

Exploring Leadership Perception Among University Students in India: A Qualitative Study of Panjab University, Chandigarh

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Abstract

Leadership is a critical component of organisational success and societal advancement, with its manifestations shaped by cultural, social and educational contexts. It plays a pivotal role in academic success, career advancement and organisational effectiveness. This qualitative research paper delves into the perceptions of leadership among young adults in India, specifically focusing on students at Panjab University, Chandigarh. By conducting in-depth interviews and surveys with 200 students and staff members of Panjab University, this study aims to explore how young people perceive leadership, including its importance, associated qualities and the role of a leader in group dynamics and organisational settings. Additionally, the research investigates beliefs regarding the develop ability of leadership skills over time through training and practice. Furthermore, it examines the extent of young adults' participation in leadership roles within student organisations and extracurricular activities, along with the challenges they encounter in such positions. The findings offer valuable insights into fostering effective leadership development programmes tailored to the needs of young adults in India, ultimately contributing to their personal growth and organisational success. By implementing the suggestions recommended by this study, Panjab University can create a supportive environment that empowers students to become effective leaders and contributes to the institution's overall success.

Keywords: Leadership Perception, Students, India, Qualitative Study, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Introduction

Leadership is a key component that makes organisational change successful. Transformational leaders ensure that their organisations remain competitive by making strategic decisions and giving such changes shape. Although the essence of transformational leadership is timeless, global and immanent, different cultures have different ways of implementing it in terms of conduct. The idea of leadership is pervasive throughout all cultures, situations, ages and it has an impact on both personal and social advancement. It is crucial to comprehend how different people view leadership since this influences organisational structures, cultural norms and future leadership dynamics. According to Ford and Ford (1994), leaders bring about change by articulating an appealing vision for their followers. When transformational leaders present a vision for the future that is appealing, attainable and engaging, they gain followers. A transformational leader would be successful in implementing a change strategy by challenging the followers' thinking and inspiring them to reconsider conventional company practices (Bass, 1985). The notion that a transformational leader fosters a change-embracing culture is in line with the body of existing change literature (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997).

The ideas and practices of leadership have undergone tremendous evolution in the global context. In the 1960s and 1970s, questions arose regarding the influence of schools on student outcomes, leading to a focus on non-school factors like family and student characteristics. The

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effective school's movement emerged, emphasising the importance of leadership. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) highlighted the significant impact of leadership on student learning, asserting that leadership is second only to classroom instruction. Subsequent studies, such as that by Grissom, Egalite and Lindsay (2021), reinforced the pivotal role of principals in student achievement, emphasising their impact on various outcomes beyond academics. Instructional leadership emerged as crucial, surpassing transformational leadership in its influence on student learning (Robinson et al., 2008). Research on successful school leadership highlighted dimensions such as vision-setting, curriculum development and fostering teacher quality (Day, Sammons & Grogan, 2020). The International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) further explored successful leadership models, underscoring the intricate relationship between leadership and context (Gurr & Drysdale, 2021). Middle leaders also play a significant role in student success, with studies demonstrating their impact on academic outcomes (Dinham, 2007; Highfield, 2012; Leithwood, 2016). The multiplicity of different leadership philosophies, from transactional to transformational, highlights how intricate leadership interactions are. In response to the needs of a society that is changing quickly due to growing globalisation, diversity and technological breakthroughs, leadership paradigms are constantly evolving (Avolio, 2018). India offers an exceptional environment for researching leadership perception because of its diverse socioeconomic landscape and rich cultural legacy. The leadership approach observed among Indian executives emphasises transparency, empowerment and a social mission, fostering employee engagement and long-term success. This approach, rooted in the Indian context, offers valuable lessons for global leaders (Cappelli et al., 2010). The leadership dynamics in the family, school and society are influenced by traditional Indian values, which place a strong focus on collectivism, humility and respect for authority (Sinha & Kumar, 2004). In addition, India's demographic dividend and quick economic growth highlight how crucial it is to build leadership skills in its young people in order to help them handle difficult situations and promote sustainable development (Singh & Krishnan, 2005). Examining how Indian kids see leadership therefore helps to comprehend the consequences of culturally rooted leadership frameworks for the advancement of the country.

The capital of the northwest Indian states of Punjab and Haryana, Chandigarh, is the perfect example of a fusion of modernism and heritage. Chandigarh, an urban city and developing centre for education, embodies the ambitions and spirit of its varied community. Perceptions of leadership in familial, educational and communal contexts are shaped by the sociocultural fabric of the region, which is impacted by Punjabi culture, Sikh traditions and North Indian ethos (Sinha & Kanungo, 1997). Through investigating how students in this area perceive leadership, we may learn more about how local elements interact with larger cultural norms to influence the identities and ambitions of future leaders. When discussing leadership development, it's crucial to acknowledge the diverse perspectives on the concept. Kjellstrom et al. (2020) identified six distinct understandings, ranging from individual growth to aligning development with organisational goals. This complexity suggests a need for tailored development activities to match both individual and organisational needs, ultimately enhancing leadership effectiveness. (Kjellstrom et al., 2020). Located in the centre of Chandigarh, Panjab University is a hub for higher learning that promotes research and changes society. Being the top university in the area, it has a significant impact on how its students develop their leadership skills and beliefs. Educational leadership in the future will be shaped by three key recommendations (Gurr, 2024). Firstly, there is a need for research to explore the enduring changes in schools and school leadership post-pandemic. Secondly, investigations into various contextual impacts on schools, including technological advancements and societal shifts, are crucial. Lastly, it is essential to articulate preferred school futures to inform future educational leadership perspectives, as demonstrated by the OECD scenario work (Gurr, 2024). These recommendations aim to guide the evolution of educational leadership in response to changing societal and educational landscapes. The varied student body of the university, which includes people from all around India and beyond, provides a microcosm in which to examine how people perceive leadership in a learning environment (Panjab University Annual Report, 2023). Examining how youngsters in Chandigarh perceive leadership, with a particular emphasis on the Panjab University catchment region, offers specific insights into the interactions between cultural influences, educational settings and leadership development.

Thus, studying how youngsters perceive leadership provides valuable insights into how future generations understand and assume leadership responsibilities in a globalised world. The findings of this research will contribute to theoretical discourse and have practical implications for leadership development initiatives.

Research Objectives

- To assess the perceived importance of leadership skills among young adults for academic success and future career opportunities.
- To identify the qualities associated with effective leadership as perceived by young adults.
- To explore the perceptions of young adults regarding the role of a leader in group or organisational settings and how these perceptions influence leadership dynamics and organisational outcomes.

Research Methodology

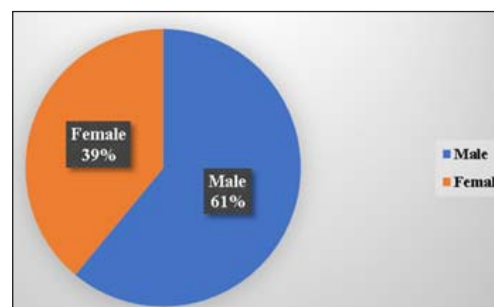
The present study is entirely based on primary data collected through a field survey with the help of a structured questionnaire. Data has been collected from 200 students and staff members with the use of simple random sampling. Then it has been processed and analysed thoroughly to find out the results. Basically, a descriptive and qualitative analysis approach has been followed to analyse the results. The results of the study have been presented descriptively as well as graphically to fulfil the research objectives.

Results and Discussion

General Information about the Surveyed Students at Panjab University

In the studied samples, which included students from various academic backgrounds and levels, approximately 61% were female and 39% were male (Fig. 1). Approximately 76% of them were under the age of 25, 16% were between the ages of 25 and 30 and 6% were more than 30 (Fig. 2). This demographic variety reflects the growing presence of women in higher education and emphasises the importance of understanding young people's leadership perspectives. The inclusion

of students from various academic streams (arts to sciences) and academic levels (undergraduate to Ph.D.) ensures a thorough analysis of leadership perception dynamics. The majority of female students is consistent with general trends in higher education participation, and the distribution across age groups emphasises the need for researching leadership perception among young adults. Furthermore, the sample's different academic backgrounds and levels provide useful insights into how leadership perception evolves along the academic journey. Understanding these differences is critical for designing effective leadership development projects that address the unique requirements of students at various phases of their educational journey. Overall, the demographic profile of the surveyed students emphasises the significance of embracing several views when investigating leadership perception among university and college students in Northern India.



Source: Fieldwork at Panjab University Campus, 2024.

Fig. 1: Gender Composition of Respondents

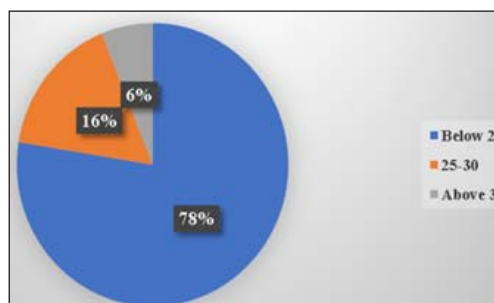
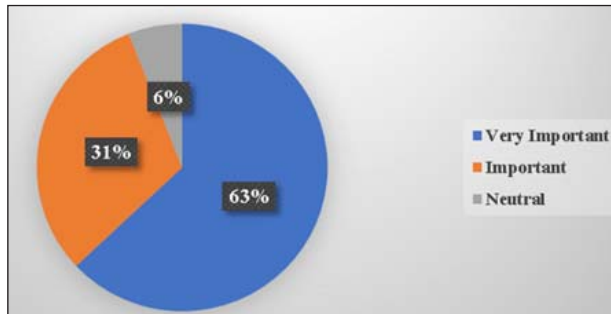


Fig. 2: Age of Respondents (in Years)

Students' Perceptions on the Importance of Leadership Skills

Approximately 63% of students (Fig. 3) consider leadership abilities to be "very important" for academic success and future career possibilities, demonstrating

a significant appreciation for leadership's importance in both the educational and professional realms. This implies that students recognise that leadership skills, such as good communication and decision-making, are critical for increasing employability and success in a variety of sectors.



Source: Fieldwork at Panjab University Campus, 2024.

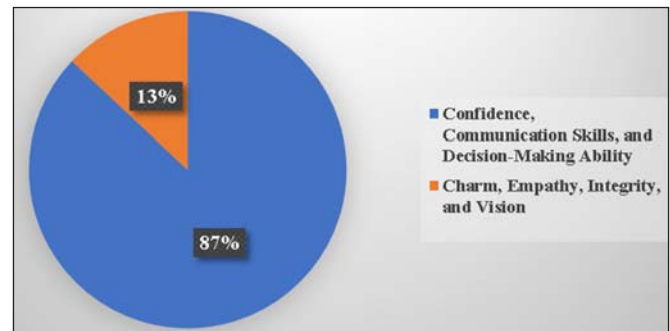
Fig. 3: Perception of Students on the Importance of Leadership Skills

Furthermore, 31% of students regard leadership qualities as “important,” highlighting the significance placed on leadership characteristics, albeit to a lesser extent (Fig. 3). The viewpoints of the remaining students (6%), who remained neutral or did not believe leadership abilities were vital, provide insight into the wide range of variables impacting students' perceptions, including different career objectives and personal beliefs. Understanding these perspectives can help shape specialised approaches to promote leadership development efforts that appeal to a wider range of students.

Students' Perceptions on Qualities of Effective Leadership

According to the findings, around 87% of students link good leadership with qualities such as confidence, communication skills and decision-making ability, indicates that the majority agree on the important characteristics of successful leaders (Fig. 4). Confidence is commonly viewed as the basis of leadership, instilling trust and encouraging others to follow. Communication abilities are essential for transmitting vision, developing teamwork and ensuring clarity in company goals. Furthermore, good decision-making skills allow leaders to negotiate complicated situations, make educated decisions and effectively drive growth. The overwhelming

consensus on these attributes shows that students should prioritise practical abilities and abilities that are easily visible and immediately contribute to leadership success.



Source: Fieldwork at Panjab University Campus, 2024.

Fig. 4: Qualities of Effective Leadership

In contrast, the remaining 13% of students believe that charm, empathy, integrity and vision are essential attributes of effective leadership (Fig. 4). While less common in the study, this viewpoint highlights the value of interpersonal skills and ethical considerations in leadership. Charisma, defined as charm and influence, has the ability to inspire and mobilise followers around a common vision. Empathy creates understanding and compassion, allowing leaders to connect with others and meet their needs successfully. Integrity ensures trustworthiness and ethical behaviour, which are critical for preserving credibility and developing organisational culture. Visionary leadership, characterised by forward-thinking and strategic insight, gives direction and spurs innovation. While these attributes may be seen as less concrete than actual talents, they are critical in building business culture, increasing employee engagement and promoting long-term success.

Students' Perceptions of the Role of a Leader

The distribution of responses to the perceived role of a leader in a group or organisation demonstrates a complex understanding among students. The majority (68%) perceive leadership as collaborative, highlighting the significance of encouraging teamwork and consensus-building. This viewpoint illustrates a modern leadership style that values inclusivity, collaborative decision-making and harnessing multiple perspectives to achieve common goals. In contrast, 27% of students believe that leadership is supportive, emphasising the importance of

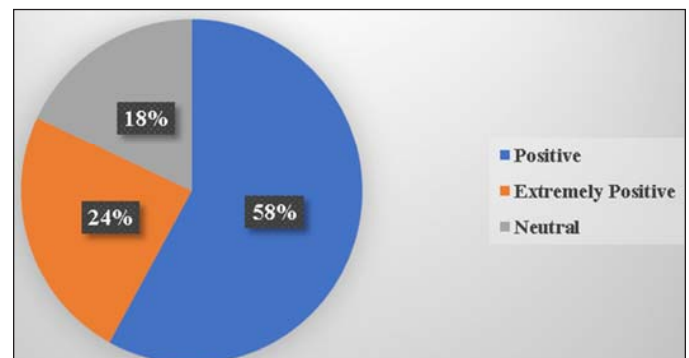
mentorship and empowerment in leadership positions. This shows a focus on individual development, trust and providing opportunities for others to flourish. However, the presence of a minority of advocates for an authoritative leadership style, in which leaders make decisions and command others, demonstrates the persistence of classic hierarchical structures in some organisational settings. While authoritative leadership provides clarity and efficiency in decision-making, it can also impede autonomy and innovation. Understanding these many viewpoints on the function of a leader can help to shape leadership development efforts targeted at developing adaptive leaders capable of navigating complex and diverse organisational landscapes while encouraging collaboration, empowerment and effective decision-making.

Students' Beliefs Regarding the Developability of Leadership Skills

The great majority of students, 91%, agree that leadership skills can be developed over time through training and practice, highlighting widespread confidence in the malleability of leadership talents. This overwhelming confirmation indicates a broad belief that leadership is not innate but can be developed and honed through purposeful work and experience. This viewpoint is consistent with current leadership development theories, which emphasise the significance of constant learning, self-reflection and practical application in developing effective leadership competencies. The minority perspectives, which include 5% who are sceptical and 4% who are undecided, may result from varied beliefs about the extent to which leadership traits may be developed. While admitting inherent features or limits, these viewpoints emphasize the importance of nuanced leadership development techniques that take into account both individual predispositions and the potential for improvement through intentional practice and learning interventions. Overall, the majority view of the developability of leadership skills reflects students' optimism and openness to their ability to cultivate and improve their leadership qualities over time.

Analysis of Students' Participation in Leadership Roles in Student Organisations

The results show that the majority of students (89%) had taken leadership positions in student groups or extracurricular activities, demonstrating a widespread interest in leadership roles among the studied population. This high level of participation indicates a proactive approach to leadership development and experiential learning outside the official academic curriculum. It also reflects a culture of involvement and initiative among the student body, with people actively seeking ways to contribute to the growth and development of their peers and campus life. Among students who have taken leadership positions, the appraisal of their experiences is overwhelmingly positive, with 58% rating them as positive and an additional 24% identifying them as extremely positive (Fig. 5).



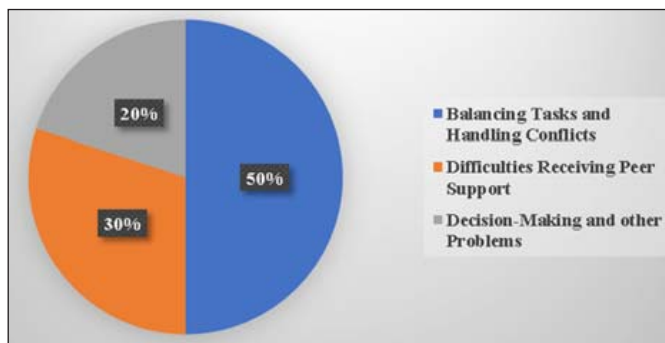
Source: Fieldwork at Panjab University Campus, 2024.

Fig. 5: Experience of Students as Leadership Roles

This shows that most people think leadership roles in student organisations or extracurricular activities are important and valuable. The large percentage of favourable ratings emphasises the enriching and gratifying character of these encounters, implying that student leaders get happiness and personal growth from their leadership duties. However, the presence of a lesser percentage (18%) who assessed their experiences as neutral emphasises the variety of individual experiences and implies that there is opportunity for improvement in student leader support and development to ensure that their experiences are consistently pleasant and impactful.

Analysis of Challenges Faced by Students as Leaders

The data highlights a range of issues faced by students in leadership positions in their roles, with balancing tasks and handling conflicts surfacing as the most pressing concerns for 50% of respondents (Fig. 6). This demonstrates the multidimensional nature of leadership jobs; in which individuals must manage multiple responsibilities while navigating interpersonal dynamics and resolving disagreements within the group or organisation. The significant percentage of students identifying these issues highlights the complexities of leadership roles and the importance of good tactics for dealing with competing demands while maintaining team unity.



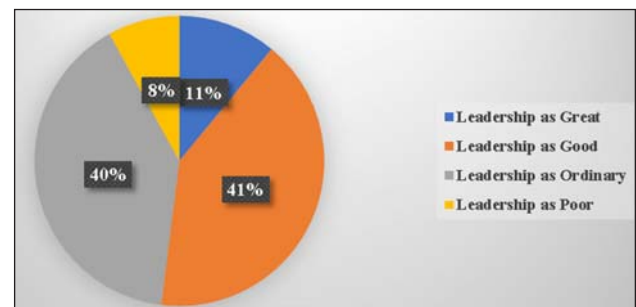
Source: Fieldwork at Panjab University Campus, 2024.

Fig. 6: Challenges Faced by Students as Leaders

A considerable proportion of students (30%) report difficulties receiving peer support and effectively managing their time. This shows that creating agreement and promoting collaboration among team members, as well as allocating time efficiently to meet deadlines and balance academic and extracurricular commitments, are key challenges for student leaders. Furthermore, 20% of students identified decision-making and other unidentified problems as challenges, highlighting the wide range of challenges that leaders may face, from ambiguity in making strategic decisions to unexpected operational difficulties (Fig. 6). Understanding and resolving these obstacles is critical to providing effective support and development opportunities for student leaders, allowing them to negotiate the intricacies of their roles with confidence and resilience.

Assessment of Leadership Effectiveness Among Administrative and Academic Staff at Panjab University

The findings from the survey show that there are various perspectives on the leadership of Panjab University's administration and academic staff. While a minority (11%) rate the leadership as great, the majority (41%) rate it as good, indicating a largely positive evaluation overall (Fig. 7). This demonstrates a level of satisfaction and trust in the university's administrative and academic leadership, which may reflect good communication, decision-making and support for the institution's mission and goals.



Source: Fieldwork at Panjab University Campus, 2024.

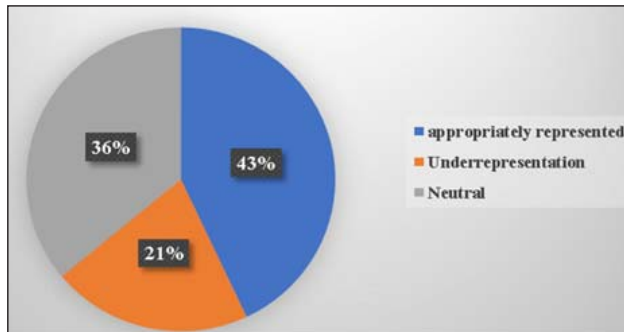
Fig. 7: Perception of Students Regarding Leadership Effectiveness

However, a sizable proportion (40%) assess the leadership as ordinary, meaning that there is space for development in areas such as strategic direction, resource allocation and stakeholder response (Fig. 7). The presence of respondents (8%) who rate the leadership as poor or very poor emphasises the significance of correcting any perceived deficiencies or gaps in leadership effectiveness to ensure the university's long-term performance and reputation as a premier academic institution.

Analysis of Student Representation in Decision-Making Processes at Panjab University

The data shows that students have conflicting feelings about the appropriateness of student representation in decision-making processes at Punjab University.

While 43% of students believe that student opinions are appropriately represented, a significant percentage (21%) disagrees, indicating dissatisfaction or underrepresentation (Fig. 8).



Source: Fieldwork at Panjab University Campus, 2024.

Fig. 8: Students Representation in Decision-Making Process

This mismatch highlights potential communication or participation gaps between students and university decision-makers, necessitating more investigation and discourse to address issues and improve transparency and inclusivity in decision-making. Furthermore, a large proportion of students (36%) are unsure, indicating a lack of clarity or awareness about the extent to which student viewpoints are addressed in university governance (Fig. 8). This emphasises the need for increasing transparency, communication and student participation in decision-making processes to ensure that various voices are heard and appreciated when establishing the university's direction and policies.

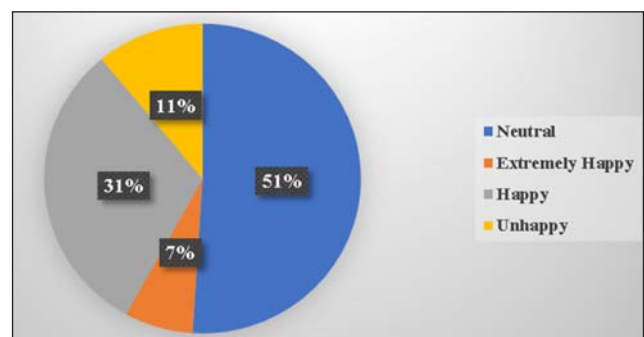
Enhancing Leadership Development Opportunities for Students at Panjab University: Insights from Student Suggestions

Numerous recommendations for enhancing Panjab University's leadership development programmes were made by students in their comments. These include arranging more student-led panel discussions, taking leadership responsibilities seriously and providing workshops, seminars and academic courses focusing on critical leadership competencies. Furthermore, mentorship programmes, encouraging participation in extracurricular activities and internships, conducting leadership events and retreats, providing research opportunities and constantly reviewing and enhancing programmes through

feedback mechanisms were advised. Suggestions also stressed the necessity of tackling current difficulties in university leadership, such as building a pleasant work culture, guaranteeing openness and promoting equitable opportunities for all students. Measures to actively involve students in decision-making processes, as well as forums for open dialogue and idea sharing, were underlined. Furthermore, students emphasised the importance of more inclusive and collaborative approaches to leadership development that incorporate multiple perspectives and empower students from all backgrounds. Panjab University can strengthen its leadership development activities and build a culture of student empowerment and excellence by working together.

Student Satisfaction with Leadership Opportunities at Panjab University

The data reveals a mixed sentiment among students regarding their satisfaction with the leadership opportunities and experiences available at Panjab University. A sizable proportion (51%) of students are neutral (Fig. 9), showing a lack of strong favourable or negative feelings about the current leadership activities. Meanwhile, 31% express pleasure, indicating that a sizable proportion of students respect the leadership opportunities offered by the university. In contrast, 11% of students report discontent, identifying areas for growth to better fulfil student expectations and needs (Fig. 9).



Source: Fieldwork at Panjab University Campus, 2024.

Fig. 9: Student Satisfaction with Leadership Opportunity

Furthermore, a smaller percentage (7%) report being very satisfied, indicating the presence of a group of students who are quite pleased with the leadership opportunities provided by the university. The various comments

highlight the significance of continuously assessing and improving leadership programmes to ensure that they effectively meet the varying requirements and preferences of Panjab University students.

Students' Interest in Future Participation in Leadership Development Programmes at Panjab University

According to the study, students are very interested in participating in future Panjab University leadership development programmes or workshops. The majority of students (61%) indicate a strong desire to participate in such activities, demonstrating a proactive approach to developing their leadership skills and experiences. This high number demonstrates that students understand the importance and benefits of leadership development efforts, such as personal growth, skill enhancement and future job opportunities. However, 9% of students exhibit a lack of interest in participating in these programmes, which could indicate varied priorities or preferences within the student body. Furthermore, 30% are uncertain, indicating a need for more information or clarification on the nature and potential effects of the university's leadership development programmes. Overall, the research emphasises the necessity of clearly articulating the value proposition of such programmes to students, as well as addressing any concerns or hurdles to participation, in order to maximise engagement and effectiveness.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The comprehensive analysis of student perceptions and suggestions regarding leadership at Panjab University provides valuable insights into the current landscape and opportunities for improvement. Overall, students possessed mixed feelings about leadership experiences and possibilities at the university, with variable degrees of satisfaction, interest and perceived challenges. It is clear that students are very interested in engaging in leadership development programmes and workshops offered by the university, with the majority expressing a willingness to participate in such activities. This presents a clear opportunity for Panjab University to expand and improve its leadership development programmes in order to more effectively fulfil the requirements and aspirations of its students.

Moreover, student suggestions emphasise the importance of fostering a positive and inclusive leadership culture, enhancing transparency and communication in decision-making processes and providing equitable opportunities for all students to participate and grow as leaders. Addressing problems such as balancing tasks, dispute resolution and ensuring student voices are represented and involved in governance structures is critical for building a healthy atmosphere for leadership development. Based on the findings, Panjab University should take proactive measures to:

- Increase and expand leadership development programmes and workshops to meet the different needs and interests of students.
- Promote a good and inclusive leadership culture among students, professors and administrative staff by encouraging transparency, communication and collaboration.
- Offer mentorship opportunities, practical experiences and networking platforms to help students develop and apply leadership abilities in real-world settings.
- Create systems for requesting and acting on student feedback in order to continuously review and improve leadership development programmes.
- Increase student representation and involvement in decision-making processes at all levels of the university.

By implementing these recommendations, Panjab University can establish a lively and supportive atmosphere that empowers students to become successful leaders, promotes personal and professional development and contributes to the institution's overall success and reputation.

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