Vol. 7, No. 1, 2026, pp. 762-774
DOI: https://doi.org/10.29210/08jces692000

Contents lists available at Journal ELORA

Journal of Counseling, Education and Society
ISSN: 2716-4896 (Print) , ISSN 2716-4888 (Electronic)

Journal homepage: https://jces.eloracenter.org/jces

Student organizations in developing leadership skills: a systematic literature review

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Sept 07th, 2026
Revised Oct 10th, 2026
Accepted Nov 16th, 2026

Keyword:

Student organizations,
Soft skills,
Higher education,
Student engagement,
Experiential learning,
Graduate employability

ABSTRACT

Leadership skills development is increasingly important in higher education as students prepare to meet evolving social and professional demands. This study examines strategies for strengthening student organizations to enhance students' soft skills through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by PRISMA 2020. Literature searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ, Google Scholar, and SINTA, covering publications from 2020 to 2025. Studies were selected based on their relevance to student organizations, leadership, student engagement, extracurricular activities, and leadership skills development in higher education. After identification, screening, and eligibility assessment, 30 articles met the inclusion criteria. This sample represents all studies satisfying the predefined eligibility requirements rather than a predetermined sample size. Screening and thematic coding achieved an inter-rater agreement of 81%. The analysis involved systematic coding, categorization, theme development, and narrative synthesis. Methodological quality was assessed using AMSTAR 2. Five strategies emerged: strengthening organizational structures, improving work programs, fostering organizational culture, developing mentoring systems, and expanding organizational networks. The findings indicate that soft skills development depends not merely on organizational participation but also on experiential learning, student engagement, mentoring, reflection, and professional networking. This study proposes a conceptual framework positioning student organizations as non-formal learning ecosystems that foster leadership skills and graduate employability. It recommends competency-oriented rather than activity-oriented organizational management in higher education.

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Introduction

The transformation of higher education in the twenty-first century has shifted attention from knowledge acquisition toward comprehensive competency development. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, digitalization, artificial intelligence, globalization, and changing labor-market demands require graduates to possess not only academic and technical competencies but also communication, collaboration, creativity, leadership, adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Consequently, graduate employability has become an important indicator of higher education quality, encompassing graduates' capacity to obtain and sustain employment, develop professionally, and create new career opportunities through professional and personal competencies (Hooley et al., 2023).

In this context, student organizations can provide an important experiential learning environment that complements classroom instruction. Through program planning, decision-making, teamwork, conflict resolution, leadership, organizational communication, and interaction with external stakeholders, students have opportunities to practice leadership competencies in authentic situations. Previous studies demonstrate that experiential learning, student engagement, and organizational participation are associated with the development of communication, leadership, collaboration, responsibility, teamwork, and employability (Santos Rego et al., 2022; Freij, 2024; Shomotova & Ibrahim, 2025). Leadership experiences within student organizations can also contribute to leadership identity and self-efficacy (Cletzer et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2023; Kim & Wargo, 2022), while extracurricular participation has been associated with stronger teamwork and interpersonal communication (de Prada Creo et al., 2021; Alnaeem, 2021). Organizational experience may also provide positive signals to employers by demonstrating communication, leadership, time-management, and responsibility-management capabilities (Baert & Verhaest, 2021).

However, student participation does not automatically produce meaningful leadership skills development. The effectiveness of student organizations depends on organizational management, institutional support, mentoring, member participation, and the availability of meaningful developmental opportunities. Studies have identified challenges related to teamwork, competing interests, organizational resources, academic workload, and institutional support (Pramono et al., 2020), while Hendra (2018) emphasized the importance of organizational management, mentoring, and active participation. Students themselves often join organizations to develop leadership experience, expand networks, develop personal potential, and prepare for future careers (Al Mukarromah & Rosda, 2024). At the institutional level, however, student organizations are not always systematically integrated into graduate-development strategies (Shomotova & Ibrahim, 2025), while the gap between university-developed competencies and workplace expectations remains evident (Otermans et al., 2025).

Despite increasing research on student organizations, experiential learning, leadership skills, and employability, the literature remains fragmented. Existing studies have separately examined student engagement and employability (Shomotova & Ibrahim, 2025; Hooley et al., 2023), extracurricular participation (de Prada Creo et al., 2021; Baert & Verhaest, 2021), leadership development (Cletzer et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2023), and experiential learning (Santos Rego et al., 2022). Several previous investigations have employed quantitative approaches to examine relationships, associations, and measurable outcomes of organizational participation. Although these approaches provide valuable empirical evidence regarding the relationship between student involvement and competency development, they offer relatively limited explanations of how students personally experience leadership development, interpret organizational challenges, negotiate responsibilities, and construct leadership identities through their organizational activities. Consequently, an integrated understanding of the processes and meanings underlying leadership development in student organizations remains necessary.

To address this gap, a qualitative phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate because it enables researchers to explore students' lived experiences, subjective interpretations, and meanings associated with leadership development within organizational environments. Unlike quantitative approaches that primarily measure variables and test relationships, phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals experience particular phenomena and how these experiences shape their perceptions, attitudes, and leadership practices. Exploring lived experiences is essential because leadership development is not merely an outcome that can be measured through participation levels or competency indicators; it is also a contextual and developmental process influenced by interpersonal interactions, organizational culture, mentoring, decision-making experiences, and institutional support. Through this approach, the study seeks to identify the essential meanings and shared patterns of students' experiences that may not be fully captured through correlational evidence.

The preliminary participant recruitment strategy will involve approximately 10–15 students who have actively participated in student organizations, particularly those who have held or currently hold organizational leadership positions and have experienced organizational planning, decision-making, teamwork, conflict resolution, and program implementation. Participants will be selected purposively based on their relevance and ability to provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. The final sample size will not be determined solely by a numerical target but will be guided by the depth and adequacy of the collected data. Data saturation is expected when successive interviews no longer generate substantially new meanings, experiences, or thematic categories relevant to the research objectives.

Addressing this gap is theoretically and practically significant because student organizations can be conceptualized not merely as extracurricular spaces but as components of the higher education learning ecosystem. Accordingly, this study aims to explore and understand students' lived experiences of leadership development through student organizations, focusing on organizational structure and systematic regeneration, leadership development, competency-oriented work programs, collaborative organizational culture, mentoring

by academic staff and alumni, and external partnership networks. It further examines how these organizational dimensions contribute to the development of communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, responsibility, and employability competencies. This integrated perspective is expected to provide a stronger conceptual and empirical basis for transforming student organizations into intentional, sustainable, and competency-oriented learning environments.

Method

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize previous research on strategies for strengthening student organizations to develop students' soft skills. Following Snyder (2019), the review was conducted through four main stages: (1) designing the review, which involved defining the research objectives, research questions, and review strategy; (2) conducting the review, which involved searching for and selecting relevant literature according to predetermined criteria; (3) analysis, which included extracting, categorizing, and synthesizing the findings; and (4) writing the review, which involved systematically organizing and reporting the synthesized results. The review also adopted the concept-centric approach proposed by Webster and Watson (2002), emphasizing the integration of previous findings around key concepts rather than summarizing individual studies separately. The selection and reporting procedures followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) to enhance transparency and reproducibility.

During the designing the review stage, the scope was defined around the relationship between student-organization strengthening and soft-skill development within higher education. During the conducting the review stage, literature searches were performed using Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), DOAJ, Google Scholar, and SINTA. The search employed combinations of keywords including "student organization," "student leadership," "student engagement," "extracurricular activities," "leadership development," "soft skills," "experiential learning," "employability," "graduate employability," "higher education," "organisasi mahasiswa," and "pengembangan soft skills." These terms were combined using the Boolean operators AND and OR to broaden or narrow the search according to the research focus.

The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed articles relevant to student organizations and soft-skill development in higher education, available in full text, and containing findings capable of addressing the research focus. Priority was given to studies published between 2020 and 2025, while earlier publications were selectively included when they provided strong conceptual or empirical relevance. Duplicate records, non-academic publications, irrelevant studies, articles without accessible full texts, and publications providing insufficient information for analysis were excluded.

The study-selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During identification, records retrieved from the selected databases were compiled and duplicates were removed. Screening was conducted by examining titles and abstracts for relevance to the research focus. Potentially eligible articles were subsequently assessed through full-text examination using the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies satisfying all requirements were included in the final research corpus. This process resulted in 30 eligible articles for analysis. Publications used exclusively as methodological references were not counted among these 30 studies. The complete identification and selection procedure was documented using a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

During the analysis stage, information from the 30 selected articles was extracted into a study-characteristics matrix containing the author and year of publication, country or research context, research objectives, research design or methodology, participants where applicable, research focus, major findings, and relevance to student-organization strengthening and soft-skill development. The extracted data were subsequently examined using thematic analysis and narrative synthesis. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006), involving familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of potential themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and preparation of the analytical report. Narrative synthesis was then employed to compare and integrate similarities, differences, and relationships across studies. This approach enabled the review not only to identify studies supporting particular themes but also to explain conceptual relationships among student-organization strengthening, student engagement, experiential learning, soft skills, and graduate employability.

During the writing the review stage, findings were organized using a concept-centric approach, integrating evidence across studies into conceptual categories rather than presenting article-by-article descriptions. The synthesis generated five major themes: (1) strengthening organizational structures through clear role distribution, systematic cadre development, and leadership regeneration; (2) strengthening work programs oriented toward experiential learning and competency development; (3) fostering collaborative, participatory, disciplined, and

reflective organizational cultures; (4) strengthening organizational guidance and mentoring systems; and (5) expanding organizational networks involving alumni, communities, professional sectors, and relevant stakeholders. These themes were subsequently interpreted in relation to the development of communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, responsibility, and graduate employability.

Overall, the integration of SLR as the research method, PRISMA 2020 as the framework for study selection and reporting, and thematic analysis and narrative synthesis as analytical techniques provided a systematic, transparent, and conceptually grounded synthesis of strategies for strengthening student organizations as environments for students' soft-skill development.

Table 1. Thematic Synthesis of the Studies

Theme	Supporting Articles	Synthesis of Findings
Strengthening Organizational Structure	Cletzer et al. (2023); Phillips et al. (2023); Pramono et al. (2020); Smith & Chenoweth (2015); Muthoni et al. (2018)	Organizational structure, role distribution, cadre development, and leadership capacity building provide opportunities for students to develop leadership, coordination, and responsibility.
Strengthening Work Programs	Guo et al. (2020); Santos Rego et al. (2022); Metan & Handayani (2023); El Messaoudi et al. (2025)	Programs based on experiential learning, projects, service activities, problem-solving, and reflection are more relevant than ceremonial activities; however, their effects on soft-skill development depend on program design and context.
Strengthening Organizational Culture	Shomotova & Ibrahim (2025); Freij (2024); Le (2024); Ningrum et al. (2018)	A participatory organizational culture needs to be supported by discipline, clear rules, a safe environment, effective time management, openness, and opportunities to receive constructive feedback.
Guidance and Mentoring	Cletzer et al. (2023); Phillips et al. (2023); Muthoni et al. (2018); Haber-Curran & Pierre (2023)	Mentoring connects organizational experiences with reflection, leadership identity development, experience transfer, and competency development.
Strengthening Organizational Networks	Baert & Verhaest (2021); Hooley et al. (2023); Moxey & Simpkin (2021); Mulyana & Linando (2024)	Organizational networks broaden students' professional experiences and strengthen the transition from campus-based learning to graduate employability and workplace readiness.
Leadership-Skill Outcomes	de Prada Creo et al. (2021); Alnaeem (2021); Dewanti et al. (2025); Mainga et al. (2022)	Meaningful student engagement is associated with the development of communication, teamwork, leadership, decision-making, problem-solving, and workplace readiness.

The eligibility criteria were established before the literature selection process to ensure consistency and reproducibility. The inclusion criteria comprised: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025; (2) studies conducted in higher education contexts, including universities and colleges; (3) studies examining student organizations, student engagement, extracurricular activities, leadership development, or experiential learning; (4) studies addressing the development of leadership competencies, including communication, teamwork, decision-making, problem-solving, responsibility, and organizational leadership; and (5) publications available in full text in English or Indonesian. The exclusion criteria comprised duplicate publications, conference abstracts, editorials, book reviews, non-academic publications, studies unrelated to higher education, articles focusing exclusively on academic achievement without discussing leadership competency development, and publications without sufficient methodological or substantive information to address the research questions. Two independent reviewers conducted the title and abstract screening, followed by full-text eligibility assessment. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. Inter-rater reliability was evaluated using Cohen's Kappa, with an agreement level of 81% reported for the screening process. The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the AMSTAR 2 instrument, which evaluates methodological rigor across critical domains. The assessment results were considered during the interpretation and synthesis of the evidence. Following the complete selection process, 30 articles met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

Results and Discussions

The findings of this systematic literature review were synthesized using thematic analysis and narrative synthesis to identify recurring patterns, conceptual relationships, and strategic approaches to strengthening student organizations for leadership skills development. The synthesis followed a concept-centric approach, as proposed by Webster and Watson (2002), and the thematic analysis procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved five interconnected steps: (1) extracting relevant information from each included article; (2) identifying and coding findings related to organizational structure, work programs, organizational culture, mentoring, and networking; (3) grouping similar codes into broader thematic categories; (4) comparing

similarities, differences, and contextual variations across studies; and (5) integrating the findings into a coherent conceptual synthesis. The inclusion criteria covered peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025, written in English or Indonesian, focusing on higher education, and addressing student organizations, student engagement, leadership development, experiential learning, or leadership-related competencies. Studies were excluded if they were duplicates, non-academic publications, unrelated to higher education, unavailable in full text, or lacked sufficient information relevant to the research objectives. Following the PRISMA 2020 selection process, 30 articles met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the AMSTAR 2 instrument (A Measurement Tool to Assess Systematic Reviews 2), which examines methodological rigor across critical assessment domains. The appraisal considered the adequacy of research objectives, literature search procedures, study selection, data extraction, methodological justification, and the consideration of potential biases, where applicable to the study designs. The quality assessment was used to inform the interpretation of the evidence and distinguish findings according to their methodological strength. The synthesis did not rely solely on the frequency of reported themes but also considered the consistency, relevance, and contextual contributions of individual studies. By integrating the thematic findings with the quality appraisal, this review developed five interconnected strategic dimensions: strengthening student organizational structure, improving competency-oriented work programs, fostering collaborative organizational culture, strengthening guidance and mentoring systems, and expanding organizational networks. These dimensions provide the analytical foundation for understanding how student organizations can function as structured non-formal learning environments that facilitate leadership skills development and graduate employability.

Strengthening Student Organizational Structure

The synthesis of previous studies indicates that strengthening organizational structure constitutes a fundamental foundation for improving the effectiveness of student organizations as environments for soft-skill development. A clear organizational structure enables the systematic distribution of tasks, authority, responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms, thereby providing members with opportunities to develop leadership, communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Conversely, poorly organized structures may reduce program effectiveness, weaken coordination among organizational units, and hinder leadership succession and regeneration.

Cletzer et al. (2023) demonstrated that leadership experiences in student organizations provide students with opportunities to develop leadership identities through direct practice in managing members, making decisions, resolving conflicts, and evaluating organizational programs. Such experiences not only enhance leadership competencies but also strengthen students' sense of responsibility and self-confidence when confronting organizational challenges. Similarly, Phillips et al. (2023) found that leadership-development programs in higher education positively influence *leadership self-efficacy*, referring to students' confidence in their ability to lead organizations and make effective decisions.

These findings are further supported by Angay-Crowder et al. (2021), who demonstrated that student organizations can serve as environments for transformative leadership learning and professional development. Participation in various co-curricular activities, including clubs, student organizations, and student government, also provides a supportive context for the development of students' leadership identities (Haber-Curran & Pierre, 2023).

In the Indonesian context, Pramono et al. (2020) found that the effectiveness of student organizations is strongly influenced by clear task distribution, coordination among organizational leaders, teamwork, and the ability to manage organizational conflicts. Conversely, competing interests, limited budgets, and weak coordination constitute major barriers to achieving organizational objectives. Therefore, strengthening organizational structures through sustainable cadre development, systematic leadership regeneration, and clear role distribution represents a fundamental strategy for improving organizational quality while simultaneously developing members' soft skills.

Strengthening Student Organization Work Programs

The review indicates that the effectiveness of student organizations is determined not only by their organizational structures but also by the quality of their work programs. Competency-oriented programs provide students with opportunities to learn through authentic experiences (*experiential learning*), thereby developing communication, leadership, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

Guo et al. (2020) demonstrated that *project-based learning* improves students' collaboration, communication, creativity, and problem-solving skills because students are directly involved in addressing authentic problems. Similarly, Santos Rego et al. (2022) emphasized that *service-learning* activities contribute to the development of transversal competencies closely associated with graduate employability. Students participating in community-

service learning experiences demonstrated stronger communication, leadership, and responsibility than those who did not participate in such activities.

Soft-skill development is also associated with the quality of learning experiences obtained through organizational activities. Metan and Handayani (2023) identified a relationship among student organizations, learning environments, and soft-skill development through *problem-based learning*. These findings support the argument that organizational programs involving direct problem-solving experiences have greater potential to develop competencies than activities focused primarily on program implementation.

Therefore, student organizations should develop programs that extend beyond ceremonial activities by incorporating leadership training, social projects, community engagement, student conferences, leadership camps, community service, and other collaborative activities that provide students with authentic learning experiences.

Strengthening Student Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is an important factor determining the sustainability of learning processes within student organizations. The synthesis demonstrates that cultures emphasizing collaboration, responsibility, discipline, openness, and reflection facilitate continuous soft-skill development. In contrast, organizational cultures focused primarily on completing administrative activities without meaningful learning processes tend to produce less valuable organizational experiences.

Shomotova and Ibrahim (2025) found that higher levels of *student engagement* are positively associated with greater leadership potential and *self-perceived employability*. Students who actively participate in organizational activities demonstrate stronger communication, leadership, and teamwork competencies than those with lower levels of engagement. Freij (2024) further emphasized that soft-skill development requires an academic culture that provides continuous opportunities for students to practice, collaborate, reflect, and receive feedback.

Strengthening participatory culture has become increasingly relevant in digitally mediated student organizations. Cheng (2024) identified a positive relationship between the intensity of social-media use and student participation in organizational activities. This suggests that student engagement is developed not only through face-to-face interactions but can also be strengthened through digital communication environments that facilitate organizational coordination and member participation.

Accordingly, organizational culture should be directed toward establishing a *learning organization* characterized by evaluation, collaboration, and participatory leadership, thereby creating an environment conducive to students' character and competency development.

Strengthening Guidance and Mentoring Systems

The literature synthesis demonstrates that guidance and mentoring constitute important components of strengthening student organizations for soft-skill development. Participation in organizations provides opportunities to gain leadership, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and decision-making experience; however, the quality of learning derived from these experiences depends on appropriate support, feedback, and opportunities for reflection.

Cletzer et al. (2023) showed that leadership experiences become more meaningful when students reflect on their experiences, interpersonal relationships, responsibilities, and leadership challenges. Similarly, Phillips et al. (2023) demonstrated that leadership-development programs contribute to students' leadership self-efficacy. Therefore, guidance should not merely function as administrative supervision but as a facilitative process that helps students transform organizational experiences into learning and competency development.

The organizational guidance system should also be situated within a higher education environment that supports continuous competency development. Freij (2024) emphasized that students' soft-skill development depends not only on formal curricula but also on institutional environments and opportunities to develop competencies through experiences beyond the classroom. Shomotova and Ibrahim (2025) similarly demonstrated positive relationships among student engagement, leadership potential, and self-perceived employability. Ribeiro et al. (2023), through a synthesis of 39 articles from Scopus and Web of Science, found that most extracurricular activities positively affect students' academic achievement and employability. Peng (2023) further demonstrated that students participating in extracurricular activities develop competencies in communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and professionalism.

Guidance is also closely related to cadre development and organizational sustainability. Hendra (2018) demonstrated that student organizations contribute to students' learning quality and skill development, although their effectiveness requires appropriate management and guidance. Pramono et al. (2020) found that organizational program effectiveness is influenced by leaders' abilities to establish cooperation, coordinate

activities, and overcome organizational barriers. Taken together, these findings suggest that guidance can function as a mechanism for maintaining organizational continuity through leadership assistance, program evaluation, and the transfer of experience between successive leadership periods. Academic advisors and alumni can therefore contribute to cadre development through the transfer of knowledge, organizational values, experiences, and leadership practices.

From a learning perspective, mentoring also intersects with the concept of *experiential learning*. Santos Rego et al. (2022) demonstrated that direct student involvement in learning experiences contributes to transversal competencies and employability. Guo et al. (2020) similarly showed that project-based learning produces various learning outcomes when students actively participate in completing tasks and solving problems. Within student organizations, planning programs, leading members, managing conflicts, coordinating activities, and conducting evaluations provide comparable learning contexts. Mentoring can therefore be understood as a supporting mechanism that connects organizational experiences with reflection and competency formation, allowing students to transfer organizational learning to academic, social, and professional contexts.

Overall, guidance and mentoring systems can be strengthened through academic and alumni mentoring, feedback, program reflection and evaluation, leadership guidance, and intergenerational transfer of organizational experience. Unlike administrative supervision, learning-oriented mentoring allows students to retain organizational autonomy while receiving support to evaluate and learn from their experiences. Guidance and mentoring can therefore serve as a bridge between organizational experience and the development of communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, and career-readiness competencies.

Strengthening Student Organizational Networks

The review indicates that organizational networks represent another important strategy for expanding students' learning experiences. Partnerships with academic staff, alumni, industry, community organizations, and government institutions provide students with opportunities to acquire professional experience, expand their networks, and understand workplace requirements.

Jones and Giles (2022) showed that student organizations actively collaborating with communities can enhance students' leadership, social responsibility, and communication through community-engagement activities. Moxey and Simpkin (2021) similarly demonstrated that participation in extracurricular activities and professional networks improves graduate employability by strengthening work experience, communication, and professional networking abilities. Organizational participation is also relevant to students' transition into employment. Mulyana and Linando (2024) found that student organizational experiences contribute to graduate work readiness, particularly through soft-skill development and professionalism. These findings reinforce the argument that student organizations can function as a bridge between higher education experiences and professional competency requirements.

Therefore, strengthening student organizational networks not only expands opportunities for collaboration but also enriches students' learning experiences through interactions with stakeholders beyond the university environment.

The findings demonstrate that strengthening student organizations is a multidimensional process that cannot be achieved merely by improving organizational structures. Their effectiveness in developing students' leadership competencies depends on the interconnectedness of five dimensions: organizational structure, work programs, organizational culture, guidance and mentoring, and organizational networks. Together, these dimensions create a non-formal learning environment in which students develop competencies through authentic organizational experiences. This finding extends the understanding of student organizations from extracurricular activity platforms to an experiential learning ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, students function not merely as participants but also as planners, implementers, leaders, decision-makers, and evaluators. This interpretation is consistent with Cletzer et al. (2023), who demonstrated that authentic organizational experiences facilitate leadership identity development through practice, interaction, reflection, and responsibility, and Santos Rego et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of authentic experiences for transversal competencies and employability.

Comparative empirical evidence further supports this multidimensional interpretation. Chen et al. (2023), in a study involving 1,761 valid responses from student club committee members across 15 Taiwanese universities and colleges, found that organizational operation, activity organization, member involvement, and training experiences were significantly associated with students' learning outcomes. Similarly, Kim (2022), examining 706 college students, reported that extracurricular participation was positively associated with individual, group, and community dimensions of socially responsible leadership. Crawford et al. (2024), using survey data from 415 undergraduate students, also found that students holding formal leadership positions demonstrated higher authentic leadership attributes than students without such positions. More recently, Soria et al. (2025), using a

multi-institutional sample of 6,030 undergraduates and propensity score matching, identified positive effects of participation in recreational student organizations on leadership motivation and efficacy. Mitchell et al. (2025) similarly found that participation in multicultural and identity-based student organizations positively influenced social-change behaviors, sociocultural conversations, and social generativity. Taken together, these studies strengthen the argument that organizational participation provides developmental opportunities, although the quality and nature of participation remain important conditions for achieving meaningful outcomes.

The first finding identifies organizational structure as the foundation supporting the other strengthening strategies. Clear structures establish role distribution, authority, coordination mechanisms, cadre development, and leadership regeneration. However, the educational value of organizational structures does not lie merely in formal positions but in opportunities for students to exercise genuine responsibility. When students lead divisions, coordinate members, manage conflicts, and make organizational decisions, they simultaneously practice communication, leadership, problem-solving, and decision-making. This interpretation is supported by Crawford et al. (2024), whose findings indicate that formal student leadership positions are associated with stronger authentic leadership attributes. Chen et al. (2023) also demonstrated that organizational operation experiences and activity-management experiences significantly explain variations in student learning outcomes. Furthermore, Konuk and Posner (2021), through a quasi-experimental evaluation of a student leadership program in Turkey, found improvements across five leadership practices, with qualitative findings emphasizing the importance of practical learning activities and leadership self-confidence. These findings suggest that organizational structures become educationally meaningful when formal responsibilities are accompanied by opportunities to practice leadership. Leadership succession should therefore be understood not merely as the replacement of organizational officers but as a mechanism for transferring knowledge, experience, values, and competencies across organizational generations.

The second finding concerns the orientation of student organization work programs. Programs with greater potential to develop leadership competencies are those that position students as active participants in addressing authentic tasks and problems. Leadership training, collaborative projects, project-based activities, community service, student-managed seminars, and social initiatives provide opportunities to apply knowledge and competencies directly. Comparative evidence from Bonesso et al. (2024) demonstrates that experiential learning can strengthen leadership behaviors, particularly visionary, coaching, and affiliative leadership practices. Similarly, Uaikhanova et al. (2022), in an experimental study involving 196 university students, reported significant improvements in leadership, communication, and organizational abilities following the implementation of an integrated leadership-development program. Muammar (2021) also found that a 20-hour leadership training intervention involving 96 students produced significant improvements in students' perceived leadership competencies compared with a control group. These findings reinforce the importance of structured developmental programs rather than relying exclusively on informal organizational participation. Pasion and Dias-Oliveira (2024), examining a project-based learning intervention among business students, further identified improvements in teamwork and communication alongside reductions in difficulties associated with critical thinking. Consequently, the number of activities should not be regarded as the principal indicator of organizational effectiveness. Organizations conducting numerous activities may not necessarily produce optimal competency development if their programs remain predominantly ceremonial. What matters more is the quality, authenticity, and reflective value of the learning experiences embedded within each program.

The third finding demonstrates that organizational culture functions as a social environment that determines the quality of student learning. Effective structures and programs cannot produce optimal outcomes without cultures characterized by collaboration, openness, discipline, responsibility, and participation. Participatory environments provide students with opportunities to express ideas, receive criticism, negotiate, address disagreements, and resolve conflicts. Such processes directly support interpersonal communication, collective responsibility, and collaborative leadership. Kim (2022) provides empirical support for this argument by showing that extracurricular participation is associated with stronger individual, group, and community values of socially responsible leadership. Mitchell et al. (2025) further demonstrate that multicultural and identity-based organizations can strengthen social-change behaviors and sociocultural engagement, suggesting that organizational diversity and inclusive interaction contribute to broader leadership development. McNaughtan et al. (2024), through a narrative inquiry involving ten student government leaders, identified the importance of previous civic involvement, peer invitations, and existing student engagement in motivating students to participate in student government. These findings indicate that organizational culture is not simply an internal set of rules but also a social environment that influences participation, belonging, and leadership development. Therefore, organizational membership alone does not automatically generate leadership competencies; benefits emerge when students are actively, consistently, and meaningfully engaged.

The synthesis further highlights the importance of guidance and mentoring in transforming organizational experience into structured learning. Although students require autonomy in managing their organizations, autonomy without appropriate guidance may result in organizational experiences remaining merely practical activities without adequate reflection. Academic advisors and alumni can function as mentors who help students reflect on experiences, evaluate failures, resolve conflicts, and connect organizational learning with professional requirements. This interpretation is supported by Konuk and Posner (2021), whose evaluation of a student leadership program highlighted the importance of practical learning activities and opportunities to strengthen students' confidence as leaders. Muammar (2021) similarly demonstrated that structured leadership training can improve students' perceptions of their leadership competencies. Jackson et al. (2024), using a survey of 324 graduates and focus groups involving 11 participants, found that mentoring and other employability-building activities contribute to students' professional development, although participation is influenced by personal circumstances and institutional accessibility. These findings suggest that mentoring should not be limited to administrative supervision but should function as a facilitative process connecting experience, feedback, reflection, and competency development. Effective mentoring should maintain student independence while providing opportunities for reflection, constructive feedback, and the transfer of organizational experience.

Another important finding concerns organizational networks. Collaboration with alumni, other organizations, communities, external institutions, and professional sectors expands students' learning environments beyond campus boundaries. Networks expose students to individuals with diverse backgrounds, interests, and working practices, requiring communication, negotiation, adaptability, and professionalism. Empirical evidence from Jackson and Bridgstock (2021), based on survey data from 510 graduates across three Australian universities, indicates that curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular experiences contribute to employability development through skills acquisition, relevant experience, and networking opportunities. Kanar and Bouckenooghe (2021), examining university students involved in job searches across two measurement periods, found that broader participation in extracurricular activities was positively associated with employment self-efficacy, partly through focused and exploratory information-search strategies. Jackson et al. (2024) further identified internships and work-related experiences as particularly valuable for professional identity development, networking, and employment opportunities. Naidoo and Ravn (2025), through in-depth interviews with eight Australian university students holding club leadership experience, also found that students viewed university clubs as spaces for developing professional positioning and navigating competitive labor markets. Collectively, these studies indicate that organizational networking should not merely be understood as a strategy for obtaining program support but as a bridge between campus-based learning and professional environments.

When the five findings are considered interactively, a broader developmental mechanism becomes apparent: organizational structure, programs, culture, mentoring, and networks constitute organizational inputs; experiential learning and student engagement function as learning mechanisms; while leadership, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, decision-making, and employability constitute developmental outcomes. This framework explains why two students who are both organizational members may not necessarily achieve equivalent leadership development. Differences may arise from the intensity of engagement, quality of responsibilities, problem-solving experiences, opportunities for reflection, quality of mentoring, and breadth of interaction. The findings of Chen et al. (2023) are particularly relevant because their analysis demonstrated that different dimensions of club learning experiences had varying relationships with student learning outcomes. Similarly, Soria et al. (2025) and Mitchell et al. (2025) provide evidence that participation in different types of student organizations is associated with distinct leadership outcomes. Thus, organizational membership alone is insufficient; the quality, intensity, and inclusiveness of organizational experiences are more decisive factors.

Proposed Synthesis Framework

Based on this synthesis, the principal contribution of this review is the proposition that leadership skills development through student organizations operates through the following sequence:

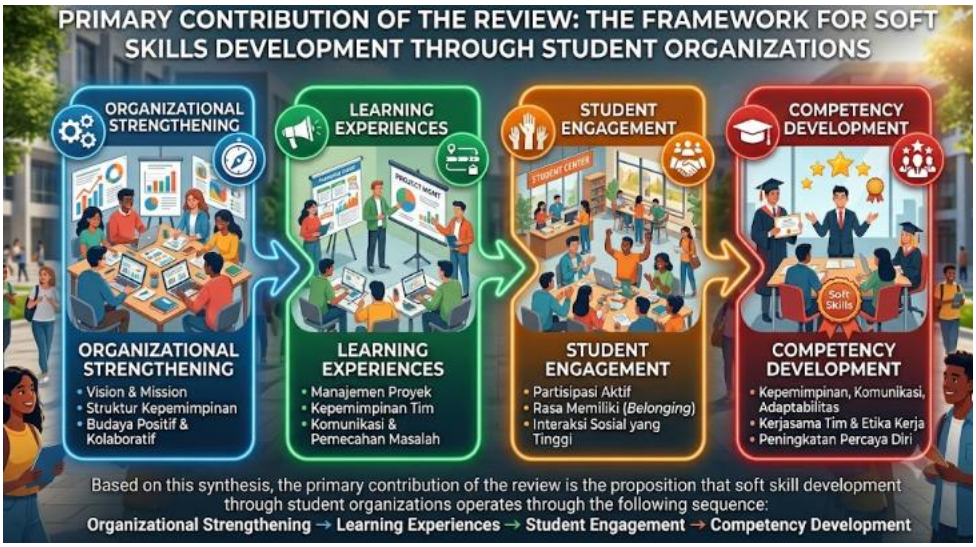


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Soft Skills Development in Student Organizations

This framework integrates three perspectives that previous studies have frequently examined separately: experiential learning, student engagement, and graduate employability. Student organizations are positioned as environments that provide authentic learning experiences; student engagement explains the quality and intensity of students' participation in those experiences; and leadership competency development represents an important intermediate outcome contributing to graduate employability. The five organizational dimensions operate as interconnected conditions rather than independent interventions. Organizational structure provides role clarity and responsibility, work programs create practical learning opportunities, organizational culture facilitates participation and collaboration, mentoring supports reflection and continuous improvement, and external networks connect organizational experiences with professional contexts.

Accordingly, an important implication of this study is the need for a paradigm shift in the management of student organizations in higher education, from an activity-oriented organization toward a competency-oriented student organization. Organizational effectiveness should not be assessed solely by the number of activities conducted, participant numbers, or administrative completion of programs, but also by the competencies students develop through their organizational experiences. Organizational evaluation can therefore incorporate indicators of leadership capacity, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, decision-making, responsibility, reflective learning, and workplace readiness. Higher education institutions should also integrate cadre development, mentoring, program evaluation, alumni networks, and external partnerships into student-development policies. Through this approach, student organizations can function more effectively as an integral component of higher education systems in preparing graduates who are adaptive, collaborative, responsible, and equipped to meet the demands of the twenty-first-century workforce.

Limitations and Boundary Conditions

This review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the synthesis is based on a relatively limited corpus of 30 eligible articles published between 2020 and 2025 and retrieved from selected academic databases. Consequently, relevant studies published outside the specified period, in other languages, or in databases not covered by the search strategy may have been overlooked. This creates a potential selection bias and limits the comprehensiveness of the evidence base. Second, the empirical studies included in the literature frequently examined students who were already actively involved in student organizations, held formal leadership positions, or participated in specific extracurricular programs. Such sampling characteristics may introduce self-selection bias because students with stronger initial motivation, confidence, or leadership interest may be more likely to participate in organizational activities. Therefore, the positive relationships between organizational participation and leadership development should not automatically be interpreted as causal effects applicable to all students.

Conclusions

This literature review demonstrates that student organizations function as non-formal learning ecosystems that complement formal higher education by facilitating the development of communication, leadership, teamwork, decision-making, problem-solving, responsibility, adaptability, and other competencies essential for graduate employability. The synthesis identifies five complementary strategies for strengthening this role: (1) systematic

organizational structures and leadership regeneration; (2) competency-oriented work programs; (3) collaborative, disciplined, reflective, and learning-oriented organizational cultures; (4) mentoring involving academic advisors, alumni, and organizational mentors; and (5) partnerships with communities, industries, alumni, and other stakeholders. Together, these strategies can transform organizational participation from routine or ceremonial activities into meaningful experiential-learning processes. The review also highlights persistent challenges, including weak cadre development, unsustainable leadership regeneration, low participation, limited mentoring, and predominantly ceremonial work programs. Theoretically, this study integrates student engagement, experiential learning, and graduate employability within a five-dimensional framework for strengthening student organizations. Practically, the framework provides guidance for higher education institutions, student-affairs administrators, academic advisors, and student leaders in developing systematic, sustainable, and competency-oriented organizational policies. Future research should prioritize a quasi-experimental design using propensity score matching (PSM) to evaluate the effects of organizational participation and strengthening strategies on students' leadership competencies while reducing selection bias between organizationally active and non-active students. Longitudinal measurements before and after participation are recommended to examine developmental changes. Psychometric validation should focus on five core constructs: organizational structure, work-program quality, organizational culture, mentoring effectiveness, and network collaboration, alongside leadership competencies encompassing leadership self-efficacy, communication, teamwork, decision-making, and problem-solving. Measurement instruments should demonstrate construct validity through confirmatory factor analysis and acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha and preferably McDonald's omega coefficients exceeding 0.70. For empirical testing, approximately 300 participants are recommended for an initial multivariable model, while 500–600 students recruited from at least 10 higher education institutions would provide a stronger basis for cross-institutional comparisons. However, the final sample size should be determined through an a priori power analysis, targeting statistical power of at least 0.80 and a significance level of 0.05, while considering expected effect sizes, model complexity, attrition, and adequate covariate balance in propensity score matching. These approaches will strengthen the validity, reliability, explanatory power, and contextual applicability of the proposed five-dimensional framework.

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