicit assumptions about core elements of the leadership development process among different stakeholders (Vogel et al., 2020). Arnulf et al. (2016) showed that participants were generally receptive to development activities, but not explicitly positive; they raised concerns when inappropriate activities were not adapted to their organizational and personal context. Even in well-designed leadership development programs, participants can distance themselves from their organizations to the point of leaving, possibly as a result of a simplified 'one-in-five solution' that does not consider the complex context (Larson et al., 2020). There is no shortage of evidence for our work, and the complexity of thinking about leadership continues to expand rapidly. All this coupled with (1) technological advances that connect and constrain human relationships, (2) social contexts in which the voices of youth are heard and can be amplified to sizes previously invisible, and (3) national contexts characterized by interdependence and diversity versus individualism and homogeneity (Dugan et al., 2018). The internal and external environment is considered a key success factor for leadership practices (Saha et al., 2019). Leadership needs to adapt to changes in their internal and external environments and create new systems that allow them to focus on new trends, identify improvements and try to guess their potential impact on their management and manufacturing systems (Bülent, 2020). We further understand the impact of leadership on job performance by describing how external environmental characteristics (i.e. generosity, complexity, dynamism) enhance or weaken the impact of concerns about independent work and/or interdependence (Luciano et al., 2020). Finding external factors that influence college student leadership has

important implications for college student leadership development, but most current research looks at the external environment as a whole and does not examine each external environment that has the potential to influence college student leadership and does not analyze each external factor that has an impact on college student leadership individually.

Today, leadership development has become an essential component of higher education, and many universities use leadership development to promote student learning outcomes and competitiveness (Posner, 2012). Leadership development also stimulates students' perceptions of self-identity, enabling them to complete identity shifts and take ownership of their social responsibilities as leaders (Sessa et al., 2018). Over the past few decades, there has been an unprecedented growth in research, theory and practice on youth leadership (Komives, 2009). Leadership development involves "improving the ability of teams and organizations to successfully engage in leadership tasks" (Day et al., 2009). A key principle underpins this. Our understanding of leadership has been socialized, and this understanding varies from person to person. In essence, leadership development does not occur in a vacuum, but is a function of our nested environments, cultures and circumstances (Dugan et al., 2018).

What are the important factors that influence the leadership development of university students? The researchers reviewed 92 articles on university student leadership development over the last 10 years to identify the important external factors that influence university student leadership development: leadership development activities, social environment, learning environment, and organizational interpersonal relationships. We conducted a theoretically based quantitative study with data from a sample of 813 Chinese students, conducted in the spring of 2023, in a study involving university students from two of China's most populous provinces, Shandong and Henan.

Theoretical framework

Reimagining Leadership Development for Social Change

Social change leadership is proposed as a values-based model that views leadership as purposeful, collaborative, and leading to positive social change (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996; Komives & Wagner, 2017). The specific domain of values consists of three broad domains: individual, group and social. "Individual values are a sense of self, coherence and commitment. Group values are collaboration, common purpose, and contention with civilization. Community or social values are referred to as citizenship and imply active engagement with others to achieve community goals" (Komives, 2016). The model's growing body of academic research explores what helps students develop leadership values for social change. In a multiinstitutional study, four practices with high impact on campus - sociocultural dialogue, mentor-apprentice relationships, community service, and membership in off-campus organizations - had a strong impact on students' social change leadership values (Dugan & Komives, 2010).

The social change model, as an emerging leadership, is helpful in this context. The theoretical basis should be integrated with the College's mission statement that socially responsible leadership is one of the key outcomes for students. This model is designed for college students to develop their social leadership responsibilities for the common good (Dugan & Komives, 2009). This is the most popular theoretical framework for student leadership (Dugan, 2006, 2011; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Dugan, Bohle, Woelker & Cooney, 2014). It has also been reported as key to enabling students' self-aware knowledge and competence in collaborative work.

Functionalist Paradigm Theory:

The functionalist paradigm is important for a conceptual understanding of educational organizations, particularly in the study of various concepts and theories in educational leadership and management. This is mainly because functionalist theory is one of the three basic paradigms for the study of educational leadership and management, as well as the interpretive paradigm and the new social theory, postmodernism. What is interesting about the functionalist paradigm is that it encompasses a number of different and diverse theoretical approaches. In a recent development (Salihu, 2019) a variety of leadership theories are synthesized and their application to leadership research in higher education is presented.

The functionalist paradigm is primarily "based on the idea that each society has a specific, real existence and systemic characteristics designed to produce an orderly and normative state". Interestingly Morgan's perspective on the functionalist paradigm is that it emphasizes the specific roles that humans play in society, the development and continued growth of a particular society, and further seeks to understand the specific roles and behaviors of individuals as influenced by the society in which they participate. Furthermore, another interesting fact about the functionalist perspective is that it aims to understand society as a whole and how it specifically produces empirical knowledge. However, in the context of understanding the nature of organizations and how they work, the functionalist perspective grounds. Emphasis is placed on how the organization and all its members are able to direct and guide their behavior and conduct towards their future state. As stated in the journal article: 'In the functionalist paradigm, behavior is always seen as being in the real world of real and tangible social relations (Morgan, 1980). Functionalist theory in the context of educational institutions is concerned with how universal education can meet the needs of society. One of the best strengths of the functionalist paradigm in the field of education is its contribution in clearly identifying

the role and importance of education in each individual member of society. In a simple way, the functionalist paradigm considers the obvious role of education, which includes conveying basic skills and knowledge to the next generation (Martindale, 1965).

Science manages universities, and the authors chose to link this theory as a case study for the following reasons: 1. The chosen institution consistently uses a scientific approach in planning the curriculum, implementation and supervision. 2. the selected institution always uses scientific elements in setting objectives instead of old rule-of-thumb objectives. 3. the selected institution chooses scientific methods of training and developing employees, rather than they choose their own tasks and train themselves as best they can. 4. the selected institution fosters a spirit of genuine cooperation between workers and management to ensure that work will be carried out according to scientifically designed procedures. 5. The philosophy in the selected institution is self-evident, as the organization is arranged in a hierarchical structure with an abstract system of rules and impersonal relationships between employees (Muftahu et al., 2020).

Our reasons for choosing the functionalist paradigm are consistent with previous research in that developing university student leadership is an important part of university educational management, and the environmental factors affecting university student leadership development presented in this study are also intended to suggest new perspectives for university educational management in developing university student leadership. Planning leadership programs and activities, working with the social environment, building a better learning environment and maintaining good relationships are all consistent with the functionalist paradigm.

Literature Review

Leadership Development Activities

Most scholars assert that leadership is not an innate talent; it is a set of behaviors and competencies that can be learned and developed (e.g., Komives et al., 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Sinem et al., 2021). The benefits of student involvement in extra-curricular and leadership activities can be many-fold (Shook & Keup, 2012). Young people need opportunities to take on leadership roles to enhance their leadership skills. Therefore, leadership development activities, unlike theoretical knowledge, should provide practical leadership experiences, a practice-based infrastructure (Allio, 2005; Fish 2011). Many areas of student leadership engagement in higher education incorporate some aspect of peer leadership, for example, through activities such as peer mentoring, peer tutoring, residential counselling and student representation in clubs and society (Jacques et al., 2019). It is not intrinsic characteristics that make a good student leader, but training and development (Cress et al., 2001). College student leadership programs must be based on practical learning experiences that address the development of leadership competencies and from a specific theoretical foundation (Dugan, 2008). Important activities that contribute to student leadership development: discussion of leadership and social issues with peers, mentoring, membership in student organizations and community service projects (Priest & Clegorne, 2015). Numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of formal leadership activities and personal leadership experiences in shaping leadership education outcomes on their own (Dugan, 2011). Pascarella, Padgett, and Blaich (2012) found that students who worked off-campus showed significantly higher gains in leadership skills than their campus peers. The authors conclude that on-campus student employment is a "missed educational opportunity", a leadership development and learning activity and opportunity (Hansen et al., 2018). Students who engage in service activities, i.e., when describing the contribution of service learning to community service, can enhance their social and personal development leadership skills (Huda et al., 2018). Based on the above theory, we hypothesized that:

H1: Student leadership development activities are correlated with university student leadership

Social environment

Higher education provides a unique opportunity for students to navigate a divided global society in a meaningful way and have the ability to continually grow into ethical leaders who drive positive change (Jessica et al., 2020). In order to understand the roots of leadership development, certain characteristics of educational, social and family experiences may be valid throughout an individual's childhood and young adulthood. In this context, revealing whether family attitudes, involvement in school activities and social skills are effective in leadership development may contribute to a better understanding of leadership development (Murphy, 2011). For a student, the home environment is the first social environment to which he or she is exposed, and family attitudes are important to the development of leadership skills. Children from democratic families have been found to have higher levels of leadership qualities based on problem-solving skills than children from authoritarian families (Düzakın, 2004). Therefore, examining activities that contribute to leadership development related to the improvement of family attitudes, learning environment and social environment may be helpful in identifying factors that encourage leadership development (Abdullah, 2018). We found that no one identity is more important than the others - each is appropriate in different contexts, as previous research has shown that identities are modified and amended as environments change (Oyserman & James, 2011; McKee, 2020), and leadership identities are similarly subject to changing circumstances. Whether it is a political, economic or social environment, leadership has been shown to be critical to the growth and well-being of an organization, and leadership is the result of many factors at play, including social-organizational

culture, leadership qualities and characteristics, and motivational systems such as hierarchical status, psychological and functional autonomy, and information systems (Gîrneată & Potcovaru, 2015). Sociological factors play a role in the formation of leadership skills. Influences such as parental style in raising children (Avolio et al., 2009) and childhood experiences (Voelker et al., 2011), maturity (Burke & Attridge, 2011), one's ability to become a leader (Bilal, 2018). In summary, the researchers hypothesized that: H2: The social environment has a facilitating effect on university students' leadership

Learning Environment

The management of schools is crucial to public administration, as in OECD countries (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), on average 13% of total public expenditure is spent on education (OECD, 2013). The literature highlights the impact of leadership on school effectiveness. Schools have considerable potential to create learning environments for teachers and students, as well as in organising policies and processes (Hallinger et al., 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). The university environment should therefore provide ample opportunities and fertile ground for learning leadership (Wurr & Hamilton, 2012). The university experience for undergraduate students should be a time to become independent and learn about their own personal leadership skills (Forbes, 2014). Opportunities for extracurricular activities, such as civic engagement (Hurtado, 2005; Klostad, 2010), pursuing leadership roles (Blom & Johnson, 2018; Dugan & Komives, 2007), and opportunities gained in the living-learning environment (Inkelas et al., 2006), also provide leadership opportunities for leadership development (Jessica et al., 2020). Various factors will effectively bring out the leadership qualities of the individuals mentioned above. These factors may include the school learning environment and family support (Bisland, 2004; Abdullah, 2018). School classroom and extracurricular activities will enable students' leadership development (Karnes, 1990; Ogurlu, 2012; Patton, 2002). Based on previous research, we venture to hypothesize that: H3: The learning environment is supportive of college students' leadership development

Organizational Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships are the binary relationships and interactions between leaders and others. Interpersonal relationships are relationships with colleagues, team members, supervisors, followers and others (Grunberg et al., 2018). The context in which we place university students is that of relationships with peers, team members, teachers, followers and others. The concept of leadership is understood as a behavioral and cognitive process closely related to success and is based on interpersonal relationships, trust, respect and consistency (Isabel et al., 2022). Interpersonal relationships and organizational culture are often referred to in research on leaders and leadership, and influence (Northouse, 2016). Leadership refers to psychosocial processes, interpersonal relationships and group dynamics, as well as the influence on aspects of others' psychology (behavior, cognition and motivation). Leaders are the drivers of these processes, adapting to goals, individuals and circumstances (Grunberg et al., 2018).

Callahan and Grunberg (2018) developed a conceptual framework for leadership based on a comprehensive review of leadership principles, models and types. The framework includes four 'C' elements (FourCe as a rendition of the word 'power', which refers to strength or energy) - role, competence, context, and communication. These elements span four levels of psychosocial interaction - individual, interpersonal, team and organizational (PITO). process-based collaborative interpersonal relationships based on shared goals (Dugan, 2006). Considering the longevity of the mentorapprentice relationship, the mentor-apprentice relationship can influence the development of students' leadership identities towards the generative stage. Teachers may be instrumental in enhancing leadership behaviors, skills and attitudes at any leadership identity stage to help students advance their development to subsequent stages (Bureau et al., 2018).

Brent et al (2019) found interpersonal relationships and self-reflective learning to have a positive effect on leadership development. Phong et al (2020) noted that if an organization's leader respects his subordinates, is able to motivate, and is able to work well with his subordinates, then this will also improve employee performance in terms of technical competence, leadership, responsibility, initiative and interpersonal relationships. After examining the literature, the researcher hypothesized that:

H4: Organizational interpersonal relationships are correlated with university student leadership

The Related Chinese Context

The rapid social changes that have taken place in China over the last thirty years have opened the door to new ways of living, identities and the flourishing of subjectivity. Observers have debated the processes, causes and consequences of the process of individualization and modernization in Chinese society, but there is no doubt that great changes have taken place: there are new forms of instability; a new balance of power between the individual and the collective, and a whole new sense of self (Goodman 2014; Feng et al., 2021). In order to enhance students' personal development, leadership development is considered to be an effective pathway, but leadership education in China is still in the developmental stage (Qian et al., 2017). It is worth noting that most universities in China are public, and as the Chinese government does not provide sufficient spending on higher education to support more reforms, higher education reform presents an uneven and inequitable picture

(Kipnis, & Li, 2010). This distribution affects the development of leadership skills among university students in different regions of China (Chi et al., 2017). Thus, even though leadership education has been introduced in Chinese higher education, universities in underfunded or less developed regions still do not have a clear concept of leadership development (Li, 2016; Weng & Yan, 2018). Some universities in coastal areas of China have introduced leadership development on their campuses, and students show sufficient enthusiasm for the content and demonstrate a desire for leadership (Zhou et al., 2016). However, Wu et al., (2014) noted that university leadership education in most regions lacked localized elements, resulting in poor training content and a single format in the development process. Therefore, leadership development for university students in all regions of China should develop student leadership development programs based on the local culture and the localized characteristics of the university.

Method

Participants, procedure, and ethics

As part of a major university student leadership development project, 813 students from four universities - Shandong College of Excellence (private), Linyi University (public), Zhengzhou Institute of Commerce and Industry (private) and Zhongyuan Institute of Technology (public) - were invited to participate in an online questionnaire. Participants were assured that they were anonymous, and we emphasize that participation was voluntary. Of the students who participated in this questionnaire, 72.6% were female students and only 27.4% of male students participated in this questionnaire. This shows that among university students, girls are more active in social activities than boys. They are on average 18-23 years old, they have just shed their high school uniforms and are moving into the freedom of university life, which is the time to show their personal abilities and is the time when leadership is most evident.

Table1. Descriptive statistical analysis table

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	813	1.73	.446
Age	813	2.50	.643
Parental education	813	1.84	.849
Institution	813	1.60	1.031
Leadership	813	3.6477	.56598
Activities	813	3.6640	.70336
Social	813	3.7026	.68702
Learning	813	3.6419	.60659
Relationship	813	3.7347	.66267
Valid N (listwise)	813		

From the results of the descriptive statistical analysis, it is clear that the highest mean scores were for interpersonal relationships and the lowest mean scores were for learning environment, which is consistent with the majority of previous research findings that good interpersonal relationships maintain better organizational collaboration and that an important part of social change leadership is collaboration. The second highest mean score for social environment indicates that being able to engage better with social activities and social links plays an important role in developing social change leadership. Leadership activities and learning environments have similar averages, suggesting that more leadership activities and a more appropriate learning environment are needed to enhance social change leadership.

Table 2. Model analysis results

Model	R	Std. Error Estimate of the
1	.865 ^a	.28437

According to the results of the model analysis, the interpersonal relationships, social environment, learning environment and leadership activities were used as predictors to explore the students' leadership as shown in the prediction results, the R value was about 0.865 and the error value was about 0.284, which indicated that the interpersonal relationships, social environment, learning environment and leadership activities were highly correlated with leadership and had a higher contribution value.

Table 3. standard variance

Model	Sum	Mean	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4	48.692	602.133
	Residual	808	.081	
	Total	812		

Using leadership as the dependent variable and interpersonal relationships, social environment, learning environment and leadership activities as independent variables in the ANOVA, the results of the 812 questionnaires showed a degree of freedom of 48.69 and a residual of 0.081, which indicated that the differences between the survey results and the actual results were small and could be a true reflection of the actual situation.

Table 4. Standardization factors

Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.711	.062		11.486
Activities	.242	.029	.300	8.317
Social	.100	.035	.121	2.840
Learning	.238	.036	.255	6.653
Relationship	.218	.032	.256	6.854

In combination, leadership was used as the dependent variable and coefficients were assigned to the relationship between interpersonal relationships, social environment, learning environment and leadership activities to be used to reflect the degree of influence of each factor on leadership. The results show that the learning environment has the greatest impact on leadership in the standardized coefficients, and the combined impact coefficient indicates that the social environment has the greatest impact on leadership.

Discussion

This study reviewed the university student leadership literature over the last decade and found that the factors that most influenced student leadership were leadership activities, social environment, learning environment and organizational interpersonal relationships, and these influences were validated by a survey, which was found to be valid and reliable from the analysis of the data. Leadership development has become a necessary component of higher education, and many universities use leadership development to promote student learning outcomes and competitiveness (Posner, 2012).

This study found that external factors have a significant impact on leadership development in university students, which is consistent with previous research where internal and external environments are considered a key success factor for leadership practice (Saha et al., 2019). In this paper, the external environment was studied separately and the role of leadership development activities, social environment, learning environment and organizational interpersonal relationships were verified as separate variables to be positive, which is against exploration in previous research and is a new finding on leadership development among university students. In future research, each of these external environments could be examined in greater depth and thus have a more positive effect on the leadership development of university students.

This paper is rooted in four universities in Henan and Shandong, China, where questionnaires were administered to current students, and the results of the study provide strong evidence of the value and significance of this research. External factors have been one of the main focuses of research in leadership development and this paper is a further development of this theory by refining the external factors again and studying them in depth. It will be of reference and value to future researchers.

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