

ENHANCING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: THE CASE OF ROMANIA

Mariana DRĂGUȘIN¹
Andreea Simona SĂSEANU²

ABSTRACT

A Leadership Education fitting the today's new networked and collaborative organizations is a real challenge for Higher Education Institutions in order to prepare their students to implement leadership knowledge, along with the needed judgement and skills into sophisticated systems of relationships they face. This conceptual paper is focusing on new trends in Leadership Education in general, underlying their main strengths (transformation leadership, relational leadership model, emotional intelligence, total leadership etc.) and on Leadership Education specificity in Romania. A short overview of current practices is provided as the outcome of an empirical desk research, along with the results of an exploratory quantitative scientific investigation on a sample of 92 master program graduates. The paper's authors are proposing a set of feasible measures that can lead to a more effective leadership education and incorporates a holistic approach, aiming both theory and practice and also emphasizing a high ethic dimension. Persons responsible for developing and running the leadership education effort can use the information to identify potential applications at their own university.

KEYWORDS: *Emotional Intelligence, Higher Education Institutions, Leadership Education, Total Leadership, Transformational Leadership.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *A2, I12, M5*

1. INTRODUCTION

The new digital era requires a new type of leadership: a more agile and entrepreneurial one, able to give meaning and purpose, to develop a sense of collective spirit, to boost engagement and loyalty. Leadership is fast shifting from being leader centred, individualistic, outlining hierarchy and power over followers, to one that is process centred, collective, non-hierarchical, context-bound and based on mutual power and influence processes (Kezar et al., 2006). In today's fluid environment the new generation of leaders will need a wide range of competences and skills in a variety of domains, as well as the skills and experience to work with diverse people at all levels of society. Paradigms are dramatically shifting in order to face unprecedented challenges of an emerging multigenerational collaborative culture (Bragan Balda & Mora, 2011).

In this changing context it is generally accepted that proper Leadership Education is a key to success at professional and personal levels. Leadership Education is an effective tool to stimulate students' mindsets, encourage innovation, and develop critical and strategic thinking. It is commonly accepted that leaders are not born but rather the result of proper training and continuous personal development. LE can and must contribute to raising students' capacity to better cope with the myriad of demands and expectations in today's complex work environment.

¹ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, mariana.dragusin@com.ase.ro

² Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, andreea.saseanu@com.ase.ro

There is a major gap between the demand for effective leaders and their availability. This situation is a concern for both Higher Education Institutions and employers in the context of a new networked, interconnected digital generation. Leadership Education is a life long journey and Higher Education Institutions can and must have an important contribution.

Leadership Education has to evolve along with the fast changing environment by incorporating new approaches. While learning encompasses education, training and experience, each component is unevenly weighted in Higher Education Institutions. There is no universal "recipe" on how to best teach Leadership but the accumulated experience can be an important starting point for universities in former centralised countries, like Romania.

2. HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS - NEW APPROACHES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

In today's highly dynamic and connected world the need for innovative, transformational leaders is huge. Leadership Education can accelerate the development of future effective leaders and it has to be reengineered, according to new expectations. Therefore, formal Leadership Education is needed and Higher Education Institutions should be an important part of it, addressing all three domains: knowledge (knowing), skills (being), attitude (doing).

Several recent papers are underlining Higher Education Institutions' responsibilities, emphasising the need for a revolution in teaching in order to meet people's expectations who are "relying on university education to help secure their future" (Pounder, 2014).

Higher Education Institutions should provide a rigorous and productive learning experience, highly valued by employers. Leadership programs should emphasize the action component of leadership studies, with a stress on specific skills—e.g., facilitation, decision making, conflict resolution. As outlined by specialists (Perruci, 2014) "Leadership development goes beyond the intellectual mastery of theories and models and connects knowledge to experience".

Approaches regarding Leadership Education in connection with Higher Education Institutions role have widely evolved. Among the emerging ones is the new focus not only on educating students for intellectual development but for life too (Middleton, 2015). Supporters emphasise that Leadership Education in Higher Education Institutions should provide higher value added, social cohesiveness, active citizenship, adaptability, satisfaction and higher motivation. Students are no longer simple knowledge receivers but persons, each with his/her individuality, potential and ability to build new approaches. Leadership Education in Higher Education Institutions should support a self-discovery process for each student, helping them to develop strengths and overcome weaknesses, provide tools to chart individual progress towards one's goals. Students have to discover the leadership style that naturally suits him/her.

Specialists are also signalling the need for re-conceptualisation of "the notion of a singular, stable, standardised knowledge base and to replace it with a more accurate and dynamic perspective consistent with growing and vibrant fields of theories and practice" (Eacott, 2011).

Meaningful course content is using modern, innovative solutions. Leadership Education should be helping students understanding their capability of becoming effective leaders and supporting them in developing their leadership potential. Leadership Education has to demonstrate how the major concepts and theories can be applied into practice.

By incorporating new theories/ models/ concepts, students' leadership development can be accelerated.

The Relational Leadership Model (RLM), for example, can teach students relational and ethical processes useful when attempting to accomplish positive changes in groups (Komives et al., 2013). As characterised by its authors RLM is:

- Inclusive (of people and diverse points of view);
- Empowering (of others who are involved);
- Purposeful (having an individual commitment to a goal or activity);

- Collaborative (it is also the individual's ability to collaborate and find common ground with others, to establish a common purpose, vision for a group, or work toward the public);
- Ethical (driven by values and standards of Leadership which is "good" or moral in nature);
- Process-oriented (how the group goes about being, remaining a group and accomplishing its purpose).

Several recent works (Goleman et al., 2013), (Shankman et al., 2015) in the field are relating emotional intelligence to leaders' higher levels of success. Leadership programs can help students to develop personal and social competences associated with emotional intelligence. Targeted activities can make the transition from theory to practice through guided immersive and transformative educational experiences in the classroom, aiming at specific learning outcomes. Fostering growth and promoting intense self-reflection can lead to more empowered students able to develop into the effective leaders of the future.

Congruent with the previous view, Transformational Leadership approach supports processes like translating strategy into action, developing students' capabilities, building strategic relationships, and leveraging their emotional intelligence. The new model of Total Leadership (Friedman, 2008) provides a holistic approach of leadership, regarding four major areas extended from self and work to home and community too. The model offers a compelling new framework that can lead to greater success in all 4 domains, that are mutually reinforcing each other and, if put into practice, can become a rich and productive experience at all levels. Teaching this model can provide students with a strong, comprehensive tool able to deliver profound results and meaningful experiences.

Alternative learning resources can be added to traditional on campus Leadership Education. These could include replacing some lectures with online modules that students can work through outside the classroom. This increasingly popular method known as "flipping the classroom", would give the chance of freeing up class time for more interactive projects and exercises. Universities would probably focus more on the social learning of leadership concepts and theories, rather than the actual content of the learning. Courses would probably be more project based or group-oriented activities that would favour discussions, debates etc. able to enhance student' creativity and to improve theory retention. Blending academic study with practical, high-level online experiences has the potential to advance leadership skills of talented young students. High quality Leadership online courses, provided by platforms like Coursera and EdX, can expand participants existing knowledge within a supportive, multicultural environment.

Leadership is a soft topic requiring a strong cross-disciplinary approach in order to provide a holistic leadership education for students, along with the traditional functional knowledge (theories, styles, practices, applications). A multi-staged approach - with skills refined in all disciplines is needed in order to build effective communication abilities, competences associated with emotional intelligence, critical thinking, understanding change, decision making etc.

Also, Higher Education Institutions have to address both students and lifelong learning individuals willing to re-skill or up-skill.

Global perspective, or the integration and internalization of a strong ethics are some of the Leadership Education's critical issues, only partially solved (Rausch & Allio, 2005). Even though, both global and ethical dimensions have been incorporated in universities' curricula, the building of associated skills and commitment are imperative.

Higher Education Institutions in countries with low experience in the failed of Leadership Education, like Romania, have to overcome additional limitations and implement new, innovative pedagogical methods, in order to building appropriate skills their students.

3. CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF LEADERSHIP EDUCATION IN ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Since turning toward a market economy, Romanian higher education system changed dramatically during the last quarter century both in quantitative terms, as in qualitative ones. An increased

number of universities (106) (according to Infoportal, 2016) out of which almost half (49) are private owned, led to a diversified education offer.

Our empirical desk research regarding Leadership Education has revealed the early stage in which Romanian Higher Education Institutions are in the present.

Although the information regarding each Higher Education Institutions curricula are not always available online (or cannot be accessed from the outside) and articles or paper on the topic of Leadership Education are extremely scarce, some common *characteristics* related to Leadership Education can be pointed out (Table 1):

- Leadership as a discipline is not yet well spread in the universities' curricula;
- It present mainly in business oriented universities/ faculties, with some exceptions);
- There is diversity regarding the level at which the Leadership discipline is taught (undergraduate, graduate, MBA);
- Leadership courses are provided under different titles, suggesting in some cases cross- disciplinary approaches too;
- Where available the leadership curricula is knowledge centred, emphasising mostly the field's theories; there are additional for-credit courses, but centred on management perspective (for example: Organisational management, Change Management, Conflict Management, Decision Making; Business Ethics etc.);
- Course content is mainly conceived upon foreign resources (based on professors' high access to books and journals);
- Case-study led instruction and project based approach are dominant as methods used during seminars; generally, students are required to complete specific activities (quizzes, assignments, papers, create artefacts) for formative evaluation done by the professor.
- The cross-disciplinary leadership approach is at its beginning and far from being transformed in an intentional, well build model;
- There are no coherent leadership focused programs;
- Insufficient training of the staff teaching Leadership; most of the professors had to learn "on the go";
- learning outcomes are weakly monitored, regularly in terms of the ability of students to master the content of the field and only on short term (usually until the end of the course).

Table 1. Universities/ faculties including Leadership courses in their curricula

	University	Faculty of:	Level taught:	Name of the course:
1.	The Bucharest University of Economic Studies	Administration and Public Management	graduate	Organizational Leadership and Communication
		International Business and Economics	graduate	Leadership and Organizational Communication
		Management	graduate	Leadership and Organizational Behaviour (1st year of study); Leadership and Organizational Change (2nd year of study)
		Bucharest Business School	MBA	Entrepreneurship and Leadership
2	A.I.Cuza University of Iasi	Economics and Business Administration	graduate	Leadership
3	Babes Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca	Business	undergraduate	Leadership
4	The West University of Timisoara	Sociology and Psychology	undergraduate	Leadership and Management
5	Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu	Law	graduate	Leadership and management in the Public Sector

Source: <http://planinvatamant.ase.ro/>, <http://www.faa.unibuc.ro/>, <http://www.uaic.ro/studii/facultati-2/facultatea-de-economie-si-administrarea-afacerilor/>, http://www.ubbcluj.ro/ro/programe_academice/, <https://www.uvt.ro/ro/educatie/facultati/facultatea-de-sociologie-si-psihologie/>, <http://www.ulbsibiu.ro/ro/facultati/drept/>

We are estimating that their exposure as employees to the working environment's diverse types of relationships, leadership ones included, may have improved the accuracy of their answers to our questionnaire. (Figure 1.)

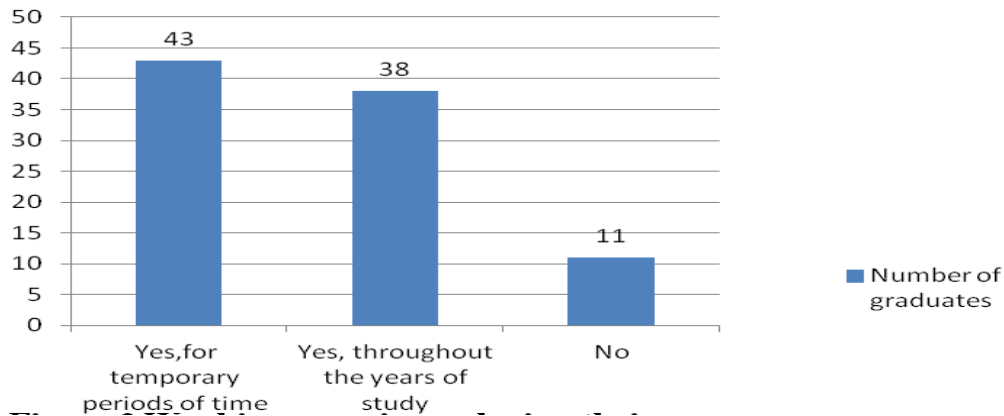


Figure 1. Working experience during university studies

Source: authors

Most of those questioned (87 people out of the 92) agreed that Leadership Education is a must to reach professional success, only 2 stated that LE is not vital for their future career and only 3 have chosen the "I don't know" answer. (Figure 2.)

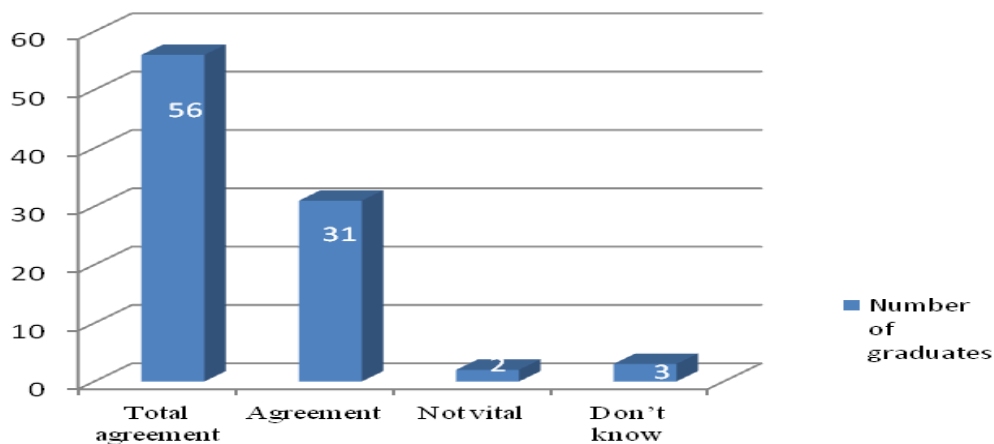


Figure 2. Respondents' perception on the importance of Leadership Education for a job

Source: authors

A surprisingly high number of respondents (over 84%) still believe that innate traits are required in order to become an effective leader. In our view this is a proof that the university Leadership Education mostly failed in the attempt to developing students' right mindset that of leadership skills acquired as a result of a continuous process of learning and development. However, 61 people (66.3%) have admitted that the completion of a Leadership course is a determinant of their ability to become leaders. Concurrently, experience and effort to refine specific abilities were also considered by over 90% of all respondents among major factors impacting ones' chances to become an effective leader. The majority (86.8%) of those included in our study reported several situations in which they've displayed leadership behaviour. A low number of respondents perceive themselves as "uncomfortable" in a leader position is (12.3%). Over 84% out of the total are aware that they should try to fulfil a leadership role anytime required.

Leadership is usually associated (70% of all) with persons in a high level management position, even though 52 respondents out of all 92 agree that leadership skills can be expressed at all hierarchical levels.

Asked about leadership education during their university studies, 53.2% of the studied graduates highly agreed, and 35 of them (38%) agreed that they have been familiarised with the main leadership concepts and theories. In the majority's perception (67.4%), university leadership education also helped in building adequate skills. However, half of them complained about the insufficient time assigned for the leadership course and about mostly theory centred approach (49 people out of the total of 92). (Figure 3.)

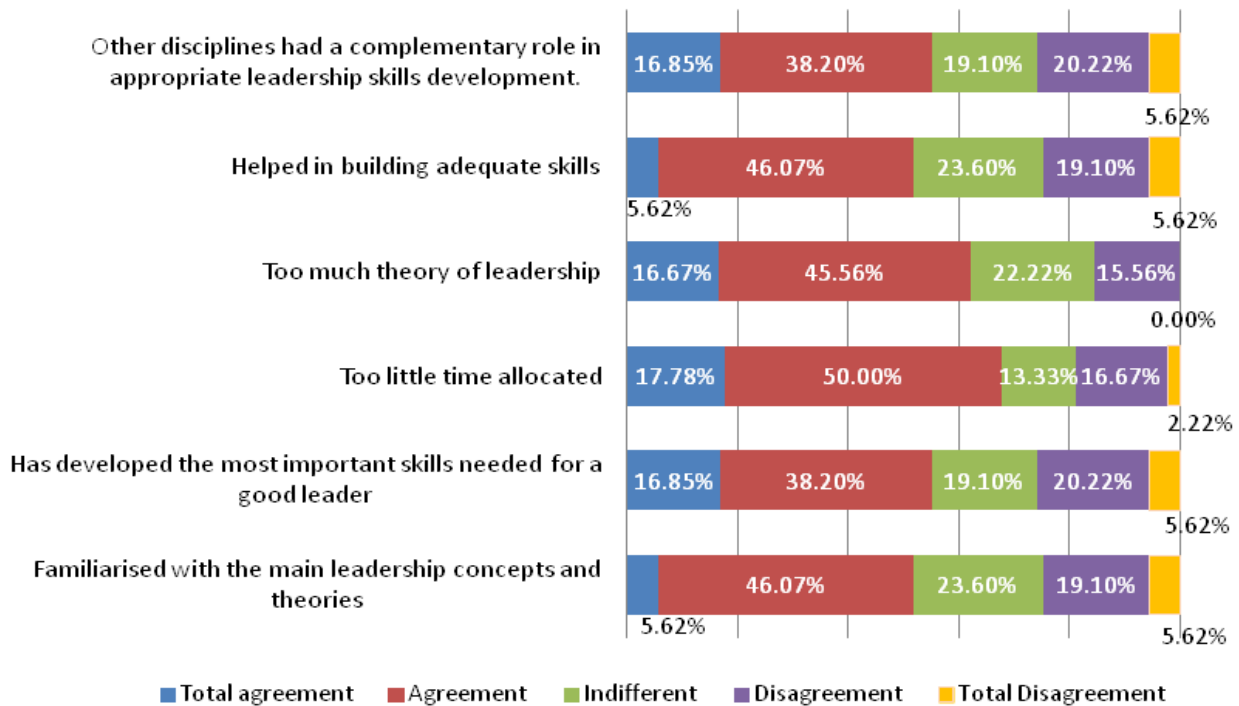


Figure 3. Respondents' perception on the qualitative aspects regarding Leadership Education
 Source: authors

Over 50% perceived that other disciplines as well, through the proposed activities had a complementary role in appropriate leadership skills development.

The questions regarding master graduates' expectations revealed that the vast majority of them - 87 persons (94.56%) are suggesting a robust shifting towards a more practice oriented approach. Bridging the gap between university and business environment by building stronger relationships can be mutually beneficial, according to over 85% of those questioned. Exposure to strong role models by inviting accomplished leaders during course activities was pointed out as a way to improve students' leadership education.

The respondents also highly agree on the fact that university leadership education should more strongly aim at developing soft skills (84 respondents) associated with a resonant, effective leader and that all taught university disciplines should contribute in a coherent manner to such an objective (80.4%). It is interesting to note that enhancing emotional intelligence was considered "very important" and "important" in the process of appropriate leadership skills development, by 81 (88%) master graduates out of the total. Allocating a higher number of leadership teaching hours would also support a more affective university leadership education, according to 64 graduates (69.56%) (Figure 4).

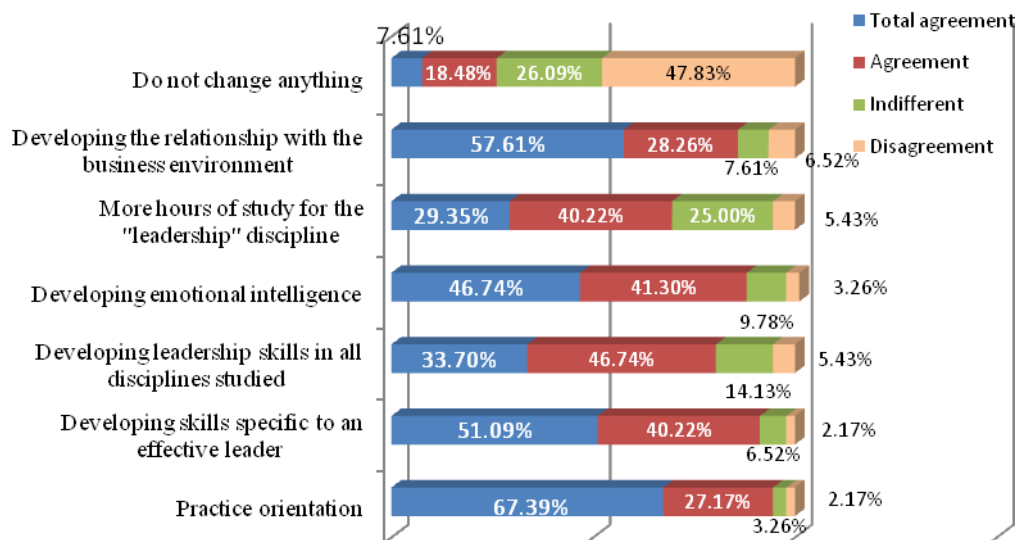


Figure 4. Respondents' recommendation to enhance Leadership Education

Source: authors

Higher Education Institutions have to become effective organisations, providing students a learning environment aiming at offering meaningful leadership experiences that can improve their chances to become authentic leaders. An overview of Leadership Education revealed several potential directions of action, outlined below, aiming at improving students effective leadership abilities. In order to generate intensive transformational experiences among students:

- Support of a stronger formal recognition of Leadership Education's necessity in Higher Education Institutions; all students should have a minimum exposure to leadership knowledge, skills and experiences during their studies;
- Through proper education, students must be convinced that leadership is not something that only those in high level positions possess (Komives et al, 2013), that it can be learned;
- Students should consider leadership as a dynamic, dialectical connection between leaders and followers, who may at times exchange roles; as a result of an adequate Leadership Education, students have to also become aware that everybody, can and should be a leader, formal or informal, at some point in time and that by proper education effectiveness can be achieved in this role; education should help them realize that each is and will be somehow involved in the leadership process;
- Guiding students to explore and be aware of their set of personal values, beliefs and commitments, help them grow/ develop, can lay the robust base for their role as members of diverse communities;
- Raising each student's self-awareness is mandatory in order to facilitate the understanding of others and an effective interaction with and integration into diverse groups, organisations and communities;
- Higher Education Institutions should provide leadership related courses (Leadership Change, Critical Thinking, etc.) that can enhance a high value perception among students;
- Course structure and flow must foster an ecosystem based on students' creativity and innovation;
- Implementing a holistic approach is also highly desirable; rethinking of the Leadership course curricula in order to better incorporate an integrated approach; learners expect to be part in sense making experiences in a human learning environment that favour personal and professional growth;
- Diversify the content and educational approaches by including personality profiling exercises for example;
- New technologies should be incorporated (mobile devices; mobile devices; social networks; other open educational resources etc.) in order to increase education quality and to enrich students' learning experiences in a digital era;

- An interdisciplinary approach has to be used; Leadership Education should exceed Leadership discipline curricula, in order to infuse the needed skills and attitude among students; leadership must be embedded in many of the academic learning processes and has to be properly modelled in the Romanian educational environment too;
 - develop and support new leadership practice opportunities like: off-campus real world experiences; international and multicultural experiences; peer mentoring or coaching of junior students;
 - stimulate reflection, guidance and assessment through: personal leadership development plan, reflective journals, self and peer evaluation, mentoring;
 - encourage teamwork, public speaking;
 - Training should take place only in a positive atmosphere;
 - Recognise and acknowledge the need for life-long learning and stimulate the ability to engage in it;
 - Providing strong role-model leaders;
 - Track Leadership Education outcomes by building effective assessment tools, like: creativity, innovation skill, ability to integrate into team and collaborate with others, ability to deliver solutions based on critical thinking, high ethics etc.
 - Leadership Education has to address students' diversity having different backgrounds and heterogeneous learning purposes; Leadership Education had to enhance cultural tolerance and respect for diversity;
 - Expand students' learning resources, especially in the virtual environment; this may include recommending high quality leadership online courses, on global platforms like Coursera and EdX.
- In the present, several Higher Education Institutions are taking proactive steps in the right direction. All concepts of operation must be refined in the future and best practices must be disseminated across the whole system.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In today's interconnected world, leadership is shifting towards more collective, non-hierarchical processes, with diffusing power and influence in modern organisations. Leadership Education needs to produce young leaders able to deliver sustainable solutions for the coming challenges. In this context, Higher Education Institutions have to have a major role in filling the gap between the high demand of effective leaders and their availability. Therefore, by integrating traditional and new theories and offering transformative educational experiences, universities can foster students' growth and their development into authentic leaders of the future.

The outcomes of our empirical qualitative research highlighted that young graduates' perception on their university leadership education is mainly positive and their level of satisfaction rather high. However additional improvements are needed in terms of a more practical focus during both courses and seminars and regarding the time allocated to leadership education.

Further researches are required in order to determine adequate methods and techniques that can provide a consistent improvement of leadership education in the Romanian Higher Education Institutions. Upcoming studies should aim at measuring the impact of the leadership education on the graduates' successes in the labour market.

Romanian universities have to overcome specific present limitations regarding Leadership Education. By translating new Leadership concepts into educational experiences, They have to help students discover the desire and confidence to innovate collaborate and generate creative solutions. Evaluating the effectiveness of Leadership Education process in Romanian higher education will require future in-depth research.

Research indicates the potential of transformational leadership classrooms and their significant impact on the quality of university teaching. Nevertheless, there are areas that require further research to enable this potential to be fully realized.

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