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### Empowering Student Leadership In Higher Education: A Literature Review On Key Competencies For Effective Leadership

Zurina Ahmad Saidi and Mohd Faiq Abd Aziz

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295 Nakhon Ratchasima Rd, Dusit, Dusit  
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# EMPOWERING STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON KEY COMPETENCIES FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Zurina Ahmad Saidi<sup>1</sup> and Mohd Faiq Abd Aziz<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> *Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

\*Corresponding author: [mohdfaiq@upm.edu.my](mailto:mohdfaiq@upm.edu.my)

## ABSTRACT

Effective leadership is essential for the success of student organizations in higher education, as it involves guiding and motivating members toward shared goals. While student leadership can foster teamwork and engagement, many student leaders face challenges in acquiring the necessary competencies to lead effectively. This study aims to systematically review and synthesize leadership literature to identify five key competencies that empower effective student leadership in higher education institutions: communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence. A systematic literature review was conducted using the PRISMA framework to analyze 68 peer-reviewed articles from Web of Science and Scopus published over the past ten years. Thematic analysis revealed that these five competencies consistently enhance leadership effectiveness by promoting unity, strengthening team engagement, and fostering responsible student leadership. The findings emphasize the importance of embedding these competencies into student development programs to prepare student leaders for academic, organizational, and societal impact.

**Keywords:** student leadership, leadership competencies, tertiary education, thematic analysis, student development

## 1. Introduction

Leadership is a critical skill for students navigating the complexities of higher education institutions (HEIs). In today's rapidly evolving global environment, student leadership is not only instrumental in shaping academic and organizational performance but also in fostering personal development, self-empowerment, and civic responsibility (Northouse, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Effective student leaders are those who can build strong teams, communicate vision, navigate organizational dynamics, and engage with a diverse range of individuals in inclusive and ethical ways (Goleman, 2001; Komives et al., 2005). However, while leadership is often encouraged through co-curricular and student-led initiatives, the development of key leadership competencies remains uneven. This study addresses this gap by conducting a systematic literature review to identify and synthesize five key competencies that consistently contribute to effective student leadership: communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence. These competencies form the foundation of a holistic leadership model aimed at empowering student leaders in diverse higher education contexts.

HEIs play a pivotal role in cultivating future leaders. It is within this environment that students are provided with the platforms and opportunities to engage in leadership activities, including student government, clubs, peer mentoring, and co-curricular programs (Astin, 1993; Bryman, 2007). These settings allow students to experiment with leadership styles, test decision-making strategies, and develop self-confidence (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). However, leadership development in HEIs remains uneven, particularly in terms of how well institutions support the cultivation of key competencies that shape effective leadership behaviors (Leithwood et al., 2008; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003).

Various studies have emphasized the importance of competencies such as communication, interpersonal intelligence, critical thinking, and emotional regulation in shaping leadership performance (Day & Sammons, 2016; Boyatzis, 1998; Goleman, 2001). Yet, despite a growing body of literature, there is limited consensus on which specific competencies are most central for student leadership within the higher education context, particularly in terms of practical implementation and institutional support (Dugan & Komives, 2010; Cress et al., 2001). Moreover, while leadership theory is well established, there remains a gap in synthesizing which key competencies are consistently supported across scholarly research and how they can be embedded into leadership development programs for students (Uaikhanova et al., 2022; Zorina et al. 2018).

Despite the increasing attention given to leadership development in HEIs, few studies have provided a comprehensive synthesis of the specific competencies most essential for effective student leadership. Moreover, existing research tends to address these skills in isolation, lacking a unified framework that integrates communication, interpersonal abilities, critical thinking, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence. This study addresses this gap by thematically reviewing recent literature to identify and contextualize these five key competencies.

In response to this gap, the present study focuses on identifying and analyzing five key competencies that have been consistently highlighted across leadership development frameworks in HEIs: communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence. These competencies represent a synthesis of the most frequently cited traits and skills associated with effective student

leadership, drawn from both classical and contemporary leadership literature (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2010; Astin & Astin, 2000).

By systematically reviewing existing literature and thematically analyzing key patterns, this study aims to contribute to the growing discourse on student leadership by offering a clear, evidence-based foundation for competency-driven leadership development. In doing so, it supports HEIs in designing programs and policies that cultivate not only capable student leaders, but also holistic, socially responsible graduates ready to contribute meaningfully to society.

### **1.1. Background of Study**

Students in HEIs often face challenges in developing leadership competencies, particularly in communication, which significantly affects their ability to lead effectively. Many undergraduates also lack awareness of the broader range of skills necessary for both personal and professional growth. Although leadership development is a critical element in HEIs, efforts to systematically nurture student leadership remain limited (Somboonpakorn & Kantabutra, 2014). When done well, student leadership development fosters a sense of belonging, enhances engagement within the university environment, and prepares students to address complex societal and professional challenges (Abe, 2020).

Despite its importance, many institutions fail to prioritize leadership development, resulting in missed opportunities to equip students with essential skills for future success (Anuar et al., 2021; Krikunova et al., 2018). Similarly, the characteristics and competencies of effective academic leaders have not been deeply explored, even though leadership in HEIs plays a pivotal role in shaping institutional progress and student achievement. While leadership traits such as ethics, strategic vision, and inclusivity are undoubtedly important (Barnes, 2020; Danels et al., 2019; Ewing et al., 2009), this study narrows its focus to competencies that can be directly observed, developed, and measured in student leadership contexts.

Effective leadership has a measurable impact on student success, ethical behavior, and institutional performance. Ethical leadership, in particular, is essential for preventing misconduct and promoting a culture of integrity (Obuba, 2022). Beyond institutional outcomes, leadership development supports personal growth, identity formation, and the cultivation of responsible future professionals (Rocha, 2022). Students transitioning from academic to professional life increasingly encounter fast-paced, uncertain environments that require well-developed leadership competencies (Song et al., 2020; Rocha, 2022). Yet, many lack access to structured leadership training, which hinders their ability to navigate these challenges confidently and effectively.

Accordingly, this study focuses on the development of five key leadership competencies: communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making skills, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence. These competencies were not arbitrarily selected; they were identified through a systematic review of literature on student leadership development within HEIs. Across numerous educational frameworks and leadership models, these five competencies consistently appear as foundational for cultivating holistic and socially responsible student leaders who are prepared to lead in diverse academic, social, and professional contexts.

Grounded in theory and supported by empirical findings, this study seeks to contribute both conceptually and practically to the discourse on student leadership. By examining how these five competencies are developed and demonstrated, the research offers insights into how higher education institutions can better support student leadership as a vital component of academic and professional preparation.

To achieve this, it addresses the following research question:

RQ1. How does cultivating effective leadership among university students involve developing five key competencies: communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence?

## **1.2 Research Objective**

This paper examines the key aspects of student leadership that contribute to their effectiveness in higher education institutions (HEIs). The study emphasizes several key components of effective leadership for achieving shared success. These include developing the strategic mission and vision of an organization or group, embodying credibility and a positive image as a student leader, and serving as a role model for others. Effective leadership also enables student leaders to cultivate a positive organizational environment, guide members effectively, and foster a strong team culture. Key competencies such as leadership proficiency, effective communication, and a commitment to social responsibility are critical.

Effective leadership is a multifaceted concept that plays a vital role in the success of organizations such as clubs, associations, programs, and projects, particularly within educational contexts. It involves skills and characteristics that empower leaders to inspire, guide, and motivate group members toward achieving shared goals, objectives, missions, and visions. This study explores student leadership by analyzing various factors in developing and nurturing student leaders. Effective student leadership enhances a sense of belonging, promotes engagement, and encourages individuals to take active roles in their leadership journeys.

This purpose of this study is to explore and synthesize key competencies that define effective student leadership in HEIs. Specifically, it aims to identify and thematically analyze five key competencies: communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence that are consistently cited in the leadership development literature as foundational to student success and holistic development. The study further examines how these competencies are developed, applied, and perceived by student leaders within HEIs to inform best practices for embedding leadership training into the student experience and enhancing students' roles as socially responsible contributors to institutional progress.

## **2. Effective Leadership in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) Context**

Leadership in HEIs is a multifaceted concept that requires student leaders to exhibit not only authority but also adaptability, empathy, and clarity of vision. In the academic context, effective leadership is defined not solely by hierarchical control, but by the ability to influence

others, foster collaboration, and drive collective outcomes in student organizations, clubs, and peer-led initiatives.

According to Northouse (2016) and Zhelanova et al. (2019), effective leadership involves the ability to guide and inspire others through a shared vision, supported by integrity and commitment. Similarly, Hitt et al. (2011) emphasize that leadership becomes effective when it builds organizational capacity, enhances interpersonal dynamics, and fosters a culture of shared responsibility. These characteristics are particularly important in university settings, where leadership roles are often peer-based and highly dependent on communication, trust, and emotional maturity (Chatsama, 2024; Hao & Yazdanifard., 2015; Deng, 2022).

Several theoretical perspectives have been used to explain leadership effectiveness. The trait theory posits that leader possess innate qualities such as confidence, intelligence, and integrity (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Chai, 2015). However, this theory has been increasingly complemented by behavioral and contingency models, which argue that effective leadership is shaped through interaction, context, and adaptability (Yulk, 2010). In the HEIs context, these flexible approaches are especially relevant, as student leaders must adapt to dynamic peer groups, diverse challenges, and shifting institutional expectations (Lowell, 2014).

Leadership effectiveness among university students is also influenced by their ability to demonstrate responsibility, inspire peers, and sustain team performance through ethical and emotionally intelligent behavior (Sipahoiglu, 2024; Mitra, 2022; Mahdinezhad et al., 2018). According to Yulk (2013) and Spector (2016) underscore that effective leaders are capable of recognizing the strengths of their team members, fostering personal development, and creating an environment conducive to growth and innovation. These qualities reflect not just positional authority but also the ability to motivate, align, and empower others (Lee et al., 2023; Lubis et al., 2024; Verawati & Hartono, 2020).

Within the scope of this study, effective leadership is conceptualized as the outcome of five key competencies: communication, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence. These dimensions, derived from the broader leadership literature, represent essential capabilities for student leaders navigating complex academic, social, and digital environments. By synthesizing these perspectives, this review highlights the multidimensional nature of leadership in HEIs and establishes a theoretical foundation for analyzing the competencies that underpin it.

### **3. Method**

This study conducts a literature review of existing literature and empirical data to explore the approaches used by student leaders in five key competencies of effective leadership in developing conducive, effective, and efficient leadership skills. The study used Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to conduct a literature review aimed at addressing the research questions. Initially, a search string was developed to retrieve relevant materials from selected databases. Following that, the literature selection process was carried out systematically, with proper documentation and quality assessment conducted through the database.

The analysis was conducted to code and identify recurring patterns. Effective leadership themes were categorized under five competencies: communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence. The initial

phase was carried out to expand the keywords used during the search procedure. To reduce bias in the information gathering process, the use of multiple databases and keywords was critical (Durach et al., 2017).

### **3.1. Search Strategy and Database Selection**

The literature search was conducted between July and December 2024, drawing on two major academic databases: Web of Science and Scopus. These databases were selected based on their global credibility and extensive indexing of peer-reviewed journals relevant to education, leadership, and social sciences. The selection of these databases was based on three key considerations, 1) their extensive coverage of literature related to effective leadership and higher education institutions; 2) the five key competencies examined in this study; and 3) their ability to provide maximum accessibility to full-text articles. Both platforms offer broad coverage of articles discussing leadership in the context of higher education and include indexed works from internationally recognized publishers. The search strategy began with the development of search strings that reflected both general leadership concepts and specific competencies related to student leadership. This structured search allowed for a focused yet comprehensive retrieval of relevant literature, which was crucial for ensuring the integrity and academic value of the review.

### **3.2. Keyword Used**

The literature review plays a crucial role in this study by paying special attention to the identification and integration of relevant research findings. Since this study focuses on empowering leadership through five key competencies, various strategic search methods were employed, including utilizing search engines such as Scopus and Web of Science to ensure comprehensive coverage, keywords such as "effective leadership", "high-impact/competent/successful/quality, high-performance", "leadership behavior/ conduct/ actions/ pattern/ approach," "key aspects," "competencies/ skills/ abilities/ capabilities/ attributes", and other relevant terms were used to obtain publications pertinent to the study. Additionally, the study refers to authoritative sources and recognized websites to strengthen the data collection process.

To explore best practices in leadership, additional keyword like 'management', 'command', 'authority', and 'best practice' were incorporated. In addition, the review was carried out by maintaining the outlined in this study: 'communication', 'interpersonal', 'critical thinking', 'decision-making', 'ICT' and 'emotional intelligence'. Boolean operator 'AND' and 'OR' were strategically utilized to combine the keywords, enabling a more comprehensive retrieval of relevant studies from the selected databases.

The study is carried out in four distinct phases. 1) the first phase involves identifying research questions, identifying relevant studies, selecting studies, and mapping the data. 2) the second phase involves collecting and summarizing the selected previous research. 3) the third phase categorizes and analyzes the data using thematic analysis. 4) the final phase involves reporting the findings and producing scholarly writing.

The systematic search strategy begins with the identification, screening, and eligibility of the selected journals. The researcher conducts a comprehensive review, emphasizing only the criteria that have been previously established. Essentially, the inclusion and exclusion criteria

are predefined by the researcher to determine which studies or sources will be included or excluded from the initial journal review. The analysis is carried out to identify the five competencies of how to become an effective student leader in leadership behavior in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This literature search only includes full-text articles and is limited to articles in English. The study was conducted from July to December 2024. The keywords used in the search string were as follows:

**Table 1: Search Strings**

Database	Searching	Searching Keyword
Web of Science	1 <sup>st</sup>	“effective leadership” AND “student” OR “university candidate”
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	“effective leadership” OR “high-impact” OR “competent” OR “successful” OR quality” OR “high-performance” AND ‘leadership behavior” OR “conduct” OR “action” OR pattern” OR approach”
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	“thinking skill” AND “communication skill” AND “interpersonal skills” AND “ICT skill” AND “decision making” AND “emotional intelligent” AND “effective leadership” AND “student” AND “higher education” OR “tertiary school” OR “campus”
SCOPUS	1 <sup>st</sup>	“effective leadership” AND “student” OR “university candidate”

### 3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure both academic rigor and thematic relevance, a set of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria was established. To refine the broad range of records obtained from the initial search, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were employed to ensure that only literature directly aligned with the objectives of the study was selected. Firstly, to ensure the study’s relevance to contemporary trends and practices, only literature published within the past decade (2014-2024) was included in the review. Secondly, only publications written in English were included to ensure linguistic consistency and broader accessibility for analysis. Thirdly, the selection was restricted to journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters, as these types of sources are generally peer-reviewed, critically examined, or editorially curated, thereby ensuring their credibility for scholarly analysis.

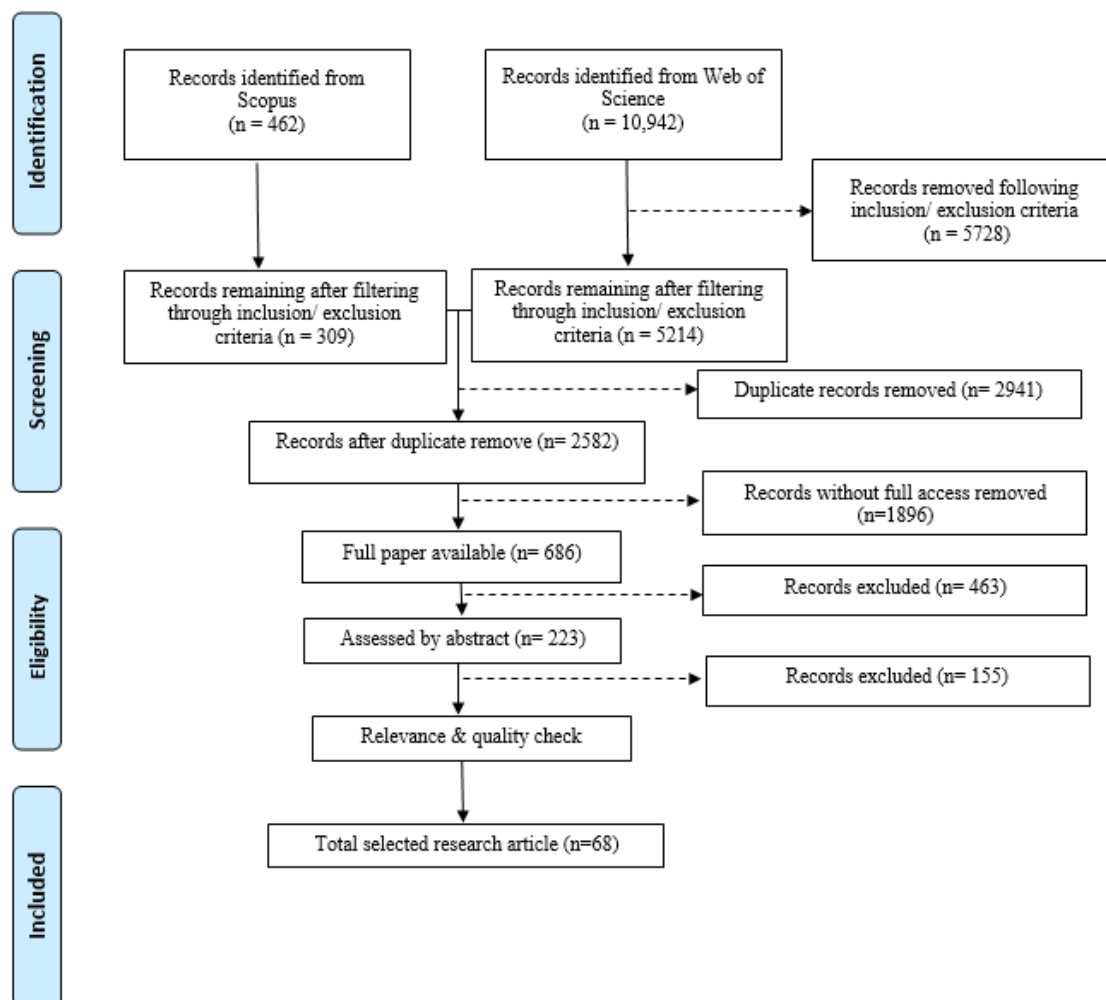
**Table 2: Criteria of Inclusion/ Exclusion for the Study**

Criteria	For Inclusion	For Exclusion
Time period	2014-2024	<2013
Language	English	Other than English
Type of literature	Journal articles, books, book chapters	Conference proceedings, review, conference review, editorial, retracted, thesis

### 3.4. Screening Process

During the initial search phase, a total of 10,942 records were retrieved from Web of Science and 462 from Scopus, reflecting the breadth of their coverage. The screening and selection of literature followed a multiple-stage process to refine the records systematically. Initially, 11404 articles were retrieved from two databases – 10,942 from Web of Science and 462 from Scopus. After removing duplicates (8,669 articles), 2,582 articles remained for initial title and abstract screening. The screening process involved reviewing each article to determine its alignment with the study's objectives and inclusion criteria. From this process, 686 articles were selected for full-text review. Following a more detailed evaluation, a final set of 68

articles was retained for qualitative synthesis. The selection process was documented and reported in accordance with the PRISMA framework. Each step—identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion—was clearly defined to ensure transparency and replicability. The PRISMA flow diagram illustrating this selection process is presented in Figure 1 of this paper.



**Figure 1: Summary of Systematic Review**

### 3.5. Justification for Competency Selection

The decision to focus on five competencies: communication, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence was informed by both the frequency of these constructs in the literature and their alignment with widely accepted leadership models. Across the 68 selected studies, these five competencies were consistently identified as key enablers of student leadership, particularly in university-based leadership programs, student government, peer mentoring, and community engagement. The competencies also correspond closely with frameworks such as Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1993), and Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Model (1998). These models emphasize not only the importance of task-oriented leadership but also the human-centered aspects of leading others such as empathy, communication, and reflective decision-making. Therefore, these five competencies were not arbitrarily selected but were evident across the majority of studies reviewed,

affirming their relevance in the context of cultivating effective student leaders in higher education.

### **3.6. Thematic Analysis Procedure**

To synthesize findings from the selected literature, a qualitative thematic analysis was employed using the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns across a qualitative data set. The analysis proceeded as follows:

#### **3.6.1 Familiarization with the Data**

All 68 selected full-text articles were read in detail. Initial notes were taken on recurring ideas, leadership constructs, and competency-related terminology.

#### **3.6.2 Generating Initial Codes**

Using a manual coding approach in Microsoft Excel, meaningful data segments related to leadership skills, behaviors, and developmental outcomes were assigned open codes. This stage used an inductive approach, meaning codes were derived from the data itself rather than from predefined categories.

#### **3.6.3 Searching for Themes**

Similar codes were grouped into preliminary themes that aligned with recurring competencies. At this stage, we began to identify higher-order categories that corresponded to widely discussed student leadership skills.

#### **3.6.4 Reviewing Themes**

Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and external distinction. Articles were re-checked to validate that the emerging themes were strongly grounded in the literature and represented the overall data set.

#### **3.6.5 Defining and Naming Themes**

Five major themes were finalized: communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence. Subthemes were also identified within each category (such as public speaking and feedback within communication skills; empathy and emotional regulation within emotional intelligence).

#### **3.6.6 Producing the Report**

Each theme was synthesized with supporting literature examples, frequency counts, and conceptual explanation. Only data derived from the 68 included articles were used to construct the thematic findings presented in Sections 3.1–3.5.

To enhance reliability and trustworthiness, two reviewers cross-checked the coding scheme and thematic structure at each stage. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

## 4. Results and Discussions

### 4.1. Summary of Studies According to Geographical Regions and Type of Sources Review

Based on the reviewed 68 articles, the geographical distribution of the studies broadly reflects a global scope, with a strong representation from Asia, followed by Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. These studies predominantly explored competencies such as communication skills, emotional intelligence, and ICT proficiency within higher education contexts. Malaysia alone contributed a significant portion, reflecting the country's growing emphasis on student leadership in tertiary education. Indonesia, India, China, Japan, and Kazakhstan were also represented, focusing on interpersonal leadership, decision-making, and digital integration. African contributions, especially from Nigeria and Egypt, emphasized ethical leadership, emotional self-regulation, and organizational impact. The Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Lebanon, provided insight into digital leadership and institutional transformation. European studies, primarily from the United Kingdom and Russia, contributed theoretical perspectives rooted in transformational and trait-based leadership. Meanwhile, foundational literature from the United States continued to inform leadership development frameworks, despite fewer recent empirical studies from North America within the 2014–2024 scope. Oceania, inferred through broader theoretical citations, had limited but relevant contributions. This global distribution underscores the widespread relevance of student leadership competencies and the cross-cultural applicability of the five themes explored in this review. The summary of studies was as follows:

**Table 3: Summary of Reviewed Studies According to Geographical Regions**

Region	Countries Represented	Estimated No. of Studies	Primary Focus Areas
Asia	Malaysia, Indonesia, China, India, Japan, Kazakhstan	~35–40	Student leadership development, communication, ICT proficiency, emotional intelligence
Africa	Nigeria, Egypt	~8–10	Ethical leadership, emotional regulation, organizational effectiveness
Middle East	Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Lebanon	~6–8	Digital leadership, institutional change, inclusive student engagement
Europe	United Kingdom, Russia	~5	Transformational leadership, identity development, trait-based leadership models
North America	United States	~3–5	Foundational leadership theories, developmental models, civic engagement frameworks
Oceania	Australia, New Zealand ( <i>inferred from theoretical references</i> )	~1–2	Broad leadership frameworks, higher education contexts

A total of 68 academic sources were systematically reviewed in this study. The majority of these, 58 articles or approximately 85%, 8 sources (12%) were academic books, and 2 sources (3%) were identified as book chapters. The summary of studies was as follows:

**Table 4: Summary of Reviewed Studies According to Types of Sources Reviewed**

Type of Source	Number of Sources	Percentage (%)
Journal Articles	58	85%
Books	8	12%
Book Chapters	2	3%
Total	68	100%

#### 4.2. Communication Skills

Thematic analysis of the 68 selected studies revealed communication skills as a foundational competency for effective student leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs). This theme was prominent across 42 sources, where communication was not only associated with information exchange but also seen as a critical leadership mechanism for building trust, delivering a clear vision, and motivating team members. Communication in this context was identified as a multi-dimensional construct, encompassing verbal clarity, active listening, persuasive delivery, and nonverbal engagement.

Subthemes emerging from the analysis included message clarity, public speaking, and interpersonal feedback, which collectively influenced how student leaders managed their roles and interactions. According to Anuar et al. (2021), clear and effective communication enables student leaders to articulate ideas and instructions in a manner that is easily understood by team members, thereby strengthening collaboration and minimizing misinterpretation. Similarly, Grigoropoulos (2020) emphasized that effective communication involves not only speaking but also listening with empathy—key to earning trust and support from organizational members.

The reviewed literature also highlighted how communication skills support confidence building among student leaders. Claes (2024) noted that students who master public speaking techniques often exhibit higher levels of self-confidence and leadership presence, which enhances their ability to make informed decisions and respond to group needs with assurance. This is particularly important when addressing teams during challenging scenarios or when articulating a shared mission. In this regard, strong communication acts as both a cognitive and emotional tool, bridging the leader's intentions with followers' understanding.

Beyond transactional interaction, communication was also framed as a strategic leadership competency that promotes inclusivity, engagement, and alignment within student-led organizations. Leaders who demonstrate effective communication practices especially through active listening and feedback mechanisms were found to facilitate better team dynamics and improved task execution. This supports the notion that effective communication is not just a desirable trait but a critical enabler of leadership effectiveness in HEIs.

In conclusion, communication skills emerged as a dominant theme in the development of student leadership capacity. These findings reaffirm that leaders who communicate effectively are better equipped to inspire, guide, and empower others. They can project credibility, align their teams around common goals, and create an open environment that values participation. Thus, fostering communication competence should be a central priority in le

adership development programs for students in higher education settings (Anuar et al., 2021; Claes, 2024; Grigoropoulos, 2020).

#### 4.3. Interpersonal Skills

The thematic analysis highlighted interpersonal skills as a crucial leadership competency, appearing in 39 of the reviewed studies. This theme encapsulated the ability to build and maintain effective relationships, demonstrate empathy, and facilitate collaboration among organizational members. Student leaders with strong interpersonal skills were portrayed as more capable of fostering cohesion, mutual respect, and trust within their teams, all of which were identified as key for effective leadership in higher education contexts.

Within this broader theme, several subthemes emerged most notably ethical behavior, flexibility and adaptability, and self-confidence. These traits were frequently cited as foundational for relationship-building and maintaining integrity in student leadership roles. Hakim and Samiyah (2024) emphasized the importance of ethical leadership behavior in promoting harmony within student organizations, while Anjum et al. (2023) and Siswanto et al. (2023) discussed the role of interpersonal ethics in establishing trust and credibility. The data also showed that student leaders who were perceived as empathetic and fair were more successful in resolving conflicts and inspiring loyalty among members.

Another recurring pattern in the literature was the connection between interpersonal skills and independent, autonomous leadership. Tam et al. (2020) argued that strong interpersonal competence enables student leaders to make confident decisions, manage team dynamics, and initiate innovation. Studies further indicated that student leaders often navigate complex, context-dependent scenarios requiring high levels of adaptability. In such situations, interpersonal flexibility was regarded as an asset that allowed leaders to modify their behavior according to team needs, cultural sensitivities, and organizational goals.

Moreover, the thematic data underscored that self-confidence and independent judgment are integral components of interpersonal competence. Leaders who exhibit these traits are better equipped to assume responsibility, motivate others, and lead with clarity and conviction. Westaby et al. (2010) supported this finding, linking behavioral confidence to improved decision-making and leadership initiative.

In sum, interpersonal skills were not only seen as social or emotional assets but as functional leadership tools. They empower student leaders to manage group dynamics, encourage collaboration, and uphold ethical standards. These findings reinforce the notion that interpersonal skills are indispensable in higher education leadership development, as they shape how student leaders influence, engage, and support their peers in achieving common goals.

#### **4.4. Critical Thinking and Decision-Making Skills**

Thematic analysis of the reviewed literature identified critical thinking and decision-making as a key competency in effective student leadership, prominently featured in 45 of the 68 analyzed studies. This theme centered on the ability of student leaders to evaluate information, make strategic choices, and respond to complex problems within dynamic organizational contexts. The review consistently highlighted that these cognitive skills are essential not only for effective leadership execution but also for empowering student leaders to act with autonomy and foresight.

Subthemes such as problem-solving frameworks, logical and reflective reasoning, and judgment under pressure were frequently coded in the literature. Studies such as those by

Dhiman (2023) and Jerab & Mabrouk (2023) emphasized that strong decision-making involves understanding systems complexity, considering uncertainties, and evaluating alternatives. These studies reinforce the notion that leadership in higher education environments is rarely linear, often requiring leaders to analyze variables quickly and with limited information.

One commonly referenced framework across sources involved a multi-phase decision-making process: problem identification, criteria development, option analysis, implementation, and evaluation. This model was supported by Onyekwere et al. (2023) and Radu (2023), who found that structured thinking practices promote critical thinking development among student leaders. Critical reflection emerged as a tool to enhance both performance and self-efficacy. Leaders who actively reviewed their decisions were more likely to grow from experience, improving future outcomes.

Several sources emphasized the integration of emotional and social intelligence into decision-making. Shahin and Phiri (2021) and Amalia et al. (2020) discussed how decision-making processes are not solely rational but are influenced by contextual and emotional factors such as time pressure, social dynamics, and team sensitivity. These insights were further supported by Xiaowei (2022), who proposed that effective leadership decisions rely on understanding inference structures and managing judgment errors. Black (2015) and Bryman (2007) added that cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation enhance strategic decision-making and team cohesion.

Moreover, the ability to balance structure with creativity was highlighted as a valuable leadership trait. While structured decision-making fosters transparency and consistency, overly rigid systems can stifle innovation and adaptability. Strategic thinking must allow room for creativity, especially when navigating uncertainty in student organizations (Altbach, 2011; Cansoy, 2017).

The data also showed that reflective practice and metacognitive awareness are increasingly critical. Student leaders who regularly reflect on their decisions; questioning their own assumptions, methods, and outcomes were found to be more resilient and responsive to change (Hakim & Samiyah, 2024; Anyanugo et al., 2024). These findings support the growing integration of metacognitive training in leadership development programs across HEIs.

In conclusion, critical thinking and decision-making emerged as strategic competencies that underpin student leadership effectiveness. Far from being isolated skills, they interact with emotional intelligence, communication, and situational awareness. Developing these competencies equips student leaders to make informed, ethical, and adaptive decisions that contribute to both individual and organizational growth.

#### **4.5. ICT Proficiency**

Thematic analysis of the reviewed literature identified ICT proficiency as a distinct and evolving competency key for effective student leadership in the context of digital transformation. This theme emerged in 29 of the analyzed studies, where digital literacy, technology-enabled collaboration, and data-informed decision-making were frequently discussed as enablers of leadership performance in higher education environments.

A prominent subtheme within this category was the ability of student leaders to strategically apply digital tools to enhance organizational management, communication, and academic engagement. Dong and Tabajen (2024) emphasized how university student leaders who develop strong ICT capabilities demonstrate improved learning effectiveness and organizational coordination. Similarly, Thekedam (2014) described how the integration of ICT into leadership practices promotes innovation and improves institutional performance. These findings suggest that technological fluency is no longer optional but fundamental to modern student leadership roles.

Another subtheme was the role of ICT in promoting digital leadership and adaptability. Onan (2024) and Aditya et al. (2021) noted that student leaders must be equipped with the ability to manage digital complexity, particularly as universities increasingly adopt AI-driven tools and hybrid learning models. The reviewed studies emphasized that digital leadership includes understanding online platforms, ensuring ethical technology use, and leveraging digital channels to promote collaboration and engagement. These competencies not only support organizational efficiency but also foster inclusive leadership by reaching diverse student populations.

The theme of data-driven decision-making also emerged as a vital extension of ICT proficiency. Studies such as Brunner et al. (2023) and Alenezi (2021, 2023) highlighted the importance of digital tools in helping student leaders personalize experiences, monitor team dynamics, and evaluate outcomes based on evidence. Anwar and Saraih (2024) further argued that digital environments demand leaders who can synthesize data insights to guide strategic initiatives and cultivate knowledge-sharing cultures within student communities.

Moreover, the analysis revealed that training and institutional support play a critical role in shaping ICT competencies among student leaders. Carvalho et al. (2022) found that structured programs in digital leadership improved academic outcomes and student engagement by over 15%. Such programs not only build technical skills but also reinforce ethical awareness, digital responsibility, and collaborative learning. These elements collectively define ICT as both a technical and relational leadership competency.

In conclusion, ICT proficiency were thematically identified as a key component of student leadership development in higher education. As student leaders navigate increasingly digitized academic environments, their ability to effectively integrate digital tools, manage information, and promote virtual collaboration becomes a key determinant of leadership success. These findings underscore the growing importance of digital literacy and leadership readiness in preparing students for dynamic and technologically advanced educational landscapes.

#### **4.6. Emotional Intelligence (EI)**

Thematic analysis of the selected literature highlighted emotional intelligence (EI) as one of the most consistently emphasized leadership competencies in higher education contexts. Found in 51 of the 68 reviewed studies, EI emerged as a cross-cutting theme that not only supported interpersonal relationships but also influenced decision-making, stress management, team collaboration, and leadership adaptability (Barling et al., 2010; Zaghamera, 2024). This competency was frequently viewed as a foundation for sustainable and ethical student leadership in both formal and informal roles within HEIs.

Subthemes identified in the analysis included self-awareness, emotional regulation, social awareness, and relationship management. According to Anyanugo et al. (2024) and Nair (2024), emotionally intelligent student leaders were better equipped to manage interpersonal conflicts, motivate team members, and cultivate inclusive environments. These leaders also demonstrated stronger resilience under pressure, maintaining focus and clarity in emotionally charged situations a trait particularly valuable in student-led organizations where conflict and uncertainty are common.

The ability to assess and manage one's own emotions was central to leadership effectiveness. Jihan et al. (2024) reported that self-assessment of emotions significantly influences students' decision-making, helping them to better understand their strengths and areas for development. Similarly, Kumari (2024) and Siswanto et al. (2023) argued that emotional awareness enhances clarity, improves communication, and fosters moral responsibility among student leaders—traits essential for organizational trust and group cohesion.

Emotional regulation was another dominant subtheme. Leaders who could maintain calm under stress were more successful at maintaining group morale and reducing interpersonal friction, which in turn boosted team performance. Paschal et al. (2024) and Kiishi (2024) showed that EI supports constructive leadership under pressure, allowing students to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively. This aligns with earlier findings by Brackett et al. (2011) and Carmeli (2003), which emphasize the role of emotional control in professional and academic leadership contexts.

EI also contributed to building strong interpersonal bonds and inclusive leadership. Leaders with high emotional intelligence were consistently described as more empathetic, collaborative, and aware of group dynamics. According to Humphrey (2013) and Wong and Law (2002), such leaders create psychologically safe environments, where team members feel heard and valued thereby improving overall group engagement and leadership legitimacy.

In conclusion, emotional intelligence is not merely an interpersonal advantage but a strategic leadership asset that enhances individual and collective functioning. Through its core components, emotional self-regulation, awareness, empathy, and relationship-building, EI empowers student leaders to lead authentically, adapt effectively, and navigate challenges with both wisdom and compassion. For HEIs aiming to develop holistic student leaders, emotional intelligence training should be a prioritized component in leadership development efforts (Anyanugo et al., 2024; Nair, 2024; Jihan et al., 2024; Kumari, 2024; Siswanto et al., 2023; Paschal et al., 2024; Kiishi, 2024; Brackett et al., 2011; Carmeli, 2003; Humphrey, 2013; Wong & Law, 2002).

## **5. Practical Implications**

The findings of this study hold meaningful implications for higher education institutions (HEIs) seeking to foster effective student leadership through competency-based development. Based on the five key leadership competencies identified, communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT skills, and emotional intelligence, universities should take intentional steps to integrate these dimensions into co-curricular programs, student governance, and leadership training initiatives.

First, the consistent presence of communication and interpersonal skills across the literature suggests that universities should embed structured opportunities for students to practice

collaborative dialogue, conflict resolution, and public speaking. These can be incorporated into student government training, leadership workshops, and peer mentoring initiatives, enabling student leaders to interact with confidence and build stronger relationships within their teams.

Second, the theme of critical thinking and decision-making highlights the need for leadership programs that go beyond surface-level involvement. Institutions should provide student leaders with real-world decision-making experiences such as managing budgets, leading campus projects, or participating in policy consultations to help them develop analytical skills, evaluate alternatives, and lead ethically under pressure.

Third, the increasing relevance of ICT skills in student leadership underscores the importance of equipping students with digital tools and platforms for collaboration, communication, and organizational management. Universities should not only offer technical training but also model digital leadership in student activities encouraging the use of platforms that promote innovation, inclusivity, and remote engagement.

Fourth, the emergence of emotional intelligence as a unifying leadership theme suggests a need for emotional literacy training, particularly for student leaders managing diverse, high-pressure, or emotionally sensitive situations. HEIs should promote awareness and reflection on self-regulation, empathy, and social responsibility possibly through leadership retreats, coaching, or reflective assignments linked to their leadership roles.

Finally, the overall findings support the idea that student leadership development should be holistic, focusing not only on administrative duties but on shaping ethical, reflective, and socially responsible individuals. Universities are encouraged to align their leadership programs with developmental goals that include cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and technological growth. By doing so, HEIs can produce graduates who are not only capable of leading student organizations effectively, but who also carry forward these competencies into their professional and civic lives.

## **6. Conclusions**

This study sought to explore how five key competencies, communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, ICT proficiency, and emotional intelligence contribute to the development of effective student leadership in higher education institutions. Through a systematic review and thematic analysis of 68 scholarly sources, the study revealed that these competencies are consistently identified as essential dimensions of leadership effectiveness in the student context. Each competency plays a distinct yet interrelated role. Communication and interpersonal skills support collaboration, influence, and team cohesion. Critical thinking and decision-making enable student leaders to evaluate complex situations and guide their teams with clarity and confidence. ICT proficiency allows leaders to adapt to digital platforms and foster innovation in virtual engagement. Emotional intelligence acts as a unifying competency, influencing how leaders build trust, regulate emotions, and respond with empathy in high-pressure environments.

These findings affirm that effective student leadership is not merely about taking charge. It is about engaging others, solving problems, navigating uncertainty, and growing both personally and socially. The study also confirms that these competencies are not innate but can be

nurtured through intentional educational experiences. Therefore, universities have a critical role to play in designing leadership programs that develop these competencies holistically ensuring that graduates are not only capable leaders in campus settings, but also equipped to lead responsibly in their professional and civic lives. While this study was grounded in secondary literature, its contribution lies in organizing and synthesizing leadership competencies in a way that is practical, accessible, and directly applicable to higher education leadership development. Future research may consider expanding on these findings through empirical validation across diverse cultural and institutional contexts, or through longitudinal studies tracking competency development over time.

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