

Leadership Readiness in Higher Education: A SILDM-Based Competency Diagnosis

Ilidkó NÉMETHOVÁ

Bratislava University of Economics and Business, Slovakia

 0000-0001-7041-1786

Lívia ABLONCZY-MIHÁLYKA *

Széchenyi István University, Győr, Hungary

* ablne@sze.hu

 0000-0002-9403-1478

Petra KECSKÉS

Széchenyi István University, Győr, Hungary

 0000-0003-1671-8378

Eva STRADIOTOVÁ

Bratislava University of Economics and Business, Slovakia

 0000-0002-3003-2850

Abstract

This paper examines the self-perceived leadership readiness of first-year bachelor's students enrolled in economics and business programmes, utilising the Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ as a diagnostic tool within the broader conceptual framework of the Synced Integrated Leadership Development Model (SILDM). SILDM is a theoretically informed synthesis of established leadership and intercultural frameworks, designed to reflect the multifaceted nature of contemporary leadership. It integrates behavioural, ethical, relational, and cultural dimensions into a unified developmental perspective, addressing a key limitation in leadership education: the tendency to apply models in isolation without accounting for their interdependent dynamics. To operationalise this framework, a survey instrument based on 29 selected Korn Ferry competencies was administered to a sample of 1,307 first-year students, enabling structured self-assessment across four leadership domains: Thought, Results, People, and Self. The findings revealed higher levels of confidence in cognitive and task-oriented domains (Thought and Results), and notable developmental gaps in ethical self-regulation and interpersonal influence (Self and People). The paper proposes six pedagogically grounded interventions designed to foster more integrated, ethically grounded, and culturally responsive leadership development during the early stages of students' academic and professional formation.

Keywords: leadership development; behavioural competencies; ethical self-regulation; cultural intelligence; interpersonal influence.

JEL Classification: M14; M19; M53; O15.

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1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, leadership is being re-examined in terms of its meaning, its sources of authority, and the ways it is taught and developed. The pressures of globalisation, rapid technological change, and increasing cultural diversity have challenged traditional models based on fixed hierarchies and control. While those earlier approaches helped maintain order through clearly defined roles, they are no longer sufficient for addressing today's rapidly changing and complex environments. In response, scholars such as Heifetz (1994), Goleman (1995), and Northouse (2021) have contributed to a shared understanding of leadership as a dynamic and interactive process, one that is contextually responsive, emotionally intelligent, ethically grounded, and rooted in the relationship between leaders and followers. This *integrated perspective* challenges traditional, top-down approaches and points toward a more flexible, relational, and thoughtful approach to leadership (Stone & Patterson, 2023).

Building on this shift toward a more dynamic and relational understanding of leadership, the present study addresses a key educational gap by assessing the baseline leadership readiness of first-year bachelor's students in economics and business programmes. It employs the Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ (Korn Ferry Institute, 2014) as its principal analytical framework. This globally recognised model provides a comprehensive framework for assessing leadership potential in ways that align with the complex demands of contemporary business environments, where emerging professionals must demonstrate technical competence and ethical adaptability from the outset of their involvement.

To extend the analysis beyond behavioural diagnostics and situate it within a more holistic understanding of leadership development, the Korn Ferry model is applied within the Synced Integrated Leadership Development Model (SILDm), a conceptual framework constructed by the authors through the synthesis of existing, well-established theories. SILDm integrates behavioural performance with ethical reasoning and intercultural adaptability by drawing on four key sources: the Korn Ferry behavioural competency taxonomy (Korn Ferry Institute, 2014); Livermore's (2015) Cultural Intelligence framework, which emphasises cross-cultural adaptability; Meyer's (2014) Culture Map, which examines variations in global communication and leadership styles; and Northouse's (2021) synthesis of ethical, transformational, and adaptive leadership theory. By combining these complementary perspectives, SILDm provides a multidimensional framework for assessing and developing leadership capacities that are suited to the complex and evolving demands of volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments.

The application of SILDm to this study is further supported by research in developmental theory and leadership identity formation, which underscores early tertiary education as a critical period for shaping foundational leadership dispositions. Komives et al. (2005) describe the first years of university as a developmentally receptive window during which students begin to internalise leadership identity through reflective practice, values exploration, and social feedback. Complementing this view, Day et al. (2008) argue that leadership development is a cumulative process initiated through early experiential learning and sustained self-reflection. Leadership development programs – if they are efficient ÷ should be important, Leroy et al (2024) state that they increase students' knowledge skills and abilities. First-year students thus constitute a strategically important cohort: their behavioural patterns, ethical orientations, and relational capacities are still highly malleable and exceptionally responsive to well-designed educational interventions.

Building on this developmental foundation, the study is guided by two hypotheses that reflect the structural imbalances often observed in leadership education. **The first hypothesis (H1)** anticipates that students will report higher self-assessed competence in the Thought and Results domains than in the People and Self domains. This expectation aligns with longstanding empirical findings suggesting that traditional education systems tend to prioritise analytical reasoning, information processing, and task completion, while placing less emphasis on emotional intelligence and ethical self-regulation. Boyatzis (1982) and Goleman (1995) note that intellectual and technical competencies are reinforced through formal assessment structures, whereas interpersonal and moral capacities often remain underdeveloped. Petrides et al. (2004) found that students showed greater confidence in cognitive domains but struggled with emotional self-awareness and social competence. In contrast, Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of over 200 studies, observing that social-emotional learning is rarely integrated into higher education, despite its clear relevance to leadership effectiveness. Day et al. (2014) further argue that universities privilege measurable performance over identity-based development, which encompasses values clarification, ethical awareness, and relational skill-building. As a result, students tend to perceive themselves as more capable in domains that are systematically reinforced and less confident in those that receive limited curricular attention.

Complementing the first hypothesis, **the second hypothesis (H2)** posits a significant positive correlation between the People and Self domains, reflecting the developmental interdependence between intrapersonal maturity and relational leadership. This proposition is grounded in emotional intelligence theory, which maintains that self-awareness, emotional regulation, and ethical consistency form the basis for effective interpersonal influence (Goleman, 1995; Boyatzis, 2008). Leadership effectiveness emerges through the integration of self-knowledge, behavioural alignment, and empathetic engagement. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) demonstrate that emotional self-regulation enhances relational attunement, while Mayer et al. (2008) provide psychometric evidence of the connection between internal and social capacities. In higher education, Komives et al. (2005) demonstrate that leadership identity development depends on the co-evolution of self-authorship and relational maturity, and Allen et al. (2012) identify self-awareness as a strong predictor of peer leadership behaviours.

The research design reflects the conceptual progression of the paper: the literature review traces the shift from hierarchical to post-hierarchical leadership models; the methodology outlines the adaptation of the Korn Ferry framework; the findings empirically support the hypotheses; and the final section proposes targeted interventions. The study concludes by highlighting the implications for curriculum design, institutional strategy, and the broader role of higher education in developing behaviourally competent leaders.

This research contributes to leadership education by offering a theoretically grounded and empirically validated approach to identifying and addressing early-stage developmental gaps in student leadership capacity. By diagnosing asymmetries in self-perceived behavioural competencies and proposing targeted pedagogical interventions, the study provides a replicable framework for institutions aiming to equip graduates with competencies required for leadership in today's complex and dynamic environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foundational Models of Leadership in the Twentieth Century

Leadership theory in the twentieth century emerged alongside the rise of industrial society, where stability, efficiency, and control were paramount. Leadership was defined less by influence or ethics and more by position, hierarchy, and procedural authority. Max Weber's Theory of Social and Economic Organisation (1947) became a cornerstone of this paradigm, framing leadership within a rational-legal order in which legitimacy stemmed from formal roles, impersonal rules, and institutional structure. Early models reflected a bureaucratic mindset, emphasising standardised procedures, predictability, and compliance as the means of ensuring organisational coherence. While effective in sustaining order, such approaches left little space for human agency, ethical reflection, or cultural responsiveness, relegating these dimensions to the margins of leadership discourse.

2.2. The Greenleaf-Burns-Bass Paradigm: From Ethics to Empirical Models

By the early 1970s, widespread dissatisfaction with bureaucratic, control-oriented leadership models was growing, driven by their failure to address the human, ethical, and relational dimensions of organisational life. These models, rooted in industrial-era priorities of standardisation and compliance, proved increasingly inadequate in a world shaped by social upheaval, economic transition, and intellectual transformation. The rise of post-industrial economies demanded more flexible and people-centred approaches. Robert K. Greenleaf's Servant Leadership (1977) marked a pivotal ethical reorientation. Reimagining the leader as a steward rather than a commander, Greenleaf placed service to others at the moral core of leadership, arguing that a leader's primary responsibility is to support the growth, autonomy, and flourishing of followers. This shift moved leadership discourse away from transactional authority toward relational care and moral responsibility. Despite its transformative intent, servant leadership continued to centre the individual leader as the principal moral agent, preserving elements of the very hierarchy it sought to transcend.

Burns (1978) deepened the ethical reframing of leadership in his landmark work Leadership (Burns, 1978), where he challenged prevailing models that treated leadership primarily as a tool for managing tasks and enforcing compliance. He argued that these transactional models, based on negotiated exchanges of rewards for performance, were suitable for maintaining order but insufficient for responding to the rising societal demand for authenticity, shared purpose, and meaningful change. Burns (1978) introduced a pivotal distinction between transactional leadership, focused on short-term exchanges, and transformational leadership, which seeks to elevate leaders and followers through mutual commitment to values, trust, and personal growth. This marked a shift known as the normative turn in leadership theory: a move away from value-neutral, results-driven paradigms toward conceptions of leadership as a moral process embedded in ethical responsibility.

Building on Burns's moral vision of leadership, Bass (1985) advanced the theory by addressing a crucial limitation: its lack of empirical specificity. While Burns had framed transformational leadership as an ethically driven relationship that elevated leaders and followers, his model offered little guidance for how such leadership could be observed, measured, or developed in practice. In Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations (1985), Bass responded to this gap by translating transformational leadership into a behavioural framework with clear diagnostic and developmental potential. Bass retained the core distinction between transactional and transformational leadership but reformulated the latter as a set of identifiable behaviours

that could be systematically assessed and taught. He delineated four key dimensions: idealised influence (exemplifying integrity and building trust), inspirational motivation (articulating a compelling vision), intellectual stimulation (fostering creativity and critical thinking), and individualised consideration (responding to individual needs and supporting growth).

To operationalise and empirically validate the behavioural dimensions of transformational leadership, Bass and Avolio (1991) introduced the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). This psychometric tool became foundational in leadership research and assessment. The MLQ enabled systematic, large-scale studies that linked specific leadership behaviours to organisational outcomes, producing robust evidence that transformational leadership correlates strongly with employee engagement, innovation, and team cohesion (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Leadership theory has been ethically framed and grounded in behavioural science, rendering it measurable, teachable, and applicable across diverse contexts. However, while the MLQ offered analytical precision and practical utility, it also reinforced a model in which leadership effectiveness was primarily attributed to the actions and dispositions of individual leaders, leaving little room for relational, cultural, or systemic complexity.

2.3. From Leader-Centric Models to Adaptive and Post-Hierarchical Leadership

While early leadership theorists such as Greenleaf, Burns, and Bass advanced the field by incorporating ethical and behavioural dimensions, their models continued to privilege the individual leader as the central agent of influence. Even transformational approaches by Tichy and Devanna (1986) and Kouzes and Posner (1987), which emphasised emotional intelligence and ethical commitment, maintained an image of the leader as the primary driver of change. However, contemporary leadership challenges, ranging from ethical dilemmas and cultural complexity to rapid systemic change, cannot be addressed solely through top-down authority. Heifetz (1994) initiated a critical shift by framing leadership as the facilitation of collective learning in morally pluralistic contexts. This view was extended by Uhl-Bien et al. (2007), whose complexity leadership theory reconceptualises leadership as an emergent, interactive process distributed across systems rather than concentrated in a single figure. Intercultural researchers, such as Rockstuhl et al. (2011), Livermore (2015), and Petrie (2014), have further demonstrated that leadership behaviours are shaped by cultural norms and expectations, highlighting the need for leaders with high cultural and contextual intelligence. These developments signal a fundamental shift toward post-hierarchical leadership models that emphasise collective agency, ethical responsiveness, and contextual adaptability, moving beyond the limitations of traditional, leader-centric frameworks.

2.4. New Directions in Leadership Theory

Peter G. Northouse's *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (2021) represents a pivotal contribution to the evolving understanding of leadership and has become a foundational text in leadership education. By synthesising a wide range of theoretical traditions into a cohesive, ethically grounded, and pedagogically practical framework, Northouse helped reorient leadership theory from a static, hierarchical model to one based on interaction, influence, and shared purpose. Northouse's (2021) well-known definition of leadership as a process in which one person influences a group to work toward a shared objective reflects this shift, emphasising leadership as a dynamic, relationship-based activity rather than a formal position of authority. This reconceptualization aligns with post-hierarchical thinking and provides a practical basis for developing leadership curricula that focus on ethical reasoning, intercultural awareness, and adaptive learning competencies, which are increasingly recognised as essential for navigating the complexity of contemporary organisational environments.

Table 1. Comparative framework of leadership models

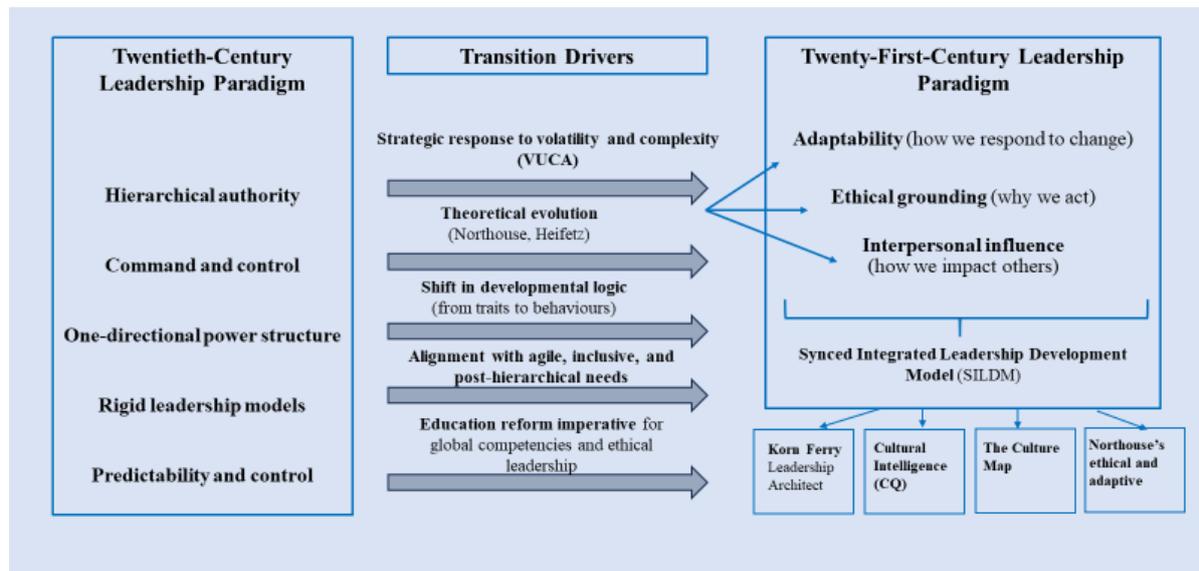
| Model | Key Features | Core Limitation |
|--|---|---|
| Weber (1947) | Rational-legal authority, hierarchy | Ignores human development and ethics |
| Greenleaf (1977) | Service-first leadership orientation | Moralised but still leader-focused |
| Burns (1978) | Ethical elevation, shared purpose | Leader-centric influence |
| Bass (1985) | Measurable behaviour, MLQ framework | Retains a top-down paradigm |
| Tichy & Devanna (1986); Kouzes & Posner (1987) | Emotional engagement, transformational learning | Retain heroic leadership framing |
| Heifetz (1994) | Adaptive leadership; leadership as facilitation of collective learning; distinction between technical and adaptive challenges | Requires high organisational maturity; less prescriptive in practice |
| Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey (2007) | Complexity leadership; leadership as an emergent, distributed process | Difficult to operationalise; challenges traditional evaluation of effectiveness |
| Livermore (2015); Rockstuhl et al. (2011) | Emphasis on cultural intelligence and leadership contingency; adaptation across diverse norms | Leadership effectiveness is culturally variable, challenging the universality of core traits. |
| Northouse (2021) | Integrated ethical, intercultural, and developmental frameworks for education | Synthesises existing theories but is still influenced by individual influence logic |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

2.5. The Synced Integrated Leadership Development Model (SILDM)

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous sections, the Synced Integrated Leadership Development Model (SILDM) provides a structured synthesis of established leadership frameworks, serving as the conceptual and diagnostic foundation for this study. SILDM does not introduce a new theoretical model but instead integrates widely recognised approaches into a coherent structure that reflects the multifaceted demands of contemporary leadership. It draws on four key sources: the Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ (Korn Ferry Institute, 2014), which identifies leadership effectiveness across four behavioural domains: Thought, Results, People, and Self; Livermore's (2015) Cultural Intelligence (CQ) framework, which highlights the importance of adaptability in culturally diverse contexts; Meyer's (2014) Culture Map, which offers comparative insight into global variations in communication, trust-building, and decision-making; and Northouse's (2021) synthesis of transformational, ethical, and adaptive leadership theories, which remains foundational in leadership education.

The strength of SILDM lies in its integrative capacity: it brings together behavioural precision, intercultural insight, and ethical orientation into a single, actionable model. This integration addresses critical gaps in earlier paradigms that either lacked empirical specificity, ignored cultural variation, or privileged individual authority over distributed agency. SILDM is particularly suited to environments characterised by volatility, diversity, and moral complexity, where effective leadership requires more than technical expertise or positional power. It enables educators and researchers to assess leadership readiness in a way that is context-sensitive and developmentally grounded, offering practical pathways for cultivating relational, ethical, and adaptive leadership.

Figure 1. Paradigmatic transformation in leadership: SILDM transition map

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The literature review traces the evolution of leadership theory from hierarchical and leader-centric paradigms, such as Weber's (1947) rational-legal model and Bass's (1985) behavioural formulations, toward approaches that foreground ethics, relational processes, and contextual responsiveness. Ethical reorientations introduced by Greenleaf (1977) and Burns (1978) were further developed through critiques by Heifetz (1994), Uhl-Bien et al. (2007), and Livermore (2015), all of whom challenged the sufficiency of top-down models in the face of systemic complexity and cultural diversity. Northouse (2021) consolidated these theoretical shifts by framing leadership as a dynamic, influence-based process shaped by ethical responsibility and intercultural sensitivity. Synthesising these trajectories, the Synced Integrated Leadership Development Model (SILDM) provides a usable framework for empirical research and curriculum design, particularly in contexts that require adaptability, inclusiveness, and ethical discernment.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Study Rationale and Theoretical Foundation

This study examines leadership readiness through self-assessment among first-year students enrolled in economics and business programmes, offering a critical lens into how emerging leaders perceive their competencies at the outset of their academic and professional trajectories. At this formative stage, students' self-perceptions provide valuable insights into the foundational understanding of leadership behaviours prior to significant experiential learning. The research aims to identify perceived strengths and developmental needs across key leadership domains, informing evidence-based recommendations for leadership education in higher education settings.

3.2. Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™: Conceptual and Structural Basis

The Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ (KFLA) was selected as the foundational framework for this study due to its extensive empirical validation, theoretical sophistication, and proven

versatility. Initially developed by Lombardo and Eichinger (1996) at Lominger Ltd and subsequently refined and formalised by the Korn Ferry Institute (2014), it represents one of the most comprehensive competency models available. Structurally, the KFLA organises 38 core competencies into four broad leadership domains, Thought, Results, People, and Self, that capture the multifaceted nature of effective leadership. These domains are further delineated into 12 behavioural clusters, encompassing critical capabilities such as Making Complex Decisions, Driving Performance, Building Relationships, and Demonstrating Integrity. This hierarchical clustering enables precise diagnosis of leadership strengths and development areas, facilitating alignment between assessment and targeted educational or developmental interventions.

While the questionnaire collected demographic information such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status, these variables were intentionally excluded from the present analysis. This methodological choice serves to isolate behavioural self-assessments and establish a clear, uncontaminated baseline of leadership competencies. Incorporating demographic factors at this foundational stage risks introducing confounding influences that could obscure the primary behavioural patterns under investigation. Future research may build on this work by examining how these behavioural competencies interact with demographic and contextual variables over time, but their exclusion here preserves analytical clarity and focus.

3.3. Instrument Design and Survey Administration

The selection of 29 competencies from the original 38 in the Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ was guided by the need to ensure developmental relevance for first-year economics and business students, who generally have limited exposure to formal leadership roles.

Table 2. Survey instrument structure and item distribution

| Thought Domain Cognitive adaptability, strategic reasoning, and problem-solving | Results Domain Task execution, initiative, and performance orientation | People Domain Interpersonal communication, collaboration, and influence | Self Domain Self-awareness, ethical consistency, and emotional resilience: |
|---|--|---|--|
| 1. I connect information to see trends and patterns. | 8. I get things done efficiently and on time. | 15. I work well in a team. | 23. I know my strengths and weaknesses. |
| 2. I devise innovative solutions to problems. | 9. I set goals and work hard to reach them. | 16. I communicate clearly with others. | 24. I stay calm under pressure. |
| 3. I think clearly and rationally when making decisions. | 10. I stay focused on what is important. | 17. I listen actively when others speak. | 25. I act in line with my values. |
| 4. I suggest new ideas for improving work. | 11. I take initiative to move tasks forward. | 18. I manage conflict in a constructive way. | 26. I take responsibility for my actions. |
| 5. I consider how decisions affect the future. | 12. I follow through on responsibilities. | 19. I give useful feedback to others. | 27. I learn from mistakes and criticism. |
| 6. I deal well with complex situations. | 13. I handle unexpected problems effectively. | 20. I help others grow and develop. | 28. I stay positive when facing difficulties. |
| 7. I can make decisions without having all the information. | 14. I adapt quickly when plans change. | 21. I build strong working relationships. 22. I am comfortable working with people from different backgrounds. | 29. I act with honesty and integrity. |

Adapted from Korn Ferry Institute, 2014

Competencies requiring advanced leadership experience, such as Global Perspective or Builds Effective Teams, were excluded in favour of those more applicable to students' current academic and early professional contexts, including Instils Trust, Demonstrates Self-Awareness, Collaborates, and Communicates Effectively. At the same time, key competencies from the Thought domain, such as Manages Ambiguity, Decision Quality, and Plans and Aligns, as well as the Results domain, such as Drives Results and Ensures Accountability, were retained, reflecting the cognitive and goal-oriented strengths often cultivated in educational settings. This targeted selection ensures the instrument remains conceptually grounded while enhancing its accessibility and relevance for meaningful self-assessment at an early stage of leadership development.

3.4. Sampling and Data Collection Procedures

The survey instrument was administered to a total of 1,307 first-year students enrolled in business and economics programmes. This large sample size was intentionally selected to ensure statistical reliability, allowing for meaningful comparisons and producing stable estimates of students' self-assessed leadership competencies. The broad participation enhances the representativeness of the dataset, thereby mitigating the risk of sampling bias and increasing the relevance of the findings for similar cohorts in higher education. This scale and diversity of responses contribute to the overall validity of the research and support the generalisability of the results within early-stage leadership education.

3.5. Analytical Strategy and Educational Application

The primary analytical procedure involved calculating mean scores across each of the four Korn Ferry leadership domains to generate a diagnostic profile of students' self-perceived leadership competence. This analysis enabled the identification of relative strengths, particularly in the Results and Thought domains, where students reported higher confidence in task execution, analytical reasoning, and structured decision-making. Areas of developmental need were also identified, notably within the Self and People domains, which relate to ethical self-leadership and interpersonal influence. This methodological approach served a dual function: it provided a data-driven snapshot of prevailing leadership dispositions and generated targeted insights to inform curricular design and educational interventions.

4. Findings and Discussion

The primary objective of the analysis was twofold: first, to detect behavioural leadership strengths; and second, to identify latent competency deficits requiring targeted pedagogical intervention. This approach aligns with the broader epistemological shift in leadership studies that views leadership not as a fixed trait but as a learnable set of behaviours influenced by ethical grounding, emotional intelligence, and relational competence (Northouse, 2021; Goleman, 1995).

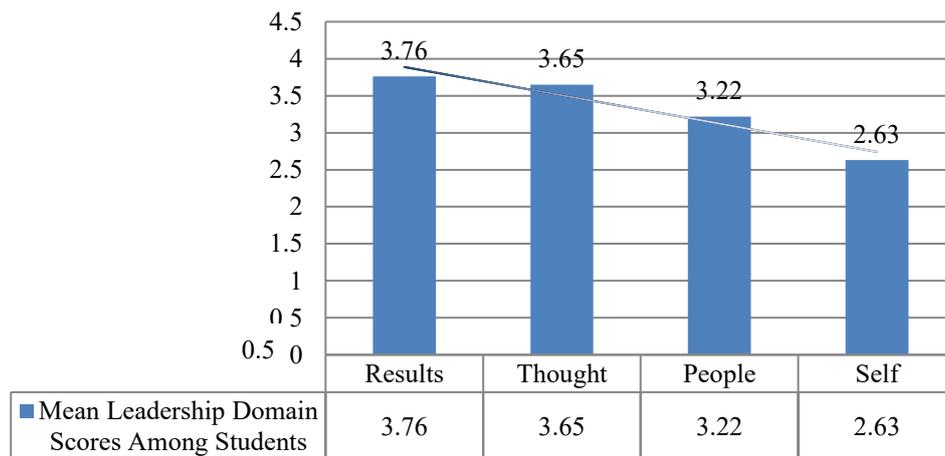
4.1. Domain-Level Competency Trends

Figure 2 provides a foundational visualisation of domain-level leadership confidence as measured across four core areas: Results, Thought, People, and Self. The data reveal a distinctly asymmetrical distribution in students' self-perceived leadership competencies. Specifically, the highest mean scores were recorded in the Results domain ($M = 3.76$), followed closely by the Thought domain ($M = 3.65$). These domains are primarily characterised by behavioural clusters

linked to execution, problem-solving, and strategic cognition, competencies typically reinforced through standardised educational pathways that emphasise individual achievement, performance metrics, and cognitive mastery.

This trend aligns with Boyatzis's (1982) foundational framework of behavioural competence, which privileges output-oriented capabilities such as goal-directedness, operational efficiency, and measurable success. The elevated confidence in these domains suggests that students entering higher education have internalised a performance-based identity shaped by institutional norms that reward intellectual rigour over interpersonal acumen.

Figure 2. Mean leadership domain scores among students



Source: Authors' elaboration.

4.2. Competency Asymmetry and Educational Implications

The marked decline in mean scores for the People ($M = 3.22$) and Self ($M = 2.63$) domains signals a pronounced developmental lag in relational, emotional, and ethical leadership dimensions. These domains are central to adaptive and human-centric leadership. The asymmetry between high cognitive-performance confidence and weaker interpersonal and ethical capacity indicates a structural misalignment in students' overall leadership readiness.

This gap is particularly salient in light of Heifetz et al. (2009) conceptualisation of adaptive leadership, which foregrounds the leader's capacity to engage constructively with complex human dynamics rather than rely solely on technical expertise. Similarly, Goleman et al. (2002) argue that deficiencies in emotional intelligence, encompassing self-awareness, empathy, and social regulation, can undermine leadership effectiveness by restricting moral judgement, relational trust, and situational adaptability. Boyar et al. (2023) contribute to the topic in question, i. e. the adaptive leadership highlighting the influence of both cognitive and emotional intelligence abilities on potential leader adaptability.

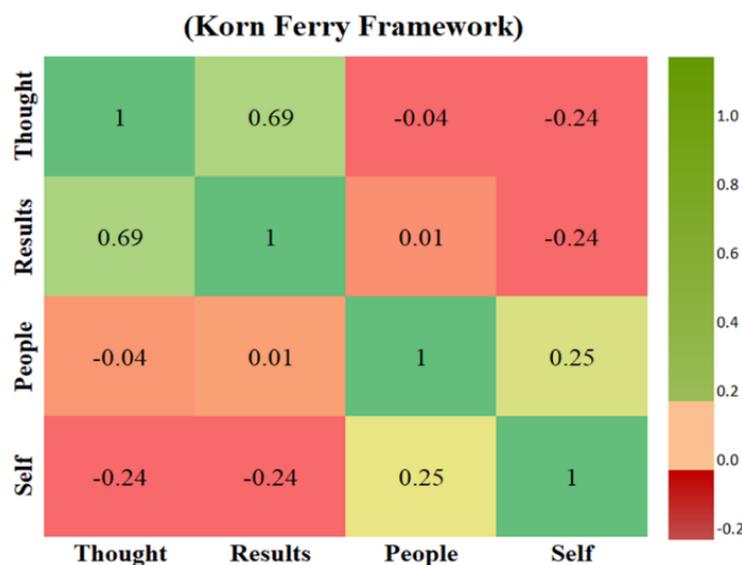
The findings from this study empirically substantiate these claims. They underscore the need for leadership development programmes to recalibrate their emphasis: from content mastery toward cultivating the soft-skill infrastructure. A curriculum that fails to integrate these dimensions risks producing technically proficient but interpersonally underdeveloped leaders, ill-equipped for the collaborative imperatives of 21st-century organisations.

4.3. Correlational Dynamics Across Domains

The second data visualisation, Figure 3 offers insight into the interrelationships among the four Korn Ferry leadership domains. The most prominent positive correlation was observed between

the Thought and Results domains ($r = +0.69$), indicating that students who perceive themselves as strong in analytical reasoning also tend to express confidence in their performance execution. This supports Northouse's (2021) concept of strategic behavioural integration, which argues that strong cognitive skills, such as logical thinking, problem-solving, and strategic planning, help leaders make more effective decisions and act with greater clarity and purpose. When students are confident in how they think, how they analyse situations, consider options, and plan, they are also more likely to feel capable of translating those thoughts into action. Cognitive clarity reduces uncertainty, enhances judgment under pressure, and enables leaders to connect their ideas to tangible outcomes. As a result, students who excel in the Thought domain are often better at setting goals, managing tasks, and executing plans efficiently, which in turn strengthens their belief in their performance capabilities. This relationship reflects the foundational principle that effective leadership is about knowing what to do and having the ability to do it well.

Figure 3. Heatmap of leadership domain correlation



Source: Authors' elaboration.

In contrast, moderate negative correlations were observed between the Thought and Self ($r = -0.24$) and Results and Self ($r = -0.24$) domains, indicating a significant cognitive-ethical divide. Students who expressed strong confidence in their analytical thinking and performance execution tended to report lower confidence in their emotional self-awareness, ethical decision-making, and reflective capacity. This pattern aligns with Goleman's (1995) findings that high-performing individuals in cognitive or technical domains often exhibit underdeveloped emotional intelligence. While they are skilled at solving problems and achieving results, they may struggle with understanding their emotional responses, empathising with others, or navigating ethical dilemmas. One reason for this may be the emphasis in traditional education on intellectual achievement and productivity over emotional development and moral reflection. As a result, students may feel prepared to think and act strategically yet remain unprepared for the interpersonal and ethical complexities of leadership. Addressing this gap is essential for cultivating leaders who are practical and self-aware, responsible, and guided by integrity.

More constructively, the data reveal a modest positive correlation between the People and Self domains ($r = +0.25$), suggesting that interpersonal competence and ethical self-leadership tend to reinforce one another. This means that students who are more self-aware, capable of

reflecting on their values, emotions, and behaviours, are also more likely to develop empathy, build trust, and engage in meaningful collaboration with others. The ability to lead oneself ethically appears to support the ability to lead others effectively. This finding is consistent with the work of Boyatzis (2008) and Goleman (1995), who argue that emotionally intelligent leaders, those grounded in self-knowledge and guided by moral purpose, are more likely to build authentic relationships and influence through credibility and trust rather than positional authority. These competencies are not isolated traits but mutually reinforcing behaviours that emerge through personal reflection, emotional regulation, and social engagement.

4.4. Validation of Hypotheses

To ensure methodological robustness, the study tested two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1) anticipates that students will report higher self-assessed competence in the Thought and Results domains than in the People and Self domains.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) posits a significant positive correlation between the People and Self domains, reflecting the developmental interdependence between intrapersonal maturity and relational leadership.

The empirical data confirmed both hypotheses. As anticipated, students demonstrated more substantial confidence in the performance-oriented and analytical domains than in the ethical and interpersonal leadership domains. The statistical validation of Hypothesis 2 further supports the integrative models of leadership that treat self-awareness and social competence as interlinked foundations of influence (Goleman, 1995; Northouse, 2021).

4.5. Curricular Interventions and Educational Response

To address the developmental gaps identified in the Self and People domains (see Figure 5), this study proposes a set of empirically grounded interventions designed to strengthen ethical self-leadership, enhance emotional intelligence, and improve interpersonal competence. These interventions align with Petriglieri's (2011) leadership identity development model, which emphasises introspection, behavioural experimentation, and social feedback as foundational for leadership learning.

Table 3. Pedagogical interventions for leadership competency development aligned with SILDM domains

| Intervention | Description | Scholarly Source | Target Domain(s) |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Reflective Journaling | Fosters self-awareness, identity development, and values alignment | Goleman (1995); Komives et al. (2005) | Self |
| 2. Ethics-Based Case Studies | Enhances ethical reasoning and moral judgment through real-world scenarios | George (2003); Brown & Treviño (2006) | Self |
| 3. Peer Coaching and Mentorship | Develops relational trust and feedback literacy | Avolio (2005); Allen & Eby (2007) | People, Self |
| 4. Group-Based Problem Solving | Encourages collaborative engagement and distributed leadership | Johnson & Johnson (2003); Yukl (2013) | People |
| 5. Emotional Intelligence Training | Improves empathy, emotional regulation, and impulse control | Goleman (1995); Boyatzis (2008) | Self, People |
| 6. Role-Plays and Interpersonal Simulations | Provides practice in team leadership, trust-building, and conflict management | Day et al. (2014). Northouse (2021) | People |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Reflective journaling constitutes a critical pedagogical tool for cultivating ethically grounded and emotionally intelligent leadership. Through a sequence of structured writing exercises, students engage in systematic self-exploration that facilitates the integration of cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions of leadership development. *Narrative reflections* encourage students to analyse specific interpersonal experiences, such as conflict or collaboration, by examining their emotional responses and evaluating the impact of their behaviour on team dynamics. *Values clarification essays* prompt students to interrogate potential dissonances between personal moral frameworks and organisational norms, thereby fostering ethical discernment and principled decision-making. *Self-visioning tasks* further extend this reflective capacity by guiding students to construct aspirational leadership identities, articulating desired behaviours, ethical commitments, and developmental goals.

Ethics-based case studies serve as a critical pedagogical method for immersing students in complex, real-world dilemmas where conflicting stakeholder interests, values, and organisational pressures generate ethical ambiguity. These cases require students to engage in nuanced analysis through assignments such as detailed *case write-ups*, *position papers*, and *formal debates*, wherein they systematically identify ethical tensions, evaluate competing courses of action, and justify their decisions using established ethical theories and leadership principles. A representative task might involve dissecting a corporate governance failure, assigning responsibility across multiple actors, and proposing ethically defensible solutions that reconcile organisational imperatives with societal accountability.

Peer coaching and mentorship are relational, experience-based learning strategies that promote leadership development through sustained interpersonal engagement. Students are paired or grouped to engage in *regular, structured conversations* focused on personal growth. These dialogues centre on real leadership experiences, where participants reflect on challenges, articulate developmental goals, and exchange feedback using models such as *the Situation–Behaviour–Impact (SBI) framework*, which supports explicit, behaviour-specific critique. *Mentorship* builds on this foundation by connecting students with more experienced peers, professionals, or alumni, who provide guidance, encouragement, and role modelling. These mentoring relationships create a psychologically safe environment in which learners can explore vulnerabilities, test new behaviours, and gain perspective on ethical and interpersonal dimensions of leadership.

Group-based problem solving is a collaborative pedagogical approach that immerses students in complex, real-world challenges requiring collective analysis, negotiation, and decision-making. It provides a dynamic learning environment in which students experience the practical demands of teamwork, shared responsibility, and adaptive leadership. Typical tasks involve working on *interdisciplinary projects*, *strategic planning exercises*, or *crisis management simulations*, where teams must integrate multiple perspectives, resolve conflicts, and develop consensus-driven solutions. These activities encourage learners to apply theoretical knowledge in high-stakes, time-sensitive contexts while cultivating essential competencies such as communication, collaboration, and situational judgment.

Emotional intelligence training develops core leadership skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, and social awareness, which are crucial for managing interpersonal dynamics in diverse and high-pressure organisational settings. By combining theory with practical exercises, such as role-plays, mindfulness, and perspective-taking, students learn to recognise emotional cues, manage stress, and communicate with empathy. These abilities are especially valuable in team leadership, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making.

Role-plays and interpersonal simulations are *experiential learning methods* that allow students to practise leadership behaviours and interpersonal skills in realistic, *structured scenarios*. These techniques help develop key competencies, such as trust-building, conflict resolution, persuasive communication, and ethical decision-making skills, which are essential for navigating high-pressure business environments. Examples include *simulating negotiations*, *performance reviews*, or *crisis management situations* that require emotional regulation and strategic thinking.

These interventions form *an integrated pedagogical framework* that addresses the underdeveloped competencies in the Self and People domains by linking experiential learning with ethical, emotional, and relational growth.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study was designed as a foundational intervention in the evolving discourse on leadership development, aiming to assess the leadership readiness of first-year bachelor students in economics and business disciplines. It employed the Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ (Korn Ferry Institute, 2014), a globally validated competency model, within the integrative structure of the Synced Integrated Leadership Development Model (SILDm), a conceptual framework to embed behavioural, ethical, and intercultural dimensions into leadership formation from the earliest stages of higher education.

5.1. Diagnosing a Competency Imbalance

The results revealed a marked imbalance between students' confidence in the cognitive-performance domains (Thought and Results) and the relational-ethical domains (Self and People). Cognitive and execution-oriented competencies are not inherently problematic; in fact, they are highly desirable. They underpin a student's capacity to formulate strategies, prioritise deliverables, and solve problems under pressure. In professional settings, these competencies manifest in financial modelling, strategic planning, or operations management, all of which rely on mental agility and clarity of execution.

However, leadership does not occur in a vacuum of cognitive prowess. Thought and Results domains, though essential, operate in tandem with and are ultimately enabled by the competencies within People and Self. In environments characterised by ambiguity, ethical tension, or human complexity, the leader's ability to engage others, self-regulate under pressure, and act with authenticity is not an auxiliary skill set but a core requirement. The current educational landscape, by privileging performative success, risks producing technically able graduates who may struggle with leadership responsibilities that require adaptive judgment and relational acumen.

5.2. Why the Gaps Matter

This developmental asymmetry should be interpreted not as an isolated gap but as a systemic pattern with far-reaching implications. From an educational standpoint, it reflects a longstanding overemphasis on individual academic performance at the expense of behavioural and emotional development. From a business perspective, it signals a misalignment between graduate competencies and the evolving leadership requirements of modern organisations, which demand emotional resilience, ethical adaptability, and intercultural fluency (Korn Ferry Institute, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2020).

Employers today seek candidates who can effectively navigate hybrid teams, exercise sound moral judgment, and maintain composure under pressure. These capabilities are embedded in the Self and People domains. For example, delivering performance feedback, negotiating with stakeholders, or coordinating multicultural projects each require emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and behavioural flexibility. These competencies are neither innate nor coincidental; they are cultivated, and higher education must take an active role in their development.

5.3. Advancing Behavioural Leadership in Curriculum

To realign educational priorities with the evolving demands of contemporary leadership, this study advances a coherent three-pronged strategy designed to systematically embed leadership development into the fabric of undergraduate education. First, leadership must be integrated as a foundational competency within undergraduate curricula, particularly in disciplines such as business and economics. This integration should not be viewed as a peripheral enhancement or optional opportunity, but rather as a central educational requirement. By introducing leadership education from the outset, institutions can ensure that students develop cognitive skills and the interpersonal and ethical capacities essential for long-term effectiveness in diverse leadership contexts. Second, the incorporation of research-informed pedagogical interventions is essential for bridging developmental gaps. Practices such as reflective journaling (Goleman, 1995), ethical scenario analysis (George, 2003), peer coaching (Avolio, 2005), and intercultural simulations (Livermore, 2015) must be institutionalised as core components of leadership formation. Third, the diagnostic and developmental application of empirically grounded behavioural frameworks, such as the Korn Ferry Leadership Architect (Korn Ferry Institute, 2014), enables precise mapping of strengths and gaps at individual and cohort levels, allowing institutions to tailor learning outcomes, curricular interventions, and developmental programming with scientific rigour.

5.4. Reframing Leadership Education as an Institutional Mandate

The findings of this study underscore the need to rethink leadership education as a foundational component of undergraduate learning. Rather than positioning leadership development as a specialised or delayed endeavour, the results demonstrate that essential competencies, such as ethical self-regulation and interpersonal effectiveness, can and should be developed systematically from the outset of academic training. This shift reflects a broader imperative: to equip future leaders with analytical skills, ethical sensitivity, cultural awareness, and relational agility, and to ensure a pedagogical transition toward integrated, developmentally aligned leadership curricula that reflect the multidimensional nature of leadership in the twenty-first century.

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