



Learning to Lead: Student Development Through Community Management Board Engagement

Research article

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Abstract

This study explores how participation in student organizations fosters leadership development in Turkish higher education. Fourteen undergraduate students (ages 18–24) from various disciplines who served at least one year on the “Mind and Intelligence Games” community management board at a public university were interviewed using semi-structured questions. Content analysis ($\kappa = 0.97$) revealed five key themes: (1) motivational factors for service, (2) personal development, (3) communication skill enhancement, (4) leadership competency development, and (5) contributions to professional preparation. Participants reported improvements in self-confidence, communication, decision-making, delegation, and responsibility. The most salient leadership competencies included decision-making under uncertainty, ownership, effective delegation, and conflict management. Findings indicate that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations influenced engagement, and that board participation significantly contributed to students’ career readiness by providing transferable skills. The study highlights student leadership as a high-impact experiential learning practice in higher education.

Keywords: *student leadership development, community management boards, experiential learning, higher education*

The mission of higher education institutions extends beyond merely transmitting academic knowledge; they are also responsible for developing the competencies that enable graduates to navigate the complex social and professional

environments of the twenty-first century. Among these competencies, leadership has emerged as a pivotal attribute due to the globalization of economies and increasing societal interdependence (Seemiller, 2016). Leadership is commonly defined

as the capacity to mobilize individuals toward shared goals through effective communication, accountability, and strategic decision-making (Northouse, 2021). However, contemporary research conceptualizes leadership not as an innate trait but as a developmental process that can be cultivated through intentional and structured educational experiences (Komives et al., 2013). Within this framework, universities play a pivotal role in providing both formal programs and informal learning environments that facilitate students' leadership growth.

Student communities constitute one of the most effective informal contexts for leadership development, offering experiential learning environments where students can apply theoretical knowledge, assume authentic responsibilities, and collaborate with peers (Dugan & Komives, 2010). Serving on community management boards, in particular, exposes students to genuine decision-making processes and nurtures critical leadership competencies such as conflict resolution, communication, and strategic thinking (Astin & Astin, 2000). These informal environments provide experiential richness that cannot be fully replicated within classroom instruction alone. Although student communities are widespread in Turkish higher education, there is a lack of systematic empirical research exploring their impact on students' leadership development. Previous Turkish studies have mapped the prevalence of student organizations but have insufficiently explored their qualitative, phenomenological impact on students' leadership trajectories. Furthermore, the dominant literature remains Western-centered, often neglecting cultural context as a determinant of leadership behavior (Cress et al., 2001; Hofstede, 2001). Given the influence of cultural norms on leadership perceptions and practices, examining student community experiences in Turkey is critical for generating context-specific insights and informing policy for evidence-based leadership education (World Economic Forum, 2025).

In contemporary universities, leadership skills are increasingly recognized as core learning outcomes. The World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report* (2025) identifies leadership and social influence among the most critical

competencies for employability in the global workforce. Leadership development, however, cannot be reduced to theoretical instruction; it requires active engagement and reflective practice. According to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, individuals learn most effectively when they cycle through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Student communities thus function as natural laboratories where students translate leadership theory into practice by managing teams, making collective decisions, and addressing real-world challenges (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Posner, 2009). In Turkey, increasing attention has been directed toward leadership education; yet, initiatives often remain fragmented and lack empirical validation. For such programs to evolve into evidence-based systems, rigorous qualitative inquiry is essential to illuminate how community engagement fosters leadership growth. This study addresses this gap by exploring university students' lived experiences within community management boards, thereby advancing contextual understanding of leadership development in higher education.

Despite growing interest in leadership education, a persistent theory–practice gap limits the effectiveness of university initiatives. While students may acquire a conceptual understanding of leadership theories, their ability to operationalize these principles in authentic contexts remains inconsistent. Meta-analytic evidence shows that leadership programs tend to increase cognitive understanding but often fail to ensure the transfer of skills into real-world behaviors (Reyes et al., 2019). In Turkish universities, where student organizations are institutionalized features of campus life, systematic phenomenological research on how participation cultivates leadership skills is still scarce. This disconnect underscores the need to investigate leadership formation through experiential and contextually grounded inquiry. Students may learn “how to be a better leader” in theory without truly becoming one in practice, which highlights the necessity of embedding experiential components such as mentorship and authentic engagement opportunities into leadership curricula.

At the same time, student leaders face multidimensional challenges, including

balancing academic and leadership responsibilities, limited teamwork cohesion, and insufficient understanding of institutional governance (Murage et al., 2019). Although university-based organizations provide safe arenas for leadership experimentation (Amirianzadeh et al., 2011), little is known about the concrete struggles faced by student leaders. Furthermore, leadership opportunities are not equally distributed. Lamm et al. (2021) reported that gender-based differences in perceptions of transformational leadership became more pronounced as administrative role level increased, with women indicating lower perceived transformational leadership capacity than men at higher levels. Similarly, recent scholarship on higher education leadership during the COVID-19 crisis underscores that limited institutional support and underdeveloped leadership capacities constrain equitable access to leadership opportunities, especially under conditions of systemic uncertainty (Xie & Sum, 2024).

A further challenge lies in the conceptual ambiguity surrounding leadership itself. Leadership lacks a universally accepted definition, leading institutions to adopt fragmented educational approaches. Theoretical pluralism—ranging from trait-based to situational and transformational perspectives—creates conceptual ambiguity (Marcketti & Kadolph, 2010). Consequently, leadership programs often emphasize cognitive understanding without integrating affective and behavioral dimensions. A unified, competency-based model is therefore crucial to align educational practices with measurable learning outcomes. In this regard, student communities provide a promising avenue for holistic leadership development that integrates knowledge, values, and action.

Community participation represents a transformative avenue for leadership development. Engagement in student organizations enhances socially responsible leadership outcomes, including collaboration, citizenship, and commitment to a common purpose (Haber-Curran & Pierre, 2023). Moreover, perspective-taking and relational learning-core elements of social-cognitive development-serve as foundations for effective leadership (Dugan et al., 2014). Student organization leadership thus qualifies as a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008), characterized by sustained effort,

peer interaction, feedback, and real-world application. Mentorship further amplifies this process by providing developmental support and reflective scaffolding (Reyes et al., 2019). Collectively, these experiences foster holistic leadership identities that integrate personal meaning-making with practical skill development.

Drawing from these conceptual foundations, the present study investigates how community management board experiences shape leadership development among university students through a phenomenological lens. Focusing on members of the Mind and Intelligence Games community at a public university in Turkey, the study explores which leadership competencies are cultivated, what challenges emerge, and how students interpret these experiences. This study draws on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory, and Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) situational leadership model to provide a multidimensional framework, explaining both how students experience leadership in practice and how leadership competencies develop in pedagogical and managerial contexts.

Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors influence students' decisions to serve on community management boards?
2. How does participation in community management boards affect students' personal development?
3. In what ways does serving on community management boards enhance students' communication skills?
4. How does participation in community management boards contribute to the development of students' leadership skills?
5. What are the contributions of participation in community management boards to students' future professional lives?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to produce context-sensitive insights into leadership development within Turkish higher education. The contribution of this research is fourfold. It fills a critical empirical gap by providing phenomenological evidence on leadership development within Turkish

higher education, thereby contextualizing Western-based theories in a new cultural setting. It identifies specific leadership competencies developed through community management experiences, offering evidence-based recommendations for university administrators and student affairs units. By presenting students' experiences in their own voices, it captures the subjective and developmental dimensions of leadership formation, providing a nuanced understanding of meaning-making in leadership identity. Finally, the study offers strategic insights for integrating informal learning environments with formal curricula, promoting holistic student development strategies that align with global skill demands and the evolving expectations of higher education.

Method

The interview protocol was designed to address five thematic areas corresponding to the study's sub-research questions.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the experiences of university students participating in the management board of a "Mind and Intelligence Games" student community. This design was selected because it allows for a deep understanding of how students interpret and construct meaning from their leadership experiences, directly aligning with the study's research questions. Phenomenology is particularly suitable for this research, as it aims to uncover the essence and structure of participants' lived experiences, focusing on how these experiences contribute to the development of leadership, communication, and team management skills (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

By examining the subjective perspectives of the participants, the study seeks to provide rich, context-sensitive insights into the phenomenon of leadership skill development within a student organization context. Phenomenological research is grounded in the philosophical tradition that emphasizes understanding human experience from the perspective of

those who live it (Van Manen, 2007). Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses or seeking generalizability, it interprets and describes the meanings individuals construct from their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Following Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach, the researchers bracketed their prior assumptions and biases through reflexive journaling to focus on participants' accounts as described in their own words. Analytical procedures included horizontalization (treating all statements with equal value), clustering meaning units into themes, and constructing textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon to arrive at its essence—what is universally experienced about leadership development through student organization involvement.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, ensuring that no new themes emerged from additional interviews. This approach was deemed appropriate as the study's research questions focused on "how" and "what" rather than "how many" or "to what extent," indicating a need for in-depth qualitative data rather than quantitative measurement.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide information-rich and relevant insights into leadership experiences within a student community (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). The selection process consisted of two stages. In the first, students who had served on the management board for at least one academic year were identified as eligible, ensuring that participants had sustained engagement with leadership responsibilities. In the second stage, the student community with the largest number of members at the university, the "Mind and Intelligence Games" community, was selected to ensure a setting with extensive leadership and organizational activity.

The final sample consisted of 14 undergraduate students from various departments, aged 18 to 24 years. Their demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1, providing an overview of the sample composition.

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18 years	1	7.1
	19 years	1	7.1
	20 years	3	21.4
	21 years	6	42.9
	22 years	2	14.3
	24 years	1	7.1
Gender	Female	9	64.3
	Male	5	35.7
Academic Program	Educational Psychology and Counseling	3	21.4
	Primary Education	4	28.6
	Early Childhood Education	1	7.1
	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	2	14.3
	Sociology	1	7.1
	Elementary Mathematics Education	3	21.4
Class Year	2nd year	4	28.6
	3rd year	5	35.7
	4th year	5	35.7
Leadership Experience	1-4 years	14	100.0

The sample size ($n = 14$) was deemed sufficient for phenomenological inquiry, as data saturation was achieved and no new themes emerged in the final interviews. This heterogeneous and purposively selected sample, diverse in age, gender, academic discipline, class year, and leadership tenure, provided a robust foundation for examining undergraduate students' lived experiences of student community leadership and the development of associated leadership, communication, and team management skills. The diversity within the sample enhanced the credibility and transferability of the findings by illustrating that shared developmental themes emerged across individuals with different personal and academic backgrounds.

Data Collection Process

In qualitative research, interviews can be used either as a standalone method or in combination with others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Hatch, 2002). In this study, semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection tool, as they enable participants to articulate detailed and nuanced reflections on their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This approach balances systematic inquiry with flexibility to

follow emerging insights.

The interview form was developed based on a comprehensive review of the literature on leadership development, student organizations, and phenomenological methods. Initially consisting of seven open-ended questions, the form was reviewed by three experts—two faculty members specializing in educational leadership and one student affairs professional—whose feedback informed refinement to five core questions emphasizing clarity and thematic relevance.

The final interview protocol included five thematic areas—participants' motivations, personal and communication skill development, leadership growth, and perceived contributions to their future professional lives—corresponding to the study's sub-research questions.

Prior to data collection, all ethical procedures were followed in accordance with institutional guidelines, and written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any point without any impact on their academic standing.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet meeting room located in the university's student center, ensuring a neutral and distraction-free environment. The interviewer adopted a flexible, conversational style, allowing participants' narratives to guide the sequence of questions. With permission, all sessions were audio-recorded using dual devices for data security. Although individual interviews lasted approximately 15–20 minutes, participants provided rich, focused, and experience-based narratives directly aligned with the research questions. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional service and subsequently verified by the research team for accuracy and completeness.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed through content analysis, a systematic process for identifying recurring meanings, categories, and themes (Krippendorff, 2018, Nowell et al., 2017). This method aligns with the phenomenological framework as it supports the discovery of patterns in participants' lived experiences.

Data analysis involved several stages. First, each transcript was read repeatedly to ensure deep familiarity with the content. Meaningful units (phrases or sentences conveying distinct ideas related to the research focus) were identified and coded independently by three researchers. The coding process was both deductive and inductive: deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework and research questions, while inductive codes emerged from participants' narratives.

Following multiple rounds of comparison, codes were organized into categories and broader themes that

captured essential dimensions of leadership development. To enhance trustworthiness, researcher triangulation was implemented: three researchers coded a subset of data independently, discussed discrepancies, and reached consensus. Inter-coder reliability, calculated using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 0.97$), indicated almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Reflexive memos were also maintained throughout the analytic process to document the researchers' evolving interpretations and ensure transparency in decision-making. Anonymized identifiers (e.g., S1, S2) were used to protect confidentiality while ensuring traceability during analysis. These analytic stages collectively enabled the identification of five major themes that captured the essence of leadership development among participants.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the phenomenological study examining university students' experiences of serving on community management boards and their leadership development. The data, derived from semi-structured interviews with 14 participants, were analyzed through content analysis. Recurring patterns were identified and organized into categories and sub-categories reflecting participants' lived experiences. Each finding is supported by illustrative quotes from participants.

Factors Influencing the Decision to Serve on the Management Board

Two overarching categories emerged: intrinsic factors and extrinsic factors (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Factors Influencing the Decision to Serve on the Management Board

Theme	Category	Code	<i>f</i>
Participation	Intrinsic Factors	Interest in activities	8
		Desire for self-development	4
		Desire for intensity/engagement	3
		Interest in games	1
		Curiosity	1
	Extrinsic Factors	Desire for socialization	5
		Influence of management team	4
		Warm and welcoming atmosphere	4
		Desire to spend time with children	3

Within the participation theme, intrinsic factors emerged as the most salient motivators. The most frequently cited was *interest in the community's activities* (f = 8), showing that students were primarily drawn to leadership roles because they found the community's mission genuinely engaging. As one participant noted: "There was a village school event and it was incredibly well-organized for me, and I thought, why shouldn't I be part of this? So I decided to join the management board" (S5 – Intrinsic Factors / Interest in activities).

This illustrates how exposure to meaningful and well-structured activities can trigger intrinsic motivation to take on leadership roles. Desire for self-development (f = 4) also surfaced as a significant driver, indicating that students perceived board membership as a means of personal growth and skill enhancement. A smaller group mentioned curiosity and the desire for deeper engagement, suggesting a wish to participate more actively in community life.

Extrinsic factors functioned as complementary motivators. The *desire for socialization* (f = 5) appeared most prominently, underlining the social appeal of student organizations. The *influence of the existing management team* (f = 4) also

encouraged involvement, as expressed by one participant: "I witnessed my close friend's management board presidency and the process in the community closely" (S14 – Extrinsic Factors / Influence of management team).

Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of a *warm and welcoming atmosphere* (f = 4) as a factor sustaining their commitment. One student stated: "When I first came to the community, I really liked the warmth of the environment and the conversations among friends" (S9 – Extrinsic Factors / Warm and welcoming atmosphere). Overall, the findings indicate that students' decisions to pursue leadership roles are multifaceted, shaped by both internal drives for growth and external influences such as social bonds and organizational climate. The interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations reflects how leadership engagement in higher education arises from a combination of personal meaning, relational belonging, and contextual support.

Effects of Management Board Service on Personal Development

Two primary categories emerged: personal empowerment and interaction-focused development (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Effects of Management Board Service on Personal Development

Theme	Category	Code	f
Development	Personal Empowerment	Increased self-confidence	4
		Awareness of personal development	4
		Assertiveness	1
		Communication skills	4
	Interaction-Focused	Ability to express oneself	3
		Sense of responsibility	3
		Practical thinking	1

Within the personal empowerment category, *increased self-confidence* (f = 4) emerged as a key outcome. Participants described gaining confidence through overcoming leadership challenges and observing positive results from their efforts: "It developed my self-confidence and increased my confidence in myself" (S11 – Personal Empowerment / Increased self-confidence).

Students also emphasized awareness of personal development (f = 4), noting that reflecting on their experiences helped

them recognize their own growth. This metacognitive awareness represents an important step in leadership identity formation. A few participants mentioned becoming more assertive, describing a stronger ability to express opinions and make decisions independently.

The interaction-focused development category encompassed interpersonal competencies cultivated through collaboration and teamwork. Improvements in communication skills (f = 4) and the ability to express oneself (f = 3) were among

the most frequently reported outcomes. One participant stated: “It positively affected my communication with the environment, and I gained the ability to express myself more clearly and comfortably” (S14 – Interaction-Focused / Ability to express oneself).

A heightened sense of responsibility ($f = 3$) also emerged as a critical theme, as students reflected on the importance of accountability and reliability in fulfilling shared goals: “Taking responsibility for decisions and their consequences and playing an active role in these processes increased my sense of personal responsibility” (S9 – Interaction-Focused / Sense of responsibility).

Overall, these findings indicate that serving on the management board fostered

transformative personal development, promoting both self-awareness and interpersonal maturity. Students learned to communicate more effectively, act responsibly, and view themselves as capable contributors, demonstrating how authentic leadership experiences can bridge personal growth with social engagement in university contexts.

Effects of Management Board Service on Communication Skills

Two main categories emerged: personal communication development and social communication development (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Effects of Management Board Service on Communication Skills

Theme	Category	Code	<i>f</i>
Communication	Personal	Ability to express oneself	3
		Diction improvement	2
		Positive communication	2
		Idea sharing	1
		Empathy	3
	Social	Listening to different perspectives	2
		Conflict resolution	1
		Solution-focused communication	1
		Socializing	1

Within the personal communication development category, the most salient improvement was the ability to express oneself ($f = 3$). Participants reported that managing events, interacting with peers, and representing their community enhanced their confidence and fluency in verbal expression: “It helped me express my ideas more comfortably and confidently” (S2 – Personal / Ability to express oneself).

Participants also emphasized gains in diction improvement ($f = 2$) and positive communication ($f = 2$), suggesting that their speech became clearer, more thoughtful, and emotionally balanced. Opportunities to present ideas publicly and mediate discussions contributed to this communicative refinement.

The social communication development category reflected relational competencies essential for effective teamwork. Empathy ($f = 3$) emerged as the most prominent, as students described

learning to understand diverse viewpoints and respond sensitively to others’ needs. Similarly, listening to different perspectives ($f = 2$) and solution-focused communication ($f = 1$) were noted as vital interpersonal skills developed through collaboration and group problem-solving: “I learned to listen to different perspectives in group work” (S4 – Social / Listening to different perspectives).

Social engagement and relationship-building were also highlighted as developmental outcomes. Some participants mentioned that leadership experiences helped them become more approachable and confident in social interactions: “It helped me be more outgoing and get along better with others” (S10 – Social / Socializing).

Overall, these findings suggest that participation on the management board fostered multi-dimensional communication growth, encompassing both self-expression and relational understanding. Students became more articulate, empathetic, and

cooperative, skills that are central to effective leadership, teamwork, and professional communication in higher education and beyond.

Effects of Management Board Service on Leadership Skills Development

Two main categories emerged: individual competencies and managerial competencies (see Table 5).

Table 5.
Effects of Management Board Service on Leadership Skills Development

Theme	Category	Code	f
Leadership	Individual Competencies	Empathy	2
		Self-management	2
		Increased self-confidence	1
		Discipline	1
		Self-awareness	1
		Composure in crises	1
	Managerial Competencies	Taking responsibility	3
		Communication skills	3
		Experiencing a leadership role	3
		Planning	2
		Decision-making	1
		Motivation	1
		Respect	1
		Developing management skills	1

Within the individual competencies category, participants described substantial personal growth in attributes such as empathy (f = 2) and self-management (f = 2). These skills emerged through experiences that required understanding team members’ perspectives, managing emotions, and maintaining discipline during challenging projects.

“Through various projects and activities, I gained experience in leadership and improved my self-management skills” (S6 – Individual Competencies / Self-management).

Students also highlighted gains in self-awareness, composure during crises, and self-confidence, reflecting enhanced emotional intelligence and resilience in leadership contexts:

“This experience first allowed me to understand myself and develop personally” (S8 – Individual Competencies / Self-awareness).

The managerial competencies category encompassed practical leadership abilities such as taking responsibility (f = 3), communication skills (f = 3), and experiencing a leadership role (f = 3). Participants reported that coordinating activities, organizing events, and making group decisions helped them internalize leadership behaviors: “It positively

developed my leadership abilities; I feel confident that I could lead a group and handle leadership tasks effectively in the future” (S13 – Managerial Competencies / Experiencing a leadership role).

Additional managerial outcomes included planning, decision-making, and motivation, which collectively reflect the applied, experiential nature of leadership learning within student organizations. Participants learned how to manage tasks, delegate responsibilities, and maintain team motivation under real conditions of accountability.

Overall, the findings indicate that serving on the management board provided a comprehensive leadership learning experience, integrating both personal and managerial development. Students learned to lead empathetically, act responsibly, and communicate effectively. They also acquired strategic planning and organizational skills, enhancing their overall leadership capacity. This dual enhancement of self-regulatory and operational competencies demonstrates that leadership in student communities is cultivated through authentic engagement, reflection, and collaborative practice, key dimensions of transformative leadership development in higher education.

Contributions of Management Board Service to Future Professional Life

Two main categories emerged: individual contributions and academic/professional contributions (see Table 6).

Table 6.

Contributions of Management Board Service to Future Professional Life

Theme	Category	Code	<i>f</i>
Contribution	Individual	Communication skills	5
		Gaining experience	3
		Discipline	1
		Creativity	1
		Increased self-confidence	1
	Academic	Educational management	3
		Group management	3
		Career contribution	3
		Planning	2
		Use of materials	1

Within the individual contributions category, the most frequently emphasized theme was communication skills ($f = 5$). Participants explained that the interpersonal and public communication experiences gained through community leadership enhanced their readiness for professional interaction. They described becoming more capable of expressing ideas clearly and building effective relationships with others in their future workplaces: “I believe it enhanced my communication skills for future interactions with students and parents” (S11 – Individual / Communication skills).

Another key aspect was gaining experience ($f = 3$). Students emphasized that participating in decision-making, event organization, and problem-solving processes provided hands-on leadership practice, bridging the gap between theory and application. Other outcomes—such as discipline, creativity, and increased self-confidence—further contributed to their overall professional maturity and employability.

In the academic/professional category, participants highlighted competencies that are directly transferable to their future teaching or professional settings. Notably, educational management ($f = 3$) and group management ($f = 3$) emerged as central themes, suggesting that these leadership experiences helped participants acquire essential skills for managing learning environments, teams, and classroom dynamics. “I can also use brain and logic games as materials in my future lessons” (S4 – Academic / Use of materials). Similarly, participants underlined the career

contributions ($f = 3$) of leadership service, noting that the experience provided both confidence and clarity in shaping their future professional goals: “I believe I will be able to apply what I learned in my professional life and gain more experience” (S12 – Academic / Career contribution).

Overall, the findings reveal that serving on the management board functioned as a practical laboratory for professional growth. It not only strengthened personal attributes such as confidence, creativity, and communication but also enhanced participants’ pedagogical and managerial capacities relevant to their career paths. These results demonstrate that student leadership experiences foster a bridge between academic learning and real-world professional practice, preparing individuals to assume leadership, management, and collaboration roles in their future professions.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that participation in community management boards provides university students with comprehensive opportunities for leadership development. Engagement in authentic organizational responsibilities fostered growth across cognitive, interpersonal, and practical dimensions. Students reported that their initial motivations to join the boards were influenced by intrinsic factors, such as interest in activities and personal development, and extrinsic factors, such as social connections and a welcoming environment. As students became more

engaged, these motivations tended to shift towards intrinsic commitments, reflecting the internalization of leadership identity as proposed by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, one participant noted, “There was a village school event and it was incredibly well-organized for me, and I thought, why shouldn’t I be part of this? So I decided to join the management board” (S5 – Intrinsic Factors / Interest in activities), demonstrating how exposure to meaningful activities can promote voluntary leadership engagement.

Participation on the management board contributed substantially to personal development. Students reported increases in self-confidence, awareness of personal growth, assertiveness, and practical skills such as responsibility and communication (S11 – Personal Empowerment / Increased self-confidence; S14 – Interaction-Focused / Ability to express oneself). These findings align with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, where reflection on concrete experiences facilitates meaningful personal transformation. Leadership tasks served as a context for developing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), as participants gained confidence in navigating complex decisions, managing teams, and resolving conflicts. Supporting this interpretation, research on teacher candidates has shown that leadership behaviors are positively associated with academic self-efficacy, suggesting that leadership roles foster confidence and professional competence development (Güneş & Yünkül, 2024).

Communication skills were enhanced in both personal and social dimensions. Students described improvements in expressing ideas clearly, diction, positive communication, and interpersonal skills such as empathy and perspective-taking (S2 – Personal / Ability to express oneself; S4 – Social / Listening to different perspectives). These outcomes highlight the multidimensional nature of communication development in leadership contexts and corroborate findings from servant and situational leadership literature, emphasizing relational and adaptive competencies over hierarchical authority (Greenleaf, 1970; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). Prior research in educational organizations shows that leadership style is closely linked to organizational commitment and perceptions of trust and cynicism,

indicating that relational leadership practices shape both individual motivation and institutional climate (Güneş, 2020).

Leadership skill development extended to both individual and managerial competencies. Personal qualities such as empathy, self-management, and composure during crises were enhanced, while managerial competencies, including taking responsibility, planning, and experiencing leadership roles were strengthened (S8 – Individual Competencies / Self-awareness; S13 – Managerial Competencies / Experiencing a leadership role). These results mirror models of authentic leadership development (Mumford et al., 2000), suggesting that structured but flexible opportunities allow students to practice decision-making, delegation, and strategic thinking in low-risk environments, a “safe stretch zone” (Sanford, 1966).

Finally, participants recognized the relevance of their experiences for future professional life. Serving on the management board contributed to enhanced communication skills, practical experience, self-confidence, and academic/professional capabilities such as educational and group management (S11 – Individual / Communication skills; S12 – Academic / Career contribution). These findings underscore the transferability of leadership experiences to career readiness, supporting the concept of high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008).

Collectively, the results suggest that leadership development in student organizations is both a social and cognitive process, shaped by meaningful participation, reflective practice, and relational learning. Moreover, the Turkish cultural context, characterized by collectivism and moderate power distance, appears to influence how students interpret leadership, emphasizing group harmony, respect, and communal success (Hofstede, 2001). This interplay between social context and individual motivation illustrates how leadership identity is co-constructed within culturally embedded educational settings.

Conclusion

Participation in community management boards offers a powerful and holistic context for leadership development

in higher education. The findings of this study demonstrate that leadership learning is not merely the acquisition of discrete skills but a dynamic, integrative process that combines personal growth, relational competence, and managerial practice. Students developed self-confidence, self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation alongside concrete leadership abilities such as planning, decision-making, delegation, and responsibility.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the leadership development literature by providing phenomenological evidence from a non-Western context. While most leadership research is grounded in Western educational settings, the present findings illustrate how leadership identity is constructed within the cultural and institutional realities of Turkish higher education. By integrating experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), and situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969), the study offers a multidimensional framework that explains not only *which* leadership competencies students develop, but also *how* they internalize leadership through lived experience. For future researchers, these results offer a validated qualitative foundation for designing mixed-methods and longitudinal studies on student leadership. The identified themes—motivation, communication, personal empowerment, managerial competence, and professional preparation—can be operationalized into measurement tools and program evaluation models. Researchers can build on this framework to compare leadership development across cultures, disciplines, and institutional types.

Practically, the findings address several problems noted by experts in higher education: the gap between leadership theory and practice, students' limited opportunities for authentic responsibility, and the weak alignment between curricular learning and employability skills. Community management boards function as "practice laboratories" where students learn to lead in real situations involving uncertainty, conflict, and teamwork. Embedding such experiential structures into institutional leadership strategies can help universities move beyond symbolic leadership education toward evidence-based, skill-oriented development.

In conclusion, student leadership in community organizations is not a peripheral activity but a central educational practice with measurable developmental outcomes. By integrating informal leadership environments with formal curricula and reflective mentoring, universities can cultivate graduates who are not only knowledgeable. Such graduates are also capable of ethical, adaptive, and socially responsible leadership in complex professional settings.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings suggest several actionable insights for universities aiming to enhance student leadership development. First, structured yet flexible frameworks should be established to provide authentic leadership experiences. Participation in community management boards demonstrated that students benefit from opportunities to make decisions and lead projects. Interaction with diverse peers fostered both individual and managerial competencies. Programs integrating mentorship, reflective supervision, and systematic feedback can help students connect experiences to explicit learning outcomes (S11 – Individual / Communication skills; S14 – Interaction-Focused / Ability to express oneself).

Faculty advisors and student affairs professionals should maintain a balance between guidance and autonomy, allowing students to navigate responsibilities while providing support for reflection. Leadership portfolios, co-curricular transcripts, or structured reflection reports may make competencies visible, measurable, and transferable to professional contexts. Additionally, promoting an inclusive and supportive organizational culture, characterized by warmth, social support, and collaboration, is crucial. As participants reported, a welcoming environment and strong peer influence encouraged engagement and persistence in leadership roles (S9 – Extrinsic Factors / Warm and welcoming atmosphere; S14 – Extrinsic Factors / Influence of management team).

At the policy level, institutions and higher education authorities should recognize student leadership as a form of experiential learning equivalent in developmental value to formal coursework. Policies could

incentivize leadership participation in accreditation criteria, quality assurance processes, and resource allocation. Further, integrating leadership learning outcomes into national qualification frameworks would support alignment between academic curricula and workforce readiness. Equity and inclusion policies should ensure that leadership opportunities are accessible to all students, regardless of gender, socioeconomic background, or other potentially limiting factors.

Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the depth and relevance of the present findings, several important directions for future research emerge. Longitudinal studies should track students over time to examine how leadership identities evolve before, during, and after service on management boards, clarifying whether observed gains in communication, self-confidence, and managerial skills are sustained. Comparative and cross-cultural research across universities, academic disciplines, and national contexts could distinguish universal aspects of student leadership development from those shaped by specific organizational or societal norms. For example, the influence of collectivist values in Turkish higher education may differ from that in more individualist-oriented systems (Hofstede, 2001). Mixed-methods designs that combine phenomenological insights with quantitative measures—such as leadership scales, peer assessments, and performance evaluations—would strengthen validity through triangulated evidence. In addition, equity- and inclusion-focused studies should examine the barriers and enabling factors affecting underrepresented student groups—by gender, socioeconomic status, or minority background—to support more equitable access to leadership development opportunities. Finally, institutional impact research should explore how sustained student leadership participation influences organizational culture, governance practices, and innovation capacity, thereby highlighting the systemic value of experiential leadership programs.

Overall Contribution

This study contributes to leadership education scholarship by demonstrating that participation in student community

management boards constitutes a high-impact experiential learning practice. It bridges theory and practice, fostering growth in personal empowerment, communication, interpersonal collaboration, and managerial competencies. Leadership development emerges as an integrative, reflective, and relational process. It is not merely a discrete or technical form of skill acquisition. Universities can leverage these findings to design structured, inclusive, and contextually grounded leadership development programs that prepare students for authentic, responsible, and adaptive leadership roles in professional and civic contexts. The study further highlights that real-world leadership experiences, when paired with reflection and supportive mentoring, cultivate transferable skills and professional readiness, underscoring the importance of experiential education in higher education curricula.

Ethical approval

All research activities adhered to ethical principles for qualitative research involving human participants with human participants. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's institutional ethics committee prior to data collection (Approval No: 2024/134). Confidentiality was ensured through pseudonymization, secure storage of digital files, and restricted data access. Participants' voluntary participation and right to withdraw without consequence were emphasized at all stages of the research process.

Conflict of interest disclosure:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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