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Abstract

The global demand for effective and culturally relevant leadership in higher education is increasing, particularly in regions undergoing reform and structural transformation. This study analyses two Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) initiatives — project MORHEL for Morocco and project LEADALKO for Albania and Kosovo — emphasising leadership development through modular, evidence-based, and interactive programming. This study evaluates critical design aspects, implementation challenges, and context-specific dynamics using the Higher Education Leadership Qualities and Skills (HELQS) framework, project documentation, and assessment data. The results underscore the crucial importance of competency-based training, a cohesive infrastructure, and policy coherence for sustained leadership development. The cross-case research validates the adaptability of HELQS across geopolitical contexts and underscores the necessity for national coordination and institutional ownership. The article advances the theoretical discourse on transformative and distributed leadership within higher education, providing pragmatic insights for future capacity-building initiatives. The LEADALKO instance focuses on needs analysis and program design, whereas the MORHEL case emphasises the piloting phase of implementation.

Keywords

Leadership in higher education; Erasmus+ CBHE; HELQS framework; MORHEL project; LEADALKO project; national leadership development; Quality Education; Strong Institutions and Partnerships for the Goals

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I. Introduction: Framing Leadership for Transformative Change in Higher Education

In the evolving landscape of higher education, leadership has emerged as a critical element for institutional resilience, strategic transformation, and societal impact. As higher education systems face escalating pressures to internationalise, improve quality, and align with socioeconomic needs, the development of leadership capacity has become a strategic imperative (Middlehurst, 2004; Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009). Contemporary leadership transcends mere administrative skills and necessitates the ability to guide organisations through uncertainty, change, and innovation (Khan, 2017).

Within the global policy context, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore this necessity — especially SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Enhancing leadership in higher education directly promotes SDG 4 by elevating the quality of teaching and learning, bolsters SDG 16 through the establishment of transparent and accountable governance, and aids SDG 17 by cultivating enduring, cross-border collaborations among higher education institutions (HEIs).

The scholarly landscape offers various theoretical viewpoints, each serving unique explanatory purposes. Initial trait theories suggested that leadership was contingent upon innate attributes; however, these theories faced criticism for overlooking contextual influences (Zaccaro, 2007; Salihu, 2019). Behavioural theories analysed leadership actions—task-oriented, relational, or change-driven—whereas situational and contingency theories emphasised aligning leadership styles with environmental contexts (Gümüş et al., 2018; Hersey et al., 1982; Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Conventional theories often lack the sophistication needed to address the complex realities of higher education institutions, particularly in post-socialist or post-colonial contexts (Muftahu, 2019).

Contemporary frameworks favour distributed, transformational, instructional, and adaptable leadership paradigms. These emphasise collaboration, shared governance, and organisational flexibility in response to change. Transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994) emphasises vision and organisational culture; distributed leadership fosters collective agency; and authentic leadership prioritises ethical behaviour and self-awareness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Spillane, 2006).

These models align with a "leadership-as-practice" perspective, which characterises leadership as a relational and emergent effort rather than a consequence of formal power. Competency-based approaches, such as the HELQS model, encapsulate these theoretical shifts by integrating strategic, operational, and personal development domains. Leadership development is increasingly informed by diagnostic tools, such as 360-degree feedback, which promote reflective practice and continuous improvement (Atwater & Waldman, 1998; Nowack & Mashihi, 2012). Furthermore, systems thinking perspectives (Senge, 1990; Oakland, 2001) emphasise that effective leaders should influence institutional ecosystems rather than solely oversee individuals.

This change in leadership philosophy signals broader developments in higher education governance, characterised by decentralisation, digital progress, and increased demands for accountability, inclusion, and societal relevance. Muftahu (2019) asserts that effective leadership in this setting requires contextual knowledge, adaptability, and an ethical foundation—qualities often overlooked by conventional models.

The MORHEL and LEADALCO project-based programs offer valuable insights into the implementation of contemporary leadership paradigms. These CBHE programs incorporate modular, evidence-based training into national reform plans, demonstrating how transformational and participative leadership may facilitate institutional change across various geopolitical and cultural contexts. These two cases extend the legacy of previous international E+ capacity-building projects on leadership, conducted in the last 5 years, such as iHiLEAD in Indonesia, and MHELM in Moldova—into the Western Balkans and in Morocco. These cases demonstrate that by openly linking their objectives and outcomes to SDG 4, SDG 16, and SDG 17, leadership development can simultaneously address national reform agendas and advance global sustainable development goals.

II. MORHEL: Leadership Development in the Moroccan Higher Education Sector

The Moroccan Higher Education Leadership (MORHEL) project is a nationally coordinated initiative under the Erasmus+ framework, aiming to enhance leadership and governance skills in Moroccan higher education institutions (HEIs).

The project's core objective is to create a National Leadership Development Programme (NLDP), delivered through a network of National Leadership Development Centres (NLDCs), to institutionalise leadership training and drive systemic, sustainable improvement in higher education leadership practices (MORHEL 2023).

The NLDP was carefully designed through a competency-based, needs-driven methodology. It is based on a diagnostic examination of 12 Moroccan higher education institutions and a comparison with European best practices. It focuses on five principal leadership profiles: university presidents, senior strategic managers,

academic leaders, functional heads, and administrative managers. National research undertaken in 2021–2022 revealed substantial developmental gaps in effect management, internationalisation, finance, change, and people performance—areas that now underpin the NLDP's modular training structure. Four principal thematic elements constitute its structural framework: Leading Strategy & Governance, Leading Operations & Systems, Leading People & Change, and a Higher Education Change Project. The training consists of 12 modules (MORHEL 2023).

The pilot cohort, implemented in 2/2 of 2024, delivered all 12 modules to 22 participants from 11 Moroccan HEIs, utilising both face-to-face and online modalities. Sessions utilised interactive methodologies—SWOT analyses, case studies, simulations, and live polling technologies (e.g., Mentimeter)—to promote peer learning and experiential reflection. This approach enabled peer-to-peer learning and fostered cross-institutional networks, which is a primary purpose of the program. The "Change Project" component was directed by foreign experts. Participants formulated institutional-level initiatives designed to achieve quantifiable organisational enhancements in accordance with national aims. Coaching focused on delivering actionable results, stakeholder consensus, and practicality within institutional contexts. Deliverables comprised case reports and final presentations, reinforcing the application of leadership skills to real-world higher education challenges (MORHEL, 2024).

Quantitative and qualitative evaluations from 2024 confirmed the pilot's effectiveness. Participants reported substantial knowledge acquisition (mean score, 4.6/5) and improvements in leadership skills (4.5/5). Instructors emphasised participant motivation and the effectiveness of the strategies introduced to address practical governance challenges (MORHEL 2024).

Nonetheless, several operational and pedagogical constraints arose. The quality and usability of pre-session preparation materials received a low rating (1.6/5), while instructor notes were deemed insufficiently detailed (2.2/5), compromising replicability. Participation in online sessions declined over time, largely due to scheduling conflicts and session fatigue. Intensive modules, such as Finance, caused cognitive overload, while others, such as Human Resources, required a broader range of activities to maintain engagement. Moreover, certain modules exhibited overlapping content, reducing overall efficiency and clarity (MORHEL 2024).

The project team has provided strong recommendations, including reorganising courses into concise, thematic blocks, improving instructor guidance resources, introducing optional online assignments, and creating a nationally recognised certification pathway.

Enhancements have been evaluated, and the program has been refined for implementation in 2025. In 2025, the subsequent four cohorts of participants will participate in the program, totalling approximately 80 individuals in training that year. Results on implementation are not yet available.

The Ministry of Higher Education plays a pivotal role in institutionalising the program through policy integration, financial assurances, and oversight of NLDC development (MORHEL 2023).

The primary objective of MORHEL is to establish NLDCs at every university – regional centres that can customise leadership development to local conditions while maintaining alignment with national reform objectives. These centres are anticipated to provide continuous training, consultancy, and stakeholder engagement, thus embedding leadership development within university infrastructure (MORHEL 2024a). This approach emulates successful models from EU counterparts and aligns with findings from comparative foresight initiatives, underscoring the significance of cohesive, contextually aware leadership development frameworks (Andreescu et al., 2012).

The MORHEL project is a flagship initiative that integrates capacity building, policy coherence, and institutional innovation to further Morocco's higher education reform objectives. Embedding leadership development inside institutional structures and national frameworks offers a replicable model for other post-reform systems worldwide.

III. LEADALKO: Leadership Capacity Building in Albania and Kosovo

The LEADALKO project addresses critical leadership gaps in the higher education sectors of Albania and Kosovo, nations undergoing systemic transition with limited prior investment in leadership development. The project entails a thorough investigation and a methodical evaluation of requirements, uncovering a notable lack of leadership. Notwithstanding heightened policy emphasis on enhancing governance, quality, and internationalisation in higher education (Eurydice, 2023; Osmani, 2022), both Albania and Kosovo lack established frameworks for cultivating leadership competencies, which continues to hinder sustainable reform implementation.

A study conducted in late 2023 with 157 leaders from 10 higher education institutions in Albania and Kosovo revealed that 39% of participants had not received prior leadership development opportunities, and just 13% had access to a formal curriculum. The remaining opportunities were fragmented, mainly consisting of networking gatherings or short training sessions. Nevertheless, demand remains robust: 92% of respondents expressed interest in a formal, accredited program that includes elements such as networking (53%), coaching (48%), and development seminars (46%) (LEADALKO 2025b).

The study employed the Higher Education Leadership Qualities and Skills (HELQS) framework to evaluate 13 categories of leadership proficiency. The analysis identified four domains as primary development priorities: resource management, impact leadership (including policy and economic involvement), leadership in equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), and leadership in

internationalisation. The domains exhibited the lowest average self-assessment scores, suggesting that leaders in these areas recognise substantial developmental need in systemic and strategic competencies. In contrast, personal domains such as personal values, personal productivity, and interpersonal impact received the highest scores, consistent with trends observed in comparable contexts of E+ capacity-building projects on leadership such as Moldova (E+ project Mhelm), Indonesia (E+ project iHiLEAD), and Morocco (E+ project MORHEL).

An in-depth analysis of individual talents indicated that the least-rated abilities encompassed influencing governmental policy, financial management, risk assessment, project oversight, economic development advocacy, and operational management. The findings indicate that numerous higher education leaders in Albania and Kosovo, frequently selected for their academic qualifications rather than administrative expertise, perceive themselves as inadequately equipped for strategic leadership positions. In contrast, respondents indicated elevated levels of intrinsic motivation, integrity, and interpersonal effectiveness, suggesting strong foundational values and a capacity for growth (LEADALKO, 2025b).

Furthermore, conversations with senior institutional executives confirmed that leadership roles are frequently assigned primarily on the basis of academic credentials rather than managerial competencies—a pattern that the project seeks to rectify (LEADALKO 2025b).

The 2023 study also examined the impact of demographic variables on leadership self-evaluations. Leaders from Kosovo typically assessed their performance more favourably across many dimensions compared to their Albanian counterparts, despite a robust correlation ($\rho = 0.95$) suggesting common developmental aims. Age showed a positive correlation with self-assessments of leadership across almost all categories, suggesting that confidence increases with experience. Conversely, variables such as gender, tenure, and work position exhibited less explanatory capacity, indicating the necessity for comprehensive, inclusive development strategies across various roles and demographics (LEADALKO, 2025b).

Additional qualitative observations were obtained via interviews conducted in early 2025 with 15 senior leaders, comprising rectors, vice-rectors, ministry officials, and quality assurance specialists. Interviewees recognised a range of interrelated leadership issues, including brain drain from migration, declining student enrolment, obstacles to staff recruitment and retention, financial instability within institutions, and regulatory rigidity. A persistent topic was the disjunction between higher education offerings and national development aspirations, especially in aligning curricula with labour market demands and significantly contributing to socio-economic advancement. These challenges require leaders who are not only technically proficient but also adaptable, strategically oriented, and system-aware (LEADALKO, 2025b).

In addition to challenges, the findings also highlighted existing leadership among respondents, including significant affective (intrinsic) and instrumental

(career-oriented) desire for professional development, a pronounced orientation towards innovation, and robust ethical principles. Affective commitment to learning was the most significant predictor of leadership competency, exhibiting a statistically significant correlation with nearly all HELQS dimensions. Action-oriented participation in leadership development demonstrated significant correlations, whilst organisational support exhibited a moderate influence. In contrast, instrumental drive and open-mindedness served as less robust predictors (LEADALKO, 2025b).

Based on these findings, the LEADALKO project is instituting a National Leadership Development Programme (NLDP) and a network of National Leadership Development Centres (NLDCs) across Albania and Kosovo. The program is customised to local conditions while being guided by European best practices. It focuses on five leadership profiles: university presidents, senior executives, strategic leaders, directors of academic programs, and administrative managers. The program design is modular, including workshops, coaching, 360-degree feedback, and institutional change initiatives. It emphasises action learning and peer collaboration among institutions, cultivating networks that facilitate both institutional and sectoral transformation (LEADALKO, 2025a; 2025b).

IV. Cross-Case Insights and Theoretical Integration

MORHEL and LEADALKO exemplify the significance of participative, reflective, and contextually integrated leadership development that directly advances the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Both initiatives implement SDG 4 by enhancing educational quality through organised leadership training; SDG 16 by establishing transparent, accountable, and responsive governance systems; and SDG 17 by reinforcing national, regional, and international collaboration among higher education institutions.

Despite variations in governance traditions—Morocco’s nationally coordinated, policy-oriented model contrasted with the Western Balkans’ diagnostic-driven, grassroots methodology—both initiatives illustrate that leadership capacity development can be tailored to diverse political, cultural, and institutional contexts. The comparative research highlights that frameworks such as HELQS are adaptable across geopolitical contexts when tailored to local requirements, rendering them useful models for other nations undertaking transformation.

From a theoretical perspective, both projects exemplify systems-thinking methodologies that emphasise institutional ecosystems rather than individual charisma (Black, 2015; Seddon, 2003), illustrating that leadership development aligned with the SDGs is contextually sensitive and internationally relevant.

V. Conclusion

The cultivation of effective leadership in higher education is essential for fostering institutional resilience, innovation, and transformation. This paper demonstrates that modular, evidence-based leadership programs when embedded within national policy frameworks, possess significant potential to strengthen institutional governance and academic cultures, as evidenced by the case studies of the MORHEL and LEADALKO projects. These outcomes reinforce SDG 4, SDG 16, and SDG 17 by enhancing education quality, strengthening governance, and cultivating lasting partnerships.

The MORHEL project in Morocco has produced evaluative evidence indicating the effectiveness of competency-based, participatory leadership training in enhancing individual skills and institutional networking. LEADALKO, now in its preliminary implementation phase, presents a comprehensive framework for scalable leadership development tailored to the evolving institutional contexts of Albania and Kosovo. Both projects demonstrate how leadership development, aligned with national reform agendas and the SDGs, may serve as a strategic catalyst for extensive educational transformation with both national and global significance.

This study highlights the relevance of contemporary leadership models—namely, distributed, transformational, and adaptive leadership—as more effective alternatives to traditional hierarchical or command-driven models (Gümüç et al., 2018; Black, 2015; Dube et al., 2022). In the context of higher education institutions (HEIs) operating within intricate, globalised, and resource-constrained settings, effective leadership necessitates strategic management, emotional intelligence, ethical commitment, systems thinking, and proficiency in managing change and uncertainty (McCaffery, 2019; Amanchukwu et al., 2015).

Moreover, leadership development should be understood not as an intermittent intervention, but as a continuous, reflective, and adaptive process that evolves in response to institutional needs and the sociopolitical environment (Muftahu, 2019; Dongare & Namdeo, 2023). Embedding such development into institutional infrastructure—through leadership centres, peer networks, and policy frameworks—ensures both sustainability and ongoing alignment with the SDGs.

Several imperatives emerge moving forward:

- Firstly, institutional leadership frameworks must adopt flexible, context-specific
- approaches that recognise national and institutional diversity.
- Secondly, program design should prioritise experiential learning, coaching, and peer support over purely didactic methods.
- Evaluation strategies must encompass not only satisfaction metrics but also assess long-term behavioural and institutional impact, including contributions to SDG targets.

- National authorities should act not only as funders, but also as coordinators and guarantors of coherence, quality, and strategic alignment.

Investing in leadership development is fundamental to building higher education institutions that are adaptative, inclusive, and proficient in functioning as catalysts for knowledge, democracy, and social justice, while furthering the overarching goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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