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Future Developments of Leadership and Leadership Education: Recommendations from synthesizing three foresight studies

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Abstract: This article discusses future developments for leadership and leadership education based on three Delphi-based Foresight studies supported by 332 experts from business, science, politics, and associations. Based on a thematic analysis, six key areas were identified that may be subject to future changes: In complex and dynamic environments such as those created by digital transformation, the traditional understanding of leadership as an individual trait or role may shift toward an increasingly distributed, network-based process. Concurrently, higher education institutions may see their role expanding toward becoming partners in lifelong learning through the creation of new learning environments, consequently integrating leadership education into all university degree programs. In this context, the focus in curricula may shift more than ever from knowledge transmission to personal development. Curricula could transform into globally connected, modular, hybrid, and technology-supported learning ecosystems. Evaluation may increasingly shift toward output-, competency-, and impact-oriented approaches, while financing models may become more diversified and place greater emphasis on the educational value generated.

Keywords: Higher education, Foresight, Delphi, Leadership education, Curriculum

1. Introduction

Digital developments, geopolitical tensions, and (trade) wars are placing constantly changing demands on global societies. A development that individuals must keep pace with. Educational institutions at the various levels of education systems have a duty not only to organize institutionalized teaching and learning (Reinders et al., 2015), but also to prepare individuals to deal with the current (and future) dynamic and volatile environment. They play an important role in developing leaders who shape structures and interactions within this context (Faix et al., 2021), requiring higher education itself to evolve in order to meet this expectation. Therefore, the future of leadership education in higher education will be examined in this article.

In academic literature, little attention has been paid to the future of leadership education in higher education. Kisgen (2017) was one of the first to examine the future of leadership education using the example of business leadership education in the tertiary education sector. A literature search revealed that, in recent years, numerous articles have emerged, yet they typically address only individual aspects of the future of leadership education. They either focus more broadly on higher education futures (Alexander, 2020; Ehlers, 2020; Jarni & Gurr, 2024), or on future further development potentials of entrepreneurship education (Dincer & Macerauskiene, 2024; Tiberius & Weyland, 2024a, Junhua & Lan, 2025). Another strand examines educational leadership within higher education institutions (Gracia-Zomeño et al., 2025; Hojeij, 2024). While these works are related to the topic, they do not address it directly.

However, in 2023 two additional studies were published that applied the same understanding of leadership and followed similar methodological approaches to derive future developments (Blumenthal, 2023; Lange, 2023). On this basis, it appeared worthwhile to take a closer look at the future of leadership education, particularly as the world continues to evolve and the newer studies may bring additional aspects into view. This led to the guiding question: How can insights from three foresight studies be synthesized to derive potential future developments for leadership and leadership education?

To further explore this question, the three foresight studies were examined in greater depth following the process of a thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

2. Theoretical and conceptual background

2.1. Leadership Education at Higher Education Institutions

It is part of the responsibility of leaders to shape the way society deals with critical developments. Educational institutions support them in their development, sometimes in a targeted manner (Howard & Maxwell, 2021). This support bears different names, for example leadership development, leadership learning, leadership training, and leadership education (Jenkins & Andenorno, 2016; Lumpkin & Achen, 2019; Owen, 2012; Schellhammer, 2016).

The term leadership has as many definitions as it has fields of application (Stogdill, 1974). A concrete definition of the term with the aid of the various perspectives on the complex phenomenon is therefore expedient (Yukl, 1989). Leadership is generally perceived as the characteristics of individuals. The focus is on human behavior (Kotter, 2001) or abilities (Stogdill, 1948). One possible consensus of various leadership definitions is that leadership can be understood as a process of influence between a leader and a led. Within this process, actions are used to achieve common purposes (Kisgen, 2017; Northouse, 2016).

As such leadership education in the context of this article pursues the goal of personal development of students in higher education and becomes consequently visible through their innovative actions and contributions to society (Faix et al., 2021; Kisgen, 2017; Mergenthaler, 2017).

In the practical design of learning and teaching theories in the form of curricula, various contents of the academic plan can be highlighted. Kisgen (2017) describes seven principles in the context leadership education curricula at higher education institutions. These add the educational ideal and funding as central elements of curriculum development in (business) leadership education at higher education institutions to Klafki's (2007) five principles of didactics (educational goals, contents, methods, media, and evaluation).

Following Kisgen (2017), leadership education is currently oriented towards the ideal of the creative personality. A creative personality is described as someone who, grounded in broad education and rationality, thoughtfully considers the complex consequences of their actions, views lifelong self-development as both a challenge and a freedom, and possesses the knowledge, strength, and courage to define and pursue their own goals (Faix & Mergenthaler, 2015). Curricula pursue the goal of systematic development towards this ideal. Therefore, the focus is on competency development. Competencies represent dispositions of self-organized action (Erpenbeck et al., 2017). They enable individuals to contribute to the world with their own personality (Kisgen, 2017). Competency development is therefore a central vehicle for personality development and, in the humanistic sense, personality formation. It is

therefore an essential point of reference in the context of leadership education curricula. The educational content in leadership education curricula is made up of the three elements "theory," "competencies," and "reflection." Methodologically, this content is conveyed through research-based and competency-based learning approaches (Kisgen, 2017). In addition to traditional and digital media, educational media is oriented towards challenges in the real world. Other articles also highlight the connection between this methodological approach and personal development (Xiaoming et al., 2024). They enable student-centered, interactive, collaborative, authentic, international, and technologically positioned learning (Kisgen, 2017). Content and media are anchored for example in the project-based learning approach. Evaluation can be considered on three levels: the micro level of learners, the meso level of institutions and programs, and the macro level, which goes beyond institutions (e.g., reports on the work situation of alumni). Funding for the curricula comes from three central sources: state funding, private funding, and tuition fees (Kisgen, 2017).

Building on this definition and curricular structure, various degree programs and curricula were examined in terms of how they meet these requirements (Kisgen, 2017; AV Faix, 2020). Although one must admit that the development of personality is in fact one of the general aims of humanistic education (Kisgen, 2017), both studies showed that at the time of data collection the focus was placed more on functional management knowledge than on the development of personality (Kisgen, 2017; AV Faix, 2020).

It should also be noted, however, that the concept of leadership education cannot be strictly distinguished from broader definitions of entrepreneurship education, as the term is applied with varying degrees of breadth (Blumenthal, 2025; Blumenthal, 2023; Kisgen, 2017). However, similar principles are also considered in the design of educational programs in entrepreneurship education (Tiberius & Weyland, 2024b).

2.2. Key Developments in Society

A look at the scientific and political literature of recent years and decades on the future of education shows that sustainability and society's efforts to achieve it are central subjects of investigation under the term "Education for Sustainable Development" (UNESCO, 2021). In this context, digitization, individualization, and demographic change are relevant points of reference (Weselek, Kohler & Siegmund, 2022). These three developments as well as the resulting requirements for curricula in leadership education at higher education institutions are focal points of this article.

Digitization was established as a megatrend in scientific literature as early as the 1980s (Naisbitt, 1984). It is described as "[...] the transformation of manual processes and physical objects into digital variants [...]" (Schawel & Billing, 2018, p. 105). Digitization not only offers new opportunities for communication and interaction, but also a breeding ground for diverse and far-reaching innovations with exponential development dynamics (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). At the same time, impacts of digitization reach beyond economic contexts, it influences and shapes society as a whole (Stowell, 2024).

For several decades, there has been a continuing social trend towards individualization (Frank & McEneaney, 1999). Individuals are increasingly orienting their lives towards their own interests, goals, and situations. In doing so, they are trying to turn away from being determined by society (Rasborg, 2017). This leads to an increase in tensions and contradictions across individuals (Heitmeyer, Mansel & Olk, 2012). This results in new challenges for human communities, for example in terms of coexistence or cooperation.

Another socially relevant development is demographic change. This umbrella term summarizes various developments in social structures, particularly in developed countries. According to the European Commission (2020), the phenomenon describes, for example, longer life expectancies and falling birth rates, which combined result in the ageing of society as a whole. The effects of demographic change can be seen in the economy as well as in social and healthcare systems and housing infrastructure (European Commission, 2023).

The developments described and their consequences are an expression, both individually and in combination, of the predominant change in society and the associated increase in complexity in many areas. As a result, leadership education, as defined in the previous section, will continue to have a duty in the future to bring forth people who can actively shape challenging

situations in a complex world.

3. Method

To address the research question, the core elements of thematic synthesis according to Thomas and Harden (2008) were used. It provides a structured approach for examining the content of multiple qualitative studies.

Within this process generated data from three Delphi-based Foresight studies was assessed. At the core of each of these studies, a Delphi survey was conducted. A Delphi survey is a well-known and well-developed instrument, particularly in the field of strategic foresight (Cuhls & Johnston, 2008; Gray & Hovav, 2011). Iterative group communication is at the heart of a Delphi survey (Häder, 2017). In addition to iteration, anonymity of the participants among themselves, controlled feedback, and statistical aggregation of group feedback after a survey round are central characteristics of the instrument (Rowe, Wright & Bolger, 1991). Participants in Delphi surveys are usually experts on the underlying issue (Häder, 2017). Delphi surveys are used in a foresight context to identify a range of possible future developments in an interdisciplinary exchange of experts. These future developments can be aggregated into consistent, plausible, and narrative images of the future, so-called scenarios (von der Gracht & Darkow, 2010).

Each of the studies had a slightly different approach to the topic of the future of leadership education. Within the first study, the thematic focus was on the future of business leadership education in higher education (Kisgen, 2017). The second study concentrated on the future of leadership in a digital and networked world and implications for leadership education (Blumenthal, 2023). The third study took a look at the future design of higher education in the context of elite higher education institutions and leadership education (Lange, 2023). **Table 1** provides an overview of the studies:

Table 1. Overview study characteristics

Characteristics	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Year of survey	2015	2021	2021
Thematic focus of study	Business leadership education	Leadership, networks, and leadership education	Higher education, elite education, and leadership education
Method	Delphi-based scenario study	Delphi-based scenario study	Delphi-based scenario study
Panel	105 experts	113 experts	114 experts
Composition of the panel by domain	31.4 % Education providers 11.4 % Education participants 47.6 % Employers 9.5 % Politics	57.6 % Practice 21.2 % Science 21.2 % Politics and associations	74.4 % Science 20.0 % Industry 5.6 % Politics and associations

These three studies include 332 expert opinions on 36 futures theses, so called projections. Experts evaluated probability of occurrence, the impact of a development described in a projection, and desirability of that development in numeric values. Additionally, the experts provided qualitative arguments for their assessments for each dimension and projection, totaling more than 4.400 qualitative contributions that were evaluated with the help of a qualitative content analysis.

In this article the three studies were synthesized together for the very first time to answer the underlying research question of this article. According to Thomas and Harden (2008) the first step regularly focuses on the coding of the text. This step did not need to be carried out due to the groundwork already established by the previous studies. The second step describes the development of the descriptive themes. The aim of this step is to distill the information of the three studies. For this purpose, proposals for categorization were developed, discussed within the research team, and revised. Finally, the codes could be grouped under the following broader themes: potential future development of leadership, potential future development of higher education institutions, and potential future development of leadership education curricula at higher education institutions. In a final step, an effort was made to synthesize the key insights from the three studies in relation to the research question. This synthesis was conducted iteratively within the research team and was compared with, and subsequently refined based on an proposal generated by an artificial intelligence language model (ChatGPT). For each category, a written

summary was prepared, and ChatGPT was asked to derive interpretative, analytical themes following the approach outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). This was done to support a higher level of abstraction, since the research team was deeply immersed in the empirical material.

4. Results

Following the structure of the categories six main findings were derived from the thematic synthesis.

4.1 Potential Future Development of Leadership

Based on the research results the leadership understanding could further develop: In complex and dynamic environments such as those created by digital transformation, the traditional understanding of leadership as an individual trait or role may shift toward an increasingly distributed, network-based process. The following aspects from the studies support this finding:

• The results imply that the capacity to handle change and complexity through innovation will increasingly define leadership.

• Successfully shaping innovation in complex environments could require collaboration in networks.

• Designing internal and external organizational network relationships as well as the opening and closing of organizations could become important leadership tasks.

4.2 Potentail Future Development of Higher Education Institutions

According to the research findings higher education institutions could expand their role toward becoming partners in lifelong learning through the creation of new learning environments. This conclusion is supported by the following aspects from the studies:

• Virtual education platforms could become serious competition for higher educational institutions.

• Technologies could be used as teachers in the context of subject and methodological knowledge institutions.

• Higher education institutions could develop into lifelong and life-wide learning companions.

• Boundaries between the different levels of the education system could become blurred.

4.3 Potential Future Development of Leadership Education Curricula at Higher Education Institutions

Furthermore, leadership education could become an integral part of all university degree programs. The studies provide the following supporting arguments:

• Leadership could no longer be attributed only to selected members of an organization.

• It could become increasingly important to embed leadership across all educational levels and disciplines.

More than ever, the focus in leadership education curricula may shift from knowledge transmission to personal development. This conclusion is supported by the following aspects from the studies:

• Against the background of augmented dynamism people may have to act ever more creatively. Especially the younger studies support the further develompent into increasingly dynamic contexts.

• In the future, educational institutions may provide the framework for individuals to (further) develop the creative aspects of their personality and thus self-determined and proactive action.

Curricula could transform into globally connected, modular, hybrid, and technology-supported learning ecosystems. The following aspects from the studies support this finding:

• In the future curricula may be organized globally. To support a globally connected curriculum international agreement on the recognition of certifications and qualifications could become highly relevant.

• Individual modules may be decoupled from the study programs and their regular program duration.

• Curricula may use both, traditional and digital learning media, to meet the individual life situations of learners.

• A variety of hybrid teaching and learning settings may develop (campus – media – organizations).

• Real world innovation projects and collaborative learning environments may be integrated into curricula – in order to do so making more than ever use of technology.

Evaluation may increasingly shift toward output-, competency-, and impact-oriented approaches, while financing models may become more diversified and place greater emphasis on the educational value generated. The studies provide the following supporting arguments:

• Diversified financing models (public, private, and student-related) could become more relevant for higher education institutions. Therefore, the “return on education” could come to the fore at the macro level in

addition to traditional funding.

• As a consequence, higher education insitutions could be required at the meso level to realize innovations with new value contributions alongside traditional research.

• At the micro level, the focus of evaluation may lie on the performance of learners and thus the practical manifestation of competency and personal development in the form of value-adding action.

5. Discussion

Based on the three studies it was possible to derive overarching impulses for future developments for leadership and leadership education. In this context six relevant thematic areas with potential for transformation in the area of leadership, higher education institutions, and leadership education curricula were identified. It appears essential to acknowledge that higher education institutions will only be able to meet emerging expectations to prepare individuals to deal with the current (and future) dynamic and volatile environment if they themselves continue to evolve, as they too are subject to ongoing change.

It must be stated that many individual aspects of the impulses synthesized here are already discussed separately – ranging for example from competency and personal development (Cano et al., 2023; Katzman et al., 2024; Schneider, 2022) and the integration of real-world settings (Fang, 2025) to lifelong learning and flexible learning opportunities (Iatrellis et al., 2024), all the way to collaborative learning and technology-rich learning spaces (Papaioannou et al., 2023; Pitsikalis et al., 2024, Thelen & Dirkx, 2025). Particularly striking is the large number of articles that deal with the use of various technologies in general (Blumenthal, Kisgen & Faix, 2025) or particular solutions (Abukhalaf, 2025; Junaidi, 2025; Zhang, 2024). However, they do not offer the comprehensive perspective presented in this article.

The synthesis was facilitated by the fact that the three underlying foresight studies share a common understanding of leadership but also employ comparable methodological approaches – an alignment that is otherwise uncommon. Furthermore, the three studies included a broad database with diverse perspectives from business, science, politics, and associations. Research was conducted at different points in time, creating an integrated perspective.

However, this article describes a single possible future orientation of leadership and leadership education at higher education institutions. This should not be seen as a normative statement or forecast. Rather, it represents an exploratively approach to address potential further developments. It is intended to serve as a source of inspiration for educational practice and policy. In addition, the data from the three Delphi-based studies can be used to develop a range of further future scenarios. No specific courses, modules or programs were developed as part of the curricular presentations in this article, leaving room for further investigations.

Future lines of research resulting from this article could focus on implementation of future-oriented leadership education curricula in practice at different higher education institutions. Furthermore, to examine the future role of educational institutions, their future and existing contextual conditions should be investigated further.

6. Conclusion

The research question posed in this article focused on potential future developments for leadership and leadership education based on three underlying Delphi-based Foresight studies sharing a common understanding of leadership but also employing comparable methodological approaches – a level of alignment that is unusual in this field. These three studies include 332 expert opinions from business, science, politics, and associations.

Building on the introduction, leadership and leadership education were first outlined in this article, along with the contextual conditions of societal change. Subsequently, the methodological approach of the thematic synthesis was described. On this basis, six key areas were identified that may be subject to future changes: In complex and dynamic environments such as those created by digital transformation, the traditional understanding of leadership as an individual trait or role may shift toward an increasingly distributed, network-based process. Concurrently, higher education institutions may see their role expanding toward becoming partners in lifelong learning through the creation of new learning environments, consequently integrating leadership education into all university degree programs. In this

context, the focus in curricula may shift more than ever from knowledge transmission to personal development. Curricula could transform into globally connected, modular, hybrid, and technology-supported learning ecosystems. Evaluation may increasingly shift toward output-, competency-, and impact-oriented approaches, while financing models may become more diversified and place greater emphasis on the educational value generated more than ever.

It is essential to acknowledge that higher education institutions can prepare individuals for an increasingly dynamic and volatile environment only by evolving themselves, given that they too operate within conditions of constant transformation. Therefore, these impulses are intended to serve as a source of inspiration for educational practice and policy. This will likely require the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders as well as an examination of the specific contextual conditions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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