

Students' Experiences of their Leadership Development through the Leadership Subject Taught in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Abdul Qawi Noori  

Assistant Professor, English Department of Takhar University, Afghanistan

✉ **Corresponding Author:** Abdul Qawi Noori, **E-mail:** abdulqawi.noory@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: May 08, 2021

Accepted: August 15, 2021

Volume: 3

Issue: 8

DOI: 10.32996/jweep.2021.3.8.1

KEYWORDS

Leadership Development, Student Achievement, Curriculum, University Compulsory Courses, Leadership Subject

ABSTRACT

Leadership is the process of influencing followers to achieve a goal. This study aims to explore the Afghan postgraduate students' experiences of their leadership development through the leadership course taught in Universiti Teknologi, Malaysia. A quantitative research design was employed in the study. An online survey questionnaire with 19 items was used to collect the data. The survey questionnaire was administered to all 46 postgraduate students in Social Sciences, Humanities and Science faculties, but only 42 of them responded to the online survey. Statistical Package for Social Sciences has been used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the mean, frequency and percentage. Inferential statistics such as Independent Sample T-Test and One Way ANOVA were used to find out the differences in the responses of the participants by their demographic variables, i.e., gender, year of study, faculty, work experience and age. The finding showed that the students had a positive perception of the leadership course. The participants believed that the course helped them to improve their leadership skills. The study recommends that the leadership course be taught in Afghanistan universities since it plays a crucial part in developing leadership skills in students, which is crucial for their career after graduation.

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, student development is an important issue in higher education. Universities need to improve the leadership and communication skills of the students and it is imperative for them to prepare and transfer students to the job market and other organizations. Well-structured programs help students to learn the required skills to become quality future leaders (Bin-Mat et al., 2013). Many universities and educational institutions develop courses and offer leadership programs to improve students' achievement.

There are different types of courses offered by the universities and educational institutions around the world. These include university's compulsory courses, faculty's compulsory courses, program's compulsory courses, elective courses and optional courses. Dynamics of Leadership is a university compulsory course taught for postgraduate students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. This course is three credits which is taken in a semester. In this course, the students study leadership theories, leadership behavior and motivation, power, politics, networking and negotiation, different leadership styles, relationship between leader and followers, principles of leadership and the application of leadership theories in professional and personal life. This course helped students to develop their leadership and communicational skills. In addition to the lectures, presentations, and practical activities in the class, students had to have short talks, prepare a high-quality portfolio, and submit it to the lecturer to evaluate students' achievement and learning performance.

Around 65 Afghan students were majoring in different fields in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and 46 of them took the course of Dynamics of Leadership in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities between Semester I, 2018 and Semester II, 2020. However, all of the participants were lecturers in different public universities in Afghanistan and it is the first time for Afghan

lecturers who were getting their master /PHD degree in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia to study leadership course. The researcher was also one of the students who took the leadership course and experienced a practical class for leadership development. So the researcher found the course and its contents interesting and precious to research whether the course has influenced these students or not. Therefore, this study explored the perception and experiences of Afghan students about their leadership development and the Leadership Course (UPPF6033) taught in the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Leadership

The term "leadership" was defined by different scholars and presented in a wide range in the literature (Smith, 2007). It was defined as the process of guiding others in a different way (Surji, 2015). Fernandez and Rainey (2006) stated that the word leadership refers to directing and guiding others to achieve a goal through change. Leadership shows the ability of individuals who direct, lead, and guide followers in a community or an organization (Smith, 2007). Leadership is an approach whereby an individual influences a team or group to achieve a certain task (Surji, 2015). Bolden et al. (2008) argued that leadership is like the Abominable Snowman, whose footpaths are anywhere, but that is nowhere to be seen. Thomas (2008) indicated that leadership can be a trade in the hope that the leader has the qualifications and abilities to guide a group or groups of people. Andriani et al. (2018) believed that leadership is a process which the leader influences subordinates by encouraging, directing, inspiring and motivating them to achieve their goals. Bolden et al. (2003) believed that leadership is a method which the leader inspires others to move along to accomplish a certain objective.

The concept of leadership has been extensively used and applied in different fields such as business, military operations, politics, and education (Selznick, 2011). In the business, the role of the organizational leaders is crucial to motivate their subordinates (Wang et al., 2010). Manzoor (2012) argued that inspiring employees provokes them to achieve the goal of the organization. In military operations, good leaders may stop a war or end a conflict (Zartman, 2019). Yukl (2012) stated that effective leaders make wise and informed decisions and know how to react in different situations. Political leaders inspire others to take different initiatives and make changes in their communities (King, 2017). Bayat (2012) indicated that political leaders are public servants and always strive to work for the betterment of their societies. Caldwell (2012) also added that the followers admire the services of their leaders and honor them all the time. In education, good leaders improve the education system so that everyone has an equal opportunity to learn and acquire knowledge (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Williams and Williams (2011) also added that good educational leaders grow a motivating and positive culture in schools, boosting students' achievement.

Different kinds of leadership styles help leaders make decisions (Atkočiūnienė et al., 2018). It is the leader who chooses a certain leadership style (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 2017). Some organizations may choose the same leadership style, while others choose a different one based on the nature of work and differentially of their task performance (Gipson et al., 2017). The truth is that the culture and goal of organizations determine the type of leadership style chosen by their leaders (Appelbaum et al., 2015). Some people may think that a leadership style is better than others (Renko et al., 2015). In fact, every leadership has its own place and situation in the toolkit of the leader (Senge, et al., 2017). Wise leaders may mix different leadership styles, but they may flex from one leadership style to another based on the circumstances (Priest & Gass, 2018). Great leaders always come up with a particular applicable leadership style to motivate, direct, guide and inspire others (Marques, 2015).

2.2 Student Development

One of the main goals of higher education is to improve and boost students' achievement (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2008). Higher education institutions focus on different dimensions such as the students' social, moral, spiritual, civic, intellectual, and physical development (Chan, 2016). Students improve their knowledge throughout their time at the college and establish a belief system that impacts their life and experience (Hernandez, 2019). Their development can influence their thinking, feeling and behavior (Altan et al., 2019). Thus, when students develop, they make a difference in society and accept social responsibilities (Doh & Guay, 2006). The association of American Colleges and Universities empathized on colleges and educational institutions' significant role in boosting students' outcomes (Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019).

Students' achievement in college is influenced by curriculum, colleges' environment, curricular and co-curricular activities (Bowman, 2010). Esterhazy and Damşa (2019) argued that the meaning-making of how students make sense of their activities at the university is very important. It is best when they grapple well with the knowledge and understand redefining their goals (Laurillard, 2013). In addition, making a symbiotic relationship with the environment helps students to develop in college. This notion is supported by theories of students' development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Chickering and Braskamp (2009) indicated that students need to make a good relationship with their learning environment and improve their achievement. Chickering and Reisser (1993) indicated that the students' academic achievement is boosted during their time at the university. Seven vectors like developing competence, managing emotions, autonomy, integrity, maturing involvement, establishing an

identity and developing a purpose play a significant role in developing students' achievement. Dalina (2016) declared that students' motivation helps them to improve their leadership skills at the university and school level.

2.3 Related Studies

Many studies were conducted to study the important role of universities and colleges in developing students' achievement (Li et al., 2018; Van et al., 2018; Kang & Keinonen, 2018; Han et al., 2017; Mushtaq & Khan, 2012; Hernandez, 2019; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014; Alsubaie et al., 2019; Dennis et al., 2005; Rose, 2020; Han & Yi, 2019). Koshkin et al. (2018) stated that students develop when they appropriately use the opportunities and resources at the college. Dwyer and Walsh (2020) argued that universities and colleges could improve their students' achievement through conferences, trainings, workshops and other learning programs. Jabarullah and Hussain (2019) believed that well designed curriculum helps students to improve their leadership skills. They also added that students who worked harder gained better scores and skills. Furthermore, Moreira et al. (2020) added that students who adapted deep approaches to learning achieved higher than those who adapted surface learning. Moreover, Akhmetshin et al. (2019) believed that a good learning environment positively impacted students' leadership development. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) claimed that college resources strongly influence students' leadership development.

Jonathan (2020) studied college students' leadership development in 87 colleges and universities in the United States and collected data from 36000 respondents through a survey questionnaire. The study found that most of the students had a positive perception of their leadership development in college. It also revealed that there was a negative association between work and skill development of students. This meant that students who had a job and worked gained lower grades than those who did not work during their study. Additionally, Zheng et al. (2019) stated that the class activities strongly impacted students' learning outcomes and leadership skills. Likewise, Mozhgan et al. (2011) studied the Iranian students' leadership development and found that factors like students' involvement in college, students' emotional intelligence, students' self-confidence, self-efficacy, college environment, students' relationship and good use of teaching methods affected students' leadership development. Orfan et al. (2021) found that most Afghan instructors used traditional teaching methods in language classes, adversely impacting students' achievement and language fluency. Bauer and Liang (2003) also believed that students' efforts and class activities were effective in developing their leadership skills at the university.

Mozhgan et al. (2011) studied the role of associations in developing Engineering students' leadership development in Iran. They collected data from 42 Engineering students using a semi-structured interview and found that the students' academic association significantly affected their leadership development. The study also found that students' involvement, classroom activities, learning environment, and relationships in campus played a significant role in developing their leadership skills. This finding is supported by Astin (1999) theory of student development which indicates that students' involvement is important in developing students' skills in college.

Nicole (2012) studied leadership development of Australian and New Zealand students and found that positive perceptions about leadership improved students' leadership skills. The study also found that gender had a negative effect on leadership development. Noori et al. (2020) studied the university lecturers' behaviors and students' motivation and found a statistically significant correlation between lectures' behavior and students' motivation. In addition, Noori et al. (2021) found that the university lecturers' behavior affects students' learning outcome leadership skills. Furthermore, Steven and Jamaliah (2015) conducted a study to explore the relationship between campus- leadership development and students motivation among undergraduate students in Malaysia. They collected data from 368 participants and found that students' involvement and class activities significantly impacted students' leadership development. Sara et al. (2011) studied students' leadership development and behavior before and after taking a management course and found that students' leadership skills were significantly improved after taking the management course.

University graduates will experience un-estimated situations in the workplace. Thus, their leadership skills will help them tackle their working environment problems (Kunz & Garner, 2007). Many studies were conducted to explore the role of college and universities in student development, but very limited studies investigated the effectiveness of specific courses on student development particularly, no study was found to investigate students' experience about their leadership development by taking leadership courses at the university/. Astin and Astin (200) argued that leadership development is a learning process and students' leadership students' competencies are improved through education and trainings of leadership principles. Therefore, this study will add to the body of knowledge and academic literature by investigating postgraduate students' experiences of their leadership development through the leadership course taught in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study has employed a quantitative research design. Quantitative research is the method which is used to provide numerical information that was statistically analyzed (Creswell, 2012). An online survey questionnaire with 19 items was used to collect the data from 42 postgraduate students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

3.2 Instrumentation

The researcher has developed the questionnaire after a thoughtful literature review. Reviewing the past literature helps researchers develop a good questionnaire (Orfan & Noori, 2021; Noori & Orfan, 2021). An online survey questionnaire was used in data collection. The questionnaire contained three sections. The first section with 5 items sought students' demographic profiles. The second part contained 13 items that explored the perception of students about leadership course and leadership development of students and the third section with 6 items asked about the importance of leadership from students' perspective.

3.3 Participants

The population of the study was Afghan postgraduate students who were majoring in different fields in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. A population is a group of people who have the chance of being selected to participate in a research study (Creswell, 2012). The researcher has targeted the students in the faculties of Science and Social Sciences and Humanities because they took the course of Dynamics of Leadership at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. All 46 students were asked to fill out an online survey questionnaire. From the total number of respondents, only 42 responded to the survey questionnaire.

Table 1 shows that only 24% of the respondents were female and 76% were male. Demographic analysis shows that half of the respondents were under 30 and most of them had at least five years of teaching experience in Afghanistan universities. Table 1 indicates that the vast majority of the respondents took the course in their first year of study and around 76% of them were from the faculty of social sciences and humanities and only 24% of them were from the faculty of science.

Table 1 : Demographic analysis of the respondents

Demographic Information		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	32	76.2
	Female	10	23.8
	Total	42	100.0
Age	20-24	3	7.1
	25-29	21	50.0
	30-34	16	38.1
	35 and Above	2	4.8
	Total	42	100.0
Work Experience	1-2 Years	8	19.0
	3-4 Years	9	21.4
	5-6	21	50.0
	6 and Above	4	9.5
	Total	42	100.0
Year of Study	First Year	39	92.9
	Second Year	3	7.1
	Total	42	100.0
Faculty	Science	10	23.8
	Social Sciences and Humanities	32	76.2
	Total	42	100.0

3.4 Validity and Reliability

2 lecturers in the faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities were asked to check and confirm the questionnaire. The problematic items were modified and improved after a thoughtful revision. A pilot study was conducted before the actual study and 20 students were asked to fill out the questionnaire. A pilot study is a preliminary investigation that helps researchers to determine the consistency of their study (Creswell, 2012). The Cronbach Alpha Statistics (Test of Reliability) results showed that all the items had an overall value of 0.88 (Table 2), which indicated higher reliability of the questionnaire.

Table 2 : Reliability Statistics

Category	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Students' Perception about the Leadership Course	13	0.87
Importance of Leadership	6	0.81
Overall	19	0.88

3.5 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS Version 25. Descriptive statistics were used to find the mean, frequency and percentage. Inferential statistics were used to find the differences in the participants' responses, i.e. Independent Samples t –Test was used to find the difference in the responses of the participants by their gender, year of study and Field of Study. One-way ANOVA was used to find the differences in the responses of the students by their age and work experience.

4. Results

4.1 Students' Perception of the Leadership Course

The first 13 items of the questionnaire sought the perception of Afghan students about the leadership course. The results indicated that the students positively perceived the leadership course taught in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Table 3 shows that 90% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that the leadership course helped them set high educational goals and improve their thinking and writing skills. Around 77% of the respondents accepted that the leadership course helped them apply leadership skills in their personal and professional lives and continuously review their achievements. 85% of the students believed that the leadership course helped them take complex tasks easy, improve their leadership skills, influence their followers, feel positive changes in their lives, be motivated learners, and be responsible lecturers. 88% of them stated that they attended no leadership course before taking leadership course in UTM and 79% of them believed that there was no university and faculty compulsory course linked to Dynamics of Leadership in Afghan universities.

Table 3 : Students' Perception about the leadership course

Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree	Mean
Leadership course helped me to set high educational goals.	90%	3.79
Leadership course helped me to improve my thinking skills	88%	3.86
Leadership course helped me to continuously review my achievement.	88%	3.81
Leadership course helped me to apply leadership skills in my life.	86%	3.76
Leadership course helped me to take difficult tasks easy.	79%	3.64
Leadership course helped me to influence my students (followers).	93%	3.83
I feel positive changes after attending the leadership class.	81%	3.79
Leadership course helped me to be a motivated learner.	79%	3.79
Leadership course helped me to improve my writing skill	88%	3.86
I attended no leadership course before studying at UTM.	88%	3.81
Leadership course helped me to be a responsible lecturer.	86%	3.76
There is no university/faculty compulsory course linked with leadership course in my home institution.	79%	3.64
My leadership skills improved after attending the leadership class.	93%	3.83
Overall Mean		3.81

4.2 Importance of Leadership

The second 6 items aimed to find out the importance of leadership from Afghan postgraduate students' perspective. Table 4 shows that 90% of the respondents believed that people who get senior positions must learn leadership skills. 93% of them recommended that the leadership course should be added to the curriculum of Afghan universities. Around 80% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that leadership course is important for every field. 93% of them believed that the leadership course is significant for their future career, and 90% stated that the leadership course is crucial for improving their knowledge.

Table 4 : Importance of leadership from student's perspective

Statement	Strongly Agree/Agree	Mean
People who get high positions must learn leadership skills	90%	3.81
I recommend leadership course to be taught in Afghan Universities.	93%	3.83
I think leadership course is important for every field of study	79%	3.64
Beside teaching and learning, leadership is an important job.	90%	3.81
I feel that leadership course is important for my future career.	93%	3.86
Leadership course is crucial for improving my knowledge.	90%	3.88
Overall Mean		3.91

4.3 Analysis based on students' demographic variables

The researcher conducted Independent Samples T-test and One-Way ANOVA to measure the differences in the response of the participants by their gender, year of study, faculty, working experience and age. As table 5 shows, the p-values of independent samples t –tests for gender, year of study and faculty (0.25, 0.054, 0.10) are greater than the alpha level (0.05). Furthermore, One-Way ANOVA tests were conducted to examine the impact of participants working experience and age on their responses. Results demonstrated that the p-values (0.27, 0.62) are greater than the alpha level (0.05). Thus, it is concluded that the participants' demographic variables, i.e., gender, year of study, field of study, working experience and age, did not have any significant impact on their responses.

Table 5 : Inferential statistical analysis for demographic variables

Variables		N	Mean	SD	P-Value
Gender	Male	32	3.7005	0.62	0.25
	Female	10	3.828	0.53	
Year of Study	First Year	39	3.7629	0.62	0.10
	Second Year	3	3.5714	0.48	
Faculty	Science	10	3.7528	0.54	0.054
	Social Sciences and Humanities	32	3.2727	0.12	
Work Experience	1-2 Years	8	3.7528	0.54	0.27
	3-4 Years	9	3.7629	0.62	
	5-6 Years	21	3.2727	0.12	
	6 and Above	4	3.8125	0.68	
Age	20-24 Years Old	3	3.7528	0.54	0.62
	25-29 Years Old	21	3.8125	0.68	
	30-34 Years Old	16	3.2727	0.12	
	35 and Above Years Old	2	3.8125	0.68	

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the perception of Afghan postgraduate students of their leadership development through the leadership course taught in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. It also explored the differences in the students' responses by their demographic variables such as gender, year of study, faculty, work experience and age. The study's findings showed that the students positively perceived the leadership course taught in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The finding of the study is in line with the study by Jonathan (2020) who studied college students' leadership development in 87 colleges and universities in the United States and found that most of the respondents had a positive perception about their leadership development in college. The vast majority of the respondents believed that the leadership course helped them set high educational goals, take difficult tasks easy, and improve their thinking and writing skills. In addition, they declared that the leadership course helped them continuously review their achievement, be a motivated learner, and influence their followers. Furthermore, the course helped the students to apply leadership principles and theories in their life, feel positive and be responsible lecturers in the future. The findings displayed that only a few of the students have taken leadership courses before coming to UTM. They also vowed that their leadership skills were improved after attending the leadership course in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. They stated that there is no university and faculty compulsory course in Afghanistan universities linked to the course of Dynamics of Leadership taught in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

The study also found that a huge number of respondents believed that leadership is essential for their future careers and is very important for university lecturers. Moreover, they asserted that people who get senior positions must learn leadership skills because they have to lead different people from different cultures and backgrounds. This finding supports the study carried out by Alghamdi and Malekan (2020) who found that managing different groups of people from different countries and backgrounds is more challengeable than those of the same background. As a result, universities and educational institutions play a significant role in growing influential leaders and change-makers in societies. Additionally, a huge number of respondents stated that a leadership course is essential for improving their knowledge and recommended being taught in Afghanistan universities.

The study's finding also revealed that there were statistically no significant differences in the participants' responses by their demographic variables such as, gender, year of study, faculty, work experience, and age.

6. Conclusion

Leadership is a concept in which leaders can use to influence their followers. Operational leadership and management lead by example, which means that leadership and management skills help people have high social conduct with their followers and improve their understanding. Doubtlessly, the leadership skill of the lecturers influences students' achievement and learning performance. In addition, in educational institutions, the good leadership skills of administrators, heads of departments, and staff directly impact the behavior and learning outcome of the students. Consequently, instructors and students feel supported by learning leadership knowledge and will perform difficult tasks by having good leadership skills.

This study found that almost all of the respondents agreed that leadership course has changed their behavior, helped them handle difficult situations, set high educational goals and played a significant role in enhancing students' skills. Most importantly, as the respondents have teaching experience in different universities in Afghanistan, they recommended adding leadership courses in universities in Afghanistan.

The study also found that a huge number of respondents stated that people who get senior positions must learn leadership skills because these skills will help tackle organizational problems. Similarly, the results of the study showed that the leadership course is important for every field of the study. In addition, the study found that leadership course is crucial and important for professional development of the students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Students believed that they learnt lots of new information about the leadership and the course was very effective for them because they practised several leadership skills and were engaged in different activities.

This study is important because the respondents were junior Afghan lecturers pursuing their postgraduate study in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and after they go back home, they might feel some positive changes in their leadership and behavioral skills. Furthermore, it is also beneficial for readers who study leadership in any university in the world.

The limitations of the study were time limitations and the availability of an equal number of male and female respondents. Future researchers are recommended to target both national and international students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and other universities around the globe.

Funding : The author received no funding for this research.

Conflicts of Interest: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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