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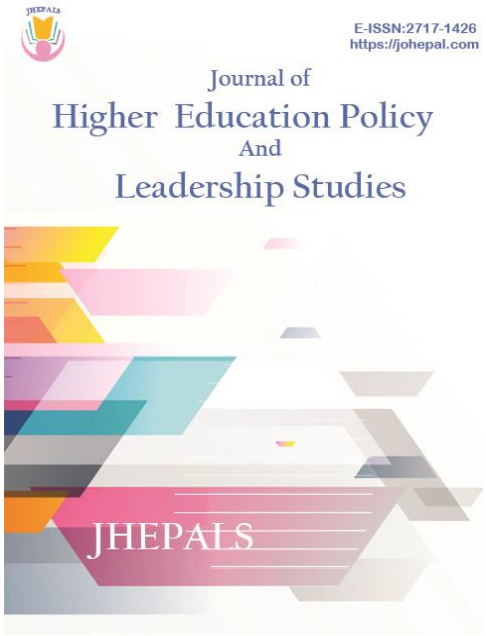
Developing Soft Skills to Strengthen Leadership Training for University Students



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Developing Soft Skills to Strengthen Leadership Training for University Students

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Highlights

- This short paper presents the results of an empirical study on leadership training that we conducted with the support of a private Mexican university; as such, it focuses on analyzing the educational and institutional implications of multivariate techniques.
- Through a multivariate analysis, we highlight the need to integrate both strategic and social-emotional skills training within an ethics-based framework.
- Students often view ethics education as purely conceptual; therefore, I believe that universities can steer ethics education toward a more practical approach and assess these competencies in practical or conflict-based scenarios.
- The ideas presented in this document also aim to serve as a call to higher education institutions and faculty to actively participate in the design and implementation of courses of action that enable students to move from the theoretical realm to strengthening their soft skills.
- Collaboration between universities and industry remains a viable option for implementing projects that help students tackle more realistic leadership situations and, at the same time, facilitate a more contextualized assessment of their progress.

Keywords: Soft Skills; Leadership; Multivariate Analysis; Managerial Education; Emotional Intelligence

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Introduction

The university education phase serves as a platform for forming and strengthening social relationships that, in many cases, become the foundation for building professional careers in increasingly complex work environments (Emam et al., 2024). In this brief context, universities face challenges in educating and preparing graduates with a well-rounded profile, that is, individuals who possess the skills to meet both workplace and organizational demands by combining mastery of their field of study with responsible and ethical leadership. Building on this idea, and according to Bisschoff and Massyn (2025), academic performance remains one of the criteria guiding many academic decisions but is insufficient on its own to develop the well-rounded profile required of today's professionals.

The gap between purely academic training and the teaching of ethical leadership is relevant, as soft skills are no longer complementary competencies, but have become critical for both developing a profile that is more attractive to the job market and adapting to a changing professional environment (Pérez Zúñiga et al., 2025). In this regard, Benmira and Agboola (202) noted that although the literature highlights the persistent tension between university education and the needs of the labor market, some universities continue to view the teaching of soft skills as isolated curricular elements rather than adopting a perspective of interdependence, thereby limiting a future professional's ability to participate collaboratively in high-pressure situations. Following the above, we believe that leadership training for university students should not be understood solely as a focus on task accomplishment but rather as a practice that enables the integration of relational and ethical competencies into specific contexts of action and pressure.

This latter idea aligns with the work of Cañadas et al. (2025), as the teaching and application of leadership have shifted from a purely instrumental approach toward a network-based and person-centered perspective. We also believe that through the use of analytical techniques, such as canonical correlation, it is possible to address universities' concerns when multiple employers continue to point out discrepancies between what graduates demonstrate in terms of collaborative work and problem-solving and what is required to place them in positions that demand the exercise of organizational leadership (Benmira & Agboola, 2021).

Literature review

Training in management and leadership skills within the university context continues to attract attention from the academic community and practitioners, as it affects the competitiveness and prestige of universities themselves, as well as their relationships with employers, helping students transition into the professional workforce (Pérez Zúñiga et al., 2025). In this regard, the literature on soft skills converges on the idea that these competencies are not peripheral attributes, but rather relevant components of the university-to-work transition. In this regard, previous studies have shown that employers tend to value communication, collaboration, adaptability, and problem-solving as decisive criteria for hiring and the professional development of graduates (Succi & Canovi, 2020). However, it has also been noted that social-emotional skills and self-regulation help students face academic and professional demands with greater resilience and adaptability.

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However, in the context of higher education, everyday practice or operations often contrast with the institutional stance in which universities declare the importance of addressing soft skills training, since in many institutions the teaching of these skills is typically incorporated into the curriculum in isolation, that is, they are developed solely through isolated courses, activities, or assessments that are disconnected from real-world situations in which students can collaborate, make decisions, or even confront their ethical principles in the context of actual business scenarios. Such discrepancy often creates obstacles for university students in fully understanding the concept of leadership, since leadership is not limited to possessing a specific skill, but rather involves the ability to coordinate personal, relational, and strategic resources in specific contexts of action.

In line with the above, the literature suggests that ethics and professional responsibility should not be taught only as abstract principles or declarative content. They need to be addressed as observable competencies in situations where students must navigate dilemmas, pressure, and the possible consequences of organizational decisions (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

From this perspective, educating students on leadership requires formative experiences that bring together communication, collaboration, decision-making, adaptability, emotional regulation, and integrity. This approach shifts the discussion away from isolated soft skills and toward an understanding of leadership as a multidimensional competency: one that is expressed in context and that can, at least in principle, be assessed through situated educational experiences.

In light of what has been discussed so far, it can be said that the discussion, beyond isolated social skills, the exercise of professional leadership and ethics should not be taught solely as abstract principles or declarative content but rather framed as a multidimensional competency whose expression depends on context and which, at least in principle, is observable and assessable through meaningful learning experiences (Tejedor et al., 2018).

Research methodology

We adopted a non-experimental and multivariate approach to evaluate the association between soft skills and leadership. For this, we collaborated with 312 college students from a private Mexican university enrolled in a Management Skills Development course. The group was composed of 48% men and 52% women, with an average age of 19 to 20 years.

The course context was relevant because the goal was not only to assess competencies but also to provide a perspective and to have multidisciplinary teams comprising students from fields such as marketing, accounting, international business, finance, human resources, and management. Each team collaborated with a private company to analyze a real-world problem, design alternatives, prioritize solutions, and select a viable proposal to present later to the company's owners or managers. Additionally, the company provided information for the project's development and evaluated each participant based on the soft skills they demonstrated.

We would like to clarify that the purpose of the questionnaire we used was to assess a set of competencies related to both managerial performance and leadership; therefore, we designed a structured questionnaire with five-point Likert-scale responses. Specifically, the instrument's design included factors such as achievement orientation, planning,

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organization, teamwork, assertive communication, integrity, stress management, openness to or adaptability to change, decision-making, problem-solving, as well as results orientation and emotional intelligence (Cañadas et al., 2025; Emam et al., 2024). Therefore, to facilitate the analysis, we grouped the competencies into a strategic-executive domain and a socio-emotional-ethical domain.

To obtain the results, the analysis procedure consisted of conducting univariate analyses to characterize the sample, bivariate or correlational analyses to identify initial patterns, and, finally, multivariate analysis, specifically canonical correlation analysis, to study the relationship between the aforementioned domains. Although we do not reproduce the complete statistical model here, we present the central findings of the analysis to discuss curricular, assessment, and institutional implications for the education or development of leadership profiles within the university setting.

Main Findings

The participants rated decision-making and assertive communication predominantly as advanced or outstanding. In other words, we observed a pattern suggesting that students recognize the importance of these competencies for professional performance and leadership and, at the same time, perceive themselves as possessing a well-established theoretical and practical profile. However, when compared with employer feedback, it is clear that participants are familiar with the language of employability and leadership, which presents higher education institutions with the challenge of translating that perception into observable performance in real-world tasks (Table 1).

Table 1.
Selected features Correlation Matrix

Variable	Or	Pl	Tw	Ac	Int	Sm	Oa	Dm	Ro	Ei
1. Orientation (Or)	—									
2. Planning (Pl)	.20	—								
3. Teamwork (Tw)	.20	.20	—							
4. Assertive communication (Ac)	.20	.10	.20	—						
5. Integrity (Int)	.20	.10	.20	.30	—					
6. Stress management (Sm)	.20	.20	.20	.10	.10	—				
7. Openness and adaptability to change (Oa)	.20	.30	.30	.30	.20	.30	—			
8. Decision-making and problem solving (Dm)	.20	.20	.20	.30	.20	.20	.20	—		
9. Results orientation (Ro)	.30	.20	.30	.20	.20	.20	.20	.30	—	
10. Emotional intelligence (Ei)	.10	.20	.30	.30	.20	.30	.10	.30	.20	—

A second significant finding concerned the association between factors such as stress management and teamwork, which was among the areas showing the greatest heterogeneity. We consider this point relevant in educational terms because both competencies are fundamental to developing leadership skills that encompass not only technical expertise but also ethical principles. In other words, exercising leadership within an organizational framework involves not only knowing what needs to be done but also includes a relational or deep-network perspective that should lead students to think about sustained performance, managing agreements, and responding in high-pressure environments. At this point, we consider the observed variability to suggest that most participants are capable of functioning in collaborative settings. However, it also highlights

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the consistency that many students require more structured pedagogical support to translate these competencies into practice. In this sense, teamwork and stress management should be treated as competencies to be continually monitored, not as incidental outcomes of group projects.

From an analytical perspective, we identified a dominant pattern linking strategic-executive competencies to both socio-emotional and ethical competencies. Based on this, we can say that, within the strategic dimension, aspects such as adaptability to change, decision-making to solve problems, and a results-oriented approach stood out. Meanwhile, in the relational domain, we found that teamwork and assertive communication constituted the observable core, reinforced by factors such as integrity, stress management, and emotional intelligence. We consider this pattern useful for the development of this work; that is, leadership skills in university students can emerge when pedagogical efforts focus on developing the ability to act strategically while considering the capacity for collaboration, self-regulation, and ethical behavior. This, in turn, has curricular implications, since if there is an association with an integrated pattern of competencies, higher education institutions should avoid designing leadership training as a sequence of disconnected modules. Therefore, teaching communication without decision-making, ethics without pressure, teamwork without planning, or adaptability without emotional regulation could result in fragmented educational experiences (Table 2).

Table 2.
Wilks' Λ Canonical correlations significance

Contrast	Λ	F	df_1	df_2	p
$1 \rightarrow 5$	0.61	6.42	25	1123.33	< 0.001
$2 \rightarrow 5$	0.94	4.31	16	926.320	0.19
$3 \rightarrow 5$	0.97	1.23	9	740.10	0.28
$4 \rightarrow 5$	0.98	0.68	4	610.10	0.61
$5 \rightarrow 5$	0.98	0.36	1	306.11	0.56

Concerning the last point, the results also revealed some tension surrounding the ethical principles necessary for the exercise of leadership. In this regard, we note that ethics and integrity were found to be important in the relational-ethical domain; however, the results also indicated that students perceive ethics as disconnected from the exercise of leadership and operational decision-making. This suggests a significant gap in the curriculum, that is, although ethics is present in the course content, greater efforts are needed to incorporate its teaching into situations that allow students to exercise judgment under pressure; thus, the ethical aspect should not be limited to abstraction but should be practiced through dilemmas, negotiation, conflicts of interest, collective responsibility, and decisions with organizational consequences (Tejedor et al., 2018).

Conclusion

In this work, we argue that leadership training at the university level must shift from fragmented soft-skill development to a comprehensive approach. The results suggested that leadership is a focused practice in which the aforementioned skills are applied in specific contexts; therefore, it is not enough for university students to claim they possess

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communication skills or emotional intelligence; rather, these competencies must be observed in real-world collaborative tasks and under pressure.

For universities, we think it is essential to continually review the design and evaluation of the delivery of ethically grounded leadership education. At this point, we consider it necessary to note the gap between students' aspirational orientation and their ability to translate that vision into verifiable actions; this requires universities to view planning not as an individual exercise but as a shared leadership responsibility, thereby simultaneously developing skills such as delegating responsibilities and network-based thinking. Following this line of thought, training should incorporate experiences that demand planning, teamwork, decision-making, and assertive communication.

We consider that the ethical dimension needs to distinguish between integrity and stress management, as students may recognize the importance of acting honestly but do not necessarily apply ethical judgment when contexts present challenges or dilemmas that test responsible and professional conduct.

Finally, although the insights presented in this study are based on a robust technique such as canonical correlation, the findings must be considered in light of the context's limitations, as the study was conducted at a single institution in a developing country. Therefore, future research should explore whether these patterns hold across different universities, disciplines, and stages of the educational journey.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Human Participants

There were human participants, all of whom consented to take part in this study. All other ethical considerations are observed in alignment with the authors' institutional policies and the journal's guidelines.

Originality Note

The authors confirm that the manuscript is their original work, and if others' works are used, they are properly cited.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The authors claimed that [Grammarly] is used in this research just for the purpose of improving the language of the manuscript. No further use of these technologies are also confirmed by the authors to write different parts of the research.

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