

# EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY OF BECOMING A STUDENT LEADER: DEVELOPMENTAL, TRANSFORMATIONAL AND TRANSACTIONAL APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to examine the developmental trajectory of students' leadership. The developmental trajectory of student leadership is dependent upon several interacting theoretical foundations such as developmental, transformational and transactional approaches to leadership. All these approaches are specific and interactional which makes them feasible choices for the theoretical foundation about students' leadership. Using a qualitative research approach and drawing on interviews conducted with students' leaders of the University College Cork in Ireland, the results indicated that students' leaders are very much influenced in their choices and actions by considerations for their future, and the development of skills and experiences that will provide personal and organisational benefit to those involved. Whilst leadership styles at this stage of their development seemed to be in a state of flux and had not been fully honed within students' leaders, there were notable findings relating to the importance of them to be mentored by experienced leaders from their institution.

**Keywords:** students, leadership, students' leadership, higher education

## INTRODUCTION

Student leadership has been gaining prominence among the higher educational spectators worldwide since 1990. The benefits of student leadership development programmes are discussed explicitly in the earlier literature, but the research process has not kept pace in highlighting the effectiveness of student leadership programmes in the contemporary environment. Under student leadership practices, students are empowered to engage in the transformation of “values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, separateness into solidarity, and risks into rewards” (Kouzes and Posner 2018, 13).

Comparatively to research done on the assessment of the benefits of students' leaderships,

little is currently known regarding the features of its developmental trajectory. This is in part related to shifts in recent years regarding the theoretical positioning of leadership. Whereas there has been a strong body of research developed across other scopes of leadership such as professional leadership. However, there has been little research conducted examining the processes involved within a student environment, despite the importance of such experiences to the overall development of leadership skills (Soria et al. 2013). Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore the developmental trajectory of becoming a students' leader in terms of a clear developmental path. Furthermore, it will examine the experiences and the trajectory of a student's leader, with a focus on developmental transitions.

To present the goal of this study in a logical format, this article starts by defining the concept of leadership and its impact on higher education. Second, it examines the developmental trajectory of leadership in the context of student leadership positions. Therefore, this section will situate the theoretical framework of the current research within the body of literature examining developmental, transactional, transformational approaches to leadership theory. Third, it briefly explains the research methodology used. This section details the means by which the study's aim will be met. It presents the research methodology that was selected for the collection and analysis of the data. It details how the participants were selected as well as the analysis of the data emerging from them. Fourth, the findings section outlines and analysis the themes that have been developed as a result of the data. Four major themes were generated from the data collected under the research questions. Last, it discusses the findings of the study before concluding. The main aim behind such discussion is to examine the developmental trajectory of student leadership and to assess the influence of developmental, transactional, and transformational approaches to leadership on students' development.

## **DEFINING LEADERSHIP**

For some of the researchers, leadership is a trait that is inherent within an individual (Antonakis and Day 2017) while for others, it is a learnable skill (Fairhurst and Connaughton 2014), although the reality probably relies on a combination of both factors (Northouse 2018). Leadership is a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organisation in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent (Sharma and Shilpa 2013). This definition is similar to Northouse's (2007) definition stating that Leadership is a process whereby an individual influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. While leadership is learned, the skills and knowledge processed by the leader can be influenced by his or her attributes or traits, such as beliefs, values, ethics, and character. Knowledge and skills contribute directly to the process of leadership, while the other attributes give the leader

certain characteristics that make him or her unique (Northouse 2018).

According to Toor and Ofori (2009), effective leadership is determined by the ability to incorporate an important ethical dimension into the process. This means that effective leadership equates to ethical leadership because it calls for a more complex understanding of leadership qualities. Indeed, Northouse (2018) suggests that leadership is not an individualised criterion but a process that is shared among individuals.

### **The impact of leadership in higher education**

Higher education institutions are the major academic institutions in the production of knowledge, technology and training of students and scientists. These organisations should always take steps in the way of perfection and move along with the excellent organisations at the forefront of the competitive environment. Higher education institutions should have the required empowerment, responsibility, accountability and legitimacy to fulfil the needs of the universities. This is not possible without effective leadership. Leadership theory is a feasible theoretical foundation for the development of formal student leadership. It develops requisite skills and competencies among student leaders to help them bring a positive change in higher education. It allows student leaders to create a shared sense of identity through a buy-in approach and directs student leaders to invite other stakeholders to share their contributions. Furthermore, it easily makes students' organisations more adaptable to change and influences students' behaviours, attitudes, values and helps them to develop skills necessary for bringing a positive change at the local, national, and international levels.

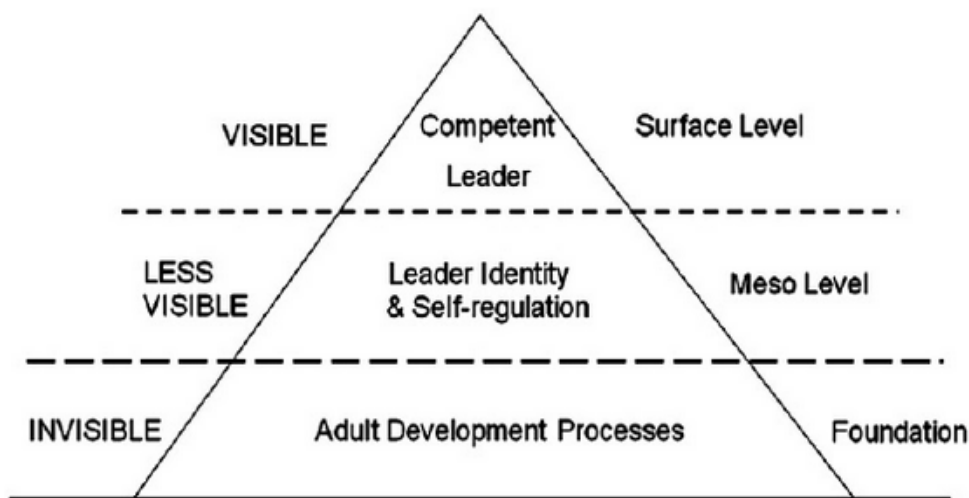
For instance, the implications of leadership theory on higher education in Africa will bring positive development because research shows that higher education in the majority of African countries is under-developed and has been a low priority for more than two decades. This article will influence positive development in higher education in Africa by preparing student leaders for broader leadership roles in society. It will improve the level of leadership education and leadership preparedness in institutions of higher education and will assist student leaders to increase the awareness about the importance of creating and developing higher education institutions in the African continent and beyond.

### **DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP**

Developmental trajectory refers to the ongoing progressions occurring in the cognitive, physical, and within the psychosocial context (Day, Hammond, and Halpin 2011). Developmental theory suggests that changes occur throughout the life span in a human body mainly due to age-related increases and decline in brain activity. In the similar context Day et

al. (2011) highlight that developmental processes are not only comprised top growth stages rather a developmental trajectory is a product of an inherent, and continual dynamic interaction between gains and losses.

One of the leadership development models proposed by Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009) can provide significant insights about the deeper level processes involved in the evolution of leadership and leadership skills and expertise. According to this model (see Figure 1), three stages are involved in the development of leadership referred to as foundation level, meso level and surface level. The model involves the set of observable and non-observable levels where the foundation level (adult development processes) is an invisible, meso level (leader identity and self-regulation) is a less visible and surface-level (competent leader) is a visible level. Day et al. (2009) developmental pyramid involves internal and external processes. According to this model, the processes of self-identity formation and self-regulation encourage the skills and expertise of leadership.



**Figure 1:** Model exhibiting the processes involved in the Leadership Development Process

### **Developmental leadership**

In view of the above-analysed developmental trajectory pyramid for leadership, students' leadership can be regarded as an ongoing process, which evolves over a period of time. Lawrence, Dunn and Weisfeld-Spolter (2018), in their mixed approach-based research of 504 students, presented an innovative model to highlight the developmental process of their students' leaders. As per their model called integrative model, students in the graduate business school develop leadership and leadership skills through the facilitation of self-awareness, reflection and intentional leadership development processes.

The integrative model further suggests that these three processes are quite supportive in helping students to identify and pursue goal-directed learning opportunities throughout their programme. The model further highlights that student leadership development process is based on the interaction among them (students' leaders), with other students and the community along with their internal potentials to lead, motivate and inspire others around them. According to Lawrence et al. (2018), the developmental trajectory of students' leaders is different from other organisational leaders as the followers under the students' leaders are not employees who are obliged to obey their leaders. In this context, Sessa (2017) highlights the importance of developing leadership skills necessary to influence others in uncertain environments.

Moreover, the influence of leadership theory is vital on the students' leadership development. Students' leaders often try to reflect the values they are required to do as a leader in their organisational careers (Tyran 2017). In a similar context, Al-Jammal (2015) has identified the set of 21 skills needed by every student' leaders to lead others. These skills included the ability to enable, encourage and empower others, the humble and teachable, conflict resolution, courageous, widget creator, decision-making, diversity awareness, effective communication and networking, integrity and honesty, differentiation, money management, passion and motivation, task prioritisation, problem-solving, project management, project planning, reflection, self-confidence, setting and achieving goals, teamwork, and time management.

### **Transformational leadership**

The goal of transformational leadership is to broaden the interests of the employees. For McCleskey (2014), transformational leadership is made achievable most of the time via a non-charismatic positioning of the leader in terms of their followers, whilst attempting to stimulate and inspire the people below them in the organisational hierarchy. In the transformational leadership, there is an effort to pay attention to differences amongst employees, for example, to garner support and attention from them (Avolio et al. 2016).

In the context of student leadership, transformational leadership has been identified as a feasible theoretical foundation for the development of formal student leadership. Investigating college student leadership development, Ingleton (2013) has reported the potentials of transformational leadership programmes in developing requisite skills and competencies among the student leaders to help them bring a positive change. Transformational leadership allows the students' leaders to create a shared sense of identity through buy-in approach. According to Ingleton (2013), transformational leadership directs the students' leaders to invite other stakeholders sharing their contributions within the group. In simple words, a student's

leader pursuing transformational approach can easily make the others and students' organisations to become more adaptable to change. It influences the behaviours, attitudes and values. For this purpose, Ingleton (2013) has also suggested the need to integrate the transformational leadership approach in the students' leadership programme. This will help students to develop necessary skills that will bring positive changes at the local, national and international levels.

Komives et al. (2011), in line with Ingleton's (2013) idea, have also highlighted the implementation of transformational leadership within the student leadership development. According to them, transformational leadership is based on the followers' motivations in the leadership process, which is also the main component of student leadership. Under this approach, leadership is refocused around the followers' needs and the pursuit of shared goals. The relational approach within the transformational leadership style further highlights the significance of adaptability skills while performing with the multiple levels of systems.

### **Transactional leadership**

Transactional leadership is a style of leadership that emphasises the role of supervision of individuals and structures, of the importance of organisational hierarchies and procedures, and how individual performance can thus be improved using these mechanisms (Breevaart et al. 2014). It is a style of leadership that tends to clearly denote leaders from followers (McCleskey 2014), and operates with either implied or clear ideas of punishment and/or reward for both individual and team performance (Breevaart et al. 2014). This is a form of external motivation for those under the auspices of a transactional leader (Deichmann and Stamm 2015). In general terms, those individuals who adopt a transactional style of leadership tend to have traits which reflect people who are adept at or prefer being directive in the way they provide information, guidance and support (McKee et al. 2018). Such individuals also tend to be resistant to change, encourage feelings of self-interest amongst teams and team members, and discourage independent thinking or initiative taking (McKee et al. 2018).

Although many of these traits sound negative, particularly when one considers leadership is concerned with generating optimal performances from team members (Andersen 2015), transactional leaders tend to be highly effective within organisations that place a great deal of emphasis on the attainment of targets, goals, and which have strict success or failure parameters built-in (Hamstra et al. 2014). One such sector is that of healthcare, which consists of services that are constantly under pressure to perform in accordance with targets, budgets, and external pressures (Frankel 2018).

It is perhaps no coincidence therefore that within the health service around the world,

transactional styles of leadership are by far the most common (Lorber, Treven, and Mumel 2016). However, despite the high rates of prevalence of transactional leadership within such settings, there is a view that such leadership styles are not as effective for the development of team morale and engagement (Lorber et al. 2016). This exposes the tension that can often occur between the attainment of organisational goals and the cultivation of a nurturing environment for individual team members (Hamstra et al. 2014).

In the context of student leadership, transformational leadership has been identified as a challenging theoretical foundation for the development of formal student leadership due to its styles that are not as effective for the development of team morale and engagement as stated by Lorber et al. (2016). However, this leadership theory is widely used in educational institutions in the relationship between instructors and students. Students are required to complete projects, assignment, or tests and if they perform well, they will be awarded good marks or the ability to pass.

## **METHODS**

To gain a more extensive understanding of the opinions held by participants regarding the objectives of this study, a qualitative research approach proved to be the most appropriate method. This approach provides the researcher with a deeper and, thus, a more comprehensive understanding of the data than do quantitative methods. It is also more flexible and can be adjusted to fit the specific situation (Roller and Lavrakas 2015).

In this study, participants were selected purposively, a non-probability sampling technique based on selecting participants based on their ability to provide rich and relevant information to the phenomenon under study. The participant in this study were students' leaders from the University Cork College (UCC), Ireland. Potential participants were made aware of the study via word of mouth and advertising on university social media channels. Data were collected through qualitative, semi-structured interviews in the form of in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to explore the concepts and areas of interest outlined in this study. According to Aleandri and Russo (2015, 519), the semi-structured interview, "gives full freedom for participants to express themselves and to deepen the conversation".

This study made use of thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis is considered as the most appropriate for any study that seeks to discover the opinions and perceptions of the participants. It illustrates the data in great detail and deals with diverse subjects via interpretations (Boyatzis 1998). Good qualitative research needs to be able to draw interpretations and be consistent with the data that is collected. With this in mind, thematic analysis is capable of detecting and identifying factors that influence any issue generated by participants. Therefore, participants'

interpretations in this study were significant in terms of giving the most appropriate explanations for their thoughts on the developmental trajectory of becoming a student leader. *Table 1* below summarises the way trustworthiness was ensured in this study.

Prior to the recruitment of the participants in this study, the UCC institutional ethical review board approved to conduct this study. It is worth noting that participation in this study was voluntary. Hence, the objectives of this study were clearly communicated to all participants, to give them the choice to participate or not, even the choice to withdraw any time during the interviewing process. Furthermore, throughout the research process, all interviews conducted remained strictly confidential, and interviewees confidentiality was not broken under any circumstances.

**Table 1:** Criteria for Trustworthiness

	<b>Credibility</b>	<b>Transferability</b>	<b>Conformability</b>
<b>Researcher</b>	Had clear selection criteria of participants, which were adhered to.	Descriptive data were provided through the use of data collection method.	Probing was done without being too personal and not to satisfy personal inquisitiveness.
<b>Participants</b>	Only those eligible for selection were included in the investigation.	Participants comprised students' leaders from the University Cork College (UCC)	Strict adherence to ethical requirements
<b>Research instrument</b>	Non-probability sampling was used to select participants purposefully.	Data collection method was used consistently.	Sampling interview's questions were semi-structured for all selected participants.
<b>Data analysis</b>	Thematic analysis.	The researcher followed the described method of data analysis.	The audit was carried out through member checking.

## FINDINGS

This section outlines and analysis the themes that have been developed as a result of the data collected. Four major themes were generated and they are labelled as follows: (1) "Student leadership goals", (2) "Importance of mentoring in the student leadership development", (3) "Challenges in student leadership development" and finally, (4) "Leadership styles pursued in student leadership development".

### Theme 1: Student leadership goals

Under this theme, two sub-themes were recognised: "Career Improvements or Improvement in Future Opportunities", and "My Leadership enriches My Organisations".



### ***Sub-theme 1: Career improvements or improvement in future opportunities***

This sub-theme was identified with the accounts of all participants and relates to the identification of the leadership roles they occupied. According to most participants, leadership provided them with future benefits:

“I think about the stuff I’m doing there and I think, well if I can do this, then when I’m out in the real world you know, once I’ve graduated that is, I can ... I can put those skills to use properly yeah?” (Participant 3).

“I’m thinking purely of my career, after, you know? I look at everyone else and see what they have done, the volunteer work or opportunities you know and I see that this is what I need to be doing to get, if not ahead exactly, but certainly on an even playing field you know? Like what I do here could make all the difference.” (Participant 1).

For Participant 2, taking a leadership role as a student was less to do with the organisation of which she was part, and more of a premeditated decision that was made before joining, with a view to boost future career prospects. The participants were more concerned about the need to develop their skills more than others.

“Oh I knew before I even got to unit, that I was like needing to develop these skills and these, this experience was what I needed to achieve so that I’m not playing catch up with others, who may get better grades or stuff – I want that experience to draw on, to make myself stand out. It didn’t matter what club [organisation] you know? It’s the skills I needed, that’s what, why I put myself up for it.” (Participant 2).

### ***Sub-theme 2: My leadership enriches my organisations***

This sub-theme was identified within three of the sample of participants within this study, and contrasts with that of the first sub-theme of “leadership improves my future opportunities”. Indeed, those participants who spoke of “my leadership enriches my organisation” focused on the benefits to their clubs or organisations going forward into the future. These findings imply that student leadership is not all about the self-progress or career advancements only rather students’ leadership pertains to the benefits resulting to others associated with the leader too.

“I mean without people like me willing to do this sort of thing, where would the club be? I love that if I am going to leave it in a better state... leaving it stronger, better for the future you know?” (Participant 3).

“I was talking to a friend who used to part of the club [deleted to preserve anonymity] and they were telling me of the old days, when they were in it and the issues they had, and ultimately like that’s why they left it. Now they’re like ‘wow this sounds better’ and are thinking of re-joining ....” (Participant 1).

In summary of this first theme, it seems that the accounts of participants indicate that the goal behind becoming student leader is viewed by them as an important component of their educational process, with future opportunities being a key concern. The opportunity that student leadership affords to develop skills and experiences for their future is central to how student leadership is experienced, although there is another, perhaps more altruistic aspect of this future-thinking viewpoint of student leadership. This involves valuing the club or organisation of which they are leading and wanting to leave it in a better state.

## **Theme 2: Importance of mentoring in student leadership development**

This theme of mentoring is related to how participants identified leadership support which is an important factor within their leadership experiences. Such support was valued by participants as a positive aspect or benefit to their student leadership development and its role. As with the previous theme, the theme of mentoring is comprised of two sub-themes, which relate to the direction in which the mentoring relationship was applied in student leadership.

### ***Sub-theme 1: Being mentored***

The first sub-theme has been labelled “being mentored”, which relates to the experiences of receiving support and advice from others whilst in a position of leadership. The first of these sub-themes, “being mentored” was identified by most of the participants who took part in this study, and accounts indicated that this was considered a positive factor in most cases:

“It’s been great receiving support whilst I learnt the ropes you know? In a certain sense it takes the pressure off, knowing I have someone, some of their experience to fall back on, and it ... for me, at least, I really valued being able to bounce ideas off and be able to get advice and support from them.” (Participant 2).

“When I first got in [i.e., started the leadership role] their help was really invaluable you know ... showing me and guiding me about the mechanics of the role was something that really took the pressure off and let me find my balance, my feet you know ....” (Participant 3).

“I was really grateful actually, to have someone with a bit more experience be there and show me like ‘this is what you need to be aware of’ and ‘this is like what you need to do first’ .... Really helpful, grateful too.” (Participant 2).

This point made above, about guidance regarding the “mechanics” of the leadership role, was reiterated by Participant 1, who stated that they too valued the support they received from more experienced leaders regarding this aspect, whilst also stating that they valued not being told how to lead; in other words, their natural leadership style was allowed to emerge:

“What was good really was that no-one told me how to act, how to like be a leader, which allowed me to develop in my own way, but if I needed to know what to do, or needed advice about any issues or whatever, that support was there to guide me which was great you know?” (Participant 1).

However, not all participants experienced the mentoring relationship in this way, and one account relayed how Participant 3 began to resent the mentoring relationship he received for the reason that he felt stifled by the support. In his account, Participant 3 went on to say that despite the initial benefits of receiving informal mentor support, he felt this also potentially stifled him as time went on:

“I guess what I didn’t appreciate too much was them like suggesting how I approached the role, the relationship side of things you know? Like we said earlier, that style, I felt like I wanted to develop my way of leading myself but sometimes I felt like they wanted me to just be like them, which I’m not yeah? So that was not so good after a while.” (Participant 3).

### ***Sub-theme 2: Acting as a mentor***

The second sub-theme is labelled “acting as a mentor” and relates to the opportunities to provide a supportive hand to others. Whereas the previous sub-theme was related to receiving mentoring-style support from others, participants also spoke of the opportunities to provide such support to others fellow students, which was seen largely as a valuable component of their leadership role:

“I’ve been able to give support to those coming through too, been able to provide the same sort of help that I got when I first started and needed to find my way, and that’s been pretty cool you know? It’s not often I’ve had the chance to do stuff like that before, so to be able to do it here has been good.” (Participant 2).

Interestingly, whereas receiving support, as outlined in the first sub-theme of this section was seen as “really useful” and a process in which student leaders were provided with the support to develop the understanding of their role, being able to provide similar support to others was regarded in a manner that was less about the use or utility of the process, and more to do with the confidence and affirming nature that being able to support others imbued:

“For me it’s been really astonishing really, looking back on how my confidence has grown; in the past, I’d like to be quite reluctant to offer up advice or anything to someone, but actually, it’s something that I feel I have been quite good at, and it’s been well-received too, so that’s all good.” (Participant 3).

“Helping in that way seems like a natural part of the process really, as the life cycle of being a leader in this environment you know? So for me to be able to be part of that, and to help others

come through as I did is pretty cool.” (Participant 2).

There are echoes within this sub-theme of the first theme covered in this section that of mentoring provides student leaders with a way to perform their roles by providing a bridge to the future for them. Indeed, one participant viewed the opportunity of being able to mentor others as a key aspect of their personal development that would be of benefit to them in the future:

“One hundred per cent, you know, I feel like this gives me an edge, or helps me stand out in some way: that I’ve had the chance to develop my skills and experiences to be able to guide others through the process, that’s like real leadership you know? That’s something I really wanted to develop within myself because I’ve valued the support of others when I’ve needed it. I just feel like it sets me up well for the future, like, having that experience now.” (Participant 1).

In summary, participants identified that being a student leader meant receiving some form of mentor-style support from others to become familiar with and to grow into their new role. Thus, it was a positive experience that allowed them to develop their knowledge. In turn, a key aspect was also providing mentoring support to future leaders. This was viewed by participants as a positive and affirming experience related to the development of their skills and their confidence.

### **Theme 3: Challenges in the student leadership development**

The previous two themes discussed above have dealt with the positive aspects of student leadership roles. This theme, however, involved experiences that were largely negative and challenging for participants to deal with. Therefore, it relates to some of the difficulties faced by the participants and it is divided into two sub-themes: “somebody’s target” and “self-critique”.

#### ***Sub-theme 1: Somebody’s target***

The first sub-theme to be discussed is “Somebody’s target”, which relates to the experiences of participants in which they felt criticised or challenged by others within their groups:

“I don’t know, really it’s a bit annoying I guess, because it shouldn’t be that hard, but sometimes when you get people chipping in or trying to undermine you, it feels pretty hard. And often it’s over something simple or like that doesn’t really matter, and you have to expend all this energy to deal with problems, so yes, pretty annoying.” (Participant 3).

“I don’t want to be like a dictator or anything you know, so I like try and listen and respond and all, but actually, sometimes I just feel people like being difficult for the sake of it, to make my life harder or whatever. It can be quite frustrating dealing with criticism and comments when all I want

to really do is crack on.” (Participant 2).

The reaction to challenges or criticism from others is divided further into one of two approaches; for example, whilst Participant 1 took the challenges and responded constructively or positively:

“I see it as a challenge but mostly a good one, you know? So it’s not always going to be easy, and I am not always going to be leading teams which are completely behind me, so it’s like, how can I say, it’s like good practice for the future and I will deal with what I can and won’t worry too much about what I can’t deal with at this stage; I’m still learning.” (Participant 1).

Others have taken the criticism personally and found the situation they have found themselves in distinctly more challenging:

“There is for me a great challenge in this, for I have always taken criticism personally, and I feel like there must be a reason for it, and spend a long time just going over and over what else I could do.” (Participant 2).

“Sometimes I feel like it’s just not worth the hassle – so I will give in, sometimes it is worth the hassle and I will dig in, but either way it can feel quite isolating and like ... exposing you know? So a bit of support here and there would be good I think.” (Participant 4).

The rumination in the last quote regarding the need for “*a bit support*” links in a way back to the importance of mentoring as described in a previous theme, and is echoed in the second sub-theme of this particular theme of “Challenges in the Student Leadership Development”.

### ***Sub-theme 2: Self-critique***

This second sub-theme, relating to “self-critique” relates to the sorts of personal doubts over performance described by Participant 3 below:

“I find myself kind of just criticising, thinking why did I do that [or] say that you know. I, sometimes, I do find public speaking difficult ... thinking about what I could have done or said different or better. It’s something I talk to others about, getting their perspective and support when I can.” (Participant 3).

This is it seems keenly felt by others within the sample, and self-doubt and criticism are something identified as being a particularly challenging aspect of student leadership:

“It’s, like for me, it’s something I have never done before so I know I’m still learning yeah? not just learning to act as a leader, but learning how to manage myself, my own emotions and insecurities, and like, there are loads (laughs) ... but like it is hard having those doubts like all time

you know?” (Participant 2).

“I just want a bit of help mostly I think ... I doubt like what I’m doing, and then if others are like looking blank or annoyed or whatever I’m doubting even more. Somebody just needs to come in and help me figure it out sometimes, and that’s like, not going to happen so it can be pretty difficult. I’m working on it.” (Participant 4).

In summary, this is a theme that illuminates the difficulties and challenges faced by student leaders and relates mostly to the psychological challenges of these positions, particularly within individuals who may still be developing their skills and experiences. These challenges are brought on by both the individual’s own insecurities and the challenging or confronting those around them. The need for support to help deal with these emotions was identified as something that may be of use.

#### **Theme 4: Leadership styles pursued in students’ leadership development**

The final theme identified via the analysis of the data relates to the “leadership styles” of participants. It is important to note that at no point within the interviews did participants refer to their style via a given name or category, and no mention of transactional or transformational styles was made, either by participants or by the interviewer. However, analysis of the data indicated that two styles were broadly identified within this sample, and these related to transactional and transformational leadership styles. These accounts will be discussed hereon.

It was worthy to note that for participants, who are still learning how to lead effectively, there was no hard leaning towards one style of leadership over another, indeed participants noted that there was a distinct process of trying out different approaches to see what worked and to see what style of approach suited them best:

“Oh at times I have to be quite directive, quite firm, and like just direct people that they should be doing x, y, or z. Others I’m like very likeable to be flexible, letting people develop their own ways of doing things and just monitoring how they go. I think they both like, I think that they both can have a place in terms of how to do things.” (Participant 3).

“It’s pretty cool actually because I had no idea of how to be a leader before, how to lead. And here I am getting to try different ways, see what actually works, and what leaves people like scratching their heads you know? I kind of try to be easy going and all most of the time but then there are times when you just need to be directive, which I didn’t think I’d be good at, but I quite like it really now.” (Participant 2).

There seemed to be a leaning, as outlined by the above excerpt from Participant 2, for participants to adopt more flexible, empowering leadership styles which align with a more transformational approach:

“Oh I’m pretty chill, I like, I think people work best when they’re trusted to do things their way, and not like constantly monitored or tasked with doing stuff by a certain time, I like really enjoy letting people just crack on and go you know?” (Participant 4).

Yet at the same time, participants went on to state that more transactional approaches, which for example utilise targets and rewards/punishments were also open options to them, as Participant 4 went on to say:

“But like there is, of course I think leading is sometimes being hard, or taking hard decisions you know? Like if something really needs doing and it hasn’t been done then, of course, I will have a word and ensure it gets sorted.” (Participant 4).

This was the case for participants who spoke about styles of leadership within their study; and perhaps is a reflection of the nascent stages within the learning process that these individuals were in regarding leadership, in which they were still developing an understanding of which styles work best for them. Only one participant actively identified as being very clear as to which style they used:

“I have no time, you know, I am really busy with other stuff going on and there’s like, there is no need in my mind to be unclear with people, so I’m like, this needs to be done, in this timeframe and in this way, and if you get it done, here’s a drink you know? I’m sure others might do it differently, but it works well for us I think.” (Participant 1).

Others mostly identified as being transformational leaders as a first instinct: “My first approach is always to let people be the experts about what they need to do, and I will just help and answer questions if needed ...” (Participant 3). But then stated that they were also amenable to taking a more transactional approach when needed: “... but like sometimes I let people know the consequences of not doing stuff properly, not doing it on time. And of course, cake always helps – I often get a cake or two in for people who do well you know? I think that’s quite a popular approach!” (Participant 2).

In summary, this final theme deals with the approach to leadership that participants within the current study discussed in the interviews. The majority of participants identified with an initial instinct to engage in leadership via a flexible, quasi-transformational manner, whilst at the same time acknowledging that transactional approaches are also often adopted, seemingly at times of high pressure or tight deadlines. There was little evidence of participants had developed at this stage of their leadership a true sense of what style they predominantly used or felt more attuned to using, and indeed only one participant was clear in their use of a single

strategy of leadership.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This section places into context the findings presented in the above section and discusses the implications of these findings both for the field of academia and for practical leadership initiatives. To achieve this, this section contextualises the themes within the wider body of literature.

The view held by participants, that by taking on a role as a student leader, they were at the same time investing in the goal to enhance future opportunities is consistent with the idea of Hoffman et al. (2008) in the area regarding why students take on such roles. Both the primary data findings and literature reviewed have confirmed that student leadership development is an ongoing process, which keeps on evolving. For this purpose, the opinions of the participants did match with the Lawrence et al. (2018) considerations related with the significance of the present and future practices both, in the development of leadership as well as leadership skills. It showed that student leaders are similarly concerned about their future development and career growth as much as they are concerned about their role to support others surrounding them. This finding is well-explained by Tyran (2017) who has identified the need to reflect the values needed in the future organisational careers by the student leaders. For this purpose, they set out a specific goal and try to develop self-identity while helping others to develop their self-identities too.

The developmental trajectory of leadership, in general, has also substantiated the self-identity and self-regulation as the key processes of becoming a competent leader. However, the participants did not identify adult development process as the main aspect for their student leadership development (such as physical, cognitive and psychological developments occurring in themselves, which lead them to self-identity) as purported by Lawrence et al. (2018). It seemed that the student leaders, who have participated in this research were more concerned about the visible processes, i.e., meso level and surface-level processes only.

Moreover, besides goals, the development of student leadership was identified also as related to the skills and relational practices like mentoring. This was consistent with the literature findings pinpointing that during the nascent years of an individual's professional development, the "long lens" approach sews the seeds of future leadership (Murphy and Johnson 2011). It is of note that, the results of the current study only relate to student leaders' perceptions of their future development, but these perceptions coincide with findings from past studies indicate that these roles are of potential benefit to individuals and organisations alike. For this purpose, student leaders identify the significance of "being mentored" as well as "to



mentor others” as equally important. It can be implied that conscious awareness of self needs as well as the support required by the others, ultimately shape the development of student leaders. However, although not highlighted by the research participants specifically yet mentorship has been recognised as the key element of the transformational leadership styles as highlighted by Komives et al. (2011).

The impact of the transformational leadership approach appeared as significant on the student leadership development relative to the transactional leadership or other leadership approaches. Like Komives et al. (2011), participants did highlight the importance of understanding and recognising the transitions and interventions needed for improvement of learning and for the development of leadership competencies. All these motives can only be achieved through a transformational leadership approach. Transformational leadership style allows the student leaders to refocus around their followers’ need to identify a shared goal and to teach them problem-solving, responsibility-sharing, interdependence, commitment, collaboration and shared decision-making. It can further be depicted that the developmental trajectory of student leadership also recognises the significance of relational approach among the leaders and their followers. With the help of mentorship, student leaders in the chosen organisation are trying to teach adaptability skills to help the followers pursue a shared sense of identity, necessary to perform with the multiple levels of systems (Komives et al. 2011). These systems are ever-changing and therefore, with every change the developmental process of student leadership also changes respectively.

Regarding the importance of mentoring, participants outlined how mentoring was valued by them, not only to receive whilst learning the processes of leadership in their chosen organisation but also to deliver to others. This relates to the work of Campbell et al. (2012), whose research ascertained that leadership capacity was influenced positively by the existence of a mentorship process, as well as the type of mentors; such as staff, faculty, or peer for example. Such a stance is similarly supported by the work of Dugan and Komives (2010), who identify mentoring relationships as being pivotal to the leadership capacities of student leaders.

The theme relating to enduring both peer and self-criticism outlines some of the stresses that student leaders may feel themselves under due to their roles. Such findings relate to those of Komives et al. (2009) who noted that during the leadership process, students’ identities were impacted upon by their experiences, and stressful experiences of leadership could negatively impact upon such identity development. Although there is some evidence to suggest that leadership positions are in fact related to lower levels of stress (Sherman et al. 2012) compared to those outside of the leadership hierarchy, such research has not been grounded within the student leadership literature. Furthermore, little is known about the impact of such roles on the

stress levels of the students filling these positions. More research in this area is needed to ensure a clearer understanding of the potentially negative impacts of student leadership is garnered.

Few of the participants had developed a firm stance regarding preferred leadership styles was another key finding. This finding can be supported by the work of Lussier and Achua (2015) who view leadership as a process in which skills are learned and developed over time. In the cases of the participants of this current study, they represent individuals at the initial stages of the skills development process and as a result, have not yet developed a coherent set of skills or approach to a specific leadership style. However, overall conclusive evidence of the themes has highlighted the influence of transformational leadership approach is dominant in the developmental trajectory of student leadership. Similarly, Ingleton (2013) in the wider literature has also suggested the need to integrate the transformational leadership approach in the student leadership programme. This can help the students to develop skills essential for fetching a positive change at the local, national and international levels.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the way student leadership roles are developed and experienced, and to meet these objectives, the experiences of students' leaders of the UCC were sought. The study concluded with a point that a set of goals, key skills, challenges and appropriate leadership style contribute vitally in shaping the developmental trajectory of students' leadership. The results indicated that student leaders are very much influenced in their choices and actions by considerations for the future and the development of skills and experiences that will provide personal and organisational benefit to those involved. Whilst leadership styles at this stage of their development seemed to be in a state of flux and had not been fully honed within the group of participants, there were notable findings relating to the importance of them to be mentored by experienced leaders from the institution (UCC). Although this study produced valuable exploratory insights into the opinions held by students' leaders on the developmental trajectory of becoming a student leader, the data should be interpreted in light of its limitations. Great caution should, therefore, be exercised when trying to generalise the opinions of the participants. Second, from the biographical data, it is clear that the participants did not represent the demographic composition of students leaders of all universities around the world. Therefore, it is important to emphasise non-generalisability of its findings.

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