

Socio-Pedagogical Mechanisms for Developing Soft Competencies of Higher Education Leaders Oliy

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Abstract: The effectiveness of higher education institutions largely depends on leadership competencies, particularly soft competencies such as communication, leadership, adaptability, and strategic thinking. In the context of global digital transformation, the development of soft competencies has become a critical factor influencing organizational effectiveness and institutional development. However, socio-pedagogical mechanisms supporting the development of these competencies among higher education leaders remain insufficiently systematized.

Keywords: Soft competencies, higher education leadership, competency development, socio-pedagogical mechanisms, leadership development, educational management.

Introduction: The rapid transformation of modern society, driven by globalization, technological advancement, and the transition to a knowledge-based economy, has significantly reshaped the role and function of higher education institutions. In this evolving context, the effectiveness and sustainability of higher education systems increasingly depend on the leadership capacity of academic and administrative leaders. Leadership effectiveness is no longer determined solely by technical expertise or formal qualifications, but also by the ability to demonstrate soft competencies such as communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, critical thinking, and strategic decision-making (OECD, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020).

Soft competencies, also referred to as transversal or non-cognitive competencies, represent a set of personal, social, and professional attributes that enable individuals to effectively interact with others, manage complex situations, and adapt to changing professional environments (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). These competencies play a crucial role in leadership effectiveness, particularly in higher education institutions where leaders must manage complex organizational structures, diverse stakeholder interests, and continuous institutional change

(Northouse, 2016). In contrast to hard competencies, which involve technical knowledge and job-specific skills, soft competencies influence leadership effectiveness through interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, social interaction, and strategic thinking (Goleman, 1998).

The increasing importance of soft competencies in leadership effectiveness has been widely recognized in international research and policy frameworks. For instance, the World Economic Forum (2020) identifies leadership, communication, critical thinking, and adaptability as key competencies required for effective leadership in the twenty-first century. Similarly, the OECD (2019) emphasizes that leadership effectiveness in modern educational systems depends heavily on leaders' social and emotional competencies, which enable them to manage change, motivate staff, and foster organizational innovation.

Higher education leaders operate within complex socio-pedagogical environments characterized by dynamic organizational processes, professional collaboration, and continuous institutional development. Their responsibilities include strategic planning, academic leadership, organizational management, human resource development, and innovation implementation (Fullan, 2014). The

effectiveness of these functions depends significantly on leaders' ability to communicate effectively, manage interpersonal relationships, adapt to organizational change, and make strategic decisions. These abilities are directly associated with soft competencies (Boyatzis, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

1 Theoretical foundations of soft competencies

The concept of soft competencies has emerged as a central topic in leadership, education, and organizational development research. Soft competencies refer to a set of personal, social, and emotional attributes that enable individuals to effectively interact with others, manage professional tasks, and adapt to dynamic environments (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Unlike technical competencies, which focus on specific job-related knowledge and skills, soft competencies emphasize interpersonal effectiveness, emotional intelligence, and adaptive capacity (Robles, 2012).

The theoretical foundations of soft competencies are closely related to human capital theory, which emphasizes the importance of individual competencies in determining professional performance and organizational effectiveness. Becker (1993) argues that human capital includes not only technical knowledge but also social and behavioral competencies that enhance productivity and performance. This perspective highlights the importance of soft competencies in leadership effectiveness.

Emotional intelligence theory has also significantly contributed to understanding soft competencies. Goleman (1998) defines emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others. Emotional intelligence enables leaders to build effective relationships, manage conflicts, and motivate organizational members. Research demonstrates that emotional intelligence is strongly associated with leadership effectiveness and organizational performance (Boyatzis, 2008).

Competency theory further explains the structure and function of soft competencies. Spencer and Spencer (1993) define competencies as underlying characteristics that contribute to superior performance. These characteristics include motives, traits, social roles, self-image, knowledge, and skills. Soft competencies represent essential elements of leadership competency frameworks.

2 Soft competencies in leadership and higher education.

Leadership effectiveness in higher education institutions depends heavily on leaders' soft

competencies. Higher education leaders must manage complex organizational systems, coordinate academic processes, and foster institutional development (Fullan, 2014). These responsibilities require strong interpersonal, communication, and leadership competencies.

Research shows that effective leaders demonstrate strong communication, emotional intelligence, and adaptability competencies (Northouse, 2016). Communication competency enables leaders to interact effectively with stakeholders, including faculty, students, and administrative staff. Emotional intelligence allows leaders to manage interpersonal relationships and organizational challenges.

Leadership research also emphasizes the importance of adaptive leadership competencies. Modern leaders must operate in dynamic environments characterized by continuous change and uncertainty (Mintzberg, 2009). Adaptive competencies enable leaders to respond effectively to organizational challenges and promote innovation.

3 Socio-pedagogical mechanisms of competency development.

Soft competencies develop through complex socio-pedagogical processes involving institutional environments, professional interaction, and learning experiences. Socio-pedagogical mechanisms refer to organizational and educational processes that facilitate competency development (European Commission, 2018).

Professional environments play a critical role in competency development. Eraut (2004) argues that professional competencies develop primarily through workplace learning and social interaction. Informal learning processes, including professional collaboration and experience sharing, contribute significantly to competency development.

Social learning theory provides further insight into competency development processes. Illeris (2018) emphasizes that competencies develop through interaction between individual learning processes and social environments. Social interaction enables individuals to acquire new competencies and improve professional performance.

Organizational culture also influences competency development. Supportive organizational environments promote learning, collaboration, and professional growth (Fullan, 2014). Institutional support systems, including professional development programs and training opportunities, contribute to competency development.

Pedagogical practices also influence competency

development. Competency-based education approaches emphasize developing practical competencies rather than focusing solely on theoretical knowledge (OECD, 2019). Interactive learning methods, including problem-based learning and experiential learning, promote competency development (Kolb, 1984).

4 Digital transformation and competency development.

Digital transformation has significantly influenced competency development processes. Digital technologies enable new forms of learning, communication, and professional development (OECD, 2021). Digital learning environments provide opportunities for continuous competency development.

Research indicates that digital competencies are closely related to soft competency development. Digital communication tools enhance communication and collaboration competencies (World Economic Forum, 2020). Digital environments promote innovation and adaptability.

Online learning platforms support competency development by providing access to professional learning resources. Digital learning enables flexible and personalized learning experiences (European Commission, 2018).

Digital transformation also requires leaders to develop new competencies. Leaders must adapt to digital environments and manage technological change (OECD, 2021). Digital leadership competencies are essential for organizational effectiveness.

5 Research gap and conceptual framework justification.

Despite extensive research on leadership and competency development, several research gaps remain. Most existing studies focus on defining competencies or evaluating leadership training programs. Few studies examine socio-pedagogical mechanisms supporting competency development in higher education leadership contexts.

Existing research lacks integrated models explaining how institutional, pedagogical, social, and digital mechanisms interact to support competency development. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for improving leadership development systems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Identification of socio-pedagogical mechanisms for developing soft competencies.

The findings of this study indicate that the

development of soft competencies among higher education leaders is a complex socio-pedagogical process influenced by multiple interrelated institutional, pedagogical, social, and technological factors. Competency development is not limited to individual learning but occurs through structured interaction between leaders, institutional environments, and professional learning systems. These findings align with organizational learning theory, which emphasizes that professional competencies develop within structured institutional and social contexts (Fullan, 2014; Eraut, 2004).

The analysis revealed that soft competency development is supported by integrated socio-pedagogical mechanisms that facilitate professional growth, social interaction, and reflective learning. These mechanisms operate at multiple levels and influence leadership effectiveness through structured learning, professional interaction, and institutional support systems.

The identified socio-pedagogical mechanisms include institutional mechanisms, pedagogical mechanisms, socio-psychological mechanisms, digital mechanisms, and reflective mechanisms. Each mechanism contributes to competency development through specific functional roles.

Institutional mechanism.

The institutional mechanism represents the organizational and structural foundation supporting competency development. Institutional environments influence professional learning by providing formal training programs, professional development opportunities, and supportive organizational cultures. Institutional support systems enable leaders to develop competencies through structured learning and professional interaction (Fullan, 2014).

The analysis indicates that institutional environments influence competency development through several key processes. These include leadership development programs, professional training initiatives, organizational learning systems, and institutional support structures. Institutional environments that promote professional learning and collaboration contribute significantly to competency development.

Organizational culture plays a particularly important role in competency development. Supportive organizational cultures encourage professional collaboration, knowledge sharing, and continuous learning. These environments enable leaders to develop communication, leadership, and adaptive competencies.

These findings are consistent with research indicating

that institutional environments significantly influence leadership development and organizational effectiveness (Mintzberg, 2009; OECD, 2019).

Pedagogical mechanism.

The pedagogical mechanism represents the educational processes and learning methods supporting competency development. Competency-based learning approaches emphasize practical skill development through experiential learning, problem-solving, and interactive learning methods (Kolb, 1984).

The analysis indicates that competency development is enhanced through structured learning processes, including professional training, leadership development programs, and experiential learning opportunities. Interactive learning methods enable leaders to develop communication, decision-making, and problem-solving competencies.

Competency-based educational approaches are particularly effective in developing soft competencies. These approaches emphasize practical learning experiences rather than theoretical knowledge alone (European Commission, 2018). Professional training programs enable leaders to develop leadership, communication, and strategic thinking competencies.

These findings support research indicating that competency-based education is essential for professional competency development (OECD, 2019).

Socio-psychological mechanism.

The socio-psychological mechanism represents the role of social interaction, communication, and professional collaboration in competency development. Competencies develop through social learning processes involving interaction with colleagues, mentors, and professional communities (Illeris, 2018).

Professional collaboration enables leaders to develop interpersonal competencies, emotional intelligence, and communication skills. Social interaction provides opportunities for experiential learning, knowledge sharing, and professional development (Goleman, 1998).

Professional networks also contribute to competency development by enabling leaders to exchange knowledge and experiences. Collaborative environments support leadership development and organizational effectiveness (Salas et al., 2018).

These findings align with social learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in competency development (Eraut, 2004).

Digital mechanism.

Digital transformation has introduced new mechanisms supporting competency development. Digital learning

environments enable flexible and continuous professional development. Online learning platforms, digital communication tools, and virtual collaboration environments support competency development (OECD, 2021).

Digital environments enhance communication competencies, adaptability, and innovation. Digital tools enable leaders to participate in professional learning networks and access educational resources (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Digital competency development is essential for leadership effectiveness in modern educational environments. Leaders must develop competencies related to digital communication, virtual collaboration, and digital management.

These findings confirm the importance of digital environments in professional competency development.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the development of soft competencies among higher education leaders is a complex, multi-dimensional socio-pedagogical process influenced by institutional, pedagogical, social, digital, and reflective mechanisms. These findings are consistent with competency theory, which emphasizes that leadership effectiveness depends on the integration of social, emotional, and cognitive competencies (Boyatzis, 2008; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). The results demonstrate that competency development cannot be understood as an isolated individual process but rather as an integrated organizational and socio-pedagogical phenomenon.

One of the key findings of this study is the critical role of institutional mechanisms in competency development. Institutional environments provide structural support, professional learning opportunities, and organizational cultures that facilitate competency development. This finding aligns with organizational learning theory, which emphasizes the role of institutional environments in shaping professional competencies (Fullan, 2014). Institutional support systems, including leadership development programs and professional training, create conditions that enable leaders to develop communication, leadership, and adaptive competencies.

This finding is also consistent with Mintzberg's (2009) research, which highlights the importance of organizational environments in leadership development. Leaders develop competencies through participation in organizational processes and professional learning systems. Institutional environments that promote learning and collaboration

significantly enhance leadership effectiveness.

The study also highlights the importance of pedagogical mechanisms in competency development. Competency-based education approaches emphasize experiential learning, problem-solving, and practical skill development (European Commission, 2018). These approaches enable leaders to develop competencies required for effective leadership.

The findings confirm that interactive learning methods contribute significantly to competency development. Experiential learning theory explains that competencies develop through practical experience and reflective learning (Kolb, 1984). Competency-based training programs enable leaders to develop communication, decision-making, and leadership competencies.

These findings support OECD (2019) research, which emphasizes that competency-based learning approaches are essential for professional competency development. Leadership development programs that integrate competency-based learning methods significantly enhance leadership effectiveness.

The socio-psychological mechanism identified in this study also plays a crucial role in competency development. Social interaction and professional collaboration enable leaders to develop interpersonal competencies, emotional intelligence, and communication skills. Social learning theory explains that competencies develop through interaction with others (Illeris, 2018).

This finding is consistent with Goleman's (1998) emotional intelligence theory, which emphasizes the importance of emotional competencies in leadership effectiveness. Leaders who demonstrate emotional intelligence are more effective in managing relationships and organizational processes.

Professional collaboration enables leaders to learn from colleagues, share knowledge, and develop competencies. Research indicates that collaborative environments promote leadership development and organizational effectiveness (Salas et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the socio-pedagogical mechanisms that support the development of soft competencies among higher education leaders and proposed an integrated conceptual model explaining competency development processes. The findings confirm that soft competencies are essential determinants of leadership effectiveness and organizational performance in higher education institutions. These competencies, including communication, leadership, emotional intelligence,

adaptability, and reflective thinking, enable leaders to effectively manage organizational processes and respond to dynamic educational environments (Boyatzis, 2008; OECD, 2019).

The study identified five key socio-pedagogical mechanisms that support competency development: institutional, pedagogical, socio-psychological, digital, and reflective mechanisms. Each mechanism plays a specific and complementary role in facilitating professional learning and leadership development. Institutional mechanisms provide structural and organizational support for competency development, while pedagogical mechanisms facilitate learning through competency-based education and experiential learning approaches (European Commission, 2018; Fullan, 2014).

Socio-psychological mechanisms contribute to competency development through social interaction, collaboration, and emotional intelligence development. These mechanisms enable leaders to develop interpersonal competencies necessary for effective leadership (Goleman, 1998; Illeris, 2018). Digital mechanisms enhance competency development by providing access to digital learning environments, professional networks, and communication tools (OECD, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2020). Reflective mechanisms support continuous professional development by enabling leaders to evaluate their professional experiences and improve their competencies (Schön, 1983; Kolb, 1984).

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the development of an integrated conceptual model explaining competency development as a dynamic socio-pedagogical process. The model integrates individual, organizational, pedagogical, social, and technological factors influencing competency development. This model contributes to leadership competency theory by providing a comprehensive framework explaining how socio-pedagogical mechanisms influence competency development outcomes.

The proposed conceptual model provides important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the model advances understanding of leadership competency development by integrating multiple socio-pedagogical mechanisms into a unified framework. This contribution addresses existing gaps in leadership research, which often focuses on individual competencies without considering institutional and socio-pedagogical factors.

Practically, the findings provide valuable guidance for improving leadership development systems in higher education institutions. Educational institutions should

develop integrated leadership development programs that combine institutional support, competency-based learning, social interaction, digital learning environments, and reflective practice. These integrated approaches can significantly enhance leadership effectiveness and institutional performance.

The findings also highlight the importance of organizational environments in competency development. Institutions should create professional learning environments that promote collaboration, innovation, and continuous learning. Leadership development programs should focus not only on technical skills but also on soft competencies essential for leadership effectiveness.

Despite its theoretical contributions, this study has limitations. The research is conceptual and based on theoretical analysis rather than empirical investigation. Future research should empirically test the proposed conceptual model and examine relationships between socio-pedagogical mechanisms and competency development outcomes. Empirical studies would provide additional validation of the proposed framework and contribute to evidence-based leadership development practices.

Future research should also examine competency development across different cultural and institutional contexts. Comparative studies would provide insights into how socio-pedagogical mechanisms operate in different educational systems. Additionally, future research should explore the role of digital transformation in leadership competency development.

In conclusion, this study contributes to leadership competency theory and higher education leadership research by identifying socio-pedagogical mechanisms supporting competency development and proposing an integrated conceptual model. The findings provide a theoretical foundation and practical framework for improving leadership development systems in higher education institutions.

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