

Students' Perspectives on Personal Leadership

Compared to Wageningen University Definition

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1. Introduction

This short report compares perspectives of BSc students at the end of their BSc study on personal leadership with the formal definition used by Wageningen University (WUR). WUR defines personal leadership as: *'To take responsibility for one's own actions, decisions, and outcomes. Set goals, make plans, and take action to achieve those goals. Be accountable for one's own learning and development and take steps to continuously improve skills and knowledge.'*

2. Methodology

As part of the Bachelor Soil, Water, Atmosphere programme, students completed a capstone reflective essay on their personal leadership development. The assignment required students to (in their own words) define personal leadership, trace their developmental journey through key academic and extracurricular experiences, critically analyze how the curriculum contributed to their growth, and outline their future development plan. The structured reflection (of 1500–2000 words) served both as an educational assessment and as a research instrument, providing rich qualitative data on how students perceive and articulate their leadership development.

A dataset of 13 anonymized student responses are analyzed and divided into 4 outcomes:

- Students view on personal leadership,
- Major differences between students' and WUR view on personal leadership,
- Main courses and actions that contributed to students' leadership development (as viewed by students), and
- Students' future action points for their personal leadership development.

Responses are grouped by primary themes and counted to show distribution between the viewpoints.

3. Results

3.1 Student view on personal leadership (components & distribution)

Students' perspectives on personal leadership are clustered into four main components: Accountability and responsibility, Self-direction and growth, Goal setting and action, and Evolvement and focus.

Accountability and responsibility (n=3) students describe as the ability to be trustworthy, reliable, and to take full ownership of one's actions and the outcomes they bring. **Self-Direction and growth** (n=4) is emphasized as an ongoing process of reflecting on one's strengths and weaknesses, taking initiative, and actively seeking opportunities for self-improvement. This definition suggests leadership is less a fixed quality than a continuous journey of becoming.

The other two components highlighted more action-oriented and value-driven dimensions. **Goal Setting and action** (n=3) is defined as making proactive and conscious choices, carefully planning, and following through on a self-determined path. Finally, **evolvement and focus** (n=3), by contrast, expand leadership to a deeper, more collaborative perspective—rooted in intrinsic motivation, emotional awareness, and empowering others rather than simply managing tasks. Together, these four components reveal that

students view leadership as both personal responsibility and growth, while also recognizing the emotional and collaborative dimensions often overlooked in more functional definitions.

3.2 Comparison with WUR definition

When comparing students' perspectives with Wageningen University's definition of personal leadership, clear differences emerge across all four components. For **Accountability & Responsibility**, the university frames leadership as taking responsibility for one's actions and decisions. Students extend this by emphasizing that accountability should not be limited to avoiding mistakes or fulfilling obligations as it must build trust and reliability in relationships.

In **Self-Direction & Growth**, WUR highlights continuous improvement and accountability for learning. Students, however, describe growth as a demanding and active process of self-management. They stress that true development begins with self-awareness: recognizing strengths and weaknesses, and being flexible enough to adjust direction as needed.

Regarding **Goal Setting & Action**, WUR focuses on the mechanics of planning and executing tasks. Students shift this perspective, insisting that meaningful goals are the foundation of action. They argue that leadership requires pursuing intrinsically motivated objectives that can sustain effort and resilience, rather than merely completing a plan.

Finally, in the component of **Evolverment & Intrinsic Focus**, the university's definition remains self-oriented, centering on individual responsibility. Students on the other hand have more relational and emotional understanding of leadership. They stress the importance of intrinsic motivation, resilience, and learning from failure, while also highlighting the role of empowering and supporting others—dimensions largely absent from the more self-centric institutional definition.

Thus, the key differences where students add nuance or expand on WUR's definition are:

- Trust is the goal: Accountability includes being trustworthy and building trust with others.
- Self-awareness is precondition: Recognize emotions and motives before acting.
- Motive is the source: Actions must be driven by meaning and intrinsic motivation.
- Collaboration matters: Leadership also about influencing and working with others.

3.3 Main courses and actions contributing to personal leadership development

Students identify a wide range of courses and experiences as important for their leadership development. These can be grouped into three categories: **High-Independence Academic Projects**, **Skills-Focused Curricular Activities**, and **Extracurricular and Personal Challenges**. Across all categories, the common thread is that students value situations that push them outside of their comfort zones, demand self-management, and require the practical application of knowledge and interpersonal skills.

High-Independence Academic Projects such as the bachelor's thesis, the Integration Course Soil, Water, and Atmosphere, and the choice of electives or minors are particularly formative. These experiences require from students to take ownership of complex, long-term projects, to design and execute research independently, and to make strategic choices about their academic direction.

Skills-Focused Curricular Activities play an equally important role. Challenging courses demand stronger planning and discipline, while field practicals allow students to bridge theory and practice through teamwork and decision-making in real-world contexts. Group work across courses develops coordination and communication skills, while presentations and debates provide opportunities to build confidence in public speaking and argumentation.

Finally, **Extracurricular and Personal Challenges** contribute significantly to students' sense of leadership. Involvement in student associations and committees foster organizational and professional skills. Side jobs and work experiences require effective planning and communication under pressure. Milestones such as moving to a new environment or studying abroad builds independence and adaptability, while deliberate habit-changes and self-study strategies reinforce discipline and self-reflection.

Taken together, these categories show that students see leadership development as emerging not only from formal coursework, but equally from independent projects and life experiences that cultivate responsibility, resilience, and personal growth. The distribution of courses and activities shows that students see their personal leadership development as shaped almost equally by **skills-focused curricular activities** (35%) and **extracurricular or personal challenges** (35%). These experiences emphasize teamwork, communication, and adaptability beyond traditional classroom settings. **High-independence academic projects** (31%) were slightly less frequent but still highly impactful, as they required students to take full ownership of complex tasks and manage uncertainty.

3.4 Students' future action points

When reflecting on their future, students connect partly with Wageningen University's vision of structured growth but also extend it in meaningful ways that emphasize resilience, well-being, and intrinsic purpose.

Near Future (MSc / 1–5 years):

The WUR vision frames this period as one of structured improvement: successfully completing courses, acquiring professional skills, and building networks. Students, however, prioritize internal resilience and self-trust. Rather than focusing solely on performance, they stress the importance of managing stress, letting go of perfectionism, and rejecting overreliance on external validation. This shows a shift from a performance-oriented trajectory toward one where emotional management and well-being are seen as prerequisites for effective leadership.

Distant Future (5–10+ years):

In the longer term, the WUR vision emphasizes professional recognition, expertise, and responsibility in leading teams or projects, often linked with career advancement or high-level roles. Students, in contrast, place stronger emphasis on purpose and intrinsic fulfillment. They aspire to careers that bring daily satisfaction, align with personal passions, and make tangible contributions to society and the environment. Here, success is redefined: less about titles, financial rewards, or formal recognition, and more about meaning, happiness, and societal impact.

4. Discussion

4.1 Epistemological Differences in Leadership Development

The analysis reveals a fundamental difference in how students and WUR conceptualize leadership development. Students demonstrate what can be characterized as an **individualistic, experience-based epistemology** - they view leadership capabilities as emerging primarily through direct personal experience and self-reflection. In contrast, WUR's Vision for Education 2025 reflects a **collaborative, community-based epistemology** that assumes leadership develops through interaction within learning communities.

This difference manifests clearly in students' responses to questions about curriculum contributions to their development. Rather than recognizing the integrated design of their educational experience or acknowledging learning from instructors and peers, students focus on isolated challenges they personally overcame. Even when describing collaborative experiences like group work, students extract primarily individual lessons ("I gained confidence", and "I learned to manage my time", etc.) rather than recognizing the value of diverse perspectives or collective problem-solving.

4.2 Limited Recognition of Educational Design

Students' responses suggest they experience their education as a series of individual trials rather than as participation in a carefully designed learning community. This represents a significant gap between institutional intent and student perception. WUR's curriculum is presumably structured to build capabilities progressively, with foundational courses preparing students for advanced work and different instructors contributing distinct perspectives. However, students show limited metacognitive awareness of these design elements.

The concentration of student responses on single courses with visible group work elements suggests they may not recognize the more subtle forms of collaborative learning embedded throughout their programs. This raises questions about whether WUR's educational design effectively communicates its community-oriented learning philosophy to students.

4.3 Implications for Leadership Effectiveness

While students' emphasis on self-awareness and intrinsic motivation has value, their apparent blind spot regarding learning from others may limit their effectiveness as future leaders. WUR's domain challenges - climate change, food security, biodiversity loss - are precisely the "wicked problems" that require collaborative approaches and the ability to learn from diverse stakeholders. Leaders who primarily rely on individual experience and self-reflection may struggle with these complex, multi-stakeholder challenges.

The students' future orientation toward "purpose and societal impact" is promising, but their limited recognition of collaborative learning suggests they may lack essential capabilities for achieving these aspirations effectively.

5. Conclusion

5.1 A Misalignment with Pedagogical Implications

This study reveals a concerning misalignment between WUR's Vision for personal leadership development embedded in the vision for education 2025 and students' understanding of their own leadership development. While WUR emphasizes collaborative learning communities and boundary-crossing

competencies as essential for addressing complex global challenges, students conceptualize leadership development through a predominantly individualistic view.

5.2 The Limitation of Self-Directed Reflection

Students demonstrate capabilities in self-reflection and intrinsic motivation, which are valuable leadership qualities. However, their apparent inability to recognize learning from others or to see their education as a coherent, community-based system represents a significant limitation. This suggests that while students are developing some leadership capabilities, they may be missing crucial competencies needed for collaborative problem-solving in their future professional contexts.

5.3 Implications for Educational Practice

The findings suggest several areas where WUR might need to adjust its educational approach:

Making Collaborative Learning More Explicit: If students are not recognizing the collaborative dimensions of their learning, WUR may need to make these elements more visible and explicit. This could involve reflective exercises that help students identify what they learned from peers and instructors, not just what they learned about themselves.

Developing Metacognitive Awareness: Students need support in recognizing how their educational experience is designed and how different elements contribute to their development. Without this awareness, they may not fully benefit from WUR's educational design.

Balancing Individual and Collaborative Development: While students' emphasis on individual growth has perspective, the data suggests they may benefit from more structured opportunities to reflect on collaborative learning and community contributions to their development.

5.4 Broader Implications

This misalignment may reflect broader cultural trends toward individualism in student populations, or it may indicate specific areas where WUR's educational design needs strengthening. Either way, addressing this gap is crucial if WUR intends to develop the kind of collaborative, community-oriented leaders that its Vision for Education envisions.

The challenge for WUR is not to diminish students' capacity for self-reflection and intrinsic motivation, but to help them recognize that effective leadership in complex domains requires both individual competence and collaborative capability. Without this recognition, even well-intentioned students may struggle to achieve the societal impact they aspire to create.

Finally, these differences suggest that students are not rejecting the WUR vision but **reframing it through a Gen Z lens**: one that values balance, authenticity, and intrinsic motivation as much as — or more than — external success markers. In this sense, their views belong to a broader generational outlook that prioritizes meaning, mental health, and social contribution, while still embracing the structured development pathways that institutions like WUR encourage.