

UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: THE POWER OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN SHAPING TOMORROW'S LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

The evolving landscape of higher education demands innovative strategies for developing future leaders. Experiential learning has emerged as a transformative approach, effectively bridging the gap between theoretical instruction and practical application. This study explores the power of experiential learning in shaping future leaders by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. Grounded in Kolb's Learning Cycle, the study examines how hands-on experiences, real-world challenges, and reflective practices cultivate critical leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision-making. Various experiential learning models, including service-learning, internships, study-abroad programs, and project-based learning, are analyzed for their role in developing leadership competencies. Additionally, case studies and empirical research provide compelling evidence of the effectiveness of experiential learning in leadership development because they demonstrate how practical engagement enables students to critically reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, thereby enhancing self-awareness. The findings of the study reveal that group-based experiential activities foster teamwork, communication, and collaboration across diverse contexts. In the same way, through tackling authentic real-world challenges, learners strengthen their problem-solving and decision-making abilities. Empirical studies further show that such experiences encourage adaptability and resilience in dynamic environments. The study also addresses challenges in implementing experiential learning within academic curricula, advocating for its integration with traditional pedagogies. Finally, the study recommends that higher education institutions should empower students to lead with empathy, innovation, and integrity in an increasingly complex global environment through embracing experiential learning.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Higher Education, Kolb's Learning Cycle, leadership development.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The evolving demands of the 21st-century workforce require higher education institutions to adopt innovative approaches to leadership development. Traditional classroom-based learning, while essential for building foundational knowledge, often falls short in equipping students with the practical skills, emotional intelligence, and critical decision-making abilities necessary for effective leadership (Gallagher & Savage, 2020; Leijon et al., 2021). Experiential learning has emerged as a transformative strategy that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge

and real-world application (Sabath, 2024) fostering a deeper understanding of leadership complexities. Experiential learning, rooted in Kolb's Learning Cycle, emphasizes learning through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application (Alabi, 2024). This approach cultivates essential leadership competencies, including self-awareness, ethical reasoning, collaboration, and problem-solving through engaging students in hands-on activities such as service-learning, internships, study-abroad programs, and project-based learning (Chang et al., 2024). These skills are critical in navigating the challenges of today's dynamic and interconnected world. Therefore, this study highlights the effectiveness of experiential learning in fostering leadership development while demonstrating how practical engagement enhances student confidence, adaptability, and resilience. Despite the growing demand for effective leadership in an increasingly complex global environment, higher education institutions continue to rely heavily on traditional, theory-driven teaching methods. Such approaches often fail to fully equip students with the practical skills, adaptability, and emotional intelligence required in real-world contexts. The lack of integration between classroom learning and experiential opportunities limits leadership development. This gap underscores the need to explore experiential learning as a transformative strategy for nurturing innovative, ethical, and empathetic leaders especially in Uganda. Additionally, few studies have been made in regards to experiential learning among Ugandan higher education students (Charles et al., 2025). Therefore, this study explores the power of experiential learning in shaping future leaders by analyzing its impact, theoretical foundations, and practical applications. The study also intends to examine the impact of experiential learning on leadership development in higher education institutions, focusing on its role in enhancing critical leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision-making. It also seeks to analyze the effectiveness of experiential learning models, such as Kolb's Learning Cycle, service-learning, internships, study-abroad programs, and project-based learning, in shaping leadership competencies and preparing students for real-world challenges. Ultimately, it emphasizes the need for higher education institutions to equip students with skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly complex and globalized world advocating for the expansion of experiential learning opportunities.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Kolb's Learning Cycle in Higher Education

This study is grounded in David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which emphasizes that learning is a cyclical process involving four stages: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation (D. A. Kolb, 1984). Kolb's model as shown in figure 1 below aligns closely with the principles of experiential learning in higher education (Charlotte & Crystle, 2024), where students engage in real-world experiences and actively participate in the learning process.

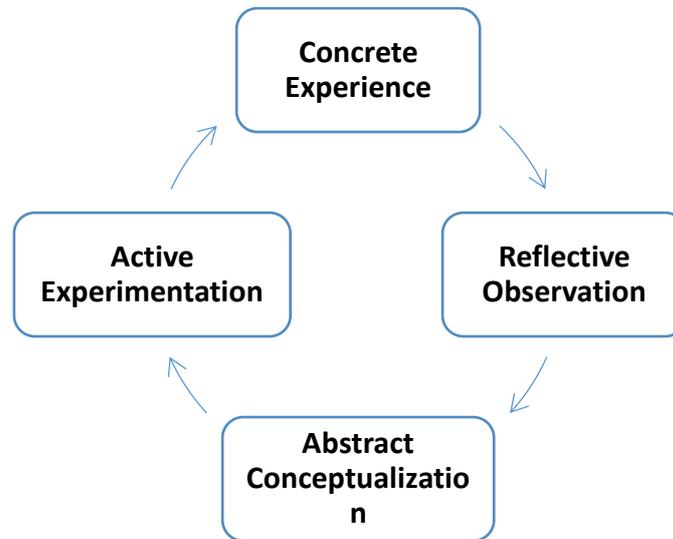


Figure1: The Kolb's Learning Cycle of 1984

Stage I

The first stage of Kolb's learning cycle, Concrete Experience, is the foundational stage in the experiential learning process. During this stage, (Mechouat, 2024) students engage directly in hands-on activities that allow them to immerse themselves in real-world contexts, such as internships, fieldwork, or project-based learning. These experiences are designed to provide students with an authentic environment where they can actively apply theoretical concepts learned in the classroom to practical situations (Caulfield, 2023). Hence students engaging in real-life tasks gain firsthand exposure to the challenges, dynamics, and complexities inherent in their field of study. This immersive involvement not only deepens their understanding of theoretical knowledge but also enhances their ability to connect academic learning with real-world applications (Damaševičius & Sidekerskienė, 2024). This phase is crucial for students to gain a deeper appreciation of the subject matter, as they encounter problems, make decisions, and observe the impact of their actions, all of which are essential for developing practical, transferable skills for future leadership roles.

Stage II

The second stage of Kolb's learning cycle, reflective observation, is pivotal for students to make sense of their concrete experiences by engaging in thoughtful reflection (Kingkaew et al., 2023). During this phase, students step back from their hands-on activities and critically examine what they did, how they did it, and the outcomes that resulted. This process of reflection allows students to identify patterns, successes, challenges, and areas for improvement, fostering a deeper understanding of the experiences they encountered (Reid, 2025). In higher education, this reflection is often facilitated through journals publications, structured discussions, or debriefing sessions, providing students with opportunities to articulate their thoughts and share insights with peers and instructors. These reflective practices encourage students to question their assumptions, explore alternative approaches, and develop a more nuanced understanding of their actions and decisions (Long & Gummelt, 2020). As

students engage in reflective observation, they become more self-aware and are better able to recognize the broader implications of their learning, both academically and professionally.

Stage III

The third stage of Kolb's learning cycle, Abstract Conceptualization, is where students deepen their understanding by transforming their reflections into more structured, theoretical frameworks. In this phase, students take the insights gained from their concrete experiences and reflective observations and develop abstract theories, models, or general principles that help explain their learning. (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2021) this process encourages students to connect the dots between theory and practice, synthesizing academic knowledge with real-world experiences. For example, students might draw on concepts from textbooks, lectures, or research to develop new ideas or adapt existing theories to better align with the practical lessons they have encountered. In higher education, this stage helps students move beyond rote memorization to critically analyze and conceptualize the information they have encountered. By synthesizing lessons from both theory and practice, students enhance their academic and professional understanding, preparing them to address complex problems in future leadership roles. Abstract Conceptualization fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation.

Stage IV

The final stage of Kolb's learning cycle, Active Experimentation, focuses on putting newly acquired knowledge and concepts into practice by applying them to solve problems or tackle new situations (Malik & Behera, 2024). In this phase, students actively test the theories, models, or frameworks they have developed during the Abstract Conceptualization stage. By engaging in hands-on activities, whether through academic projects, simulations, or professional tasks, students experiment with their ideas and strategies in real-world contexts. This stage is essential for reinforcing learning, as students assess how well their newly developed concepts work in practice and make adjustments based on the outcomes. In higher education, (Idealistiana et al., 2024) active experimentation encourages students to experiment with different approaches, refining their methods and gaining deeper insights into what works and what doesn't. Students further develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, by applying their learning in academic or professional settings, all of which skills are essential for leadership and success in their future careers.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the transformative role of experiential learning in shaping future leaders within higher education. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it provides rich, in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and reflections that cannot be captured through quantitative methods (Jackson et al., 2007). The study is grounded in interpretivism, which emphasizes understanding meaning through participants' narratives and contexts (Rehman, 2021). The study incorporated a case study analysis at Victoria University Kampala because it has successfully integrated experiential learning across all its programs. Additionally, it is located in the city center where there are many industries, companies and organizations where students easily access internship placements. Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with undergraduate and postgraduate students who had engaged

in experiential learning activities such as internships, service-learning, study-abroad programs, and project-based learning. Semi-structured interviews also allowed for flexibility in probing individual experiences, while focus groups further encouraged collective reflection and discussion on shared challenges and opportunities. To ensure diverse perspectives, participants were purposively sampled from various academic disciplines and cultural backgrounds (Ajay & Micah, 2014). In addition, document analysis of institutional reports, program curricula, and reflective journals supplemented the primary data, providing a triangulated understanding of how experiential learning contributes to leadership development. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically code and identify recurring patterns, themes, and sub-themes related to leadership competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, and ethical decision-making. NVivo software was also used to support data organization and analysis. To enhance trustworthiness, credibility was achieved through member checking, review and validate emerging findings from participants. Transferability was also ensured by providing thick descriptions of contexts and participant experiences, while dependability and confirmability were established through maintaining an audit trail and peer debriefing (Mokkink et al., 2023). This study provided a holistic understanding of the impact of experiential learning on leadership development by synthesizing findings from multiple sources. The results aim to inform educators and policymakers on best practices for integrating experiential learning into higher education curricula to enhance leadership competencies. Therefore, by employing qualitative methodology, the study sought to uncover nuanced insights into how experiential learning bridges the gap between theory and practice, ultimately preparing students to lead with empathy, innovation, and integrity.

4.0 RESULTS

The findings of the study revealed that experiential learning significantly enhanced leadership development in higher education. It was observed that experiential learning fostered critical skills such as problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision-making. Figure 2 indicates that institutions that incorporated experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, service-learning, and global exchange programs, witnessed a significant increase in student engagement and leadership development. These programs provided students with real-world exposure, allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts, which enhanced their critical thinking and decision-making skills. Additionally, through service learning, students developed a sense of social responsibility and teamwork, while internships offered them with hands-on industry experience that strengthened their professional competencies. Students engagement in global exchange programs further expanded their understanding and perspectives by immersing them deeper in diverse cultural and professional environments, fostering adaptability and cross-cultural communication.



Figure 2: Frequency analysis of key career development and skill terms

As a result, students became more proactive, confident, and prepared to take on leadership roles in various settings. This holistic approach to education not only enhanced academic learning but also ensured that graduates were well-equipped to navigate the complexities of modern leadership. Hence experiential learning has tremendously shifted students from merely absorbing information to actively engaging with real-world challenges which encourages students to think critically and apply their knowledge in practical settings and gaining confidence in their abilities to develop a proactive mindset when facing real-world problems, thus preparing them to take on initiatives in leadership role.

Additionally, the study revealed that hands-on experiences highly enabled student leaders to navigate real-world challenges and work effectively with diverse teams which enabled them to benefit from experiential learning particularly in fostering adaptability, problem-solving, and collaboration skills as highlighted in figure 3 below.

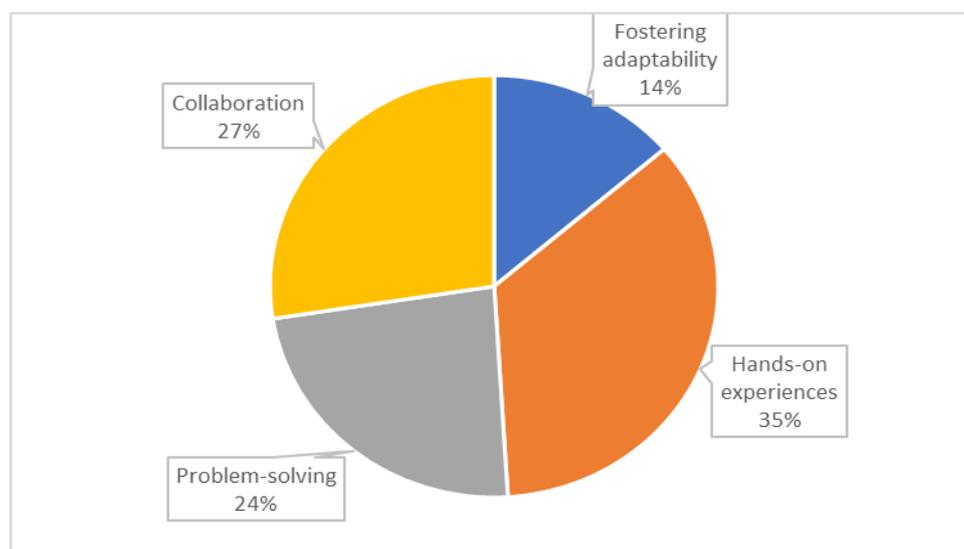


Figure 3: student skills to navigate experiential learning

Many students discovered that hands-on experiences provided them with valuable insights into leadership by exposing them to real-world situations that demanded quick thinking and strategic decision-making. Through facing challenges such as conflict resolution, project management, and team coordination, they learned how to analyze problems, develop solutions, and communicate their ideas effectively. These experiences helped them bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, making leadership concepts more tangible and meaningful. As a result, students gained confidence in their ability to lead, collaborate, and adapt to complex professional and social environments.

Similarly, students who engaged in project-based learning and internships reported gaining practical experience that strengthened their leadership skills and decision-making abilities. Working on real-world projects allowed them to take initiatives, solve problems independently, and collaborate effectively with peers and professionals. As a result, they developed greater confidence in their ability to lead, manage responsibilities, and adapt to diverse challenges in both academic and professional settings. During a focus group discussion with one of the journalist students, it was revealed that;

“...my internship experience was truly transformative because it allowed me to apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings. I was given the responsibility of coordinating a small project team at one of the biggest TV Stations in Uganda, something that challenged me to practice communication, delegation, and problem-solving under pressure. This experience strengthened my adaptability and decision-making skills, especially when unexpected challenges arose. Most importantly, it boosted my confidence as a leader and helped me recognize both my strengths and areas for growth. Overall, the internship prepared me to approach leadership with greater responsibility, collaboration, and self-awareness...”

Internships and real-world projects provide students with the opportunity to put theoretical concepts into practice, helping them to understand their real-life applications with working in professional settings allowing them to take on responsibilities, solve problems, and collaborate with experienced mentors which strengthens their leadership abilities. Ultimately, these experiences build confidence among students enabling them to make informed and impactful decisions in both academic and professional environments.

Leadership development professionals reinforced the idea that experiential learning plays a crucial role in transforming students into effective leaders by providing hands-on opportunities to apply theoretical concepts. They highlighted how real-world experiences enhance critical thinking, decision-making, and adaptability skills essential for leadership success. This was uncovered during an interview with one of the administrators who revealed that;

“...experiential learning encourages students to analyze complex situations, make informed decisions, and adapt to challenges which help in strengthening their critical thinking skills. For example, when these students get engaged in real-world experiences, they develop emotional intelligence, they learn to manage their own emotions, empathize with others, and also communicate effectively among their peers and within the community. These combined skills are critical essentials for future

African leaders because they enable them to navigate diverse environments with confidence, resilience, and ethical awareness...”

Therefore, engaging in practical learning environments allows students to confront real-world challenges that require them to think critically and act decisively. Through participating in internships, service-learning, and project-based activities, students learn how to approach problems, collaborate with others, and apply their knowledge in practical settings. These experiences build their confidence as they develop essential problem-solving abilities, preparing them to tackle complex professional situations with greater competence and resilience.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the profound impact of experiential learning in shaping leadership competencies among students. Participants consistently reported that hands-on opportunities such as internships, project-based learning, and community initiatives enabled them to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts, fostering critical skills such as problem-solving, communication, and collaboration especially during their internships. Students learned how to make decisions under pressure and communicate effectively with teams, something which they could never have fully grasped in the classroom. This underscores how experiential learning bridges the gap between theory and practice, enhancing confidence and self-efficacy in leadership roles (Johnson & Griffin, 2023). Reflective practice emerged as a key factor in maximizing learning outcomes. Students noted that guided reflection sessions encouraged them to critically assess their experiences, recognize personal growth areas, and refine their leadership approach. Community projects helped students to understand their strengths and weaknesses as leaders. Such insights align with existing literature emphasizing reflection as central to internalizing experiential learning (Morris, 2020). The study also revealed that experiential learning nurtures ethical awareness and social responsibility. Many students emphasized that engaging in real-world challenges, particularly through community-based projects, enhanced their understanding of societal needs and the importance of values-driven leadership as also observed by (Pandita & Kiran, 2023). Overall, these results suggest that higher education institutions can strategically leverage experiential learning to cultivate leaders who are skilled, adaptable, and socially conscious (Kohn, 2024). Integrating structured, reflective, and socially relevant experiential activities into curricula provides students not only with technical competencies but also with the ethical and interpersonal qualities necessary for effective leadership in dynamic professional contexts.

Theme	Description	Illustrative Student Quote
Bridging Theory and Practice	Experiential learning helps students apply classroom knowledge in real contexts, enhancing skills and confidence.	“During my internship, I learned how to make decisions under pressure and communicate effectively with my team, which I could never fully grasp in the classroom.”
Reflective Practice	Guided reflection encourages critical evaluation of experiences and personal growth.	“Reflecting on my community project helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses as a leader and how to improve my approach.”

Collaboration and Teamwork	Students develop interpersonal skills, adaptability, and resilience through group activities and mentorship.	“Working in teams taught me how to listen, negotiate, and lead while respecting diverse perspectives.”
Ethical Awareness & Social Responsibility	Experiential learning fosters understanding of societal needs and values-driven leadership.	“Working with the local community made me realize that leadership is not just about achieving goals but about making a positive impact.”
Confidence and Self-Efficacy	Hands-on experiences strengthen students’ belief in their ability to lead effectively.	“Being responsible for a project outcome boosted my confidence and made me feel capable of taking on leadership roles.”

Table 1: Summary of key findings

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Experiential learning is a powerful approach that enhances students’ understanding by integrating theory with practice. It is therefore recommended that higher education institutions should adopt experiential learning strategies such as internships, service-learning, simulations, and project-based learning to cultivate critical thinking, problem-solving, and real-world application of knowledge. Faculty members should also be trained to facilitate experiential learning effectively especially in ensuring that students are actively engaging in reflective practices to solidify their learning experiences (Gordon, 2022). Institutions should also foster partnerships with industries and communities to provide diverse and meaningful learning opportunities. Additionally, experiential learning should be embedded in curricula across disciplines to promote interdisciplinary collaboration and holistic skill development. Assessment methods should be adapted to measure experiential learning outcomes effectively, incorporating reflective journals, case studies, and practical demonstrations. Policymakers and administrators must allocate sufficient resources to support experiential learning initiatives, including technology integration and faculty development programs. It is also suggested that future research should explore the long-term impact of experiential learning on students’ career readiness, leadership development, and adaptability in an evolving job market. Therefore, embracing experiential learning in higher education institutions has the potential to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and professional practice, equipping students with the skills needed for lifelong success.

7.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, experiential learning plays a transformative role in leadership development by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. Through internships, service-learning, project-based learning, and global exchange programs, students gain hands-on experience that enhances their critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision-making. The findings of this study demonstrate that students who engage in experiential learning develop greater confidence, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities, preparing them to navigate complex leadership challenges. Administrators, student leaders, and leadership development professionals emphasize that these experiences cultivate essential

leadership competencies, fostering collaboration, resilience, and social responsibility. Institutions must embrace and expand experiential learning opportunities to ensure students are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and mindset needed to lead with integrity and innovation in an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment.

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