

**Student Leadership Experience - A phenomenological  
analysis from the perspective of student leaders in  
university student organizations**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of the student leaders from different student organizations at a university. This study was designed to better understand the phenomenon of student leadership from the perspectives of the student leaders themselves. In order to understand the essence of the experience, the motivation to seek it and the outcome or effects of the leadership experience after completing it were taken into consideration. The goal of the study is not to produce a generalized perspective on the phenomenon, but to present the experiences as lived by the participants acknowledging their subjectivity. To answer these questions, a phenomenological research method was adopted as it focuses on understanding the lived experience in order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon in question.

This qualitative study is based on empirical evidence. The data was gathered from interviews with eight student leaders, who were studying during their leadership experience. The context of the study is set at the university level. The findings show that the essence of their collective experiences revolve around two key aspects 1) self-development and 2) connection with people. The experiences had both positive and negative moments and the student leaders faced various challenges which led to learning points. The reasons that motivated the students to join student organizations and to take on the responsibilities of student leadership seem to be fulfilled after the experience. This study presents a closer and deeper view of the leadership experiences the participants have had, from their perspectives. It brings out an important perspective of the experience being a valuable learning experience which is positively recommended by the participants to fellow students.

Key words: student leadership, student's perspective, phenomenology

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the main focus areas of many discussions globally with various different perspectives and ideologies depicting the purpose, impact and role of education. While Vinoba Bhave argues that education is developing oneself internally and externally, by learning through experience and independence (Indira.S, nd.), Tikly (2004) states that modern forms of education have their roots in western cultures and systems, and act as a common thread between European imperialism and colonialism and the new imperialism. Education can be viewed as a flourishing business as well, when you take into account the universal aspect of it. Education, however, has for a long time been acting as a means to develop motivated young visionaries who could be future leaders (O'Sullivan, 2004). Through many school and university systems, leadership is encouraged in students in different ways. It can be the role of a class representative, a project leader or captain of a sports team. These roles provide opportunities for students to learn and practice leadership. Similarly, department organizations and subject organizations are run by students at the university level. These opportunities could be effective self-learning platforms for the young students, to learn and develop themselves in addition to learning about leadership through experience. Students who are associated with the student organizations within the universities as leaders or part of the team, learn how to be 'self-disciplined, positive, resilient, visionary and focused on goals' (Hilliard, 2010, p. 96). These students also develop skills and values that help them to work in a team, inspire positive change in others and accomplished tasks to reach the goal (Hilliard, 2010).

These opportunities are available for the students interested in it. But apart from this there are also initiatives where students are trained about leadership and the necessary skills required. Leadership development is becoming an increasingly important part of the educational program for university students (Poser, 2004). Colleges and universities continually seek to foster the leadership development of undergraduate students through extra-curricular opportunities

and experiences. (Baccei, 2015). Leadership development initially based on the capable individual leaders resulted in a leader centric approach, where there were leaders and their followers. But the relationship between the leader and the follower has been subject to change. Beginning to acknowledge that the followers are a valuable resource, empowering the followers to become leaders, engaging in a practice where the leaders and followers have a mutually beneficial relationship are some of the changes that have developed (Ghamrawi, Ghamrawi & Shal, 2018). On one side there are courses and programs on leadership development and on the other, activities and trainings related to leadership development are integrated with studies. The aim of these trainings and programs is to motivate, enable and equip young leaders when they move beyond the university level to work. Student leadership development programs may inspire students to lead in the future, encourage intentions to serve people and enable the sharing of knowledge and resources to enrich the society (Abdul-Hamid, Krauss & Ismail, 2008). Universities are also trying to promote leadership skills which includes intelligence, large scale thinking, decision making, vision for change, people skills and more through leadership programs. Efforts are being made to integrate these leadership programs and opportunities existing in both curricular and co-curricular forms to give the necessary tools to the students to be successful in academics, society and in their future work (Rehman & Farooq, 2017). Many of these programs, however, are based on business perspectives, and the biases and appropriateness of this is being debated (Poser, 2004). But this aspect is also being challenged and subjected to change. The mission of many higher educational institutions being developing future leaders, the focus on leadership development in schools is increasing. With the attention on leadership development being quite recent and leadership philosophies being varied and various, it is a very interesting area to focus on because of the differing mindsets (O'Sullivan, 2004).

As a student leader, I found the experience to be a great platform to learn many skills through practice, experience organizational work environment and also explore one's potential in different departments in an organization. In

addition to my own experience, however, there is a need for research on leadership development in students, which is increasingly becoming an important component of higher education (O'Sullivan, 2004) as well as university education (Poser, 2004), from different perspectives. As research highlights that student leadership experiences benefits students' life even after graduation, it is important to understand these experiences better and its potential, explored (Bialek & Lloyd, 1998). This study aims to contribute to such researches on student leadership, by studying student leaders' leadership experiences from their own perspectives. The concepts of leadership and student leadership are discussed in the following section, as relevant to this study.

## 2. STUDENT LEADERSHIP

### 2.1 Understanding Leadership

Leadership is a concept that has existed for the longest of time and its definition evolving with time. Commonly, a leader is recognized as a person who has a vision and the capabilities to inspire, lead and guide people towards that vision. The leader is usually an individual who has the ability and skills to motivate and work together with people to achieve a common goal or move towards a greater objective (Hilliard, 2010). Apart from being skilled and knowledgeable, the personality of a leader has also been playing a crucial role in determining if the individual will be an effective leader. Hillard (2010) mentions that the personality of leaders has to have the ability to attract and persuade others to join him or her in working towards a goal, moreover in today's world a leader should be capable of enabling effective collaboration, communication, optimistic thinking and establishing an ethical framework for the organization or team.

Although leadership has been existing, observed and researched for a long time (Bialek & Lloyd, 1998; Logue;Hutchens;& & Hector, 2005; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Hall;Scott;& Borsz, 2008; Posner, 2012; Rehman & Farooq, 2017), it is not a phenomenon that can be reduced or labeled based on a single definition. Leadership is defined from different perspectives by various scholars and has transformed drastically through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For a long time, leadership has been associated with one person leading and others following. This has changed during the years with more awareness on thinking styles and mindsets. In a hierarchical thinking style, the power and control reside with the people in the upper level, while in systemic thinking the emphasis is on efficient leadership process to adapt to the fast-changing environment (Thompson, 2006). Different leadership styles such as collaborative leadership, distributed leadership, situational leadership, etc., have also emerged through the years. The definition of leadership according to the social change model is, "a purposeful, collaborative, values-based process that results in positive social change" (as cited in Baccei, 2015, p.16). The term leadership and management can be interchanged in many situations (Hilliard, 2010). Leadership is not necessarily



associated with a position but is also being viewed as an art of bringing people together to enable or initiate a change (Abdul-Hamid, Krauss & Ismail, 2008). With a number of theories and models that are developing based on leadership seen from different perspectives, the concept of leadership is constantly evolving and expanding.

## **2.2 Student leadership**

Student leadership is a form of leadership that is situated in universities and schools, and where students are provided with opportunities to lead a team or an organization within the institution. Student leadership can be seen as a burden that could possibly distract the student from focusing on his or her studies or as a proud accomplishment and in some cases are valued by the employers who hire the students, if the student is able to articulate or demonstrate skills that he or she had developed during the experience. The education system bears the responsibility to inspire and motivate students to become leaders who could possibly make positive changes in the world which currently faces various challenges (Ghamrawi, Ghamrawi & Shal, 2018). Apart from the opportunities to lead student organizations, a number of leadership development courses are being introduced in many universities for students, as a response to this responsibility of preparing future leaders. These courses or programs are also significant for the development of students as leaders. It should also be noted that despite the availability of such programs, the capability and impact of the teachers must also be taken into account (Campbell, Smith, Dugan & Komives, 2012). The experience of being a student leader is not just about a student learning how to manage and lead teams or an organization, but to understand the working of systems and processes, working with people and effective and ethical decision-making. Participation of students and voicing the thoughts and opinions of students are important purposes of student leadership. The aim of student leadership is to align with the principles of education and to provide a platform for young students to understand their rights and responsibilities, voice their views and to participate in the decision-making process. Studies also suggest that there is more commitment to civic responsibility and development

of skills like conflict resolution and planning, in students who go through leadership experiences (Ghamrawi, Ghamrawi & Shal, 2018). Student leadership is an integral part of higher education and there is a need to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the students in order to support and develop it (O'Sullivan, 2004).

### **2.3 Research studies on Student Leadership**

Student leadership opportunities and experiences differ based on the social, economic, cultural and historical background and contexts of each country or even state (Reche, Díaz & Sánchez, 2013). Different studies have been done with regard to student leadership from different perspectives, many of which focus on specific aspects or sections of the leadership experience. Rehman and Farooq's (2017) study delves deep into leadership skills and competencies and is aimed at understanding the relation of those skills with gender and the type of course pursued by the students. This quantitative study resulted in the finding that self-confidence was the highest attribute among the participants and that skills associated with critical analysis or cognitive development were developed more in males than females. Baccei's (2015) long term study focused on examining leadership trainings on campus and its relation to the leadership development of students also considering gender and racial background. He points out that most existing literature are focused on short term experiences for example in the first year of college which might not give a complete picture of how leadership development takes place in students. Some of the interesting aspects that Baccei (2015) found affected the leadership development was curricular stress of the student, interactions with diverse peers and prior leadership experience.

Research done in the Middle East addresses an integrated approach model for student leadership training and emphasizes the need for training on skills with the help of existing contextual environments within the student and local communities (Abdul-Hamid, Krauss & Ismail, 2008). A significant oversight from the research on leadership development is the focus on students who are

experiencing or have already experienced being involved in a student leadership role or programs. Students who are not involved in leadership activity are rarely assessed on leadership capacity or development, given the mission statements emphasizing on holistic nature of leadership intended for all the students (Thompson, 2006). Thompson's (2006) quantitative study, which explores students' disposition related to leadership behavior and etiquette, suggests an effective assessment tool in evaluating the leadership behavioral preferences of students, pointing out that this knowledge could be useful in promoting leadership development of students who don't go through the leadership experiences on campus.

While several studies have been conducted along similar lines where the experience is presented only through the eyes of the researcher, there are comparatively less studies aiming to understand the leadership experience through the perspective of the students themselves. Dempster and Lizzio (2007) state that there is a need for research to understand better how students perceive leadership. Several researches have been made on student leadership is of quantitative nature and focuses on one or more aspects related to leadership development programs. It is pointed out that most of the existing literature associated with student leadership is from the perspective of adults and their views of what leadership means. Although there are some researches from the perspective of students, there is still need for more. In a multi layered qualitative research about enabling students to explore their perception on learning through leadership revealed that all of the student leaders who participated in the study had the opinion that they had grown personally, academically and socially and believed that they contributed to developing educational environments (O'Sullivan, 2004). This study also presents the challenges the students had which was associated with maintaining relations and balancing responsibilities. The author presents the need for integrating leadership training involving the classroom and community and advocates focus on inquiry-based learning methods (O'Sullivan, 2004).

In a study on the perceptions of student representatives on their functions

in the different aspects of leadership within the university in a British context, researchers used mixed methods to record the emotional responses of students and to collect their opinion (agreement or disagreement). The results from the study suggested that the students' perceptions are influenced by the culture of the organization and the social and economic reality of the country. In this particular context an inclination towards transactional leadership and hierarchical conflicts was noticed. The researchers also point out that this situation is different from that of other European countries where lack of motivation and participation are the key issues (Reche, Díaz & Sánchez, 2013).

A descriptive case on studying the outcome of the student leadership experience and student perception of their learning from leadership experience highlighted the need to understand what students learn and develop from their experience event though there are many studies regarding various specific aspects of leadership. The themes that emerged were "planning, and delegating; balancing academic, personal, and professional roles; motivating/influencing others and being a mentor/role model; problem solving and decision making; communication skills; working with others/diversity; and giving and receiving feedback" (Hall, Scott & Borsz, 2008). A study in the Lebanese school context had a similar aim of investigating students' perception of student leadership with a focus on the principles and values related to it, the possible impact of the experience on them and ways to enhance student leadership in their school. This research used mix methods of quantitative surveying along with qualitative focus group interviews. The researchers present that this study points out that student leadership is considered valuable for the growth of students and that there is a lot of room for improving and enhancing student leadership in public schools (Ghamrawi, Ghamrawi & Shal, 2018). Research on the phenomenon of student leadership, however, is limited and not extensive (Campbell, Smith, Dugan & Komives, 2012). Although these studies provide a considerable insight to the experience as seen by the students, there is still need for more exploration of the student leadership phenomenon from the point of view of the students who experience it.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of the student leaders from a number of different student organizations in university. The idea and motivation behind the research emerged from my personal experience as a student leader, and the curiosity to understand if it was similar in other organizations in the university. This study was designed to better understand the phenomenon of student leadership from the perspectives of the student leaders themselves. In order to understand the essence of the experience, the motivation to seek it and the outcome or effects of the leadership experience after completing it were taken into consideration. The research questions were therefore, formulated as:

1. What is the motivation behind students voluntarily joining student organizations and taking up leadership positions?
2. What are the outcomes of the experience, from the perspective of university students themselves?

The goal of the study is not to produce a generalized perspective on the phenomenon, but to present the experiences as lived by the participants acknowledging their subjectivity. To answer these questions, a phenomenological research method was adopted as it focuses on understanding the lived experience in order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon in question.

## **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Phenomenological research method**

Exploring from within, understanding lived experience as it is, philosophical perspective and in-depth qualitative analysis are some phrases that emerge when one comes to discuss phenomenology or phenomenological research. A certain degree of vagueness and confusion regarding its nature, comes with the term itself, since it is not a research method that is commonly chosen and employed by researchers. In this section, the different perceptions of phenomenological research and the philosophies of influential phenomenologists will be outlined and discussed.

Phenomenological research method, philosophical in a way, has as many approaches to it as there are phenomenologists (Dowling, 2007). It is described as an examination from the inside out and is characterized by its focus on the consciousness of a person and the deep and narrow interpretation of the learning (Creely, 2016). The basis of a phenomenological approach to research has evolved through protest to the positivist paradigm. The perspective of positivist paradigm is that reality can be studied by researchers and that it is an ordered and logical concept. The subjectivity of human beings was eliminated through rigid quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. In contrast, phenomenology is closely related to the naturalistic paradigm, where reality is presumed to be based on individual and subjective reality (Reiners, 2012) and these perceptions can be a starting point in our understanding of a social phenomenon (Ernest, 1994).

Phenomenology in its essence, is a method to research and understand experiences and perceptions in its reality, with a goal of better understanding of the experiences and the social phenomenon that may be identified from the research. Phenomenology could be seen as the study of the lifeworld, not in the way we perceive, process and understand it, but in the organic way we experience it. The goal of phenomenology is to enable deeper understanding of the actual everyday experiences (van Manen, 1984). A phenomenological method of research enables the researcher to explore and understand processes and

experiences that happen every day as it is, without necessarily having any previous knowledge of the experiences or conditioning. Through this process a researcher is open to what presents itself during a phenomenon (Converse, 2012). Subjectivity and diversity of experiences are embraced in this method of study if it represents the reality of the phenomenon. In the words of Converse (2012) a “phenomenon is multi-faceted and may be experienced by different participants in many different ways: proximity to a phenomenon has no epistemological priority”. But this does not imply that theory or scientific explanation is not given importance. Phenomenology acknowledges both the role of theory in research, as well as that of unintended consequences, which makes the research more than story telling from the participants (actor's) perspective (Aspers, 2009). The degree to which theory is given importance depends on the researcher and also the type of phenomenological research method chosen.

There are different approaches to phenomenological research devised by phenomenological theorists. Husserl and Heidegger are two prominent figures in phenomenology. Other important researchers who contributed to phenomenology include Moustakas, Merleu-Ponty, Giorgi, Colaizzi, van Manen, Gadamer and Alfred Shultz.

## **4.2 Phenomenological philosophies**

### *Husserl's Descriptive approach*

Philosopher Edmund Husserl is considered the founding father of Phenomenology. The idea behind Husserl's approach to phenomenology is understanding human experience without the influence of the researcher's bias, perceptions or previous knowledge of the experience. The goal of Husserl's work was to bring back philosophy to human experience, and in the process shifting the association of philosophy to idealism and rationalism which had been characterizing it in the centuries before (Creely, 2016). Phenomenological enquiry, for Husserl is for the purpose of understanding human thought and experience as it is. This implies that the researcher has to strip away his/her preconceptions of the experience or phenomenon in order to understand its pure essence

(Converse, 2012).

Husserl's phenomenology is rooted in representing the actual truth, which means that the goal is more about providing a description as close to the lived experience as possible, than interpreting it. Hence the approach to phenomenology inspired by Husserl is known as descriptive phenomenology. In this descriptive approach to phenomenology, the belief is that the phenomenon exists as the truth, and its essence can be described (Converse, 2012). Here the judgements and opinions one might have, is set aside or bracketed (Reiners, 2012). Bracketing is a key element in descriptive phenomenology and it is a process where the researcher's biases and assumptions related to the phenomenon or experience can be identified and set aside. The strategy 'bracketing interviews', is used as a continuous self-critique and self-awareness process by the researcher, to express in what way his or her biases or experiences have or have not influenced the stages of the research. This is known as reflexivity (Dowling, 2007). Moreover, intentionality is the core of Husserl's method (Creely, 2016, p.6). Nineteenth century psychologist Franz Brentano developed the idea of phenomenon to include thought, with his 'principle of intentionality', which became a core aspect of his student, Husserl's, phenomenology. According to this principle, 'every mental act is related to some object and implies that all perceptions have meaning' (as cited in Converse, 2012, p. 29).

Phenomenological reduction is understanding the lived experience prior to reflection or interpretation. The researcher tries to understand the features of the experience as it has happened, before even attempting to explain it or make judgements. But in order to be able to do this it is important make, or rather bracket one's judgments, preconceptions, expectations and reflections visible and clear (Dowling, 2007, p.132). Hence Husserl's phenomenology, is a descriptive approach aiming to present the truth in its reality and entirely, with concept of intentionality and processes like bracketing and phenomenological reduction playing very important roles.

*Heidegger's Interpretive approach*



Experiential epistemology being the focus in Husserl's method, human existence, its meaning and the interpretations of such existence constitutes Heidegger's ontological approach to phenomenology. According to Dowling (2007, p.133) Heidegger was one of the first philosophers to integrate phenomenology with existential occurrences. The belief behind Heidegger's phenomenology is to investigate the critical question 'What is the meaning of being?' (Converse, 2012). This method deals with and presents human experiences and phenomenon, not in its actual reality but from the perspective of the researcher. Hence the method is interpretive in nature. Here the preconceived opinions and knowledge of the researcher are not entirely set aside but are acknowledged. In the interpretive method, the focus is shifted to seeing the phenomenon through the researcher's eyes rather than reveal the actual essence of the phenomenon, because in this method the belief is that "humans exist in a world that they experience and interpret" (Converse, 2012). This method was developed by applying hermeneutics (Reiners, 2012). This philosophy of interpretation deals with more than description of concepts and aims to find embedded meanings of the concepts in its daily occurrences. Heidegger's philosophy establishes that our interpretation of the world is crucial in understanding it. Hence hermeneutics being in the center of our understanding (Reiners, 2012). In this interpretive method where hermeneutics plays a key role, prior knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon are assumed to be present, thus bracketing, in this method is not a necessity (Reiners, 2012). Indeed, Heidegger proposed that this circle of hermeneutics, with the belief that understanding is a mutual and reciprocal activity (Dowling, 2007).

In a hermeneutical approach to phenomenology, the researcher goes through a self-reflective process. The researcher's presumptions and experiences are incorporated in the interpretive research process and are not completely bracketed out. The researcher may also include these reflections and its effect on the interpretation and research process in the final paper (Lavery, 2003). This hermeneutic circle is formed based on the repeated back and forth movement between parts of an experience and the whole experience itself, to increase the

depth of involvement with the text and deepen the understanding about it (Laverty, 2003). But there are a few impediments to executing this type of reflective interpretation which is time consuming, requires previous experience in the area where the research is being done and also high-level skills to focus on and envisage a lot of data to produce a substantial interpretation (Converse, 2012). Some researchers argue that there is a possibility of phenomenology becoming shallow without hermeneutics (Dowling, 2007). However, hermeneutic circle is used in different researches with different contexts and interpretations. Hermeneutics, conceptualized as a continuous circular process of understanding the nature of being, will not become a vicious circle if researchers enter with the awareness of their preconceived notions and opinions (Converse, 2012).

#### **4.3 Phenomenological methods of data gathering, analysis and presentation**

Phenomenological research which has certain fundamental principles and guidelines, also offers the possibility of integrating ideas and tools from other methodologies with reasonable justification. The current research utilizes the interpretive phenomenological analysis to explore individual experiences. In this research, the research and interview questions were formulated based on my experience as a leader after which the participants were selected with only criteria regarding the time period of holding leadership position in a student organization. When the responses were collected, they were clustered based on themes and further reduced to sub-themes and were subject to coding. From this data, a description and explanation of the experiences are constructed. But before the data was clustered, the transcriptions were read thoroughly to seek meaning from them, based on which the clustering was done. These methods are also combined with qualitative content analysis to code, categorize and cluster data in the beginning stages.

Presenting the research process and findings in an understandable and established way is important in any research. But in phenomenological research, writing plays a more important role as it is the means for the reader to understand the truly existing phenomenon. Effective phenomenological writing

aims to convey essence of an experience as the participant sees it. Converse (2012) agrees that the manner of writing that a researcher uses to express his research findings, perspectives and analysis is intrinsic in a Heideggerian approach. The purpose of the writing is not to just effectively describe the experience of the participant but also to accurately capture and compose the essence and the meaning of the experience. The researcher may be creative in employing different styles of writing to express with greater clarity (Converse, 2012). Phenomenologist van Manen (1984) suggests compiling a phenomenological description thematically, analytically or existentially adding that they are not exhaustive and can be modified according to the nature of the phenomenon being researched. He also claims that employing examples in a thoughtful, appropriate way could help achieve a certain transparency in the writing, that can enable the reader to understand deeper meaning structures of the lived experience (van Manen, 1984).

Phenomenological research involves a certain level of reflection from the researcher. There is a continuous reflection of the research process, the context as a whole, the responses of the participants and the researcher's perspectives. The deep reflexive process that the researcher goes through while the findings evolve is essentially reflected in the writing, with language playing a key role. The phenomenological method needs going back and forth among different kinds of questioning to facilitate a rigorous interrogation (van Manen, 1984). Phenomenological writing plays a vital role in communicating effectively even feelings described by participants in an articulate way that the reader grasps it with ease. In the words of van Manen, 'to write phenomenologically is the untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself' (van Manen, 1984, p.68). The philosophies or approaches chosen in phenomenological research lays the foundation for choosing the research process and method of analysis. The following sections present the phenomenological methods and concepts drawn on in this study to generate and analyze eight university student leader interviews.

## 5. RESEARCH DESIGN

### 5.1 Data gathering

In order to collect as much relevant data as possible a qualitative method was used so that different aspects of the participants' experience can be explored. A phenomenological method was chosen in order to understand the experience as it is, in its reality and also to give the opportunity to the participants to express without any restrictions, their experience in its entirety, along with their own thoughts and opinions about it. This method was employed so that it can potentially reveal aspects of their experiences and opinions that might not emerge with quantitative method and also allow the participants to reflect without restrictions on their experience. A commonly used way to gather data in an interpretive phenomenological analysis study is through semi-structured interview because it enables the researcher to engage with the participants and to have flexibility to probe interesting areas that emerge during the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Aligned to this line of thought, data was primarily gathered through the process of personal semi-structured interviews.

The interview questions were formulated based on the structure of my own leadership experience and my perspectives towards it. The interview questions were formed and then later grouped based on their connection to the research questions. "...the process of bracketing aids researchers to temporarily suspend personal consideration of the experience..." (Logue; Hutchens; & Hector, 2005). This process was employed as the questions were derived from my experience. The questions were first answered by me after they were drafted, in order to test it and also for me to be aware of possibly existing biases within myself. The guiding interview questions were modified after the initial bracketing process, so that the participants would not be steered unconsciously by me in particular directions. The questions were designed in a way that the focus was on getting to know the participants' perception of themselves as a person, their motivation to join the organization and take up a leadership position, their job description and experience, and the impact that it had on them. The semi-structure in the

interview with guiding questions helped the participants to reflect along wide focus points, which allowed them to explore certain specific aspects of their experiences and helped some of them to reflect more than they had before.

## 5.2 Participants

Participants were selected based on two criteria: currently in or had been in a leadership position for at least six months or more in a student organization in a university and the willingness to participate in the study. The ideal leadership position was that of the president, so they were the ones who were primarily contacted. But depending on their response, some of the vice-presidents and members of the board leading different functions like finance, international affairs, etc., within the organization were also contacted later. Participants were identified through connections that I had made during my time as a student leader and by attending student union meetings, where leaders and liaisons of many organizations were present. They were solicited through electronic mail messages with a brief description of the subject of the research and the voluntary nature of participation in the research. An interview was scheduled with those who responded positively. For the purpose of clarity, in this research a student organization is one that is within the university and is registered with or recognized by the university, and the student leaders are those who hold leadership positions in these organization.

Table: 1 depicts the demographics of the student leaders who participated in this research study. Eight students who met the criteria established, agreed to participate in the study. Five of the eight participants were female and three of them were male. Three of them are currently in the leadership position and five of them were former leaders, which meant that they had been in the leadership position for at least one year. All of them were between the ages of twenty and thirty, studying or having completed their studies in the bachelors or master's degree program.

TABLE 1: Demographics of the participants

Participant	Age	Educational background	Current position	Leadership position	Leadership period	Nationality
Liam	24	Master's degree	student	Liaison for International communications	1 year	International
Anna	24	Master's degree	working	Vice President	2 years	International
Helmi	26	Master's degree	student	Vice President and President	1.5 years	International
Rachel	27	Master's degree	student	International Correspondent	1 year	National
Nick	26	Master's degree	student	Head of communication in Finnish	7 months	International
John	20	Bachelor's degree (ongoing)	student	President and Treasurer	1 year and 2 months	National
Henni	25	Master's degree	Student	President	1 year	National
Alex	25	Master's degree	student	Head of International affairs	2 years	National

According to Brocki and Wearden (2006), in an interpretive phenomenological research the objective is to choose participants so that diverse perspectives can be recorded, and a complete interpretation of data can be developed to illuminate the respective research questions of the study. Four of

the participants were Finnish while the other four were students from western countries other than Finland. The University has organizations for both Finnish and international students. The four Finnish participants were from organizations where there were a majority of Finnish students and the four international participants were from the organization where there were more international students. The sample was taken to represent both type of organizations.

### **5.3 Interviews**

The interviews were scheduled individually with the participants in a common place and at a convenient time for them. The interviews were semi-structured because I had already drafted a set of guiding questions for the interviews. The questions were quite open ended and the participants were allowed to describe more than the guiding questions if they wished to. Before starting the interview, the participants were given the consent form which they were asked to read carefully and sign. The recording began after they signed the consent form (appendix) and agreed to be recorded. They were also informed that they could opt out of the study at any point if they wish to.

The interviews started with the participants filling in their personal details and it was followed by them describing themselves in five sentences. This first question proved to be a good ice breaker with the focus on the participant and it was used so that it helps in easing into a reflective process or zone. This was followed by questions relating to their motivation to join and expectations they might have had before they joined the organizations and took up the leadership position. After this they were asked to describe briefly the work that they did as a leader and their opinion of it. This was followed by questions regarding the effects that taking up a leadership position had on them, in their social life, student life and personal life. The interview was for the most part conducted with open ended questions which enabled the participants to make connections, express their thoughts, opinions and reflections that come up. There was no strict

order in which they were questioned. The questioned were used as guidelines and as the conversation progressed, I built on in with relevant questions from and outside the guidelines. There were also situations where the participants answered many of the questions without even being asked. Hence the objective of the interview to collect authentic and relevant data as naturally as possible, was enabled by this flexible interview method. The interviews lasted from about forty minutes to one hour. The participants were allowed to elaborate more on a subject if they chose to. The interview recordings were then transcribed into written documents, for the process of analysis.

#### **5.4 Data Analysis**

Qualitative analysis of data can be time consuming and a complex process. Many different qualitative analysis methods often could be intertwined, consisting of combinations of two or more methods (Sjöblom, 2017). In this particular study the primary data or content collected was decided to be analysed in a method of qualitative content analysis along with the method of interpretative phenomenological analysis. In an interpretive phenomenological analysis the researcher should completely immerse in the data and make an effort to view it from the perspective of the interviewee as much as possible, as the objective of this method is to provide evidence of the participants' meaning of the phenomena as well as recording the researcher's meaning making process as well (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). One of the main theoretical orientations in the interpretive phenomenological method is idiography, which focuses on analysis individual cases and the perspectives of individual participants with their contexts in mind and exploring them individually before producing generic statements. In this way of analysis, presenting the analysis and findings involves the researcher to include individual narratives, comparing and contrasting between them to support the themes generated through analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The current research emerged based on the experience that I had as a leader



but focuses on establishing the participants' experience as a whole, without being influenced by my biases. There is acknowledgment of these presumptions and their possible influence on the research process. Hence bracketing and reflexivity was used in different stages of the research. In phenomenological research it is better not to start with specific assumptions but to progressively build and establish a foothold (Aspers, 2009). Bracketing was done before the interviews to understand my biases towards the topic. During the analysis stage, data about the participants irrelevant to the current study was bracketed out. Reflexivity which is an important concept in hermeneutics was practiced to a certain extent to be aware of my presumptions at every stage and acknowledge prominent ones.

Data was gathered in the form of audio recordings. I began the analysis by listening to the recordings and transcribed them into written documents digitally, with all identifying aspects replaced with generic terms. The names of the participants were changed to ensure anonymity. The transcription of all the interviews resulted in a total of 75 pages, with the font size of 12 and line spacing of 1,5. I read and reread the transcriptions multiple times while making notes as I read. The words and phrases that seemed to signify the most meaning, were highlighted. For example, in the quote below the phrases that stand out are “believing in yourself” and “don’t always feel confident”.

*“Like believing in yourself that you can be in a formal leadership position, with a title and everything... that people will look up to you for help, because you don’t always feel confident when you are younger and less experienced.”*

This excerpt brings forward the participants want to develop self- confidence, (which was stated as a motivation to take up the role). The entire dataset was primarily analyzed this way, after which I began the process of coding using an excel sheet. All the words, phrases or paragraphs that seemed to reflect meaning were coded. If we take the example above the code for that particular quote would be ‘gain self-confidence’. The codes were not restricted to single words and a method of open coding was adopted at this stage, where the codes were derived from the text and were not imposed based on my perspectives or presumptions (Blair, 2015). For the purpose of clarity, the term code is used to describe a word or phrase that symbolically represents the summary of the

meaning of a portion of data (Saldana, 2009). A category is group of similar codes that might reflect similar meaning or fall under a common topic/area. Theme refers to a pattern or trend that can be noticed during the coding and categorizing processes (Saldana, 2009).

After the preliminary coding process, the codes were read to identify emerging themes by simply analyzing the data in hand, without being influenced by my own biases. A few researchers who employed this method organised themes as they emerged from the transcripts and codes rather than basing them on constructs that are already determined. They emphasise that the guidelines for analysing using a interpretive phenomenological analysis method are more for development and adaptation than restricting or stagnating the approach (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). The themes were identified based on the codes which were clustered based on a topic that they related to the most, and each theme was given name a that represented the meaning of the codes. Six themes under which the codes beloged to, emerged in this process. They were, 1) Experience with Organization, 2) Expectations and Motivation, 3) Challenges and negative experiences, 4) Gains and Learnings, 5) Leadership Perspective and 6) Characters and attributes.

In an interpretive phenomeological analysis, the researcher should ensure that the list of themes produced are not selected only based on prevalence but also the context and emphasis the participant articulates the experience with (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). The themes and categories in this study was drafted with the intentioin of including and representing each participants view and experience and also taking into cnsideration their context. The codes under each theme was furthur analysed, reread and categorized into categories, based on emerging similarities or connections between the codes. This categorization, similar to the coding, was done based on what emerged from the data and not to fit pre-existing perspectives. The categories and the codes were reanalyzed and reorganized based on the research question at this stage into two groups namely motivations and expectations to join and take up leadership roles and outcome

of the experience. The categories were narrowed further based on similarities in meaning to a point where it could not be reduced further. A final chart that represented each participants' perspective of the experience and their responses in relation to the themes was created. The chart also showed the positive and negative aspects of the experience from the participants' perspectives, the orange boxes representing negative aspects and the green one representing the positives (see chart 4).

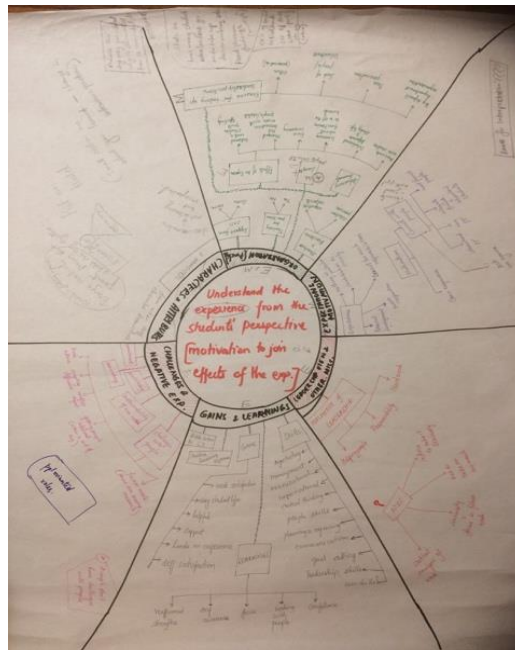


Chart 1: First chart of analysis

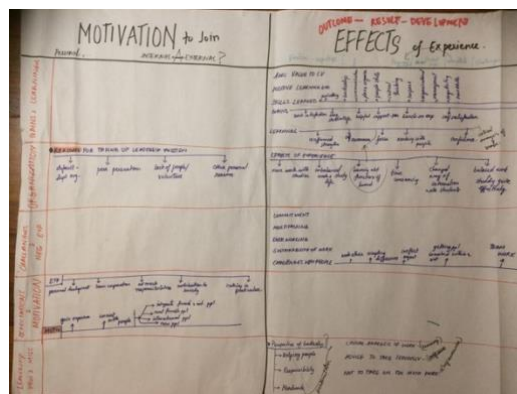


Chart 2: Second chart where the content from chart-1 is divided based on research questions.

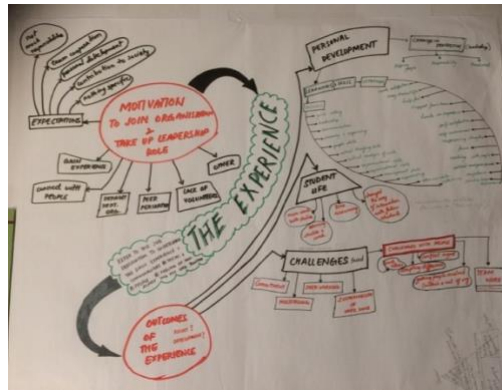


Chart 3: Third step of analysis with the whole experience taken in to account

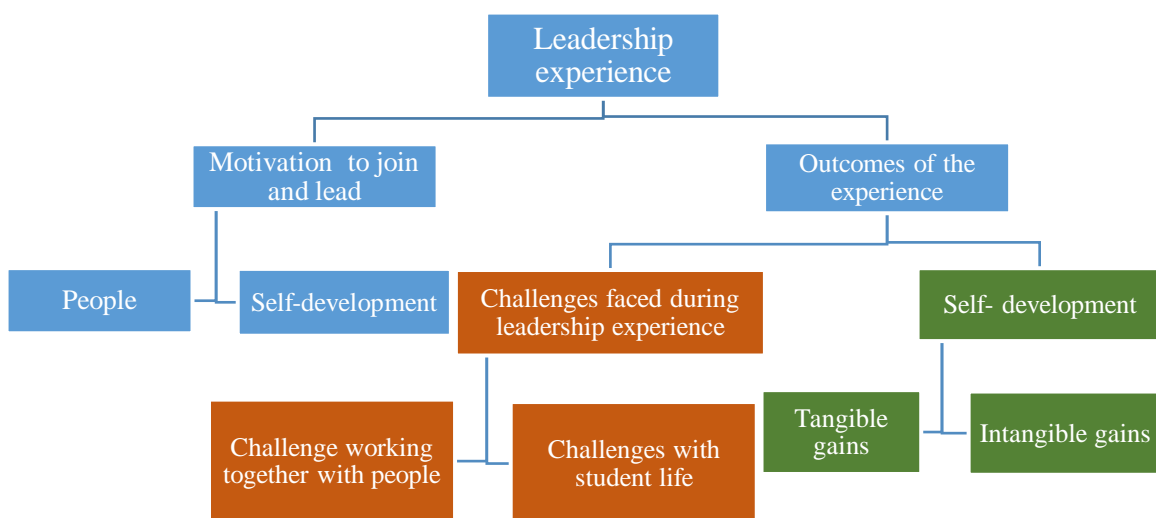


Chart 4: Final chart of findings

## 5.5 Ethical considerations

Phenomenological research with its exploratory value could bring to light unexpressed or undiscovered phenomena (Logue, Hutchens & Hector, 2005). Phenomenological research method when employed has the potential to project the truth and reality of a phenomenon. However, there are ethical considerations involved while conducting a phenomenological research. This section addresses the ethical considerations in phenomenological research and how it has been followed during the research process of the current study.

Researches rooted in human sciences or social experiences where people are involved, respecting the people, their dignity and decisions are integral to the research process. Indeed, acknowledging and understanding the rights of each participant is more essential than the research itself and it is the responsibility of the researcher in ensuring that this is practiced (Isotalo, 2017). In this research the participants were made fully aware that their participation was entirely voluntary right from when they were first contacted. The interview participants were those who volunteered to participate from those who were contacted. Planning of the data gathering method, in this case a personal face-to-face interview, was done with ethical considerations in mind. The questions were based on objectives of the study and were kept as open ended as possible to allow the participant to freely express their experience. When this is the case, the issue of confidentiality arises as the participants are freely sharing their personal opinions and experiences. Therefore, before beginning the interviews, all the participants were clearly informed of their right to withdraw their participation at any time and to not respond to some questions if they choose to. An agreement (Appendix) stating this, along with the participants consent to participate and the researcher's responsibility and confidentiality of the data acquired, was signed with all the participants individually before beginning the interview. The form also included their consent to allow the researcher to record and use the data collected for research purposes in a secure manner, maintaining anonymity.

The interviews were organized in a convenient and calm place mostly on the university campus and in a couple of situations, through Skype and were also organized at a time that was suitable for the participants. When the interviews were conducted through Skype, it was conducted in an isolated room to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants' statements. During the interview I recorded all exchanges and responses of the participants with their permission, to support analysis of the data. During the process of reporting the research, the participants' identities were protected by the use of pseudonyms and avoiding the mention of details that might compromise their identity. The interviews will be destroyed after the research report is evaluated. Other data

collected from observations and other literature is responsibly used to avoid plagiarism. Finally ethical considerations were also made regarding the protection of the involved participants' and organisations' identities and their anonymity maintained.

## 6. FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented in this section. The findings have been organized based on the research questions, 1) Motivation to join student organization and take up leadership roles and 2) Outcomes of the experience. The nature and description of their work in the organization are also touched upon to add to the context in order to enable better understanding. For the categories that fall under the two main themes based on the research questions, refer to Table 1.

Table 1 Themes and categories of the findings of the study

Themes	Categories
1. Motivation to join student organization and take up leadership roles	Self-development  Connection with People
2. Outcomes of the experience	Challenges faced during leadership experience  Personal development and learnings from the experience

The aim of the study is not to compare the experiences of the student groups even though the data consists of the experiences of both Finnish and international student. However, significant experiential differences that arise on the basis of their context or background are acknowledged and presented. A few interesting aspects that emerged from the study but are not aligned to the research questions are also presented and discussed briefly in the end of this section. The findings are presented in a more detailed manner in the following pages. To better understand the experience from the participants' perspectives, their own words

are used to describe and emphasize various points, while also attempting to provide as much context as possible.

## **6.1 Motivation to join student organization and take up leadership roles**

The first research question is aimed at understanding the motivation of the student participants, to join the student organizations and also take up leadership positions. Based on the assumption that people have certain expectations or hope to gain something from their work and also my personal experience of having certain expectations that I hoped would be fulfilled during my work, the participants were questioned if they had expectations prior to or reasons for joining the organization or leading it. When questioned the participants also expressed what they had expected from the experience of being a leader and a part of the student organization. Different people had different expectations based on their situation in life and with the organization. The response of the participants could be categorized under two sub-themes, 1) self-development and 2) connection with people, which are explained more along with the help of the participants words.

### **6.1.1 Self -development**

The leadership experience and the experience of working in an organization is considered as an opportunity to develop oneself for the working world, gain credentials and also experiment in work environment. The aspect of self-development and hands-on experience includes developing one's skills and knowledge as well as supporting the studies with some experience related to it. Many students join student organizations to get this experience for different reasons. In the case of Henni the leadership experience was an opportunity to experiment and try new things as a leader, along with developing skills, while John just was seeking a new experience. Henni who had been with the organization for at least a year believed that she could do a good job leading the organization and wanted to give it a try.



“So, it is important skills in my opinion. And also, I thought that I would be capable of doing it. Not like an obligation but because I thought that I would be okay at it. So, I think I just go there and have ago at it, try it out.” – Henni

“Some kind of new experience I think, that is.” – John

There was a clear want to do something more along with the studies for Helmi. Adding an experience to support the studies and possibly practically implement what is being learnt was an additional motivating factor, along with the fact that her studies and interests were closely aligned to the mission of the organization.

“I didn't want to just go and study, but I wanted to do something more while being in Finland and making use of my time there. Well, I think it was just that I was looking for something and what they were telling me, their purpose was something that I immediately connected with. And I liked that they were trying to have an impact on the world and change things. And also, the whole leadership thing. I thought “Oh! That’s cool. I am studying leadership and I could work leadership, while being in the organization, which is nice because I will also get some practical training, kind of, for my studies, which are more like theoretical. I thought I could implement leadership styles that I had learnt during my studies. Because, I mean yes, you kind of understand those, when you are reading about them and writing about them, discussing them. But trying them out is a lot different.” – Helmi

Self-development could also include very personal aspects. For example, Anna expected to gain self-confidence and self-belief through this experience by proving to herself that she can do this job, along with learning some skills through practical experience. These expectations were a motivational factor in the case of Anna.

“I expected that I would work with social media, event promotion on Facebook and stuff like that. And yeah, develop myself. Like believing in yourself that you can be in a formal leadership position, with a title and everything... that people will look up to you for help, because you don’t always feel confident when you are younger and less experienced” – Anna

“Well I wanted the experience of being in a leadership position. I think that is good.” – Henni

“...knew that I would get some leadership experience as vice president.” – Anna

It was evident from the interviews that the participants greatly valued and wanted to obtain leadership skills, and many believed that being a leader in the student organizations and going through the leadership experience can help them gain those skills.

### 6.1.2 Connection with People

This seems to be a broad category but many of the reasons the participants had, to join the organization or take up a leadership role was related to people. One of the reasons mentioned several times was meeting new people. This includes international students expecting to meet Finnish students and vice versa. Students who are new to the city, both Finnish and international, are very much interested in integrating with the student community and meeting new people. Joining a student organization meant meeting other fellow students from the university and many students join to make new connections and network with people. Alex had expectations of meeting many international people while John wanted to make new friends. Anna on the other hand, being an international student was keen on meeting local students.

“because I was the international spokesperson and I had just come from abroad and I was really keen on meeting international people. So, I guess that was my expectation, meeting international people.” - Alex

“Then I also expected to have more friends like to get to know more people.” - John

“And also, to like networking, meeting new people .and just to like expressing your idea.” - Rachel

“And I wanted to get engaged with the local community somehow. And I also expected that I would get to know Finnish people and also the exchange students and have fun!” - Anna

Henni who was new to the city and joined to make friends mentions that many did the same.

“So generally, when I first joined the organization as everybody did, it’s just a way to get to know people in the university and take part in their... you know...they have parties and get together and whatever. So, when you move from a different city to study here it’s a good way to meet people.” - Henni

The opportunities and power, being in a leadership position or in an organization can offer them, to contribute to society, enable change and create an impact, is one of the motivating factors. John strongly believes that being in the board of a student organization gives you a greater advantage and opportunity in making a change. He points out that being a normal student, there could be limits to what

you can do even if you have the intention to create change. The passion for making a difference and creating an impact comes through in his statements.

“All the students in the organization can make a difference if they want to but you are like really doing it when you are on the board. Because if you want to make change and are a normal student and you are not like in this board, then you just go and tell them, that this is not right, and I'd like to make a difference in this one. Of course, you can do something yourself but then board can do more because they are representing the whole organization. Well I always like to be part of this kind of organizations so that I can make an effect on things, which I think is nice. If something is not well, then I think you have to do something to make the difference.” – John

Being a part of an organization and in a significant leadership position helped students be in a position to help other people and also fellow students.

“we could actually do something for international students not just in events but also in other things, like helping them with whatever kind of issues they have.” – Liam

Many student organizations are aimed at maintaining student welfare and contributing to their academic welfare. This provides an opportunity for the organizations to serve as a bridge between the faculty and the students and communicate the issues the students have and try to better the situation. Henni had a vision to improve the organization to better support the students while Alex saw being in his department's organization as a good way to be informed about the activities of the community and the department.

“Well as the president I wanted to take the organization forward. I had some big ideas about how to improve it, didn't actually manage to improve it in those ways at least but still I had some ideas about taking the organization as a whole. So, I wanted to contribute to the student well-being in that way.” – Henni

“Because I ...out of the studies I had done by then, I had half of that I've been away. Because I knew I was going to stay in Finland a bit longer this time, so I kind of wanted to get to know what is going on.” – Alex

Issues in the student community need not necessarily be related to academics but could also be related to the student community. In the case of Rachel, her goal was to enable more interaction between the local and international students. Alex shares this perspective and uses this leadership opportunity to introduce international students to his department. There seems to be not enough

opportunities for international students to integrate with the local students and both of them were keen on enabling spaces for interaction.

“But why I decided to apply for that is because for this position especially the international correspondent because I thought there was a lack of interaction between the international students and the local associations. So, the organization was kind of chosen for me but that is the reason that I choose to join.” – Rachel

“And I know that there are not many international students in the xxx department, but I kind of wanted to work with those people and get to know them and kind of like make the xxx people to realize how important it is to integrate international people among Finnish people and so on. So, we can be very homogenous, we have no international students really at the xxx department, even though we have at the xxx. So that’s the reason why.” – Alex

As Rachel mentions earlier that the organization was chosen for her, a common occurrence is that most students belonging to a certain department join their department specific organizations. Alex, Henni and John also describe that they joined the organization almost by default as it was closely associated to their department and most of the students in their class or department were members.

“So, the organizational firm is for xxx students. So. umm I guess I just wanted to. I’m a xxx student, so I always wanted to.” – Alex

“So, we have one organization for students in our department and pretty much everybody is a member.” – Henni

“So, we like always choose this one because I study the related subject.” – John

A very common aspect mentioned by the many of the participants was the role of peer persuasion in motivating them to join an organization. The main method of hiring, selecting or making sure that the leadership position is filled, was by word of mouth and convincing or motivating friends or friends of friends to apply. For example, Helmi was motivated more, seeing that a person she liked was also going to be in a leadership position. Knowing that your future work team might consist of the people you want to work with can be an encouraging factor.

“I liked the person, who was going to be the president, so was going to be my team leader. I liked her from that weekend and as I said I felt encouraged to do it.” – Helmi

In the case of Anna, she had intended to apply for a different position but ended up applying and getting selected for another. Even though the deadline for the application period had passed, she was encouraged to apply anyway in an informal setting, by members of the selection committee.

“And they asked me apply for vice president. And so, we made an application on my phone and emailed it. And they were the ones evaluating the applications, and they said ‘okay! This counts as an official application; like you are entered into the election’”. – Anna

Liam describes it jokingly that there was some manipulation involved. He had not thought about taking up the leadership role but ended up in one, after being in the organization for about one year.

“well there was a little bit of tricking involved, so they sort of made me come to the general meeting and somehow I ended up being one of the board members. I think I was hoping for a nice cooperation with the rest of the board.” – Liam

Alex and Nick mention that they were contacted by the board members encouraging them to apply and recommended by friends associated with the organization, respectively.

“Well, wanted to do it myself and then a friend of mine who was doing it knows me and what I've done and where I've been. So, I suggested myself and I was suggested to be in that position.” – Alex

“I was really like...when I arrived as a student, I was looking for something like this and then I heard about it and found out that this was like a small organization. But I didn't join the board right away. Because in the first year I didn't feel like I had enough time. Just former board members had personally contacted me, and it was just like personal networking. I thought more that the organization like needs my help. I didn't necessarily see it as I am going to get a ton of experience. This was my attitude going in, I think.” – Nick

Nick took up leadership position after being in the organization for a year. For him it was an obligation and duty to the organization along with some persuasion from friends, to keep the organization functional.

Another reason to join and take up leadership position, repeated by almost all of the participants was interestingly the lack of people to volunteers for the leadership positions. Some organizations were almost desperate to fill the

positions and be relieved of their duties while also ensuring the continuity of the organization.

“I was at the board meeting and it was very much...they were I would say desperate looking for board member. And I just happened to be at the right place at the right time. I was kind of hesitant at first but then was like okay I'll do it. I went to the meeting and there were not really very many people at the meeting, so they said who was not a board member already, got a position. I personally joined because I think they needed some more like guidance from someone who has already been here the whole year, because everyone else was a first year.” - Nick

“Well, for one I think it felt like they needed people and why not me. There weren't that many people saying yeah I am going to do it, and I thought sure why not.” - Helmi

“Well, we just had a meeting, the first meeting when I was...um... there weren't that many volunteers, let's be honest, to be a part of the board. So, we had our first meeting and then, in that first meeting they were like what would you like to do, and I was like this is what I am interested about. And no one else was really that interested in that.” - Alex

“But last fall before our meeting where we choose everybody there was no one who said could apply for the president position and I was like I have been thinking. But then no one volunteered for this financial thing and I had done the same kind of things in upper secondary school. So, I was like I could do that, that is interesting.” - John

Apart from these reasons there were also participants who had no specific expectations or motivation to join. Rachel just expected to have considerably less responsibilities since this was a voluntary position.

“So, I was kind of was expecting that people have kind of free hands to do what they want but not too much responsibilities if they don't want. Because it is voluntary so cannot basically ask too much I guess.” - Rachel

To sum it up among the many reasons the participants had that motivated them to join the organization, peer persuasion and lack of people interested in the leadership positions were some external factors and the opportunity, power, experience and skills that a leadership position offers were some of the personal motivating factors. Most of the factors of motivation relates to people, referring to building network, helping people, integrating with community and contributing to society, while also gaining useful skills and personal experiences making this a potentially mutually beneficial experience. The experience is viewed as valuable in the present, during the studies, as well as in the future in work life.

## **6.2 Outcomes of the experience**

Every experience has an outcome or impact on the person experiencing it. As discussed previously the participants were encouraged and motivated to pursue leadership experience with the intention of learning various skills and accomplishing something combined with the need for leaders and persuasion from peers. To understand the other side of the experience, it is important to know how the experience affected them and if they achieved what they set out to achieve. When the responses of the participants to various questions relating to their perspective of what the experience is to them and has done for them were analyzed, two sub-themes emerged, namely 1) challenges faced during the leadership experience and 2) personal development and learnings from the experience. In this section which aims to answer the second research question, these sub-themes will be discussed in detail.

### **6.2.1 Challenges faced during leadership experience**

Every experience comes with its own set of positive and negative aspects, rewards and challenges. In this section the challenges and negativities faced by the participants during their leadership experience are presented and discussed. The challenges could be grouped under two broad categories namely challenges working with people and challenges with student life.

#### *Challenge working with people*

Working in an organization usually involves a team or multiple teams of people. In this study the student organizations in which the participants worked in, typically had a board. The board consists of leaders or vice presidents of specific departments like finance, marketing, external relations, event management, etc., also including the president. With these kinds of teams involved where people have to work together, there are possibilities of different types of challenges arising. Almost all of the participants stated that working with people was one of the most difficult challenges during their leadership experience, for different

reasons. One of the common reasons being that the team not being able to work together in a committed and equal way. Liam points out that although their team was initially big, the team members' contribution to the work was not equal. Some of them eventually fell out of the organization, which meant more work for very few people. The lack of proper communication also influences the team dynamics when it is formed. Liam expresses his feelings of frustration when this happens in his team.

“our board wasn't as well-oiled as we would have liked it be. So, some people didn't do much, some people sort of dropped to the background, eventually. it hasn't been easy, especially not if you work with 8 people and eventually there are a lot of people not doing anything or not communicating. That brings a lot of frustration. but that's the whole thing about being in the board together so that you can split responsibility, and everyone does a little bit. And then if it turns out that most people don't do anything, and you have to take on all the work, that's quite frustrating and the lack of communications sometimes.”  
-Liam

Nick shares a similar opinion while adding that expectation setting and clear job description is essential within a team in order to divide the labor equally or fairly among the team. He mentions that he felt that it was he who was holding the team together and was responsible for getting most of the work done. He explains that the team mates did not know what to expect from each other and there was a lack of spaces and opportunities to discuss these issues among themselves. Taking into account the fact that he might also not have been clear or expressive about his feelings and expectations, he reflects that he would change the people he worked with if he had had the chance.

“I think I have a lot of unfortunately negative memories associated. Basically, like feeling like we were able to pull it off, whatever it is and event or just some collaboration with some other organization, but it was like if I hadn't done that we would have sunk. And the times when I kind of backed off and like let other people plan and like the events just don't happen. So, it's like “Oh that sounds like a great idea. Let's do it.” And then someone kind of gets delegated to do it and if I don't actually step in it kind of dies.... kind of like the world does revolve around me and I am the only person holding everything together right now. I think the problem is that people are not necessarily clear about their expectations about what the other people are supposed to do. And I haven't necessarily been clear about how I feel. There hasn't really been a time or the space to be like okay I have been doing too much, you guys haven't ben contributing enough. I guess I would change the people I work with if I could.” - Nick

In the case of Alex, the challenge was to find support from the board for the work that he was in charge of. He elaborates on how it felt that his work was not



regarded important and how overworking made the team stressed. He expresses feelings of loneliness and teammates being unsupportive and annoyed with his ideas and work, most of the time. In his opinion, they had no regards for the work he was doing and thought it to be irrelevant while they were stressed over doing more than what they can.

“Well, often times I found myself to be alone with my case and I found people being really irritated with me in the meetings. I would be like hey so what is the situation with international people and they would be like this is only for Finns and that kind of stuff. So that was the challenge that most of the time I felt like I was alone. I knew people were talking about me outside the board. Because they thought that the stuff that I was doing was basically irrelevant for their student organization. There were couple of people with really strong opinions and obviously everyone wanted the best for everyone. But I guess they are being so active that they stress themselves out and suddenly we have eight events for the whole, you know...there are lots of events. And there are some events that needs to be, it's kind of in the rules or something. It is in the beginning of the year. And then year, people just get stressed out.” – Alex

For Helmi it was challenging when it came to conflict management and progression towards the goals. In her situation it involved conflict with team members as well as personal conflicts with another member. She explains that knowing and sometimes even not know knowing of situation of conflict and tensions between her team members or of a team member and her and being the one who has to take the initiative as a leader to resolve it was quite challenging. She reflects that realizing her own mistakes and faults and having self-doubts and feeling responsible for teams not moving forwards were some difficult situations and brought forth some challenging feelings.

“Conflicts are never easy especially for me. Knowing that there are conflicts going on within your team, and you are the one who has to be solving them. Or knowing that somebody is in a conflict with you or finding that out when you didn't know about it. And realizing your faults and the mistakes you did. I think those were the hardest ones. And also knowing that the whole team is not moving towards the goals that was set and you don't really know what to do about it. And you are the one in the end responsible and ask yourself what I do wrong. What is it I could have done better, what is it I can change now, all those things.” – Helmi

Anna points out an interesting challenge or rather area of improvement – accepting differences. She brings attention to the diversity in the people whom she worked with and also the diversity in their personality, opinions and working styles. She notes that the low work ethics was a challenge for her to deal

with even though the team was bigger, more experienced and associated with a lot of power.

“But then I left that community and went to another one, with different personalities, very egoistic people. People with like a lot of power, so called, and access to big budget and money and big contacts in the cruise industry and so on. And they weren’t doing their jobs efficiently like people in my organization would do. And that was very challenging because we had a lot of work. It was the biggest event I participated in planning and the work ethic was even lower. So, I needed to learn how to work with people like that, who I perceived as very different from me, and how to make an event together and how to get along. That was the most challenging thing.” - Anna

Another rather common challenge among the participants were getting people involved. This includes both the people outside and within the organization. Since most of the organizations catered to students, all events and activities were created for the students. And it was essential to involve the students to these events for it to be useful and successful. Getting the students interested in these events was a challenge faced by multiple organizations. It was also mentioned in different ways that people working for the organization were not all committed to the work and this turned out to be challenging and taxing for the ones who were. Liam and Rachel explain that catering to the interests of a lot of people who are diverse was a difficult task.

“Being a part of the organization and organizing things and getting people to be involved...mm.... especially because in a city there is so much happening, but at the same time people keep complaining that there is not enough or that it’s not what they want. ...then it’s sad that you go through a lot of efforts to make it happen and then not that many people come, even though that people that do come have a good time which is really nice.” - Liam

“It is such a small-scale thing, so I think like getting people interested. For example, like in development corporation there is a meeting for that every month. And there is nobody there. So, it’s like eight people, five international students and a few locals. Even if...they might come to the same room but still be in their own like...So just getting people as interested in those things that I am interested in I guess.” - Rachel

“Our board was consisting mostly of people who have been in the organization before. And also, students from like third year and upwards. So like people already doing their master’s program or in the master’s program, having been studying here for a longer time. So, I think that coordinating the people was a bit of a challenge. So... because they have been in the organization for two years or more, they are not like super innovative about it anymore and not that excited about it anymore. So, like getting people to do the stuff.” - Henni

Henni points out that finding common times to meet with the student's schedules was also challenging along with getting people to be excited or innovative in their work even after being in the organization for at least a couple of years. The challenges faced by the participants were with team work, working with differences in people, low work ethics, lack of involvement and conflict management, which all relate to communicating or dealing with people in one way or another. The experiences we have are shaped and influenced by the people we experience it with. These challenges with people played an important role in each participant's experience contributing to their learning in their experience in one way or another. This section of the findings points out that these experiences could be platforms or opportunities where people skills could be developed and learnt by students through practice.

#### *Challenges with student life*

The second sub-theme comprises the aspects in which the leadership experience affected the participants' student lifestyle. One of the most common aspect was the ability to balance the responsibility of being a student and that of the leader in the organization. Half of the participants mentioned that there was quite a lot of additional work with studies. In Liam's situation, there was excessive work due to the lack of people in the organization resulting in him doing most of the work.

"But yea, because there is only two that are actually doing the work, then there is more coming at you that just the position that you were chosen to do. So, you just take on whatever is necessary." -Liam

Henni mentions that even though she had been in the organization as a member and also had experience of taking up multiple responsibilities, it was an increase in workload. She also points out the voluntary nature of the jobs and how it is done along with studies since it is not paid.

“As I said I was the treasurer before and I took on lots of extra jobs back then. But it is quite a big increase in the workload. Because you are doing it on top of your studies. You don't get real compensation for it, so you can't stop studying. – Henni

In the experience of Helmi the leadership experience came with a lot of responsibilities that studies had to take a back seat. It was a decision that she made to prioritize the job over studies because of her belief that the experience would be beneficial in the future, not to mention the current studies. She also reflects that this experience delayed her graduation period and also postponement and delayed submissions of assignments even though it was useful for her.

“It took up all of my time. So, a lot of my assignments were postponed and handed them in later than I was supposed to. I am still enrolled as a student even though I was supposed to graduate last summer. I am still writing my thesis, so you can see how everything got delayed. But, at the same time what I was doing in the organization, I could use for some of the assignments.” – Helmi

But in the case of Anna the additional work seemed to be working in a positive and supportive way and helped in developing connections and increasing her self-confidence. In her words:

“It made me a lot busier. It kept me going and it gave me the confidence to keep going with my studies and to find a job which paid money. Yeah, and it gave me a support network. It gave me a very good network of people at the university, in the organization and out of it.” – Anna

It is also not uncommon that some students tend to take up more activities and involve themselves in many things during university years, to try out different areas of interest. Similar to Henni, Rachel also mentions being part of many different things among which the leadership position was one. In some cases, it turns out to be rewarding and in some a burden. This depends on how the student perceives it, and also on his or her priorities. For example, Helmi was happy with the experience even though it hindered her academic progress, because in her opinion this was a valuable learning experience that was significant. But Rachel admits that it was quite hard to balance all the responsibilities and she became less active later on, because of being too active and taking on too many things.

“I don't think well enough. I think I should have given more time to my studies. At the same time, I don't regret giving more time to the organization because what I learned there I couldn't have gained from studying.” – Helmi

“Last year not too well because I am taking up too much stuff constantly. I think that is even typical for some of the people in the associations. But yeah last year I was studying, working, in the association and I also had like a band. And I kind of like because of all those things, less active during the end of the year. I think I became less and less active in the end of the year because I had too much of it. So, it didn't work out too well last year.” – Rachel

Nick points out that when you are working to achieve small tangible goals it is easy to procrastinate the academic work.

“Yeah I think it has taken away more time from my studies than I anticipated because there was always like little small goals. Like little things you could take care of and those were so much easier to do really quickly instead of like working on my thesis. But now when I look back, I have been babysitting and micro managing all these like little things in the organization instead of putting that aside and focusing on my studies completely.”  
-Nick

Nick also mentions another thing that affected his student life which was the way in which he interacted with his fellow classmates and friends. He explains the feeling of having different identities while talking to friends and facing difficulties in switching between them, one being a fellow student and the other a representative of the organization. He recollects a feeling of awkwardness while being with friends and also being conflicted about which identity or role to take up sometimes.

“Knowing that I am a part of an organization, like representing them. It felt like sometimes I couldn't interact as myself with people. Like I have this different identity a little bit. Like I have to talk from the organization's board member position and not just as a student sometimes. And that was a little awkward because like if I was in their shoes as a student maybe I'd totally agree with them or something. But then as the board member you have to kind of take a neutral stance or...I don't know. Because before being a board member I wouldn't have necessarily promoted that event but now that it's my job then it's like somebody who has like a dual persona. It just felt kind of awkward really.” – Nick

When there is additional work it definitely takes up more time. As a student managing to have time for things like classes, personal study, social activities, hobbies and relaxation could be a challenge. In this study few participants said that they didn't not have any problems balancing the extra work with their

studies. Henni was one of them, but the issue was the lack of time to indulge in hobbies.

“School work and responsibilities, I could balance but free time is a different thing. Not that much time for hobbies.” – Henni

The challenges faced by the participants also included a few personal ones. It should be noted that these leadership positions are voluntary jobs that the students do along with their studies. There is a certain amount of determination and commitment needed from the students to be able to do both. And with teamwork being present in these organizations, it is important that the members of the team can be depended on and have time to commit to the work. Anna mentions that if she had to go back in time and change something, she would be more dependable.

“guess I would have been more accountable and reliable.” – Anna

These challenges, having either a positive or negative effect based on the mindset and perspective of the student, could also be seen as an opportunity to learn to prioritize and also be aware of one’s own self and interests. The leadership experience which could easily turn into a burden to a full-time student, also presents itself as an opportunity to practice balancing or learn to balance the responsibilities of student life, work life and personal life.

## **6.2.2 Personal development and learnings from the experience**

One key aspect that all the participants had in common was learning and development during the experience. In this section some of the aspects and skills that the participants considered they had developed during their experiences are discussed.

### *Tangible gains, skills and knowledge learnt during the experience*

The experience helped the participants learn a number of skills which will be discussed in this section. Out of the eight participants seven of them state that this leadership experience is a valuable one that can be added to their curriculum

vitae/ resume, which can be useful while searching for jobs. In the words of Helmi and Anna:

“having something on my CV that would help me in my future career path.” -Helmi

“And also, to improve my CV for job applications” - Anna

Liam adds that this experience helps while taking the next steps in life, after university.

“It gives you quite a lot for the next step in life, I think or at least I hope so.” - Liam

From Rachel point of view, this kind of voluntary experiences demonstrates proactiveness and interest which could be an advantage while seeking jobs. Nick adds that taking on those challenging responsibilities of a leader is a valuable experience.

“I thought, and I still do think that doing voluntary work, it's a good experience when you are actually looking for a job. It shows on paper that you are active and interested in different things.” - Rachel

“Well I guess it's something that also looks good in your CV, that you have been doing stuff like this in the past that is voluntary” - Alex

“I guess more responsibility this time around. It challenged me in some ways and it was a good thing, I think. Something to put on our resume.” - Nick

John reflects that this type of experience working in a board of an organization, teaches a lot of skills and knowledge that one might not learn during university studies and these skills could help one in their future work life.

“So, all those things I think that those people thought they didn't learn in university, those things when I saw them, I thought all those things you will learn if you work in a board of an organization. That is what I hope that those skills help me in the future.” - John

Another skill that was mentioned by the majority of the participants was people skills. It can be noticed that this connects to the challenges that they faced while working with people. In every single experience in this study the participants were in a situation where they had to work with or in, one or multiple teams. This being the case interaction with people was inevitable and working with

diverse people was common. Liam points out that it is important in these work situations that you are sensitive to people's differences.

"you sort of have to be culturally sensitive or just people sensitive" - Liam

Henni says that while working with people, trying to make them work at ease and being approachable is important. She adds that the people you work with should be comfortable enough to discuss their ideas and doubts with you and feel supported and part of a team.

"People skills also because you are working with people, you have to try to make everybody feel comfortable in that if they don't know for sure what they are doing or what they should be doing. They have to feel comfortable in like coming to you and be like hey I know you said I should do this thing, but I have no idea what I am doing. And then I am like I have no idea what you are doing either. So, let's have a look together and let's figure it out." - Henni

The experience served as a learning opportunity for Alex where he learnt a lot about people. This being his first experience, he emphasizes that he was able to learn more about how people work, how to work together with people and to understand them. John points out that there might always be criticism within a team, but he actively takes upon himself to provide a positive voice of encouragement within the team.

"It taught me a lot about people and how people see things. And why we need people who kind of look outside the box as well. It was a great learning experience of how people work. To understand people. When you see people working closely to you, they are like the same. Because I have never been in an organization like this before I came to this one. I just learnt a lot about people" - Alex

"And that is a big part I think because there is always somebody who is like this didn't work and that was bad. So, there is always somebody so I feel like I am the one to say that "there is always somebody to say that, but you did very well." - John

For Nick, trusting people with work and delegating was a challenging learning point. He points out this experience helped him practice collaboration and trusting or depending on people to do their part of the work. He mentions that his development was more in character rather than skills with regards to working with people, in terms of collaborating and being able working with diverse set of people. Nick adds that knowing and bonding with the people who he worked



with might have helped in this challenge, if he had known their strengths and capabilities. He reflects that even though the job did not challenge him to improve his skills, it made him realize the importance of a team to have a shared vision.

“I have definitely gained some interpersonal skills from it. I have learned a bit more to trust people when you delegate something to them. Maybe people are more dependable than I initially thought sometimes. But yeah, I mean I just gained experience trying to like to collaborate with people and work together. I think I would have like to know the other board members like who they were and at a more personal level ahead of time. To kind of get like the letters of reference to get to know like what this person is actually capable of. A huge part of my experience has been affected by the people around me. So, had I known more about them, then I would have kind of known what to expect. I would say character definitely, not too many skills. I haven't been really challenged that way, on like any kind of management level. But just like more like being okay working with different types of people. But now I realize that it requires people to be a lot more on the same page as far as like what is the big idea and why are we doing it.” – Nick

Having been in a leadership position, leadership skills was something that was also mentioned a lot. What was considered leadership skills different from participant to participant. Henni mentions that she was not in charge of particular activities but was responsible for the people who were doing it. She considers guiding and leading the people to do their work as the leadership skill that she developed.

“Because you are in charge of the whole thing. Like you are not in charge of the any of the particular things that have to be done, like event organizing or finance or social political issues or whatever. But you are in charge of the people who are in charge of the stuff. So, you know, that people leading skills.” – Henni

Helmi, for whom this was a first experience being a leader, points out the many different skills involved in a leadership role, while Anna mentions that she developed a better understanding of what it is to be a leader beyond the power and privileges. Anna points out that the leader could also be a person who is behind the scenes making sure everything is functioning well.

“Well, my leadership skills of course, that's the first thing. Because I've never taken up a position like this before, I've never led anybody. Lots of different skills that you learn with the tasks you have to do, like marketing sales, preparing trainings, giving feedback, all those things.” – Helmi

“I could say I've done project management, I've led teams of people. I guess I understood better, alongside my leadership studies, I understood what it means to be in a leadership

position, that you are not taking all the glory and you don't get the best benefits because you are the boss." -Anna

A few participants mentioned developing communication skills. Liam being responsible for external communications, states that dealing with miscommunication was a learning point, while Henni emphasizes on the importance of developing communication skills even within the team and listening to one another as part of effective communication.

"well Facebook skills... because for me being responsible for the communications part, I felt like okay it has to be visible. So, that miscommunication and how to deal with that."  
- Liam

"You know when people are discussing maybe just don't jump right into it. Listen too...they say something, and they say something, hear them both out and then think about it for a while...and like...what is that in English? ...consideration? Something like that. Considering, listening." - Henni

Nick reflects that the experience had made him more diplomatic in communicating. This came from his experience within the team where he learnt not to blame people for failure of some work. With a little frustration in his tone he adds that in his situation, which did teach him about communication, he chose to care less and not point out who was or what was in the wrong.

"I think I have become more diplomatic. Because in the face of potential like failure as an organization like trying to like run events, I learnt to like not point fingers or blame. I will just kind of like let it happen, and kind of like give less of a damn." - Nick

Most of the organizations in this study involve event management for marketing or other purposes. So many of the participants were involved in the planning and organizing of events in the university. Alex and John mention that planning and organizing were among the skills they developed, even though John was a treasurer.

"Especially like event making like organizing events and reaching out to people." - Alex

"And then also even thought I was a treasurer I always like helped in other things also. Probably I got to learn more about how to organize happenings and everything." - John

For Henni, she developed a better understanding about planning the organization's actions for a year.

“I now have a clear picture of what it takes to like a yearlong project. Because when we set out, we did this like everybody wrote down a few things that would like to do during the year.” – Henni

Nick and Henni mention developing themselves in goal setting. Nick elaborates that this learning came from the experience of taking on too much than the organization can handle with big ideas in mind without taking into account reality and practicality of it. Henni also shares a similar perspective adding the importance of pacing the actions and planning for it with understanding of the practicalities.

“I would say to focus the goals onto like smaller more achievable ones. I think we might have dreamed too big sometimes and then like faced with like woah that is a really huge task. So, if we were like better at planning that like this is what we can do, and this is what we will do rather than like shoot for the stars,” – Nick

“Goal setting, pacing the thing and just the general understanding of what it takes and what can be achieved in a yeah, which is not a very long time.” – Interviewee7

For Rachel, the development was also in knowledge in relation to the processes and legalities involved in a student organization, its position in the university, its functioning and administration. In her words:

“I guess about like understanding how things work and are organized for example in the university context. To get a better idea of like if you want to do something what is the route you do it thought or something. So, it’s like I guess understanding the administrative or management part. Like how things work in the university and what is the role of the student associations in them. And there are also other documents and stuff I didn’t deal too much with, but I saw that it was there. There are the official things the law says you need if you are an official organization, you should follow this guidelines and laws. So just understanding that I guess.” – Rachel

It is evident that through this experience the participants gained quite a number of tangible skills that could be applied in other scenarios. These skills including people skills, leadership skills, communication skills, planning and organizing and goal setting skills are factors that make this experience a valuable one to the participants, as mentioned earlier.

#### *Intangible gains, skills and knowledge developed through the experience*

Apart from the tangible skills mentioned there were other gains that the participants claim to have gotten from the experience. The majority of the

participants found the experience to be a rewarding one for many reasons. What most of them mention is the feeling of achievement and satisfaction after successfully executing an activity, in many cases an event.

“The feeling afterwards when you are exhausted and you’re ready to go home. And then you see all the happy faces of the people who participated. And then you look around at your fellow team members and realize that you pulled it off, that you did it. And it wasn’t perfect, but it happened, and you made it happen together. That’s like the most memorable type of moments I have.” – Anna

“We’ll all the happening where you are organizing them and when they go well, it’s like always nice feeling. When people tell you that it was a very nice thing and you know that you have worked for that and your friends have worked for that. So yea I like those feelings yeah.” – John

“There was both times when I arranged it and I was a success, I think because we got a lot of people coming.” – Alex

“So, you know you have put in a lot of effort and lot of work and then you see those people enjoying themselves and having a good time. that ...That's really rewarding.”. - Liam

While for Anna, Helmi, John and Liam the rewarding part of the experience was to see and know that other people have enjoyed their work, recognition was something that Henni cherished. She recollects memories of her team appreciating her and addressing a gathering representing the organization to be the best part of her experience.

“We had the pikkujoulut, it is right in the end of the year like early December, everything is finishing, and I knew also it was going to over soon. We have a tradition that the board they do a small speech for the president and then they did that for me and it was really good. Also, at the anniversary party, giving a speech to the whole organization at the like formal dinner was memorable.” – Henni

Rachel cherishes peer feedback and support when her ideas are received well and supported while Helmi recollects her team winning very fondly. She clarifies that it was not just the winning that made it special but the feeling that her team worked well and moved forward together and being recognized for that in the organizational conference.

“I guess when you have an Idea and like when others support it, like when they find it good as well. I think that’s like ...peer feedback I would say.” -Rachel

“I was at the conference in the spring, national conference where we had some sort of like competition between the local committees and our team got most points during all those like games we had to play and the activities we had to do. We won, and it made me really happy because I felt like our committee had grown together so much more. It wasn't about winning but just to be recognized as you are the ones who are working together best and were striving towards one goal together. It was really great.” - Helmi

In relation to this work satisfaction was also something a few participants mentioned as a gain. Liam says that he did not have to change much for the role and was able to be the way he is in his work and enjoyed these aspects of his work. Helmi having enjoyed the work she did in the organization that even after her term ended, she started looking for similar jobs with payment. For Rachel the nature of the work turned out to be one of the main reasons for her to join the organization.

“I think for me it's nice I could be me in this position. So, if a meeting drags on for too long, I know how to inspire the spark and get people laughing for a moment and you know... it's nice to be able to do that and to motivate them like okay yeah” - Liam

“That was really nice to see because I really liked what I was doing in my organization and I was not doing it anymore and I was trying to find some sort of position that would relate to that or interesting for me to do, not just do a stupid job.” - Helmi

“I liked the things they have done in the last two years. I think the organization was like heading in a good direction with positive people who had lot of ideas, so I think the atmosphere was getting better. So that is why I wanted to apply at that point and not earlier” - Rachel

A few of the participants said that they developed self- awareness through the experience. For Helmi it was about identifying where her strengths and areas of development lie, while for Nick the experience helped reaffirm what he already knew about himself. Helmi also reflects that being a person who could not take criticism or negative feedback, it was quite challenging to face that in the position. But it resulted in her being able to learn to accept constructive criticism.

“Not in a negative way that I changed but I changed...I think more about what my actions have as an impact on my surrounding. But I think also I became more self-aware, knowing more what I am good at, what I am not good at. And also, being able to say that I have difficulties with this or this is one of my weaknesses. I think it was a lot harder for me in the beginning. And I used to be a person who would be upset easily by negative or constructive feedback and thinking that as my personality. But I think now I can deal with that more easily. I think my thinking processes too. Like I said earlier about what my actions have...what impacts they have on my surroundings.” - Helmi

“I wouldn't say I changed a whole lot. Maybe it reaffirmed the things I've had before. I mean it has been multi-faceted.” – Nick

Helmi reflects that the experience altered her mindset to be aware of her actions and its relation to society. She became conscious of the consequences her actions might have on the environment.

Henni recollects how stressful the work was and her response to it and mentions that the experience made her realize that she can handle it even though she wouldn't choose to take it up again.

“But I was also like useful just to see how you react in stressful situations when you have lots to do. As a person it's not something that I would necessarily want to do again, like being really stressed out. But it is comforting to know that I can handle it.” – Henni

For Anna and Rachel, the leadership experience helped them to gain confidence. Anna mentions that she gained confidence in herself and her ability to manage and cope with different situations by actually going through them. Rachel shares her opinion adding that even though these organizations might be small the experience is important. Liam mentions that being part of the organization made his student life easier, in a way that he was obligated to be in certain situations and connect with people which might not be the case if not for the leadership position.

“now I feel confident that I can manage and learn and survive in different situations, and work with different type of personalities. That's the biggest thing. So, the network and also the confidence that I gained. I learned that I can jump into new things.” – Anna

“it's really liked the self-confidence and just like doing something like, yeah this is good idea I will just do it. Not just think about it but actually.... again, its small-scale stuff but I think it is important.” – Rachel

“It made it easier for me to be in the student life, to be involved...because you feel this obligation that if you are a part of this organization you have to be there for those events., so it made it easier to connect and go out and do things and get out of your room.” – Liam

John points out the support he got from his colleagues as well as alumni of the organization.

“No, I don't think so because there is always someone you can ask for, like last year's president and then we have like the other presidents of other student organizations.” – John

Some of the participants consider the hands-on experience useful and valuable. Alex shares his hopes of working in an international environment and this might be a useful experience for that. Liam points out the diverse nature of humans and mentions that there is a lot of learning taking place while also sharing the same hope as Alex.

“And I am kind of hoping to be able to work in an international environment in the future. So, yeah” – Alex

“So, you will always work with people that are thinking on a very different level from you. And you have to learn to deal with that. Especially looking towards maybe working in an international environment, an international school or something like that. Because it's a good experience. And you learn not just working with the people that are together in the board with you, or the leaders together with you, but also with the people that you are doing it for, or the other people that you have to work together with to get something done” – Liam

Henni says that this experience might be like a training before one starts to work in a bigger organization with a paying job.

“So, it is a good perspective on our like training and then also you get a bit better idea of what it is that will be needed of you once you go into the workplace.” – Henni

Rachel says that there is a lot of freedom and support in this type of small organization and opportunities to implement and experiment with new ideas without severe consequences.

“And also, to like networking, meeting new people .and just to like expressing your idea. If you have an idea that is a way to try it out. But this is so kind of small scale that you have the freedom to do something in a harmless way. You can't lose a lot of money or anything because you don't have it in the first place. So, you just like...it's a good way to practice. If you have an idea try to do it for a year. It's not sure that it doesn't work but there is a safe place to practice implementing your ideas.” – Rachel

Even though the reasons might be varying with each participant, these immeasurable gains also play an important role in how the participants look back at their experiences.

When the participants were asked to reflect on what they thought leadership was before the experience compared to what they think about it now, many of them mention that their opinion of leadership or what it means to be a leader had definitely changed. The changes in their perspectives about leadership which was one of the intangible outcomes of their experiences, were centered around the aspects of helping people and hard work. Anna took up the position also having in mind the pride and privilege that comes with it, but later realized that being a leader was more about understanding one's self better and enabling people to develop and work better. She also mentions that leadership was also about learning to work with people, with differences in opinion, maintain relations and having the ability to encourage people.

“Before the role, like I said, I thought that you know, being president or vice president is like having a title. You have like the highest priority. But after a while, I realized I didn't even want it. So, after doing the leadership role, like I said earlier, I realized that it's about helping people do their best work and learning how to work with different personalities and how to best motivate different personalities, how to be patient and how to be organized and multitask.” - Anna

Helmi shares a similar perspective stating that leadership is more about being a facilitator to assist people to achieve or perform better. She also mentions it is about collaborative effort towards a goal adding that it is a complex subject. Nick also shares this perspective but, in his opinion, there is a certain amount of sacrifice from his part.

“For me leadership is not about telling people what to do and like being responsible for what they do, yes, we do that but at the same time its more about being to service to those people, so they can do a good job. And together achieve something together. but yeah this is a really complex thing”. - Helmi

“to me it means like I am helping out, I am sacrificing time and energy for a greater good for some organization some cause.” - Nick

Some of the participants expected this leadership position to be easy to carryout but realized after the experience the amount of hard work that it requires. Alex points out that even though his position was not a higher one in the board the experience was harder than expected. Nick mentions that he has learnt that there



are many difficulties in being a leader and emphasizes on the requirement of hard work and effective communication.

“I guess I thought it would be a lot easier than it was. Even though it wasn't a really high position in the board. But yeah it was just harder than I thought.” – Alex

“right now, I can say that it is a lot of hard work and requires a lot clearer communication of goals and things like that. So, I think I have gained a lot of appreciation for the depth and the breath of like how difficult leadership is to pull off, in a big organization. So maybe before I thought it was easier somehow or simpler.” – Nick

“I thought that it would be easier, especially in a position like that where the people are motivated, and they are committed. So, you would think that the leadership thing kind of takes care on its own. Not necessarily the case because you have to do a lot of things like goal setting and making sure everybody is thinking the same and trying to get to the same goal and stuff like that. Yeah I thought it would be less work intensive.” – Henni

Henni mentions that she had expected it to be less work intensive with the context of the organization in mind. She points out that previously her opinion was that when people are motivated, leadership would be easier and automatic job but realized that working with people involves a lot of effort and hard work.

When the participants were asked to describe their leadership experience in a word or a sentence, seven out of eight of them remarked that it was a good learning experience. All of them recommended this kind of leadership experience, claiming it to be valuable. Here are some of the responses from the participants.

“It's been a very good experience, a very good learning point.” – Liam

“Lots of work, lots of learning. In a nutshell I think that is it.” – Henni

“I was trying to find some sort of position that would relate to that or interesting for me to do, not just do a stupid job. So, I think in that sense its really great.” – Helmi

“I think I have learnt something, but I don't know if I have changed. Probably nothing major but definitely learnt something.” – Rachel

“But I have liked it. It is very nice, and I got to know a lot of people and do many nice things. It is hard to describe in one word or sentence.” – John

“I think it was the biggest learning experience during my studies, more so than the studies part. They complimented each other.” Anna

The participants were asked to share their perception of what type of a person they were, and they expressed it by mentioning various characters and attributes. This question was an icebreaker in the interview while it also gathered data. When the responses were analyzed, characteristic traits like being open, positive, reliable, motivated, committed, active and responsible were repeated occurrences. Skills like multitasking, decision making and communicating effectively were also mentioned. This interesting data about the perception of the participants of their own personality was useful in understanding their self-image, but it was bracketed out of this particular research as it was not relevant to this particular research question.

The leadership experience has had a considerable impact on the participants in both positive and negative ways, changing their perceptions, challenging them in various areas and helping them in learning different skills and gain knowledge. It can be noted that be it the challenges or motivation or gains that the participants had, they revolve around the themes relating to people and self-development, and that this experience has proved to be enabling learning in the participants. It is evident that the participants see the experience as a learning experience which is highly recommended by them. With these findings taken into consideration, their implications and interrelated connections are discussed in the following section.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study is to understand the phenomenon of student leadership from the perspective of the leaders. In this section the implications of the findings will be discussed, and the meaning and the essence of the participants' experiences will be explored. The limitations of this study and suggestions for further research are also discussed in this section.

### 7.1 Examination of the findings

In all the aspects of the findings in the present study, two themes seem to be a common occurrence, one being personal development and the other relating to people. When the motivational part of the findings of the present study is taken into account, the divide is quite clear. The motivation to join a student organization and take up a leadership position was primarily to gain hands-on experience and leadership skills, networking with new people, but being in a position of power that could help create change were also equally important reasons that encouraged the participants. The external factors where people were involved in motivating the participants were pressure or persuasion from friends and also simply the need for leaders in the organization. In these reasons for motivation it can be noted that there is an underlying motivation to engage with people, either to develop one's self or to help others. This motivation to engage with people relates to the challenges the participants faced which were mostly connected to dealing with people.

When the outcomes of the experiences are examined it can be seen that it also falls under the two broad themes mentioned earlier. While self-development is connected primarily to development of the person, the challenges also relate to self-development and people, when analyzed. The main challenges that the participants had were with working with people for different reason like lack of communication support and expectations, low work ethic, lack of interest and commitment, difficulty in accepting differences and facing conflicts, and also having conflict of professional and personal identity while interacting with

people. While most of the reasons relate to people, reasons like conflict of identities, miscommunication, commitment and accepting differences are also connected to personal development. The self-development section which consists of the tangible and the intangible skills the participants claimed to obtain from the experience, may also be categorized based on these two themes. With most of the tangible skills like people skills, leadership skills, communication skills can be associated with people some of the others like planning and organizing and goal setting could be considered personal development. The intangible gains and skills like work satisfaction, self-awareness, confidence, easy student life, valuable hands-on experience and freedom and support lean more towards the theme of self-development.

When we take into account the first part, before the experience, the motivation, and the second part which is the outcome of the experience, it can be noticed that there is some correlation between these two sections. The motivation being mainly developing one self and increasing interaction and working with people, the outcomes are also on the same lines. The participants developed a number of skills and knowledge and faced challenges that were related mostly with people. It appears that the 'what' the participants expected from the experience which motivated them to join, was fulfilled during the experience in one way or another although this did not come without some challenge.

The challenges the participants faced is closely connected to the tangible and intangible gains. For example, the challenges faced by most participants were with people for reasons of miscommunication, lack of interest and support within the team, and the corresponding gains were developing communication and leadership skills. The gains and learning of the participants seem to arise from the challenges that they faced during the experience. The challenges in the participants' experience have played a significant role in affecting their individual outcomes. If these challenges were not present, would the participants have had similar learning experience?

Considering that the participants did not necessarily have an entirely positive experience and faced various challenges, all of them reflect back to it

being a valuable learning experience. The experience was valuable in different ways to different participants despite being pressured into taking up the position in many cases. The ability of the participants to reflect back to their leadership experience with the perception of learning something from it, should also be recognized. It is also noteworthy that all the participants recommended this kind of leadership experience as something a student should experience. Based on the findings it can be concluded that the participants experiences were centered mainly around various types of interactions with people and developing themselves in the process by learning different skills. The core of their experiences relates to engaging with people and learning valuable skills and knowledge through those challenging experiences.

It can be noted that some of the present findings align with parts of findings from a few other researches related to perceptions of student leaders. Themes like balancing academic, personal and leadership roles, planning and communication, working with others (Hall, Scott & Borsz, 2008) and maintaining relations with different people and balancing responsibilities (O'Sullivan, 2004), are also part of the findings in the present study. The findings in O'Sullivan's (2004) research on students' perception of learning through leadership also revealed that the student leaders shared the opinion that they had developed themselves in different ways through the experience. Despite these studies being in different contexts and also focusing on different aspects of student leadership their findings point to developmental aspects of students which emphasizes the universal potential of this phenomenon to facilitate development in different areas for students.

One of the most interesting parts of findings is the participants' perception on what it is to be a leader. It can be observed that there is a significant change in their perception of a leader and a leadership role, after they have experienced being a student leader. There is a certain level of understanding in the participants of the complexity and difficulty involved with a leadership role, which they are able to reflect upon. The student leaders seemed to have developed some respect towards the role and humility while reflecting about it.

This gives rise to the question of whether the student leaders learn in a different way with a different mindset when compared to leaders who are in a recognized and paying leadership role.

This study presenting a closer and deeper view of the leadership experiences the participants have had, brings out a key aspect of it being a learning experience. This kind of leadership experience which the students recommend as good learning experiences could be possibly utilized by the departments, by giving it a recognition which could draw more students towards these experiences and help change the situation of the organizations being in desperate need of successors. Providing spaces and opportunities to organize student events and other modes of support can also help these organizations thrive. As mentioned earlier these leadership experiences have helped in learning transferable skills like communication, people skills, team work, etc., along with enabling change in perception through experiential learning. It could be explored more maybe in a larger scale or recognized and used as a medium to facilitate students' leadership development. Analyses of researches in the past few decades show that the leadership skills of students increase when they are in college (Hall, Scott & Borsz, 2008). Leadership skills were also mentioned by many participants in the present study as their gains. These experiences could also be viewed as opportunities to possibly shape future leaders.

## **7.2 Limitations and validity**

In this phenomenological study, careful attention was paid in describing each part of the research process in detail, truthfully and transparently. In order to achieve the aim of understanding the experience of student leaders from their perspectives, personal interviews were chosen as a data gathering method. Open ended questions were mostly used, and it enabled me to get more information from the participants. In any qualitative study it is common to have a relatively small sample size which means that the findings cannot be generalized facts. But on the positive side, more information can be gathered in a more subjective and

deeper way which might not be possible in a quantitative study. There were only eight participants in this study from a university where there are thousands of students. So, the findings might have been different with a larger sample size. It should also be noted that these experiences were short term leadership experiences (Baccei, 2015).

The interviews were semi-structured ones with guiding questions. Technically in a phenomenological interview the interview should contain as few questions as possible allowing the participant to freely express their views. Even though in this study the participant had the freedom to express all they wanted to, it was guided around certain topics like motivation, effects and outcome. This semi-structure helped me as an interviewer to keep the conversation on track and not get diverted with other topics, and also avoid the risk of the participants not being able to open up or reflect deeply about their experiences. While the semi-structure made the interview focused, it also might or might not have limited the possibility of the participants expressing other parts of the experience that are different from these aspects. Moreover, the guiding questions might also have influenced the length of the interview.

The interview questions were formed based on my experiences, therefore might carry my biases. A phenomenological method was chosen where this can be acknowledged and taken into account by the reader. Since the interview questions were based on my own experience and perspectives, there were certain assumptions and expectations that came with it. I realized this during the transcription stage when my expectations were not met. The aim of the study was to understand their experiences, but I included guiding questions about their perception of leadership to discover about that particular aspect of the experience. Even though it provided reliable data that was useful, when we take into account the general aim of the study this might be considered a limitation in a way that there was definite focus on this aspect of the experience because of my curiosity towards it.

According to Brocki and Wearden (2006), the interpretive role of the

researchers might be briefly mentioned by authors or might not be mentioned at all. In this study, I took care to acknowledge the reflective nature of the analysis and my interpretations which could be possibly affected by my experience as a leader. While analysing the data I tried to be as unbiased and neutral as possible and tried to find deeper and subtle meanings behind the participants' statements, while also trying to make connections within their narration. As Blair (2015) mentions, there might be difficulties in coding data in a detached way, when you can hear their voices as you read the transcripts. It took a while and multiple readings for me to look at the participants' responses without visualizing the interview. But the contexts of the participants were kept in mind while the data was analyzed. I also used original direct quotations from the participants to report the findings, in order to represent their uninterpreted views. The process of often reflecting between my views and interpretation and the participants' perceptions was a truly challenging and interesting experience.

Another difficulty in this process was bracketing out the information that was not necessary or irrelevant to the topic. I realised that there was some amount of data, regarding the functioning of the organizations that they worked in and their perception of themselves and their personalities, which turned out to be loosely related to the topic. Even though the information about the organization was useful background information which made me understand their context, it fell under a different topic of research. Even though the findings cannot be generalized, it provides an insight to the leadership experiences university students have and how they are affected by it. This information can help universities to pay attention to these student organizations and acknowledge the importance and potential of these leadership experiences in developing young leaders.

### **7.3 Suggestions for further research**

There is need for research that is focused on different aspects of leadership experiences of students (Hall, Scott & Borsz, 2008). Although the aim of the study



was not to compare the experiences in local and international student organizations it can be seen that there are difficulties in integration of the local and international students. The participants from the local organizations did not seem to have problems with communication or team work, which was not the same in international organizations. In addition, not many students get the opportunity to experience this due to various reasons like lack of positions, not being aware of the existence of such leadership experiences and not knowing about the learning part of the experience from others. These could be a potential research area that can be explored further. Another interesting aspect related to this is the personality of the people who take up these leadership positions. It would be interesting to find out if many student leaders have a similar personality type and if the personality type influences their decision to be a leader. The relationship between the personality type of the person, their perception of themselves and their motivation to take up leadership position could be an interesting topic to explore further. A study on perception of students on what an ideal leader should be like, could shed light on how younger generations view leadership.

According to Rehman and Farooq (2017) many employers seek students who have completed higher education and also possess a broad skillset specifically leadership skills. These student organizations and their importance and impacts on students have been and are being researched and now the perspectives of the student leaders are also being studied. While these are important aspects in understanding this phenomenon, it would be interesting to research the perspectives of teachers or professors, employers' and parents' perspective on such experiences. In a world where many parents prefer their children excel in academics, it is important also to understand this as they play a key role in the life of the students. Understanding how they perceive these experiences may provide clarity to certain aspects influencing these opportunities and experiences and possibly might help in creating an awareness about the positive effects of such experiences.

The society at present expects a lot from the current leaders to overcome difficult situations in various sectors, and possibly the younger generation of leaders with different values could redefine leadership (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2018). Student organizations and the student leadership experience is something that should be given more importance and recognition, for its potential to develop young leaders. Educational institutions could devote some resources to developing and providing more of these experiences to possibly hone future leaders and enable their leadership development.

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## APPENDIX

### CONSENT FORM

This is to confirm that I agree to participate on a study carried out by Anamika Gowthaman, Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Jyvaskyla. Ms Gowthaman has provided me all the information that I have requested in order to make the voluntary decision to join her study on Student Leadership in student organizations at University level (Understanding through a Phenomenological approach); she has also made me known that I may withdraw from the study at any point.

I give permission for the information produced during the interview sessions (oral and written), to be used in academic research, lectures and articles, and any other publications. The information may be presented anonymously without any identifying information. Confidentiality with regards to the received information binds the researcher in charge and the 'informant' alike.

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of the participating student

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Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of the researcher in charge

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