



**Linnæus University**

Sweden

Master Thesis

# Leadership Development in International Student Organization

*Case Study on Erasmus Student Organization  
(Sweden)*



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## Abstract

The research on the topic of leadership has long been the area of interest for scholars for many decades. Despite the extensive amount of literature available there is still a gap when it comes to research about the role of student organization in the leadership development of an individual.

This thesis project, therefore, is designed in order to gain deeper understanding of the potential effect of a student organization on the leadership development of a student who took leadership position within student organization.

This ambition was accomplished through qualitative research with semi-structured interviews conducted in a case study of Erasmus Student Network.

The results of the research have revealed certain link between the leadership development and person's participation in the activities of student organization. Additionally, cultural aspect has been identified as the important factor of the organization. As the result of our findings, we may conclude that there is a positive correlation between student organizations providing a good opportunity for students to test their leadership abilities in a safe environment, while it was not possible to identify the extent of that impact on the leadership development of an individual.

We believe that our research may add value to the theoretical knowledge on the leadership topic in the context of student life while giving an opportunity for the reader to use the findings of this study as a practical information and guidelines for potential of student organization to have an impact on the future of an individual.

## Key words

Student Organization, Leadership Development, Leadership Competencies, Cultural Sensitivity, Intercultural Communication



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## 1 Introduction

Student organizations are part of the history of many countries' higher education with the main purpose from inception being to express the student's voice. They encouraged students to manage their free time through engagement in social, political and extracurricular activities. In addition, Amirianzadeh et al (2011) argue, that student organizations were established with the aim of enhancing the political, social, ethical, cultural and scientific levels of growth among students across the world. The significant role of student organizations was observed in the 18th and 19th centuries when students initiated rebellions against restrictive policies (Novak, 1977). The rebellions were motivated by the perceived unreliability of a classical curriculum, substandard food and poor lodging in colleges (Broadhurst, 2014). Campus regulations also made small offenses such as entertaining guests in college accommodation rooms, playing cards or pool, dancing and having distilled liquor punishable (Broadhurst, 2014). This move angered college students. However, their revolts rarely led to changes in college regulations. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, student activism became a crucial function of the associations during the era of Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X with the aim of conquering racial discrimination in the United States. The two leaders (Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm x) inspired many African American youths to pursue their dreams in leadership. Today, a student organization can be generally defined as an organization, led and operated by group of students at an educational institution with the purpose of pursuing the common interest of enabling students to meet, socialize and have fun.



## **1.1 Background**

The history of western higher education has witnessed many student movements owing to the unique nature of its campuses. In each period, there have been unique protests for students' rights which represent the dynamic nature of these organizations (Broadhurst, 2014). The tactics used to attain student's goals have shifted from the use violent revolts to the use of negotiations led by student leaders. In this sense, it's clear that modern student organizations provide student leaders a chance to represent students on a negotiation platform.

Recently, the role of student associations has grown beyond political activism to growing interactions and nurturing leaders through exchange programs. The communication between students in these organizations aids the creation of diversity in universities and the inclusion of different viewpoints from students (Altbach, 1989). In addition, the rise in international student organizations has provided a platform where student leaders from different nationalities can interact and experience leadership on an international scale. This implies that there's a possibility of developing multinational leaders using international student organizations.

Student development can be traced back in 1936 - a period associated with the beginning of American student organization involvement. In this context, universities played the role of facilitators for the perfection of human skills via attainment of maturity among students. Miller (1997) articulated that student leadership development was an important part of a student's life to be provided by colleges and universities. It was basically the process in which an individual was subjected to changes that went on to elicit a somewhat complex behavior as a result of the capability to overcome the increasing life challenges (Astin, 1984). To this effect, Astin (1984) proposed that the universities and colleges played a critical role in the development of student leadership.





Similarly, Boyer (1987) argued that student development is one of the most significant experiences of university students and was, therefore, a duty of the higher learning institutions. In this context, he exhibited that the time spent by students in the university and the number of participatory activities characterizing their stay in the university had the potential to affect the quality of leadership experiences. In more specific terms, Astin (1993) showed that there was a positive relationship between student leadership development and certain critical environmental factors. These factors were: interaction between students, student to faculty interaction, volunteering activities, provision of tutoring service to other students, intramural sports, participation in group class projects, making presentations in class and fraternity membership. Astin (1993) reinforced the development of student leaders through student organizations via his findings that students thrive when universities work together to enhance involvement in co-curricular activities. The leadership outcomes were more pronounced when students engaged to practice what they learned in classrooms or service learning projects that had a direct relationship with class work. This means that student organizations could only yield leaders if the students enrolled for leadership courses in their respective colleges.

According to Astin (1984), students who involve themselves in university organizations or associations and those who assume leadership positions in university activities or in-class sessions have a higher chance of developing leadership qualities. The period of time that students spent on involvement in student activities had positive effects on the development of leadership (Astin, 1993). Consequently, students are likely to develop more leadership traits when they spend more hours in student associations (Guido-Dibrito and Bachelor, 1988).

However, the research work mentioned above may not be applicable to the new realities of a modern world. The scientific evidence from early 1990s should be reviewed and critically appraised in order to provide relevant and valid insight on the research matter. Additionally, a recent research by



Aymoldanovna et al. (2015) suggests that for all leadership levels, student leaders are provided with training programs, retreats and workshops to enhance leadership development. In this way, it could be assumed that student organizations contribute to not only develop future business leaders but also nonprofit leaders and leaders for the local communities. Thus, we believe that in the era of globalization, the role of the student organization has changed. As a result of this change, a new and different leadership traits and skills are required and should be developed among individuals.

With our research work, we intend to explore the new opportunities for a student to develop those leadership traits and skills based on the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) organization. Founded on 16th October 1989, ESN grew significantly as an international student organization to become the largest student association in Europe which develops and promotes student exchange programs. The choice of the organization was influenced by several factors. First of all, being the biggest student organization in Europe, it is represented in over a 1000 higher education institutions in 39 countries. With over 40.000 active members ESN offers its services to a relatively large number of students (approximately 350.000 students per year). Secondly, ESN being an international student organization, with the aim of supporting the needs and rights of international students studying abroad, will provide us with a diverse team of research subjects for the thesis. We believe that the choice of this particular student organization will add value to the significance of the results of this study.

## **1.2 Problem Discussion**

Due to the unique challenges of the 21st century, universities train student leaders to adapt to the complex social, cultural and technological changes. This should enable them to confront the contemporary societal challenges. The



long-term focus of the ecological leadership theory has on the future makes it suitable for the process of developing student leaders. It mainly focuses on the responsibility of the individual, development of capabilities, a long-term perspective, adaptation, and harmonization.

Student leaders require a platform for self-development in order to attain essential leadership skills. However, the coursework, which mainly focuses on theory, puts little emphasis on practical leadership skills. In this research we are wondering if the exposure to distinct personalities and different behavioral styles through the mentors involved in international student organizations can motivate students to identify their pathways in leadership. The student leaders are likely to encounter Kronz's (2014) behavioral styles that range from the analyzer to the socializer, the director, and the relater. We will thus discover if understanding leadership personalities and behavioral styles enable students to recognize specific areas of leadership that need improvement.

Secondly, leadership competencies such as knowledge of business, the desire to lead, drive, self-confidence, honesty and emotional stability are compulsory for effective leaders (Chowdhury, 2015). Being part of any organization around the globe, a person could gain a set of skills that help him to develop his or her leadership traits. Student organizations are one of the opportunities for students to explore and test their leadership abilities. However, many researchers do not provide enough attention to the role of student organizations in supporting and improving the development of knowledge, skills and competencies in students. We will explore this gap to uncover if student organizations help student leaders to attain leadership competencies.

As mentioned earlier, globalization requires organizations to come up with resonant leaders who can counter the challenges of a fast changing business environment. One of the characteristics of resonant leaders is cultural sensitivity which could be acquired via participation in international student leadership organizations. In this case, the organizations can produce open-



minded leaders who can manage diverse teams by accommodating different points of view. These types of leaders can, therefore, be in a position to perceive the needs of others and to appreciate them. The multicultural engagement among the students should give them the right leadership skills to practice in the complex environment of the 21st century. The experiences of engaging with students from different nationalities have the potential to empower them with the skills required to work in different countries across the globe.

### **1.3 Research question**

It is argued, that specific and relevant research question can play an essential role in the whole research process (Saunders et al., 2009). Consequently, a well-developed research question may support the focus of our study and provide a clear path for the research process and procedures. Due to the fact that the main interest of our study is the significance of taking a leadership role in international student organization to the leadership development of a person, our research is intended to answer the following main research question:

#### **How taking a leadership position in a student organization affect the leadership development of an individual?**

In order to answer the main research question of our study, we developed two sub-questions, which we believe will provide a better insight on the ways in which a broad term of leadership development can be understood:

1. What leadership competencies could be learned by the students as the result of participation in a student organization?
2. How/In what ways can students get an insight into global cultures and develop cultural sensitivity through the participation in international student organization?



The responses by the participants of the study will be analyzed via content analysis to determine whether involvement in the organization was positively related to the development of leadership skills. We believe the research questions explained above are clear, focused, and specific and give us an opportunity to achieve the objectives of our study research.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding on the opportunities for leadership development of students and the role of the student organization in a modern student's life. Therefore, the study is intended to take an exploratory approach in order to provide new insights on the ways of leadership development of an individual based on the experiences of the board members of Erasmus Student Network organization in Sweden.

We believe the opportunity to explore the leadership development of students can potentially be achieved by linking certain competencies to the leadership development. It is also worth mentioning that we would like to add value to the research on student organization impact on the individual and close the gap in this area we identified as the result of our literature review process.



## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter includes the literature review related to the topic of leadership development and competencies, as well as theme of cultural aspect. The existing theoretical frameworks are provided in order to provide some insights and motivate our choice of choosing this particular research subject.

### **2.1 Leadership Experience**

Leadership experiences that are provided early enough equip students with tools needed to excel academically, in social settings and in the workplace (Holzweiss, Rahn and Wickline, 2007). According to Day (2000), leadership development refers to the processes involved in building and practicing interpersonal leadership capabilities. It refers to the strategy used to help people understand how to develop social networks by relating with others, building commitments and coordinating their efforts in a manner that applies the comprehensive knowledge on social and organizational imperatives (Day, 2000). Leadership development during a student's time in college has been studied to determine the most promising methods of developing leadership skills and the different processes that must be followed in order to develop leaders out of different student groups. The following is a literature review touching on the role of student organizations in the development of leadership in students.

First of all, Flochiegger (1998) studied the benefits of student involvement in collegiate activities. He listed the benefits to be; improved interpersonal skills, positive bearing on leadership skills, positive impact on community service, higher rates of satisfaction with students' experiences in college and increased retention. On a similar note, Rosch and Collins (2017) found that participation in student organizations provided an environment for



the development of leadership capacities in students. In this case, he found that most of these organizations were created for the purpose of pursuing community-based or campus-based impact. In most cases, participation was usually voluntary but would be mandatory if it was part of a university's major. However, the students had the obligation of choosing the activities they were willing to engage in from those that they deemed unnecessary.

Rosch and Collins (2017) related student organizations to effective experimental laboratories because they aided in the development of a leader's identity and provided a platform for practicing leadership behaviors and skills. In this case, Membership or enrollment in student organizations increased student involvement in campus activities. The experiences of students in these organizations influenced the way they pictured themselves as leaders and their convictions about how the student organizations should be designed and structured. Large, stable and properly managed student organizations looked remarkably similar. This was possible because the structures of the large student organizations were closely related to the structures of professional organizations in the real world (Mainella, 2017).

Mainella (2017) proposed that the organizational structure of student organizations had the capability to affect the acquisition of leadership skills by leaders. In this case, it influenced the extent to which students/members were satisfied and their commitment to the organizations (Day et al, 2014). Mainella (2017) argued that If the student organization was properly designed, students could work collectively to tackle contemporary leadership decision-making activities. This helped the students to grow into effective leaders who could work in groups or teams. On a similar note, Rosch and Collins (2017) found that in instances where student organizations were designed to impact the greater community through collectivist activity, they functioned as leadership catalysts which improved the leadership capacity of the communities where



they operated. This meant that student organizations enhanced both individual capacity building and collective development of leadership.

According to Mainella (2017), Student organizations should be characterized by a specific culture that the members are comfortable with. In an ideal structure that promotes leadership development, students start at junior roles before they advance to complex leadership roles (Dugan & Komives, 2010). This is consistent with the leadership identity model which suggested that students who stayed long in the organization recognized their ability to rise to important leadership roles and thus helped in the development of imminent leaders (Komives et al., 2006). On a similar note, Mainella (2017) suggested that the organizations should recognize both positional and nonpositional organizational leaders so that every student who participates in student organizations is honored and appreciated for leadership.

Keating et al (2014) proposed that leadership development initiatives should not only attend to the development of skill but also show unswerving focus to the wide range of factors that enable the student to practice the behaviors of effective leaders. Based on the foundations of Heifetz adaptive leadership model, Mainella (2017) argued that the student organizations provide a 'holding environment' that enables students to learn and practice new behaviors and to incorporate the new perspectives that they learn from their peers. Komives et. al (2006) expounded on this point by indicating that participation in student organizations enabled students to find their own voice in a group context in order to develop their leadership identity. Additionally, he found that the organizations could be used as a pipeline of involvement which translated to professional network graduates.

On the other hand, Austin (1993) proposed a student involvement theory that focused on the activities that the students engaged in during their collegiate experience in relation to the time, energy and motivation that characterized the learning process. Austin preferred to use the term





involvement in place of motivation because it was easier to measure the involvement of students in collegiate activities. His theory was concerned with the processes and the activities that promote student development. According to the student involvement theory, the number of hours per week spent in student organizations, the virtue of holding an elected office and the chance to make presentations to a class was the most dominant variables that influence leadership development. In addition, Austin highlighted that students who put in psychological and physical energy in the organization's' activities were able to derive knowledge through learning.

From a different perspective, Anthony and Robert's (1979) comprehensive leadership model provided a detailed description of leadership growth in universities. This model proposed that student leaders could be developed through training initiatives, education, and development. While training aimed to improve the student's performance, education was provided to enhance leadership competence. On the other hand, the role of development was to provide a platform for students to mature in a unique way that enhanced their potential in leadership.

According to Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998), the extent to which students participated in collegiate leadership activities was proportional to the assignment of post-college leadership obligations. Similarly, Rosch and Collins (2017) found that the level of growth that was likely to be experienced by students who involved themselves in student organizations ranged from the improvement of skills, growth of self-efficacy in leadership and the increase in the motivation to lead. On the other hand, Pescarella and Teranzini's (1991) research on college alumni revealed that individuals who hold leadership positions in college acquired vital interpersonal leadership skills that enhanced job success.

An empirical study by Hoover and Dunigan (2004) exhibited that most students joined student organizations because of their significance to



their own career goals followed by the implied opportunities of leadership development. The other reasons for joining student organizations were related to their ability to enhance socialization with peers and the tendency to bring together individuals who share similar interests (Hoover, and Dunigan, 2004). On the other hand, Holzweiss, Rahn, and Wickline (2007) argued the objectives of the student or the individual reasons for joining student organizations informed the choice between academic and non-academic student organizations. In this case, students who seek to prepare for their future careers joined academic organizations while those who prioritized socialization and other collegiate experiences joined non-academic organizations. The students persisted or stayed in the organizations only if their objectives were met.

On the contrary, a study by Kuh (1993) found that students rarely prioritized academic outcomes in relation to involvement experiences of student organizations. They preferred to join non-academic organizations that provided an avenue for socialization, friendships and interpersonal relationships between students.

Student leaders have not been adequately studied by researchers. In addition, Holzweiss, Rahn and Wickline, (2007) argue that the impact of involvement in student organizations has only been studied on a broad scope. This appears to ignore the findings of Dugan (2013) that student organizations are characterized by a significant degree of diversity. Their diverse functions include; governance, religion, sports and sporting and sporting activities, community service, career development issues, cultural issues, and academic issues. Therefore, the literature implies about student organizations focuses on some defined aspects and gives almost similar results irrespective of the nature of the student organization in question. In this context, there's a need to examine whether the different types of student organizations provide opportunities for learning different leadership competencies. Additionally,



there's a need to separate the students who participate in student organizations to impact their future from those who desire to improve their experiences in college through friendship and socialization.

Additionally, Holzweiss, Rahn, and Wickline (2007) argue that the extent to which student experiences in student organizations influence their leadership capabilities is not clear. It's a complicated process trying to understand the experiences of students prior to college and thus understanding the impact of student organizations in college is difficult or impossible. The following literature review, therefore, shows gaps in the existing literature that should be filled in future.

## **2.2 Leadership Competency**

According to research by Thorn (2012), leadership competencies can be described as the facilitators of leadership effectiveness. Thorn (2012), conducted a research on the global leadership competencies by interviewing 12 leaders from four international financial and development institutions. The research found out that the main leadership competencies were consistent with the findings of the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research program. These competencies included; integrity, good communication skills, honesty, and risk-taking capabilities. In addition, the competent leaders were found to be visionary (ability to plan ahead or charismatic), just and trustworthy. They also had a positive attitude and were able to build confidence and to motivate others. The aspect of being communicative enabled them to build and leads teams. In the context of student organizations, one face of the experiences of student leaders should include events that shape the values of integrity and honesty while the other should enable the students to easily adapt to the diverse environments in which leaders are bound to practice. Additionally, the organizations should provide



role models to reinforce the values/leadership competencies and to enhance consistency in the practice of these competencies. Most importantly, as informed by Thorn's (2012) study, student organizations should be guided by a strategic vision, have systems that foster teamwork and create room for open communications in an attempt to enhance the development of leadership competencies.

From another point of view, Amirianzadeh et al (2010) conducted a study to assess the development of leadership competencies during a student's time in college and the range of factors that influence this development. The researchers used individual in-depth interviews to conduct the research. They designed a model for assessing the development of student leadership competencies which stipulated several factors that mediate such development. These factors were; the ability to challenge the process, the art of empowering others to act, and capabilities to inspire a shared vision, think systematically, encourage the heart and to model the way. To this end, the authors proposed that the practitioners of student affairs needed to reassess certain assumptions in their leadership practices in order to match the dynamic nature of the student body. Additionally, the university leaders who were tasked with creating leadership programs, training and other extracurricular activities needed to understand the changes in the student body in order to enhance the development of leadership competencies.

Fragouli (2017) examined the positive role of higher education in the development of leadership competencies and the student's perspective on the impact of higher education in the development of the competencies. He analyzed previous literature findings which proposed that the failure by institutions of higher learning to shift from lecture-based on competence development models was the major challenge facing institutions of higher learning. In this case, he found that universities could only enhance the development of leadership competencies if they used a competence-based



model to teach the students. The research also suggested that integrating innovation in teaching methodologies was an essential part of developing leadership competencies among the students. The findings by Fragouli (2017) can be applied in student organizations by introducing competence-based learning models to facilitate the mentoring and teaching activities that are part of their general activities.

However, Osteen and Coburn (2012) found that building successful leaders in higher education was dependent upon the context within which leadership programs were embedded. In this context, the context referred to factors such as; how the society perceived and expected of higher education institutions, the history of the organization and the institutional mission, and the structures of administration. For leadership competencies to be developed, the students were expected to get; administrative support and a collaborative environment. In addition, the organizations were expected to have an institutional mission and an associated high purpose for education. The authors used existing literature on this topic to draw a conclusion on the development of leadership capabilities in students. In the context of student organizations, the contextual areas suggested by Osteen and Coburn (2012) should play a significant role when creating leadership programs. The organizations should have a mission within which the students inform the choice to join and an environment which gives the students unique experiences that enhance the development of leadership competencies.

Moreover, Farver, Smalling, and Stoller (2016) conducted a study to address the gap in leadership training programs within academic medical centers and business schools where there were only a few well- developed programs. The authors framed a leadership development course with the central focus being emotional intelligence. They found that the concept of emotional intelligence was not effectively covered by institutions of higher learning because the medical trainees rated low in conflict resolution and



teamwork. Most of the medical trainees indicated the need to acquire additional knowledge regarding these leadership competencies. What this means to student leadership organizations is that the concept of emotional intelligence along with the competencies of conflict resolution and teamwork need to be developed in order to develop effective leaders.

Salas Velasco (2014) conducted a study to propose a model of competence development which universities could use to equip their students with the required leadership competencies. These competencies by the students were exhibited to be very important in the job market because they added value to the courses that they undertook. The author suggested that universities needed to move from the traditional lecture-based teaching model. The adoption of a competency-based model along with the use of innovative technologies suggested better outcomes for students.

Logue, Hutchens, and Hector (2005) conducted a study to examine the subjective experiences of college students who hold leadership positions. The students were interviewed and their responses recorded. The authors found that interpersonal and skill development and other development processes could be addressed through the evaluation of leadership experiences in college. The findings of this research can be applied to the management of leadership competencies in student organizations. In this context, the heads of these organizations should first evaluate the experiences of students to identify gaps in the context of impacting leadership competencies. The leadership programs should then be designed in a manner that addresses the missing leadership competencies.

Smart et al. (2002) conducted research to assess the relationship between the expenses incurred by universities and the perceptions by students about progress in leadership competencies over their stay in the university. The authors used data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program in their 1986 and 1990 surveys. They found that expenditures by universities had a



statistically significant effect on the growth of leadership competencies by students. The implications of the research for student organizations were clear. The organizations are expected to monitor their expenditures in order to arrive at an optimal level that coincides with the development of leadership competencies.

Smart et al. (2002) argued that colleges and universities should establish the right balance between student growth and development and the costs of operating colleges/ universities. In addition, they recognized a complex interaction between the personal attributes of the students as they joined college and the choice of an academic major in the university that reinforced the presence of leadership competencies. The attributes of students as freshmen informed the importance they attached to leadership competencies and the probability of developing them. In addition, participation in leadership activities during the stay in the university and the provision of an effective environment for student development were important factors in this complex interaction. This means that universities must ensure that the environment in student organizations fosters the development of leadership competencies. Students must also be encouraged to put more effort into the level of leadership involvement when they join student organizations.

Modern leadership has to offer innovative solutions owing to the dynamic nature of the business environment in the 21st century which is characterized by globalization, technology, and societal development. Campbell et al. (2012) studied the significant gap in leadership to suggest ways in which future generations can be prepared for leadership positions. The type of mentor was important where students desired to be mentored for personal development derived better outcomes when mentored by a mentor from the faculty in comparison to those who were mentored by a student practitioner. On the other hand, greater leadership capacities were achieved when students were mentored by student affairs practitioners that when they



were mentored by their faculties. This meant that for the development of leadership competencies, psychosocial mentorship was preferred to mentorship by the faculty. The study by Campbell et al. (2012) could be applied in student organizations. In this context, psychosocial mentors should be used to aid the development of leadership competencies in student leaders.

### **2.3 Intercultural Competence**

Culture - is a vast topic which has been discussed for decades throughout the human history. The father of cultural anthropology, Sir Edward Tylor, is considered to be the first mover in an attempt to define the phenomenon in his work of "Primitive Culture" in 1871.

According to the author, "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. xii).

Until today, many scholars have tried to develop the term further, by considering the realities of the world they live in (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Schwartz, 1992; Hofstede, 1984). On the other hand, most of those definitions can be interpreted in a similar way as Tylor's. First of all, Edward Tylor was the first scholar to claim that the culture can be acquired, meaning learned, in contrary to beliefs that culture was inherited. Secondly, he argues that culture is shared and based on social interaction. Thirdly, according to his definition, culture involves both moral thoughts as well as behaviors of people.

Furthermore, Geert Hofstede (1991), a well-known Dutch anthropologist and scholar defined the term culture as "...the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (p.5). Based on the results of his research between the years 1967 and 1973, he identified five different dimensions of





culture. By conducting in-depth interviews with IBM workers from more than 50 different countries, he constructed 5 major dimensions of the culture as following: power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, feminine vs. masculine, uncertainty avoidance and short-term vs. long term orientation. Hofstede studied culture at its national level, by trying to identify patterns and reveal the cultural differences across various nations. From the time the results of his work have been published, Hofstede's model of five cultural dimensions has been a major tool in predicting the expectations and the behavior of people from different cultural backgrounds for business, management and marketing purposes. Later, Hofstede added another cultural dimension called indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede, 2011). Consequently, his work on cultural dimensions has been used as a platform for many culture related researches and publications, and one of them is the development of a phenomenon that we are particularly interested in our research: intercultural communication.

It is worth mentioning that the studies of intercultural communication refer to the separate discipline, which is concentrated on the communication among people from different cultural backgrounds. As it can be derived from its name, intercultural communication assumes that the key to understanding one's other culture is through the means of communication. Additionally, it is argued that intercultural communication heavily depends on the way the person perceives the world, and thus, another culture. It also involves the symbolic actions, social attributes and ideas of people, alongside with the language factor.

The term of intercultural communication has been interpreted in various ways, while many argue, that the term was first introduced by Edward T. Hall in 1959, in his book called "The Silent Language". He is also given a credit for developing the intercultural communication paradigm, which was mainly used for practical purposes in an attempt to train American diplomats to succeed in overseas assignments. Hall suggested certain elements of intercultural communication paradigm, such as focus on non-verbal



communication rather than verbal, intercultural studies in contrast to monocultural disciplines and acceptance of differences between cultures instead of judgmental attitudes (Hall, 1959). Based on the developed paradigm, he included the approaches for effective training techniques in developing one's intercultural communication skills.

As such, the need for teaching people in acquiring skills for effective communication with people from various backgrounds has been recognized on a national level. The subject of intercultural communication started being taught on the university level in the USA and also spread in the form of trainings within organizations in 1970s. Comparably, the first course on Intercultural communication was introduced in Europe by the year of 1980 in Finland.

Acquiring the intercultural communication skills is a significant step in building a stronger intercultural communication competence as a whole.

In our study, we would like to explore in what ways taking the leadership role in a student organization may facilitate the development of a cultural sensitivity of a student. Throughout the literature review, we could find certain distinctions made among the terms of intercultural awareness, intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity. Thus, it is important to recognize the difference between those terms.

According to Chen and Starosta (1996), all three terms are related but different concepts. As such, the authors identify the intercultural communication as a notion, which consists of three parts: cognitive, affective and behavioral abilities of the person subject to intercultural interaction.

To begin with, the cognitive part is described as being the representation of the intercultural awareness. Intercultural awareness is identified as cultural understanding which affects the human thoughts and behavior (Chen & Starosta, 1996). Secondly, the behavioral section of the intercultural communication competence is defined as intercultural adroitness, or capability of the person to achieve the communication goals within the



process of interacting with other cultures. Finally, the affective element of intercultural communication competence is intercultural sensitivity.

According to Chen & Starosta (1996), the intercultural sensitivity is individuals' "active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate and accept differences among cultures" (p. 231). In this way, individuals can understand and appreciate the differences between other cultures in contrast to their own and may adjust their behavior in an effective way in the process of intercultural communication. Additionally, authors identified that intercultural sensitivity consist of six following elements: open - mindedness, interaction involvement, self - esteem, self - monitoring, non - judgement and empathy. To elaborate, the high level of self - esteem may support a person in dealing with stress and anxiety, due to uncertainty and ambiguity that may arise while intercultural interaction. Self - monitoring may lead to being more attentive to a person from another background and provoke an effective response accordingly. Open - mindedness permits the person to be open and curious about one's culture and thus, provide new perspectives on the subject matter. Interaction involvement consists of three other concepts, such as being responsive, attentive and perceptive (Chen & Starosta, 1996). It also requires an effort to be non - judgmental, but listen effectively to other person with prejudices and stereotypes being eliminated as much as possible. Finally, empathy is one of the main factors that play significant role in the intercultural sensitivity, which is a capability to understand the other counterparts from their perspective: understand their point of view, feel their emotions, develop the same thoughts and behave in the same way, if required.

This being said, Chen & Starosta (1996) claimed that in order to identify the effect of intercultural sensitivity, one should recognize the need for developing the model, which would serve as the measurement tool.

In an attempt to promote a suitable tool for measurement, it is worth mentioning to review the work of Milton J. Bennett, who introduced the DMIS - Developmental model of Intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986). This



model was developed as a framework and the guideline to understand how the person experience the cultural difference he/she encountered with. The DMIS was created on the basis of a grounded theory, with the observations being made both in corporate settings as well as academia world.

Bennett designed the model as a continuum, which starts from ethnocentrism and extends towards ethno relativism. Ethnocentrism was first introduced by William Graham Sumner in 1906, in his book “Folkways”, where he describes ethnocentrism as being “ethnically centered”, and believing one’s own culture to be standard/norm and superior to others, that are considered to be unlike, or different from one’s own culture. On the contrary, ethno relativism assumes acknowledgement and recognition of the differences among one’s own and other cultures being different, and not wrong.

#### **Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity**



*Source: Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). (Bennett, 2004, p. 153)*

According to Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, ethnocentrism worldview is comprised of three elements: denial, defense and minimization. Denial is the first stage, which an individual typically experiences when encountered with different culture from one’s own. Denial stage is a tendency of a person to deny the fact that cultural differences exist.



This may lead to the isolation of the person from either physical or social setting of another culture.

The second stage of the DMIS model is defense. At this stage an individual is aware of the cultural differences, however, adopts a defensive position against the another culture, due to the fact that he/she feels threatened by differences, perceiving them as problems to be handled.

On the other hand, during the minimization stage, an individual is still aware of the cultural differences but attempts to minimize them by concentrating on similarities rather than differences between one's one and another culture.

In case minimization stage is passed through, the ethno relativism comes into play. Ethno relativism consists of other three elements: acceptance, adaptation and integration.

The acceptance stage can be considered as a smooth transformation from ethnocentrism to ethno relativism. During the acceptance stage, an individual is aware of cultural differences, may respect those differences, but does not classify them as being positive nor negative. In this way, he/she does not adjust to the cultural context, but at the same time no longer sees the cultural differences as wrong or threatening.

In the stage of adaptation, an individual starts seeing the differences between one's one and another culture as a positive and valuable resource, which may provide an opportunity to look at the world from a different perspective. At this stage, an individual begins to interact with other cultures effectively, and thus, has a potential to develop the skills of intercultural communication.

Finally, at the stage of integration, an individual develops the understanding of his/her own identity to be not bound to any particular culture, rather being integrated within various cultures. This understanding allows people to, consciously or unconsciously, be able to change their perspectives on the world on a case by case basis. In this way, they are no longer tied to one particular worldview through the lenses of an identified culture. Despite they



maintain the major part of their own culture, they still integrate other's culture with one's own and create a unique experience with the potential to see the world in its fulfilling sense.

Having discussed the literature available on the topics of culture, intercultural communication and cultural sensitivity, there are certain factors that address the need to take into consideration.

First of all, we need to consider the different interpretations of the terms culture and intercultural communication. Due to the fact that there are no commonly accepted definitions of those notions, we might be interested in understanding those ways people might perceive those terms outside the academic settings.

Secondly, as the result of our literature review, we could not find enough information about the research on the cultural sensitivity and its implications. Therefore, we assume cultural sensitivity is a new area of interest today and the DMIS model constructed by Bennett we might be interested in reconsidering its applicability in the real life setting.



### **3. Methodology:**

In the methodology section, the approaches, strategies and the methods of collecting and analysing data as well as overall research design is described.

#### **3.1 Research approach, Methodology and Design**

*“...Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3).* Inspired by the quote stated by Denzin and Lincoln, we, as researchers took the interpretivist point of views in conducting our study. According to Saunders et al. (2009), interpretivist philosophy involves the individual perception and interpretation of the experiences that take place in the environment. Since the purpose of our study was to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena, we adopted the interpretivist view which was followed by the choice of qualitative study approach.

We made this particular choice for a number of reasons. First of all, qualitative research is defined to be an approach that allows to explore and understand the meanings that individuals ascribe to a particular subject matter (Saunders et al., 2009). Moreover, according to Patton's study in 1990 (cited in Newman et al., 1998), qualitative data can be defined as “detailed descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions, observed behaviors, direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts” (p. 16). The interest of our study is concentrated on the experiences of the students, who took the leadership positions within Erasmus Student Network, in order to understand the effect of student organization on their personal leadership development. Thus, we believe that qualitative approach will provide the opportunity to reflect upon students' experiences and opinions,



therefore, add value to find the answers for the research questions introduced earlier.

As such, we performed an inductive study, which in contrast to deductive, is aimed to build a theoretical assumptions of the phenomenon based on the data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We started our study by collecting relevant secondary data associated with the leadership skills and development, student organizations and the topics on intercultural skills development. Afterwards, we summarized our findings in a form of documented literature review. The use of inductive approach also implied the interpretive perspective, which was identified as “describing phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Denzin, 1989). Based on definitions provided earlier, we believed it was necessary to study the subjective meanings that motivate students for their actions associated with taking a leadership roles within student organizations. Consequently, in order to identify and interpret those meanings, we adopted the subjectivist approach. Based on the notions of subjectivism, we, as the researchers reflected on our own experiences and values about the subject in an attempt to identify how those could affect the process and findings of our research project (Saunders et al., 2009).

Another important matter to be considered was the choice of a research design for our study. According to De Vaus (2001), “The function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible” (p.9). Thus, we recognized the importance of choosing the most suitable and relevant research design in order to answer our main research question in the most accurate way possible. Since we were going to conduct our study on the basis of particular student organization – Erasmus Student Network, we designed our research as a case study project. By definition, case study research is associated with a detailed study of an individual or a group of people (De Vaus, 2001). We motivate the choice of case study as the basis of our research due to several factors.





First of all, we concentrated our research on one particular student organization because we believe that Erasmus student network is a good representation of the typical student organization. One of the factors supporting it is the fact, that ESN was established mainly for educational purposes, as many of the student organizations are. Additionally, ESN is the largest student organization network in Europe, which provides us with an opportunity to add value to the generalizability of the results towards the end of our project. Another important factor is the international aspect of the ESN, which covers our ambition to assess the cultural factors that could have an effect on the students who joined the organization. Last but not least, the accessibility to the members of the ESN also played role in our final decision of choosing a case study. As a result, we collected the empirical data from a group of individual students who possess a leadership positions in Erasmus Student Network. It is also worth mentioning, that our research was a cross-sectional study due to time constraints of the academic course and according to Bell (1999), a case study approach provides an opportunity to study the subject matter in some depth within a certain time constraints and is, therefore, convenient for the individual researchers.

After having identified an inductive approach for our study, we believe that the right and the most suitable method for data collection was qualitative, non-statistical analysis method introduced below.

### **3.2 Data Collection:**

Data collection is meant to be the process of gathering information from relevant sources in order to answer the research question of our study. According to Creswell (2003), the qualitative method usually associates with conducting the interviews to obtain respondents' opinions, views, and attitudes. We, therefore, used semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection method.



We believed that interviewing techniques will add value to the relevance, reliability, and validity of the answers collected. As it was described by King in 2004 (cited in Saunders et al. 2008), semi-structured interviews are often referred to as the most commonly used “qualitative research interviews”. Therefore, certain questions were prepared beforehand (Appendix 1), so that the interview could facilitate answers to the particular research objectives of our study. In this way, semi – structured interview were used as a guidelines for the interviewers. However, we choose this particular category of interviews, in contrast to structured and unstructured types (Denzin, 1989), in order to provide ourselves flexibility of omitting irrelevant or asking additional questions to disclosure or clarification of the important information to respondents which we may have not thought before.

Our ambition was to gather the information from different board members in various sections of ESN around Sweden. Therefore, due to time and financial constraints we used technological tools such as social media messengers, telephone calls, and video calls in order to conduct the interviews and get in touch with individuals we chose for our study.

### ***Participants' Profile***

The following table presented below (Table 1) is the representation of the interview participants' profiles. To begin with, participants for our study were chosen purposefully, to represent board members from different Erasmus Student Network sections around Sweden. In this way, we believe a representation of student organization in different parts of the country may add value to the generalizability of the research. Additionally, the chosen participants come from different countries and national backgrounds, in an attempt to understand the perceptions of their experiences within ESN that might be affected by their cultural background. Therefore, it was assumed that more diversified answers on the interviews would add value to our research,



due to the cultural differences and diversity of the participants. Despite the fact of Erasmus Student Network being the organization supported by European Union, and therefore, having the majority of the members to be European, we managed to get in contact with board members coming from different continents apart from Europe, such as North America, Asia and Africa. Out of 9 participants, they were 6 female and 4 male interviewees. We motivated the choice of a bigger proportion of female respondents by the potential to explore whether realities of female leadership in the modern setting of the 21st century may have an effect on the development of women leaders within student organization.

As it can be observed from the table below, the respondents chosen for the interviews have different cultural backgrounds and nationalities. The table also contains the description of the position they possess within their local or national board, nationality and the time duration of their service in the stated board position.

It is worth mentioning, despite the fact that members usually apply for specific board positions at ESN, many do not solely perform the designated tasks and responsibilities stated in the job descriptions of the organization. This is due to various factors: first, the board consists of people working on a voluntarily basis who are limited to carrying out their work at their free time from studies and work. Therefore, the tasks might be delegated to the most available member at a certain period of time. Secondly, most of the members join ESN during their exchange semesters and do not have possibility to stay in the country for a longer period of time. Consequently, it results in high turnover rate within the board. This is why people in the board are exposed to spare their duties and take responsibilities of the vacant position which were not filled on time. In order to carry out credible research, we chose the participants who have been acting as a board member for at least 2 academic semesters and thus, are assumed to have knowledge and experience in taking



leadership responsibilities within the student organization. We believe the purposeful sample was a credible choice for us to collect valuable answers for data analysis.

We might, however, mention the main responsibilities of board member positions as the following:

**Board members on the local sections level:**

President:

- Responsible for strategic planning of the local section, maintains stability and continuity of the local section
- Conveys and chair meetings / appointments within the board
- Handles the external representation of the local section towards stakeholders.
- Holds the ultimate responsibility for the local section

Vice – president:

- Takes over the presidential duties, if the president is unavailable.
- Maintains the communication between the local section and ESN Sweden
- Supervises the board members' work and supports them in their tasks.
- Represents the voice of the local section at National Board meetings.

Event committee leader:

- Coordinates the work of an event committee team
- Delegates responsibilities for planning and execution events and activities
- Responsible for finding the venues suitable to the event/activity
- Creates and presents ideas for activities for students within local section



## Event coordinator:

- Responsible for planning and organizing activities for members
- Together with communication manager plans the promotion strategies of the activities
- Responsible for hosting the events: entertainment, music, guest, etc.
- Collects feedback on satisfaction of the student members with the event/activity

## Communication manager:

- Keeps local section communication channels up to date.
- Maintains and updates local section emails, pages and accounts in social networks
- Actively promotes section's projects and activities using available resources
- Creates promotional material for the initiatives held by the local section by using graphics and design.

## IT specialist:

- Develops and maintains local section website
- Coordinates with ESN Sweden on the use of software platforms for ticket sales and events
- Provides members with technical support when using the platform

## **Board members on the national level (ESN Sweden):**

### National representative:

- Represents ESN Sweden in international meetings
- Acts as the link between the international, national and local level
- Cooperates with International board for strategy and policy making of ESN on international level



## Communication manager:

- Responsible for communicating the brand of ESN Sweden on international level
- Promotes ESN projects in Sweden on national and international levels
- Manages the ESN Sweden pages and accounts on social media platforms
- Consults local sections on effective communication strategies

## Partnership manager:

- Represents ESN national board in establishing commercial partnerships
- Promotes partnerships within ESN sections in Sweden and internationally
- Develops strategic partnerships plan for ESN Sweden

#	Name	Nationality	ESN section	Position	Duration
1	Jessica	Canada	ESN Kalmar	President	10 months
2	Mikaela	Sweden	ESN Sweden	National representative	5 years
3	Sainath	India	ESN Södertörn	IT specialist	3 years
4	Frej	Sweden	ESN Borås	Event coordinator	5,5 years
5	Dardo	Gambia	ESN Luleå	Vice-president	3 years
6	Theodora	Bulgaria	ESN Malmö	Communication manager	1 year



7	Alice	China	ESN Sweden	Partnership manager	3 years
8	Mary	Netherlands	ESN Sweden	Communication manager	6 years
9	Daniel	Germany	ESN Linköping	Event committee leader	4 years

*Table 1 (Participants' Profile)*

When it comes to the procedure of conducting the interviews, we first contacted board members through the Facebook group for ESN board members in Sweden. After posting a post with explanation on nature of our research, we invited people to sign up if they felt interested in taking part and add value to the research project.

After collecting a poll of people willing to participate in our study, we picked suitable candidates based on the purposeful sampling, when participants were selected on the criterias described earlier, such as diversity in nationality and cultural backgrounds as well as gender. When we received the confirmations on participation, the introductory letters to the potential respondents were sent. Additionally, the consent form for taking part in the research was delivered and positive responses from respondents were acquired. Afterwards, we set the method of communicating (face-to-face, phone, video call) and suitable dates/times with the participants for scheduling the interviews. On average, one interview lasted from 40 to 60 minutes each. Both of us, researchers, conducted the first face to face interview together as a trial. After successful interview completion, we discussed the impressions from the interview and based on the responses and the feedback of the first respondent reorganized



the questions and noted what parts to stress more attention for the following interviews.

Later, we were conducting the interviews separately, due to time constraints and a more efficient flow of work. However, all the interviews were recorded to the audio tape device (with the consent of the respondents) so that we could share the audio tracks with each other and, in this way, did not miss any information.

#### Interview questions:

The questions we prepared for the interviews (Appendix 1) involve certain topics associated with the leadership experiences of the board members. As such, we divided the interview questions into 3 logical sections based on the research questions we had. For example, the first three questions are related to the leadership development, designed to ask regarding the participants' understanding of their roles within the organization and in this way potentially explore their own identity view within the organization. Here, we were particularly interested in stories, events and activities they experienced that respondents feel have contributed to their leadership development.

Next, the questions from number 3 to 7 (Appendix 1) were focused on the leadership competencies of the board members. Additionally, we aimed to get responses if any of opportunities provided by student organization have challenged them or had no significant impact on their leadership capabilities.

Furthermore, questions involved students' opinions whether participation in international organization added value to their understanding of different cultures. We also asked participants to share their opinion and perception of intercultural communication skills. We were also intending to collect the answers from former ESN leaders who were involved in student organization activities previously and may provide insights whether student organization positively contributed to their leadership development and





affected the path of their international career. However, we did not get an access to any of them due to their unavailability after leaving the boards of ESN and returning back to their country. Instead, we asked the participants if they feel their experience at ESN might affect their future career and in the end were surprised by the results.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

Our first intention was to collect 6 interviews from different board members at ESN. However, in the process of conducting the interviews we decided the amount of data collected was not yet sufficient. Then we started adding one interviewee to keep checking if we would be satisfied with the results. By the end of the 9th interview, we realized that data collected so far was in a sufficient amount, since the answers started being repeated.

As soon as required data was collected we started the analysis by performing a content analysis - a search for particular patterns of data that can be observed and then developed and transformed in to results that may explain those patterns based on our qualitative, inductive approach.

We took into consideration the steps described by Saunders et al. (2009), in order to ensure the effective analysis of the data. According to authors, first stage involves trying to comprehend the data collected. We could implement this by integrating the related data from audio-recording tapes taken during the interview sessions. Then, we would attempted to identify certain patterns by comparing the different responses from the research participants. The third step involved observing the relationship between different patterns identified. At the end, we concluded our findings and answered the research questions stated in the introductory chapter of our research.

From the very beginning of our research, we were planning to use the content analysis approach in order to evaluate the data collected via interviews. According to Patton (2002), content analysis is defined as “any



qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (p.453). In order to ensure systematic and credible process for analysis, certain steps had to be followed.

First of all, the data was converted from the oral interviews into the written text.

Second, we identified the unit of analysis for coding purposes. According to Robson (1993), the unit of analysis can be the sentence, the word, certain paragraphs or letters within the text analyzed. As such, we looked for certain words/phrases that were used by the participants while explaining their stories related to the leadership and skills.

The next step was to develop categories and a coding scheme. Finally, we coded all text and came up with the conclusions as the result of the data coded. We then tried to identify the relationship between different patterns and interpreted meanings derived from the process of coding by presenting them in the Empirical data and findings sections.

### **3.4 Quality of the research:**

Many scholars worked to create standards and criterias to follow and base the project paper upon in an attempt to identify the quality of the study in a qualitative research method approach (Patton, 1990). However, the most common system for testing the quality of the research is still considered to be the work of Guba and Lincoln (Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 1995). According to authors mentioned above, there are 5 factors using which one may identify the quality of the research:

- Credibility
- Transferability
- Dependability



- Confirmability
- Authenticity

To begin with, in order to ensure the credibility of our work each one of us was first analyzing the data independently, so that later we could share the results with each other and identify the points we agree and disagree on. This practice helped us to check each other's work to make sure we did not influence each other's opinion on interpretation of the results.

Additionally, we provided the research participants with some of the conclusions we came up with to explore and get feedback whether they feel we interpreted their answers in a correct way and they think our analysis does represent their experiences.

Transferability involves the practice of describing the context of the situation in addition to the experiences and behavior of the respondents. We believe we provided relevant background information and the context of the study process and interviews so that the data and results will make sense to the third party who was not involved in the thesis project.

Dependability of the research assumes the study to be consistent over time and accurate (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In our case, we realize the study was conducted in a particular setting of ESN at this period of time. Considering that reality around us is constantly changing we may not claim that the results of the study will stay the same if it was repeatedly conducted in a certain moment of time. One of the reasons is the respondents we have interviewed. We have mentioned earlier, that there is a relatively high turnover rate within the ESN organization due to members who come for an exchange semester. Therefore, people will probably be replaced by other board member who might have a totally different opinion and experiences compared to the ones we collected the data from.

Confirmability of the research refers to nonjudgmental and unbiased interpretation of the data analysis. We, as researchers, are aware of



the potential bias that lead to interpretation of the results in a certain way due to our own engagement with ESN and volunteer experiences in similar student organizations. Even though it was important for us not to relate our own experience with the explanations of board members' perceptions, we still have to acknowledge the possibility of confirmation bias to take place in the process of interpretation of data.

Authenticity. During the whole process of conducting the study we can assure that we have been acting authentically, in a fair and trustworthy way. According to Robson (1993), being authentic in qualitative studies means being honest. We realize this may involve various practical matters which may be anything from the accurate and understandable choice of wording for conducting the interviews to the manner in which the interviews conducted. It was our intention to develop interview questions that will not possess double meanings as well as conduct the interviews in a similar way and consistent way with all research participants in order to improve the quality of our research.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations:**

Furthermore, within any study project, there are ethical concerns that need to be addressed. According to Saunders et al. (2008), research ethics involves «...questions about how we formulate and clarify our research topic, design our research and gain access, collect data, process and store our data, analyze data and write up our research findings in a moral and responsible way» (p. 184).

In order to avoid any ethical misconduct, we got familiarized with the terms and procedures associated with ethical study research - the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity developed by the European Commission in 2017.



Practically speaking, we did explain the purpose and objectives of our study to the participants prior to starting the interviewing process. Secondly, as it was mentioned above, the consent form was sent to participants in order to familiarize them with the interviewing procedure. Also, the privacy and anonymity of the participants in certain cases was provided, as per their request.

Thirdly, the participation in our research was only voluntarily with the right of the participants to withdraw from the process at any time. Therefore, avoidance of any stress and harm to the research participants, their safety and comfort while taking part in our research process was guaranteed.

In conclusion, we have strived for honesty and transparency regarding the whole process of our research from data collection to the results derived from that data. We did not falsify, fabricate or misrepresent any data collected. We did not discriminate nor were biased to the participants of our study on the basis of their race, nationality, gender or any other characteristics. With our research, we only strive for social responsibility by preventing any social harm of the research to the participants, our colleagues, and the public in general.

### **3.6 Contribution**

Being an international student in a country with a different educational system from what you are used to in your home country might seem challenging to understand, adapt and change your work style accordingly. As such, both of us were not experienced in working in pairs for the thesis report before. Despite the challenges involved with any team work, we must admit that both authors have contributed significantly to the work progress and the outcome of this study.

First of all, it was important to understand that individual skills of authors are the strong success factors to the overall project. Therefore, we tried to



divide the work by utilizing the best skills we possess, that could add value to the project.

We started the work by meeting dedicated to brainstorming and generating ideas on the topic of the research we might both be interested in. Two of us proposed different ideas about our research interests. As the result of discussions, we came up with a decision of the research topic. In the process of writing, we believe both of us shared an equal responsibility and carried fair share of the workload. It should be noted, that every section of this paper was discussed and planned together, before the actual writing took place.

The introduction section was mainly written by Nasser, while Malika was working on the methodology section. The literature review section was a joint effort of both authors.

The data collection process was divided equally, so that both authors would have an opportunity to conduct interviews and share his/her valuable experience of having a conversation with the respondents. After having discussed the profile of the participants together, Malika contacted the potential participants of the research through different channels and received their consent for participation. The first interview was conducted by both authors together face-to-face with the first respondent. After this experience, the overall flow of the interview was discussed and analyzed. We shared our opinions on how the process of the interviews could be further improved. Later, we divided the number of interviews equally and conducted them separately, followed by sharing the audio recording of the conversation with each other after completion of each interview.

After collecting all the necessary empirical data, both of us worked together on empirical findings and analysis, discussion and conclusion sections of the paper. We believe that both of us were equally involved in the work process and contributed significantly to the outcome of this research paper.



#### **4. Empirical Findings and Analysis**

In this chapter the data collected through interviews is presented. Additionally, this section represents the interpretation and analysis of primary data collected, which will lead to the conclusion of our research project.

##### **4.1 Leadership Development**

###### ***A platform for practicing leadership;***

Five interviewees (Daniel, Mary, Alice, Frej, Mikaela and Jessica) believed that their involvement in boards of the student organization gave them an opportunity to learn and practice the basics of leadership. For example, Mary stated that the opportunity to serve as a vice president positioned her at a great position to lead diverse teams and to form friendships with people of different cultures. She was able to understand the roles of a leader of being diplomatic, considerate and visionary. Similarly, Daniel argued that the participation in the boards of the student organization exposed him to the multicultural leadership environment which is applicable in contemporary leadership. He also mentioned that his involvement in the organization added value to his leadership framework by providing a platform where he could interact with multicultural teams. Frej also indicated that the opportunity to work in various boards of the student organization presented him with the opportunity to practice the theoretical knowledge he had learned in the classroom. He stated that he was undertaking a degree course in business management and logistics engineering which had equipped him with leadership knowledge. Lastly, Mikaela and Jessica indicated that the organization provided a platform to design and coordinate events.



According to Mainella (2017), the student organization provides a ‘holding environment’ that enables students to learn and practice new behaviors and to incorporate the new perspectives that they learn from their peers. The leading platform tasks leaders with establishing goals and targets for their followers. This involves developing and inspiring the group’s vision (Skillsoft, n.d.). Students who rose to the positions of president and vice president in their respective boards were more likely to practice this role. They were therefore able to apply classroom knowledge to a real leadership situation and this led to leadership development. Secondly, a leader at a student organization is likely to be involved in ensuring that an orderly and supportive environment is maintained. The student leaders thus experienced the role of setting the tone for an organization. In the role of designing and coordinating events, the student leaders got a platform to build trust and collaboration among the students. In this case, Mary stated that fairness is a characteristic of good leaders

***Workshops and training programs:***

Mary, Frej, and Mikaela stated that leadership organizations provided workshops and training programs that enhanced leadership development. Other than the school earned knowledge regarding the practice of leadership, the student organization exposed participants to successful leaders who gave lectures and insights about good leadership. The effective traits of leadership were communicated during these workshops and training events. Daniel also noted that there were exchange programs that exposed the students to a variety of training programs. In most cases, the leadership competencies mentioned by the interviews were learned in the workshops and training programs and put to practice via execution of actual leadership roles in the student boards.





According to Skillsoft (n.d.), training programs and workshops involve facilitation guides and leader-led activities. There are also reflection questions and knowledge checks that seek to evaluate the participant's understanding of the subject matter.

***Showing leadership capabilities:***

Theodora argued that leaders should be in a position to show their complex knowledge of their world and their business. The involvement in student organizations gave the students an opportunity to lead others and show their vast knowledge of issues in relation to their followers. This could be easily translated to the contemporary leadership where leaders need to support and give direction to their followers

***Preparation for international leadership:***

Frej believed that his involvement in the boards of the student organization prepared him for an international career. He interacted with people from different countries who oriented him with different international cultures. He also gained the trait of intercultural communication which is crucial for multinational leaders. The contacts he gained and the friendships he established with colleagues from the international scene would be an added advantage if he was to function internationally.

Based on information collected via interviews, most respondents felt that student organizations promoted leadership development by providing a platform to lead others. Most of them had functioned as leaders of boards at their time in the organization. Alternatively, the student organizations provided student leaders with Workshops and training programs and a platform to show their leadership capabilities. The workshops were meant to



impact to students the best practices in contemporary leadership. Similarly, the organizations prepared student leaders for international leadership by exposing them to diverse national cultures.

The belief that student organizations gave participants a platform to lead others can be supported by existing literature. Komives et. al (2006) found that participation in student organizations enabled students to find their own voice in a group context in order to develop their leadership identity. In the interviews, the respondents discussed the type of events they organized and how these events prepared them for future leadership. These types of activities had the capability to put them in a position to identify their leadership identity which aided their development into effective leaders in future.

Secondly, the belief that the workshops and training programs provided by student organizations enhanced student leadership development can be supported by Anthony and Robert's (1979) comprehensive leadership model. This model proposed that student leaders could be developed through training initiatives, education and development. The role of training in this context was to improve the student's performance as a leader. Alternatively the potential to meet successful leaders in these workshops could also inspire the students to develop into great leaders.

The possibility of showing leadership capabilities via student organizations is supported by Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998) who argued that such participation was directly related to assignment of post-college leadership obligations. Future employers considered the student's roles in collegiate organizations and their ability to lead. By showing the critical leadership capabilities, the students could be hired and assigned to leadership positions. This implies that student leadership development in student organizations could be supported by increased opportunities to portray leadership capabilities.



However, the relevance of the results could not be established in all the responses. For example, Former student leaders who were not yet employed like Frej did not have leadership experience in typical organizations. It was therefore impossible to evaluate their leadership development based on their current roles since they didn't hold any leadership positions. The themes of student development were therefore based on the assumption that continuing students who had left the organization would portray the implied leadership development in their future employment.

## **4.2 Leadership Competences**

The most popular leadership competencies include integrity, good communication skills, honesty and risk taking capabilities. In addition, competent leaders are always visionary (ability to plan ahead or charismatic), just and trustworthy. When questioned about the effectiveness of the student organization in impacting leadership competencies, the interviewees listed a number of competencies that are listed below.

### ***Communication skills:***

All the interviewees agreed that the ability of a leader to communicate effectively was a significant leadership competency that was gained during the stay at the organization. In this case, Alice felt that working boards involved dealing with people who at times had different views from the leader. Moreover, organizing events in the organization required the leader to coordinate with other members in his team. All these scenarios required the leader to communicate effectively in order to ensure that everything was moving in the right direction.



Effective communication skills are manifested by a leader's ability to enhance fruitful conversations. A fruitful conversation is a product of two or more individuals who come together with the perception that something new can be created from their understanding of one another (Griset and Raymond, n.d.). Speaking and listening are equally essential parts of the conversation. This implies that individuals need to not only validate their points of view by speaking but also need to listen actively in order to help their partners in conversation arrive at insights or feel supported. Furthermore, the listening part of the conversation also informs speaking (Griset and Raymond, n.d.). The leadership opportunities provided by the student organization enable student leaders to develop the effective communication competency.

***Emotional intelligence:***

Daniel and Mary believe that the student organization gave them the opportunity to develop the leadership skill of emotional intelligence. Sometimes when leading in the organization, they encountered certain important issues that were sensitive to them or other board members. Discussions on the issues could lead to heated debates that could end up in unpleasant exchanges. However, learning the skill of emotional intelligence was crucial in such encounters. It enabled the student leaders to recognize their own emotions and those of others in order to facilitate healthy discussions. The interviewees noted that this competency was very important even in their current careers.

***Cultural understanding and cultural intelligence:***

Five interviewees indicated that their involvement in leadership positions at the boards of the organization enhanced the intercultural communication skills. This revelation explained a bigger leadership



competency of cultural intelligence and cultural understanding that was noted by Sainath. These two concepts are closely related because they apply in communications where different cultures exist. Cultural intelligence enables leaders to express themselves in ways that are easy to understand by collaborating with individuals from different cultures. On the other hand, just like intercultural communication, cultural understanding is a component of cultural intelligence. It refers to the knowledge about cultures and application of this knowledge to conceptualize contextual factors in different situations (Solomon and Steyn, 2017).

When one deals with diverse cultures in student organizations, it is possible to develop the cultural intelligence leadership competence. This translates to the development of cultural understanding and intercultural communication traits.

***Team leadership:***

Mikaela and Mary believed that when they lead in the various boards of the student organization, they learn a crucial leadership competency of teamwork. They understood the benefits of teamwork and the role of team leaders. In this context, Alice learned that the role of leader in teams was to support members rather than controlling them.

***Conflict management:***

Almost all the interviewees mentioned the acquisition negotiation skills during their time at the organization. Although, this was closely related to effective communication skills, it was categorized as an important approach towards conflict management. The interaction of the leaders with people from diverse cultures enabled them to learn different negotiation skills that fitted



different people. Additionally, they were able to understand the priorities of other cultures and to factor them in conflict management.

***Drive to inspire people:***

Alice, Theodora, Frej and Mary recognized the drive to inspire people as an important leadership competency which they reinforced during their stay in the student organization. When they functioned as presidents and vice presidents, they were involved in recruitment of members and in inspiring people to support the objectives of the organization. ... says that he learned that a leader must show unswerving support to the vision of the organization. Drive enables this kind of internal motivations to “keep eyes on the ball”. When the leader inspires his/her followers to view things in a positive way, it’s possible to achieve the long term objectives of the organization.

The diverse context in which student leaders function in student organizations makes it difficult to analyze all the leadership competencies that could be attained. The respondents were assigned different leadership positions that carried out entirely different roles. However, the responses considered for this research showed that the most dominant leadership competencies that could be attributed to leading student organizations were; communication skills, cultural intelligence, emotional intelligence, team leadership, conflict management and the drive to lead.

Overall, the data from the interviews revealed that most student leaders who had served in the boards of ESN acquired a number of leadership competencies. However, it appears that sometimes the student organization only reinforced already existing competencies. In this case, our results found that former student leaders who had experienced other student exchange programs regarded the role of ESN as no different to previous programs. Additionally, some former student leaders such as Daniel felt that leadership



competencies are learned continually and that they have acquired some competencies in their current leadership positions.

Perhaps the single most important role of student organizations is the reinforcement of communication skills. All the respondents rated the communication competency highly and regarded it as important in the day-to-day running of the board activities. Even the respondents who identified the competency of cultural understanding or cultural intelligence recognized the importance of communication when dealing with diverse cultures. Some defined this type of communication as intercultural communication. The belief that communication could be the most important competency is underlined by Thorn (2012) who argued that open communication enhances the development of other leadership competencies

In some responses, conflict management was played down as some interviewees felt that conflict rarely emerged in their boards. Nevertheless, where conflict occurred, the respondents agreed that they learned the leadership competency of conflict management. Others like Frej felt that in their respective boards all students had “equal” responsibilities in decision making and thus they rarely led teams. This implied that team leadership was not experienced in a significant way. However, a number of respondents rated team leadership highly as a leadership competency they learned during their time at ESN

Students enroll in student organizations for various reasons. Cultural intelligence was also a possible leadership competency given that a number of students joined student organizations to enhance socialization with peers and the ability of these organizations to bring together individuals who share similar interests (Hoover, and Dunigan, 2004). ESN, being an international organization, exposed students to different national cultures. Interactions in the multicultural context enabled student leaders to develop the cultural intelligence leadership competency.



On the other hand, Hoover, and Dunigan (2004) argued that some students joined student organizations because of their significance to their own career goals followed by the implied opportunities of leadership development. This group of students had little interest in socialization or enjoying interactions with their peers. They would therefore leverage the leadership opportunities interpersonal relationships in student organizations to attain leadership competencies such emotional intelligence and the drive to lead.

### **4.3 Intercultural sensitivity**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of joining Erasmus Student Network on the intercultural sensitivity of the individuals, we used the questions number 8, 9 and 10 as the guidelines throughout the interview process.

The question number 8 was developed in an attempt to understand whether the respondents feel that interaction with student from different cultural backgrounds have impacted their own understanding of those cultures.

#### ***The reasons of joining the international environment:***

First of all, for a better understanding of the participants' experiences and their perceptions of other cultures we may divide the 9 respondents into two groups:

- a) Local swedes, who experienced the new cultures at their homeland and
- b) International students, who arrived to Sweden and had a new experience of understanding both local swedes and those people coming from all around the world.

In this way, we might observe the reasons why board members were seeking for international environment at the student organization. It appeared that local





swedes became a part of the ESN in order to meet new people from other countries and socialize in way that they would step out from their comfort zone and expose themselves for different perspectives on the world around them. One of the Swedish respondents expressed a concern of local swedes being mainly emotionally reserved people who usually avoid the uncertainty associated with meeting someone from the culture they do not have understanding of. According to the respondent, Swedish people tend to stick to their own group of friends from Swedish society because it feels more comfortable to communicate and avoid the unnecessary misunderstandings otherwise. As it was argued by the authors who did research on students' experience, many have difficulty to socialize with students who do not share their culture and language (Montgomery and McDowell, 2008). However, those swedes who want to step out from their comfort zone do have an opportunity to socialize with people from different backgrounds and be open for the new experience by joining the international community. Thus, we may conclude that one of the reasons behind Swedish students take leadership role within ESN is to get the feeling of international community while staying in their home country.

On the contrary, those respondents coming from abroad for their studies in Sweden joined the international organization in order to fulfill their need to "feel like home". According to them, coming to the new country and culture they did not feel they fit in, students were seeking for a place where people would understand how they feel in this new environment. For many of them, joining the ESN was an opportunity to share their emotions and attitudes towards Swedish way of living, food, music and other aspects of culture in Sweden. As such, it can be observed that international students felt more comfortable, welcomed and supported in international community. According to Castles (2002), when people migrate to previously unfamiliar for them country, their interaction with persons in similar situation do maximize the social aspects of cultural exchange in a positive way.



As the result of our empirical data findings, we would like to present and describe certain patterns that could be observed during the interviews with the respondents.

The question number 8 was used as a guideline for ESN board members to share their overall experience of interacting with students with cultural backgrounds different from their own.

***Language:***

According to respondents, one of the most apparent differences among nationalities that comes to their mind is the languages of different countries. The respondent from ESN Luleå stated that one of the areas of her interests has always been learning different languages. According to her, hearing different languages within the organization developed a curiosity about the countries people live in. For many members who speak more than one language joining ESN became a good opportunity to practice their language skills by talking to native speakers of those languages. Based on the work of Richard Lewis' book «When cultures collide», first published in 1996, language education opens the access to culture teaching (Lewis, 2010).

*Food.* Three of the respondents agreed on the importance of cuisine they were introduced by people from different cultures. During the events they had within their local networks, they have been organizing food festivals, cultural potlucks and cultural nights that were designed for people to cook national dishes from their homeland and share among other international students. According to feedback collected after the event, it was understood that students enjoyed the cultural night and later volunteered and gladly took part in organization of similar events. Consequently, the curiosity of trying new



food united people and might have indirectly added value to their understanding of various cultures. Overall, from the historical development of various societies, the importance of national cuisine and sharing cooking practices while traveling to different parts of the world with the purpose of trading, have resulted in development of similar preferences in the food over time (Montanari, 2006).

***The way of living:***

For many of the interviewees it was quite surprising knowledge about how other cultures live, their traditions and customs. For example, Jessica from ESN Kalmar mentioned her conversation with one of the authors of this thesis, Malika, who comes from Kazakhstan. It came surprising to Jessica that Kazakhs do serve a horse meat as their traditional dish. Even though horse is commonly eaten in countries of Central Asia, to Jessica, this practice would have possibly not been acceptable in Canada. Another respondent Theodora shared her experience of talking to a student coming from Iran, who mentioned that it is still unusual for her to see women driving cars and riding the bicycles on the streets. Being born and raised in Europe, Theodora has never thought that woman sitting behind the wheel of the car would ever be perceived as one of the factors for country's level of development. This corresponds to the cultural relativity of perceptions, what is to be “normal” or “abnormal” (Lewis, 2010).

When it comes to the 9<sup>th</sup> question of the conducted interview, respondents tried to identify the meaning they give to the term of “intercultural communication”. We asked the board members at ESN to define this notion in their own words. Despite the fact that people had quite different explanations of the term, the following words were used repeatedly.



***Understanding:***

Interestingly, the word «understanding» was repeated by many of the respondents in an attempt to define communication among different cultures. The board member from Luleå section explained the term in the following way: “Intercultural communication is having the understanding of another culture while not forgetting your own”. The national board member, acting as the representative of ESN Sweden on international level stated, “It is important to experience one’s culture to get understanding of that culture”. It seems that many board members were in line with common notion about intercultural communication stated by researchers like Clifford (1988), who argues that in order to be able to establish relations with people coming from another culture, it is a crucial factor to understand the way those racial or ethnic groups are organized within a community.

***Feeling:***

Many of the respondents used the word «feeling», when describing their own view on intercultural communication. Daniel from ESN Linköping had what we felt a very unique definition for intercultural communication. According to him, “Intercultural communication is about communication using your feelings, and not words”. In this way, he pointed out the need for careful observation of the person speaking to you. He mentioned the importance of spotting the tone of voice of the individual, his/her gestures and moves, facial expressions while having the conversation. This corresponds to studies about verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as the importance of non-verbal signs, like body language which is a learned form of communication and is mainly affected by the culture (Birdwhistell, 1970). Another example of a respondent commenting on the verbal factor within communication stated that people from the same cultural backgrounds may communicate with explicit statements and be on the same page, while individuals from different cultures may understand different words



in various ways. As such, he made an example of usage of curse words in everyday life across cultures. While some cultures do not perceive specific words as a personal offense, for some the words carry the harsh meaning and perceived as an insult. As we might conclude from the answers provided by respondents, they needed to adapt their both verbal and nonverbal communication depending on the cultural background of the person they had the conversation with.

***Communication:***

The very word «communication» was revealed to be the main factor in defining the intercultural communication. According to Theodora, «people are still people wherever you go». In this sense, she pointed out the need for basic communication tools, such as listening, comprehending and responding accordingly (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). Many of the interviewees mentioned «active listening» as the key to intercultural communication. Another international student shared her positive experience of interacting with local swedes, from the time when she first arrived to the country. According to her, swedes in general are open minded people who communicated in polite and respectful way regardless the nationality of others. Based on the answers of respondents, it can be assumed that the success of the intercultural communication experience still depends on the very basic level of effective communication skills.

The 10<sup>th</sup> question of the interview was used as a guideline for board members to share the challenges they might have experienced which are associated with communicating with people from different cultures. We asked respondents if they encountered certain conflicts or misunderstandings caused by the differences between their cultures. Many of them replied they did not necessarily have the conflicts but some tension existed between them and the other person which they later realized to be a cultural difference issue.



***Responsibilities:***

For example, one respondent described the situation in which he replied to an email of the president of another section and later forwarded the message to the vice-president of his local section. The vice-president then expressed the dissatisfaction with this action, since he believed it was an intrusion into his work and interpreted the behavior of that board member as an offensive overstepping of his responsibilities. Apparently, in the culture where the vice-president was from, the strong hierarchical structure is a common way of working environment, while the board member was used to the flatter structure and therefore, tried to help by replying to the email. This situation can be related to the Hofstede's work on cultural dimensions, which contrasts the high versus low-context cultures assuming the power distance and individualist vs collectivist societies within cultures (Hofstede, 1984).

***Gender roles:***

Another respondent taking the leading role in one of the local sections explained the situation she encountered involving the issue of gender roles in different cultures. She described the conflict she experienced with one of the male board members coming from a more male – oriented patriarchal society, who could not accept the leading position of a female colleague. Consciously or unconsciously, he had been challenging and questioning almost all decisions she made and proposed, while not having the reasonable explanation of his dissatisfaction. This particular example might be contrasted to one of the basic beliefs within a culture regarding the capabilities of females in contrast to males (Lorber, 2001).

***Misinterpretation:***

Some examples the respondents shared with us in the process of the interviews were not pleasant to talk about. One of the respondents experienced a situation which might have been perceived as racial



discrimination. One of the students who had never lived abroad approached the board member at one of the ESN sections and claimed he had never seen any black person before. Later, he asked her if there are any other differences between black people and white people apart from the skin colours, whether black people possess different genes or think differently in contrast to white people. The statement caused an awkward situation of the board member not being sure how to react to this. However, she assumed the person did not mean to be rude and asked his questions from what she called “genuine curiosity” and therefore, she took it easy and with humour and replied saying “you do not have to worry, we are all humans and we are all the same”. According to Feagin and Eckberg (1980), the acts of unintentional discrimination might nevertheless affect the individual's perception of the situation and, therefore, have negative mental consequences on the person subject to discrimination. Thus, we believe it is crucial to get the basic knowledge of sensitive topics while communicating on international level to avoid misinterpretation as the result of miscommunication.

***Stereotyping:***

The important factors that were mentioned by the respondents was also stereotyping. Despite the fact stereotyping is often perceived as a negative pattern, many of the board members agreed that they spotted the behavior among different nationalities which can be assumed as stereotypical behavior for those particular cultures. For example, the respondent with Swedish cultural background shared that during the international meetings with ESN members it was typical for people from Scandinavia to be on time, while individuals from southern Europe countries tended to arrive at least 10 minutes later than the time set. Similarly, within Europe, the northern people assume themselves as calm and not explicitly expressive at their communication style, they observed the southern to use their body language more actively and talk louder. Some respondents also made a parallel of the



weather conditions in northern and southern part of Europe, stating it seems that people who are exposed to more days of a sunlight tend to be happier and more relaxed in their everyday lives.

The other respondent from ESN Vaxjo admitted she had many stereotypes before coming to Sweden since she has never been living abroad. According to Alice, some of the stereotypical thoughts did not have a ground in reality while others were confirmed to be the truth. Similarly, having a Chinese background herself, she discovered the stereotypes Europeans have towards her own culture and tried to discuss and clarify those stereotypes with people, since she felt those prejudices were not relevant nor relatable. The problem of stereotyping has been discussed for many years since the consequences of stereotypes shared within a certain society do not affect only one individual, but many groups of people in the same way (Taylor, 1981).

The final question of the interview was designed in an attempt to identify whether participants whether think their future career will be influenced by their experience as the board member at ESN. Surprisingly, 2 of them responded that their experience at international student organization has already changed their career path. Particularly, Mary, who is now active in the position as communication manager of ESN Sweden stated, that she used to study Arts and Design during her bachelor studies. However, when she joined ESN for the position of communication manager on a local level, she realized it is the job she would like to have in the long term. Later, she started her master's degree in Media and Communications while being promoted to the Swedish national level for Communication manager position.

Another example is Mikaela, who, as the result of her work at ESN decided to continue her career in the education sector, promoting the mobility and exchange programs among students. It can be concluded that student organizations have the potential to affect the career choice of the members, since they have the possibility to test themselves and get real on the job practice while staying in the safe environment.





## **5. Discussion**

Many students didn't specifically refer to themselves as leaders and hesitated to talk about it. They indicated that decisions within the boards of ESN were made through consensus. Some responses showed that the "perceived" leaders sometimes allowed members to make important decisions and take responsibility for the outcomes. We believe that this type of informal leadership behavior was perhaps entrenched in the Swedish business culture which doesn't pay close attention to hierarchy. Wästberg (2009) argues that the Swedish leadership style is unique in that it portrays easy communication with anti-hierarchical structures and low tendencies for internal competition. This type of culture supports informal decision making where the entire process of strategy formulation does not follow a hierarchical arrangement.

In spite of the hesitation by most of the respondents to regard themselves as leaders during their tenure in ESN, we still believe that the simple act of joining the organization was a manifestation of leadership. These individuals took the step to be members of ESN and were selected among many other applicants. Based on our responses, we can divide the former and current students in ESN into two groups. The first group consists of those who took a leading position like President and VP while the second group comprises of those who rose to a national level position. On the other hand, there was a group of students who only took the position of a board member and were contented serving at this level. Based on the findings that ESN enhanced leadership development mainly by providing a platform to lead, it is clear that the group that held national level positions had the highest probability of developing into leaders.

Also, the students we interviewed understood leadership competencies differently. We believe that this emanated from the individual perceptions



about leadership and the qualities of an ideal leader. On one hand, a group of interviewees were conditioned to believe that leaders are born while on the other extreme end, several respondents embraced the perspective that the technical, human and conceptual skills of leadership can be learned. Additionally, we believe that the Swedish business culture which fosters informal communication in organizations influenced the responses. Perhaps that's why most of our interviewees prioritized the communication competency as a fundamental component of their experiences in ESN. It could also be the reason why most interviewees struggled to answer the questions related to the leadership competencies concept. Also, the fact that students join organizations like ESN for a number of other reasons rather than just enhancing their leadership skills could contribute to the mixture of responses. Those who didn't intend to sharpen their leadership skills gave entirely different responses from those who purposed to excel as leaders.

From the interviewees' responses, we realized that ESN rarely developed their leadership competencies, and many of them had them before being enrolled. It thus appeared like the role of student organizations was simply to reinforce already existing competencies. Overall, those who worked for ESN were super dedicated that's why they developed more leadership skills and those who served for one year didn't get the chance to adequately develop their leadership skills.

When it comes to intercultural aspect of the interviewees' responses, it is worth mentioning, that majority of the respondents agreed on the fact, that their experience at ESN had a positive effect on their knowledge of cultures different from their own. Interestingly, as it can be tracked from the analysis described in the sections on leadership development, basically all interviewees mentioned the impact of international aspect of ESN to their experience as the board members. While giving answers to the questions asked before those on intercultural sensitivity, they shared their international experiences as the



important aspect and outcome of participation in the student organization, mainly by explaining the leadership competencies they developed through their experience at ESN.

Initially, for many of them, the intercultural environment of the Erasmus Student Network was one of the main reasons and motivational factors to join the student organization at the first place. They pointed out the new business realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as globalization and trend of companies expanding internationally. According to respondents, the multicultural aspect of ESN is what it makes special and important tool to develop the understanding of various cultures, their languages, values and traditions.

As such, most of the respondents answered to the subquestion of our research by directly stating “Yes, definitely, my experience at ESN had an impact on my understanding of different cultures”. Despite the positions respondents possess within the ESN board, all of them have direct contact and communication with international students and therefore, might be exposed to encountering cultural differences and diversity among the students.



## **6. Conclusion**

Our study research was inspired by the increasing need to develop international leaders as a result of the emerging trends of globalization, technology and innovation. We focused on the role of student organizations that enrolled international students to examine the development of leadership and leadership competencies. In particular, our participants were drawn from ESN- an international student organization based in Sweden. The findings of our research revealed the connection between participation in a student organization and the leadership development of a person. Based on the findings provided in the empirical chapter of this paper, we may conclude the results of our study by providing the answers to the research questions as the following:

1. How taking a leadership position in a student organization affect the leadership development of an individual?

Student organizations initially attract people with certain leadership capabilities. Nevertheless, it can be a good way for companies to spot those people while recruiting people with potential to develop into leaders. Despite the fact that the positive effect of a student organization is observable, the extent of its effect does depend on several factors. Most importantly, it depends on degree of involvement and self-motivation of people to become leaders.

2. What leadership competencies could be learned by the students as the result of participation in a student organization?

Some leadership competencies can be learned but this was limited to the student's capabilities when joining the organization. However, communication skills stood out because all the interviews recognized the role of participation in ESN in promoting the communication competency. They indicated that the opportunity to organize events in multicultural boards



improved their intercultural communication skills. For other leadership competencies, the respondents noted the potential of student organizations to offer trainings and seminars and in this way develop leadership competencies in people

3. How/In what ways can students get an insight into global cultures and develop cultural sensitivity through the participation in international student organization.

As the results of our findings, the second sub question of our research on the intercultural sensitivity was not clearly answered. It was understood, that development of the cultural sensitivity is the demanding process which might not be developed within student organization. First of all, it requires a student organization to have the international aspect in its nature. For example, participation of international students, availability of exchange programs and opportunity for assignments abroad puts pressure on typical student organizations where many of those activities mentioned earlier cannot be fulfilled.

Secondly, the development of cultural sensitivity is a thorough and time-demanding process which cannot be learned as a result of one-time training, but requires ongoing procedures and activities concentrated on the interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the typical student life takes from 3 to 4 years of studies of an individual which would not be sufficient to gain deeper understanding of cultural aspects that are usually broad and not easy to relate. However, the initiatives and opportunities provided by student organizations may be used as the guideline to the new cultures and may, if not develop, but somehow enhance the cultural sensitivity of the individual. In this way, we believe it is student organizations' responsibility to develop the means for their members to achieve their ambitions related to cultural awareness, understanding and sensitivity.



## **6.1 Theoretical and Practical implications**

The findings of this thesis can be used by universities to select the right personalities for leadership growth. Given that student organizations mainly enhance already existing leadership competencies, student organizations must ensure that individuals who occupy superior leadership positions have a specific interest in leadership. In order to develop leaders, the organizations can use a personality questionnaire to ascertain that those who apply to join show specific leadership interests. This means that sometimes it would be important to hire an occupational psychologist to assess the applicant's personality profiles. At this point, the big five personality measures of the trait leadership theory can be applied to assess the applicants' personalities. These personality characteristics are; agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness

Student organizations should also provide adequate platforms for leadership growth. Our results indicated that having a platform to lead was important for student leaders who developed into more effective leaders during their time at ESN. This implies that the organizations sought to create a number of hierarchical leadership positions which should be occupied by student leaders. Students who grow their leadership profiles can advance from a junior leadership position to a more superior one that has more responsibilities. This will in turn promote the development of student leaders via their participation in student organizations. Similarly, the student organizations must also come up with collegiate activities that promote the development of student leaders.

The findings also indicate the importance of maintaining a formal organization structure within student organizations. Students are likely to develop into international leaders when their organizations foster the hierarchical system of decision making. They are able to practice leadership



roles in formal organizations were the responsibilities of every leader or board member are clearly defined. The presence of clear and respectful relationships between the leader and other members can be truncated into the international leadership scene where most organizations are led via formal structures.

Corporate and government entities can use the findings of this thesis in the process of recruiting or promoting employees to critical leadership positions. At this point, applicants or employees who were assigned senior leadership positions during their tenure in student organizations could be shortlisted. These individuals had the highest probability of learning and practicing leadership competencies during their years in college. On the other hand, the findings indicate that leadership is a continuous process and that leaders never stop learning. The interviewees indicated that they learned additional leadership competencies in their work life and that the competencies learned earlier were clearly manifested in the workplace. Once leaders are employed, corporate and government agencies should continue nurturing leaders to ensure that they continue growing their leadership skills.

## **6.2 Limitations**

The limitations of this project paper involve certain aspects to be acknowledged and considered for the reader to get a better understanding of conditions under which the research was carried out, data was collected and results were interpreted.

### ***Language.***

First of all, one of the limitations of this study could be the English language limitation.

The respondents for the interviews within this study are international students who come from various continents and different cultural



backgrounds. As such, only one of the respondents for this study was native english speaker from Canada. Additionally, considering that both authors of this paper have knowledge and experience of studying and conducting research in English language, being non-native speaker of the language might have created the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the data collected.

***Sample size.***

The amount of interviews collected for conducting the research is reasonable for this particular case study within Erasmus Student Network. However, a bigger sample size could have added value to the generalizability of this study in relation to other student organizations in Sweden or on international level.

***Time constraints.***

The thesis project was conducted within the framework of the one-year masters study program. The research, therefore, had a particular deadline which should be considered as a constraint for conducting a more in-depth interviews with bigger sample size.

***6.3 Method and Data Collection Process***

Due to our ambition to get the responses from board members in various locations within Sweden, it was not always possible to travel to other cities and conduct the interviews face-to-face. Consequently, the responses were collected through the means of video call. The interpretation of the participants' responses could have been different if the researchers could observe and consider the body language and other non-verbal signals by the interviewees while answering the questions. Additionally, topics touched upon within our research are sensitive in their nature and thus, respondents might





not have felt comfortable and open enough to provide their reflection of relevant experiences that they felt are private.

***Biases.***

Finally, both researchers and participants' biases should be considered. We have to acknowledge, that researchers might have been affected by their own perceptions of the student organization due to their previous experiences in taking leadership positions in student organizations. Likewise, most of the participants in the study have been volunteering at Erasmus Student Network organization for considerable amount of time and thus, might have had certain bias towards the organization, its procedures and activities as a result of emotional attachment.

**6.4 Recommendations for future research**

Based on the limitations of this research described in the earlier section, we would like to mention the recommendations for future research on the topic of leadership development within student organization. As it was mentioned before, time constraints have affected the depth of the interviews and sample size of the participants. Therefore, it would be suggested to invest more time in accessing and interviewing the research participants. It is believed that bigger sample size could have shown a more significant impact of the student organization on leadership of students.

Additionally, it is highly recommended to look at the leadership perspective within student organization in countries different from the cultural context in Sweden. It is assumed, that perception of the leadership can be affected by the cultural understanding of the word leadership, as well as the cultural dimensions of high and low-context societies might have different effects on leadership among students. Likewise, one could conduct the study



of student organizations that do not possess the international aspect. In this way, we think the cultural aspect would significantly affect the findings and the results of the study.

Finally, the findings of our research have led to the results we were not looking for, which is the potential of student organizations to impact the choice of the students' professional path as the result of their experiences. We believe that this finding will encourage the reader to conduct a new study and try to identify the link between student organizations and such an important topic of deciding on the life - time profession and career path.



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## Appendix 1

### **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. When did you join the ESN and for how long have you been a board member?
2. What was your motivation to become a board member at ESN? Or why did you decide to join student organization?
3. Describe the different tasks you were involved in within the organization? How these tasks were organized? Who was leading them and what did you generally learned from taking part in the organization?
4. What is Leadership to you?
5. What competencies the interviewee think is related to leadership?
6. Do you believe that leadership competencies can be / could be acquired during your time as ESN board member? If so, do you believe you acquired those competencies, elaborate.
7. Did you encounter conflicts/challenges/misunderstandings when leading teams in the ESN? If so, how did you resolve the conflicts?
8. Do you think you became a better leader through your experience at ESN? If yes, what experiences/activities at ESN can you relate with your development as a leader?
9. Are you convinced that the leadership competencies acquired during your term as a board member at ESN are relevant in the dynamic business environment of the 21st century? How?
10. Do you think the interaction with students from different countries had an impact on your understanding of different cultures? If yes, in what ways?



11. How do you understand the term “intercultural communication”? Do you think you developed your intercultural communication skills at international student organization ESN?
12. Do you remember any cultural challenges/misunderstandings? What was the situation, what did you do and what did you learn?
13. What professional position do you hold and do you think your experience at ESN influenced your career? In what way? (Former board members)