

Sustained Success: Evaluating the Enduring Effects of Leadership Training on Professional Growth

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Abstract: The focus of this longitudinal study is on the long-term effectiveness of leadership training modules on the professional growth of graduates, with a particular emphasis on the strategic management and leadership training modules in postgraduate management education programmes. The study aims to track a cohort of graduates over five years post-module completion, assessing their leadership skills, career progression, and their impact on organisational performance. The first phase of the study focused on the initial assessment of the ongoing influence of leadership training over time, highlighting the key areas of career progression. Data was collected at multiple time points—immediately post-completion, and at the 1, 2, and 5-year mark. This approach enables a comprehensive analysis of the trajectory of leadership development over time. The study employs quantitative methods, administering the same questionnaire annually to the same cohort of graduates. The consistent data collection allows for a robust comparative analysis across different years, providing insights into how the leadership training modules contribute to individual career progression and organisational outcomes over time. Initial findings revealed that six months after completing the module, 90% of respondents integrated the leadership concepts into their daily activities, with a 75% implementation rate. Additionally, 80% observed noticeable changes in job responsibilities, and 85% reported increased job satisfaction. One-year post-completion, 55% of the initial respondents participated in the study, with 29% engaging in further leadership development programs. All respondents perceived a significant improvement in job performance, and 41% received promotions or career advancement opportunities. Two years after completion, 29% of the original respondents remained employed at the organisation. Among them, 76% attributed their career advancements to the leadership module, and 80% felt confident in leading and managing teams. Additionally, 84% were satisfied with their overall career progression. Five years post-completion, only 13% of respondents remained employed, with 90% rating the module's long-term impact on their leadership abilities and career trajectory as significant. All these respondents had assumed leadership roles and rated their organisation's overall success positively. This research significantly contributes to understanding the sustained impact of leadership education and offers valuable implications for curriculum developers, educators, and organisational leaders, highlighting the importance of continuous investment in leadership development for long-term career and organisational success.

Keywords: Leadership training, Leadership development programmes, Career progression, Management education, Sustained success

1. Introduction

Success in Higher Education (HE) holds different meanings for various stakeholders. Students see success as completing all assessments within their programme, passing each one, and graduating. For academic teams, success means maintaining a high module success rate and facilitating students to graduate within the minimum time. Together, these factors contribute to institutional success (Alyahan and Düşteğör, 2020). In turn, a successful business consistently generates long-term profits, indicating profitability. However, profitability alone does not define a business's success. Sustainability, built on economic, social, and environmental foundations, ensures a business is equipped for long-term growth and success (Schoenmaker, 2020). Additionally, strategic management is crucial for the success and survival of any business, organisation, or enterprise (Hunger and Wheelen, 2020).

Central to both educational and business success is effective leadership. Leadership plays a pivotal role in steering institutions and organisations toward their goals. It involves setting a vision, inspiring others, and driving strategic initiatives that foster growth and development. To cultivate such leadership, many institutions and businesses invest in leadership training programmes. These programmes aim to enhance the skills and capabilities of current and future leaders, ensuring they are well-prepared to tackle challenges, innovate, and guide their teams to success (Avolio, 2004).

McCauley and Palus (2021) stress the importance of leadership development programmes in helping professionals develop employability skills and competencies is becoming more widely acknowledged. To better understand the long-term impacts of leadership training as it relates to postgraduate qualifications, this study concentrates on how it affects professional growth and, eventually, organisational success. Studying the topic of sustained success in higher education and business, along with the role of leadership and leadership training modules is important for many reasons (Liu, Vankatesh, Murphy, and Riggio, 2020). Firstly, to enhance

educational outcomes. Understanding how module assessments influence student success and institutional achievement, will allow curriculum developers and policymakers to better develop content and improve systems that positively influence student performance and valediction rates. Secondly, improving business performance and/or institutional success. As previously stated, profitability and sustainability can only be achieved by developing strategies to ensure long-term growth, flexibility, adaptability, and resilience in a very competitive market. The role of leadership is a third reason with the impact of leadership development programmes being the fourth reason. Leadership can positively influence education and business. Incorporating the concept and practices of leadership within an educational qualification will equip a student not only to be successful educationally but also in business. Effective leadership training can inspire teams, drive innovation, and navigate challenges. It is therefore important to measure the impact of leadership training modules to determine the effectiveness thereof on organisational success. The instructional design of leadership development modules must be to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to apply the skills and knowledge learned in industry thereby facilitating their professional growth. Theory is important, but the practical application thereof is of great importance. Studying the impact the programme has on the student in their world of work, will assist curriculum developers and policymakers in refining the programmes to be more insightful, impactful, and successful. The fifth reason is to foster sustainability. Sustainable practices receive more and more attention daily. Understanding how to foster leadership skills and capabilities to ensure sustainable practices within an organisation and/or educational institution, can positively contribute to the economy, socially and environmentally. The sixth reason is to incorporate leadership as an aspect of strategic management. Leadership should not be practiced in isolation but should be an extension of strategic management. Teaching students how leaders can leverage organisational resources and objectives to ensure long-term objectives are met sustainably, will lead to better decision-making and effective rollout of strategies (Senge, 2006; Porter & Kramer, 2011). Lastly, change management or the adaptation to change. Educational institutions and businesses must learn how to adapt to change and how to adopt new challenges and opportunities to benefit the institution and the business, but also how to manage areas of weakness and possible threats within the industry. Leadership plays a crucial role in change management to ensure the sustainability of a business. This will ensure that a business always remains relevant and competitive in a rapidly changing environment (Coopersmith, 2022). Researchers, educators, and corporate executives can create more successful methods and systems that improve overall performance and success in their respective sectors by looking into these areas.

This study aims to evaluate the success of leadership training programmes as embedded in a postgraduate qualification, in enhancing the student's skills and capabilities in implementing leadership skills in their working environment to establish personal growth, and indirectly, or directly, influence the success of the business. Furthermore, the study emphasized the pivotal role that leadership and leadership development modules play in personal growth and ultimately business success. The study further aims to fill critical knowledge gaps in the existing literature on how leadership development modules impact personal growth and business success.

The current literature examines HE and business success separately. Although business success is multi-faceted, the study specifically focused on how leadership and leadership training modules impact personal growth and business success. The study seeks to bridge the gap between graduating with a postgraduate qualification and how knowledge is implemented in the business with a specific focus on leadership practices.

What is known in the literature about this study is the impact of leadership training. Various studies have evidenced that leadership training can increase leadership skills, job performance, and personal growth. Avolio, Avey, and Quisenberry (2010) concluded that leadership training will impact behaviour and effectiveness in the organisation. Studies by Lacerenza, Reyes, Marlow, Joseph, and Salas (2017) have further shown that there are short-term benefits such as job satisfaction and increased self-efficacy. This often leads to enhanced leadership capabilities and job satisfaction which yield immediate positive outcomes for the individual and organisation. Leadership training is also synonymous with career advancement and professional growth. As highlighted by Day (2001), individuals will embark on leadership training programmes and are more likely to experience professional and career growth, which in turn could lead to higher-level positions within the organisation. Research by McCauley and Van Velsor (2004) evidenced that leadership training is crucial for organisational competitiveness, sustainability, and adaptability.

The indefinite of the study in the current academic body of knowledge is whilst the short-term benefits are clear, it is uncertain what the long-term impact of leadership training is on personal growth and organisational outcomes. Avolio et al. (2010) note that a longitudinal study is needed to understand these long-term impacts and benefits, and how leadership skills evolve. Yukl (2013) questions if leadership skills enhancements can be

sustained over the long term and points out that there is a need for a study to determine and track the changes post-training. Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, and McKee (2014) also suggested a longitudinal study to determine how leadership training influences career trajectory. They further proposed that it is important to capture the aggregate effect of leadership training on career growth. Further research is required to determine additional external factors that influence the success rate of leadership training programmes. DeRue, Nahrgang, Hollenbeck, and Workman (2012) underline that organisational context, economic conditions and multiple other external factors also determine the success of leadership training programmes. Lastly, studies tend to focus on specific organisations, institutions, and industries. It is important to include more diverse populations within these longitudinal studies (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). They highlight there is a need to examine leadership training in various demographical contexts to generalize conclusions more substantively.

Existing literature provides a solid foundation for understanding the importance and benefits of leadership training programmes, and it is evident there is a gap in long-term impact studies. This study aims to address the gaps by introducing a longitudinal study over a period of 5 years which will measure the impact and effectiveness of leadership training modules. This study will provide invaluable insights to educators, curriculum developers, and organisational leaders.

2. Methodology

The research design of this study was quantitative with the research instrument used being a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed using Microsoft Forms and comprised six sections with the first section focusing on respondent demographics whereafter each of the remaining sections was dedicated to each year of work. This approach is appropriate as it allows the researcher to use the same questionnaire over the next 5-years to fulfill the requirements of a longitudinal study. Rich, detailed data was gathered from respondents in the first phase of completion. Data collection was further supplemented by analysing documentation which comprised curricula, syllabi, and assessment strategies and tools, to gain insights into the design and delivery of the programme. The respondents for this study were postgraduate students who completed either the Bachelor of Commerce Honours or the Postgraduate Diploma in Management qualifications. Embedded in each of these qualifications is a strategic management and leadership module which very strongly focuses not only on the theoretical aspects of strategic management and leadership but also on the practical application of the theory in the world of work.

A convenience sampling method was used based on the availability of the respondents and their willingness to participate in the study over the next five years. The alumni are diverse in terms of size, demographics, and location, and they are easily accessible via the institution's alumni channels. This method was further chosen as it was readily available to the researcher, cost-effective, and less time-consuming. The questionnaires were distributed via institutional email addresses with a timeline of two weeks for completion. One round of reminders for completion was sent out halfway through this period. Responses were stored in a password-secured cloud database to which only the researcher has access, and this also ensured data security.

The data analysis for this study involved a combination of descriptive and inferential data analysis to determine the interaction between the variables. The independent variables are identified as the completion of the leadership module, and the time since module completion. The dependent variables are the integration of leadership concepts, professional growth, job performance perception, perceived organisational success, and employment status. The data was triangulated with the document analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the theory affected the practical application of knowledge gained during the leadership training programme.

The research followed ethical principles of research. All respondents were informed of the purpose and nature of the study, and how their input would contribute towards expanding the current body of knowledge on how leadership training programmes aid in professional growth and subsequently organisational performance. Informed consent was gained before the respondent could continue with the questionnaire. The respondents' privacy and confidentiality were upheld throughout the study, and no identifiable information was required from the respondents. There was no harm or risk to the respondents in completing the study, and they could withdraw from the study at any point in time.

3. Results

To provide context to the findings, it is important to understand the demographic characteristics of the study respondents. One of the key demographic variables examined was the age range of the respondents. Understanding the age distribution helps to contextualize the results, as leadership development needs and career progression can vary significantly across different age groups. Figure 1 below illustrates the age range distribution of the study respondents at the time of the initial data collection.

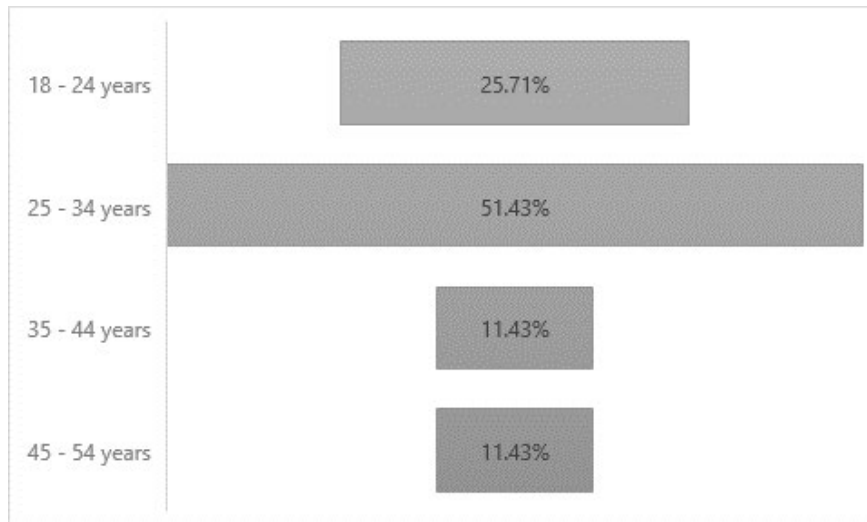


Figure 1: Age Range Distribution of Study Respondents

Fifty-one percent of those surveyed fall within the 25 to 34 age brackets, while 25.71% are aged 18 to 24. 11.43% were between the ages of 35 and 44 years with the remaining 11.43% of the respondents being between the ages of 45 and 54 years. As shown in Figure 1, the study cohort included a wide range of ages, from early-career professionals in their twenties to more experienced individuals in their forties and fifties. This diversity in age range is significant because it reflects a broad spectrum of career stages, which can influence both the perception and impact of the leadership training module. In terms of gender, 52% identified as male and 49% as female. Most respondents, 71%, live in Gauteng, with contributions from KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, and the Western Cape as well. Additionally, 6% of respondents reside outside of South Africa.

As depicted in Figure 2 below, the respondents in the study possess varying levels of educational attainment, ranging from bachelor's degrees to postgraduate qualifications. This variation in the educational background is significant as it highlights the diverse academic experiences of the cohort, which may influence their perception and integration of leadership training.

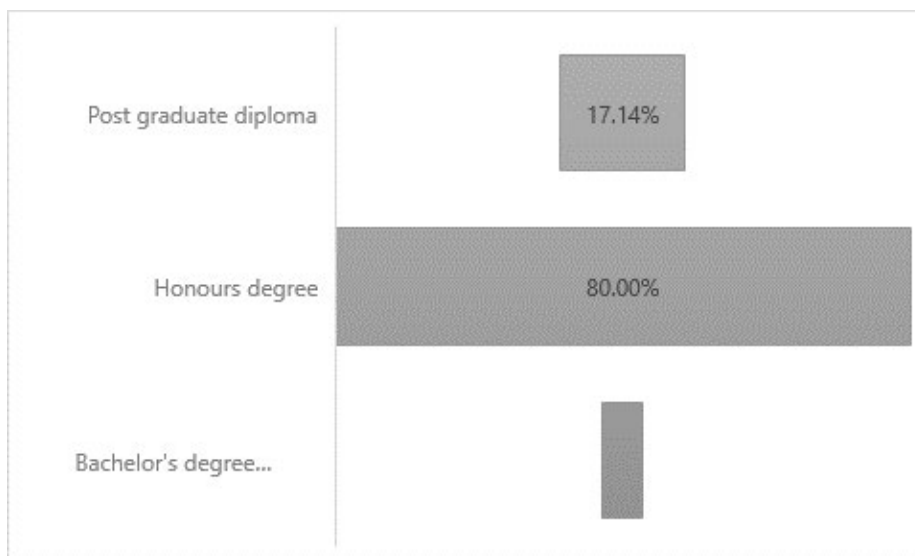


Figure 2: Highest Level of Education

Eighty percent of the respondents completed the Bachelor of Commerce Honours qualification with 17% being Postgraduate Diploma in Management graduates and the remaining 2.86% holding a bachelor's degree. Understanding the educational qualifications of the respondents provides insights into their preparedness and potential benefits from the leadership development modules. For example, those with higher educational qualifications might have more advanced theoretical knowledge, which could affect how they apply leadership concepts in practice. Conversely, respondents with less formal education might bring a different perspective and practical experience to their leadership role.

It is essential to examine the characteristics of the organisation where the respondents are employed. This includes analysing the current field of employment of the respondents as well as the size of the organisation. Participants were asked to specify their current field of employment, which varied widely from aviation, aerosol, and supply chain industries to human resources, education, and beyond. Job roles encompassed controllers, supervisors, administrators, managers, analysts, and assistants. Figure 3 presents the distribution of the organisational size where the respondents are employed. This demographic information contextualizes the findings, as the organisational size can significantly impact leadership development and progression.

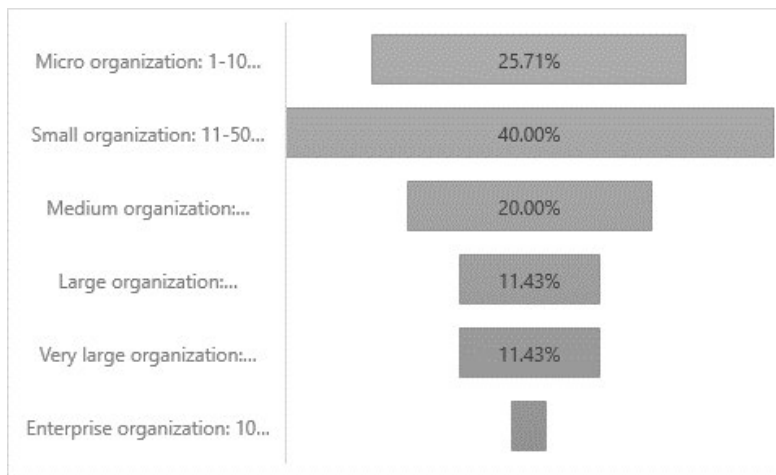


Figure 3: Organisational Size where the Respondent is Employed

Regarding the organisational size, 25.71% of the respondents are employed in micro-organisations with less than 10 employees, 40% in small organisations with 11 to 50 employees, and 20% in medium-sized organisations with 51 to 250 employees. Additionally, 11.43% work in large organisations (251 to 1000 employees), with a further 11.43% working in a very large organisation (1001 to 10,000 employees), and 2.86% in enterprise-level organisations (10,001+ employees). Understanding the organisational size helps to create a framework for the effectiveness of leadership development modules. Respondents from a larger organisation may have more formalized leadership resources, which could influence their perception and implementation of their training. On the other hand, respondents from smaller organisations might experience more direct and immediate impacts from the training due to less involved structures.

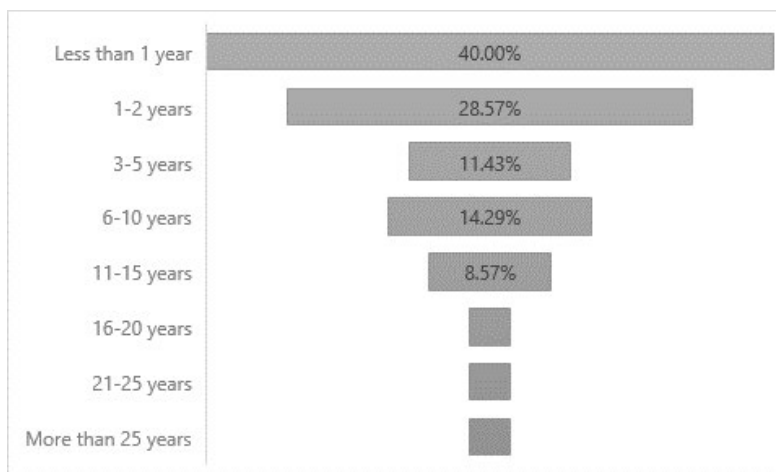


Figure 4: Years of Experience in the Organisation

Understanding the respondents' years of experience within their organisation and the length of time can influence their ability to implement and benefit from the leadership training modules. Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of respondents based on their years of experience in their respective organisations. Experience levels vary, with 40% of respondents having less than one year of industry experience, while 5.71% have been in the industry for 10 or more years. The majority, comprising 54.29% of respondents, have between 2 and 10 years of industry experience. Employees with extensive experience might have established leadership networks with the organisation, which can either facilitate or hinder the adoption of new leadership practices as introduced in the leadership training module. On the contrary, less experienced employees might be more adaptable to new concepts but might lack the organisational knowledge and relationships to fully leverage the training.

Participants were asked to gauge their confidence in applying the concepts learned in the strategic management and leadership module to their current roles. Of the respondents, 52% expressed confidence or high confidence, while 48% felt neutral or lacked confidence. On average, the response rate equated to 3.61 out of five, indicating a confidence level of 72%. After completing the module, 88% of respondents reported a significant increase in their leadership skills, while 71% stated that they adjusted their career goals or objectives; the remaining 29% did not. Within six months of completing the module, 65% of respondents had secured employment.

The subsequent questionnaire sections were categorized to determine the duration of employment following the completion of the modules: 6 months, 1 year, 2 years, and 5 years. After 6 months of employment post-completion, 90% of respondents reported integrating the leadership concepts learned into their daily activities. The response rate for this question was 3.75 out of five, indicating a 75% implementation rate. Additionally, 80% of respondents noticed significant changes in their job responsibilities, and 85% reported increased job satisfaction. After 1 year of employment, 55% of the initial respondents contributed to this section of the study. Of these, 29% participated in additional leadership development programmes. All respondents (100%) perceived a significant improvement in their job performance after completing the strategic management and leadership module. Furthermore, 41% received promotions or opportunities for career advancement.

Two years after completing the module, 29% of the original respondents were still employed at the organisation. Among these, 76% credited their career advancements or achievements to the leadership development module, and 80% felt confident in leading and managing teams. Additionally, 84% were satisfied with their overall career progression.

Five years after completing the module, only 13% of the respondents remained employed. This may be due to not having reached the 5-year mark yet or leaving the organisation. Among those still employed, 90% rated the long-term impact of the module on their leadership abilities and career trajectory as significant. All these respondents had taken on leadership roles and responsibilities since completing the module and rated their organisation's overall success over the past 5 years as positive. One respondent added a notable insight: "Leadership capabilities play a significant role in any organisation."

4. Discussion

These findings suggest that the leadership module has a substantial and positive impact on job performance, career advancement, and leadership confidence, both in the short-term and long-term. The module not only improves individual career trajectories but also contributes to the overall success of the organisation by fostering strong leadership skills. The implications of this study are multifaceted, impacting both individuals and organisations. For individuals, the study suggests that participation in leadership development modules can significantly enhance job performance and lead to career advancement. Individuals who complete such modules may be more likely to receive promotions and take on greater responsibilities. Increased job satisfaction and confidence in leadership abilities highlight the personal benefits of leadership training. This can lead to greater motivation, engagement, and overall job satisfaction among employees. A substantial percentage of respondents pursued additional leadership development opportunities after the initial module. This indicates a potential positive feedback loop, where initial training encourages ongoing personal and professional growth.

Organisations can view the findings as evidence that investing in leadership development programmes yields substantial returns in terms of employee performance, satisfaction, and retention. Such programmes can be integral to talent management and succession planning strategies. The positive correlation between

leadership training and perceived organisational success suggests that fostering leadership capabilities within the workforce can contribute to overall organisational effectiveness and a positive workplace culture. Despite the decline in response rate over time, the study highlights that leadership training can play a role in retaining employees, especially those who feel confident in their roles and see a clear path for career progression within the organisation. Understanding that various stages of employment may require several support initiatives, and development can help organisations tailor their programmes. For instance, initial modules might focus on fundamental leadership skills, while later programmes could address advanced strategic management and specialized leadership challenges.

This study can also guide researchers and policymakers. The study provides a framework for future research on leadership development. Researchers can build on these findings to explore long-term impacts, compare diverse types of leadership programmes, and identify best practices. Policymakers in education and workforce development can use these insights to advocate for the inclusion of leadership training in professional development curricula, emphasizing its role in economic growth and workforce competitiveness.

5. Limitations

There are potential limitations to the study that must be mentioned. The response rate declines significantly over time, with only 13% of the respondents contributing to the data at the 5-year mark. Although this attrition could be an indication of bias, it is important to note that most of the respondents are between the ages of 18 and 34, of which 67% of the respondents indicated that they were employed less than 1 year in their organisation at the time of the survey. Thirty-two percent of the respondents confirmed at the marker of 6 months, that they were not employed 6 months after completion of the module. A further limitation is that the study relies on self-reported data, meaning that the data could be subject to biases such as social desirability, recall bias, and subjective interpretation of job performance and satisfaction. The absence of a control group of individuals who did not participate in the leadership development module makes it difficult to attribute improvements solely to the leadership development module. External factors such as economic conditions, organisational changes, and personal circumstances could also influence job performance, satisfaction, and career advancement. The respondents who have experienced positive outcomes are also most likely to participate in follow-up surveys, potentially leading to an overrepresentation of positive impacts and an underrepresentation of neutral or negative outcomes. The study will be measured over the long term based on respondents' perceptions. While perceptions are valuable, they might not fully capture actual performance or organisational success. The study mentions that only 13% of the respondents were still employed after five years of completing the module. It is unclear whether this low percentage is due to respondents not having reached the 5-year mark yet or having left the organisation. This limits the researcher to conclude long-term employment retention. Addressing these limitations in future research could provide a more robust understanding of the impact of the leadership module on career and organisational outcomes.

Future research can address the limitations identified, such as including control groups, using larger and more representative samples, and incorporating objective performance metrics. This can lead to more robust and generalizable conclusions.

6. Conclusion

The study reveals important findings about the impact of the strategic management and leadership module on participants' careers. In the short term, six months after completing the module, 90% of respondents integrated the leadership concepts into their daily activities, with a 75% implementation rate. Eighty percent observed noticeable changes in job responsibilities, and 85% reported increased job satisfaction. Medium-Term Professional Development and Advancement: One-year post-completion, 55% of the initial respondents contributed to this section of the study. Twenty-nine percent participated in further leadership development programmes. All respondents (100%) perceived significant improvement in their job performance. Forty-one percent received promotions or career advancement opportunities. Long-Term Employment and Leadership Confidence: Two years after module completion, 29% of the original respondents remained employed at the organisation. Among them, 76% attributed their career advancements to the module, and 80% felt confident in leading and managing teams. Eighty-four percent were satisfied with their overall career progression. Long-Term Impact and Organisational Success: Five years post-completion, only 13% of respondents were still employed, possibly due to not reaching the 5-year mark or leaving the organisation. Of those still employed, 90% rated the module's long-term impact on their leadership abilities and career trajectory as significant. All

respondents had assumed leadership roles and responsibilities and rated their organisation's overall success positively. A respondent highlighted the critical role of leadership capabilities in organisational success.

Potential future research contributions could include analysing the generational composition within the organisation. In this study, most respondents have been employed at the organisation for less than five years, with most of the respondents belonging to Gen Z or Millennial cohorts (Dimock, 2019). An estimated 26% of the respondents are Gen Z with 65% of the respondents being Millennials. According to Arun (2024), there are distinct differences between Gen Z and Millennials: Millennials, the first generation extensively exposed to technology, are considered more tech-savvy, highly educated, and collaborative. They prioritize work-life balance, continuous learning, and career advancement. Gen Z, having been exposed to technology from an early age, seeks efficient and smart ways to complete tasks using online techniques and takes a pragmatic approach to work-life balance. Both generations seek job satisfaction that aligns with their values and strive for continuous learning to advance their careers. They are unlikely to stay in 'dead-end' jobs and do not respond well to a 'command-and-control' leadership style, preferring not to be micromanaged. Workplace mentorship and feedback are crucial for them to foster innovative, growth-oriented career paths.

The study underscores the critical role of leadership development in enhancing individual career outcomes and contributing to organisational success. Phase 1 of data collection yielded evidence that substantiates the importance of leadership training programmes to develop and equip alumni with leadership skills and practices in industry. The data further demonstrates that there is a compelling case for sustained success in equipping a student with the necessary leadership skills through the strategic management and leadership programme offered in management education programmes. It provides a compelling case for continuous investment in leadership training and highlights the need for ongoing research over the next 5 years to enable educators and curriculum developers to optimize these programmes to further enable alumni to leverage the benefits of leadership training and development. By understanding and leveraging these findings, individuals, organisations, and policymakers can work together to foster environments that support leadership growth and organisational excellence.

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