



Leadership Development and Workplace Preparedness among MBA Students: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

Leadership development has emerged as a fundamental objective of modern MBA education as organizations increasingly seek professionals who can navigate complexity, innovation, and organizational change. This study explores MBA students' perceptions and experiences regarding leadership development and its contribution to workplace success. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 MBA students affiliated with Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco (Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences-Souissi), from diverse educational and professional backgrounds. The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. The findings generated eight interconnected themes: motivations for MBA enrollment, perceptions of leadership, the significance of leadership development, experiential learning, challenges in leadership formation, leadership and employability, recommendations for program enhancement, and essential leadership competencies. The results reveal that students perceive leadership as transformational, collaborative, and ethically grounded rather than authoritarian. Experiential learning activities such as teamwork, presentations, simulations, and workshops were considered particularly effective in strengthening communication, critical thinking, adaptability, and decision-making abilities. Participants also emphasized the importance of mentorship, coaching, collaboration, and practical exposure in bridging the gap between academic learning and workplace realities. Despite encountering challenges such as communication barriers, cultural diversity issues, and balancing academic and professional responsibilities, students viewed these experiences as opportunities for resilience and personal growth. The study contributes to the growing scholarship on leadership education by highlighting the importance of integrating experiential, reflective, and interpersonal learning approaches into MBA curricula. The findings suggest that leadership development should extend beyond theoretical instruction to include authentic professional experiences that enhance workplace readiness and managerial effectiveness. By examining leadership development within the Moroccan higher education context, this study contributes to the body of qualitative research on MBA leadership education in non-Western contexts and provides context-specific insights that can enhance curriculum design, leadership training, and graduate employability initiatives.

1. Introduction

The contemporary business environment is characterized by rapid technological advancement, globalization, organizational uncertainty, and increasing workforce diversity. These developments have transformed the nature of leadership and expanded expectations

regarding managerial competence. Organizations no longer seek leaders who rely solely on technical expertise or hierarchical authority; instead, they require individuals capable of collaboration, innovation, adaptability, ethical decision-making, and strategic thinking. Leadership has therefore become an essential competency for professionals operating in increasingly complex organizational settings.

Within this evolving context, higher education institutions, particularly business schools, have assumed a critical role in preparing future organizational leaders. MBA programs are expected not only to provide students with managerial and analytical knowledge but also to cultivate interpersonal, strategic, and leadership capabilities necessary for workplace success. Leadership development has consequently become a central component of MBA education worldwide, reflecting the growing recognition that effective leadership can enhance organizational performance, employee engagement, innovation, and long-term competitiveness.

In Morocco, these expectations have become particularly significant as the country continues to pursue economic modernization, attract foreign investment, and strengthen its integration into global markets. Moroccan organizations operate within an increasingly competitive business environment shaped by digital transformation, entrepreneurial growth, public-sector reform, and expanding international partnerships. These developments have intensified the demand for managers who possess not only technical expertise but also leadership competencies such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, ethical judgment, and the ability to manage organizational change. Consequently, Moroccan higher education institutions, including MBA programs, face growing pressure to equip graduates with the leadership capabilities required to meet the evolving needs of both national and international employers.

The growing emphasis on leadership cultivation reflects broader organizational demands for professionals who can inspire teams, manage change, resolve conflicts, and contribute strategically to organizational objectives. Employers increasingly value communication skills, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving alongside technical business competencies. As a result, MBA curricula have progressively integrated experiential learning approaches, including case studies, simulations, teamwork, leadership workshops, reflective practice, and industry-based projects to facilitate leadership development through authentic learning experiences.

This study addresses this gap by exploring MBA students' perceptions of leadership development through qualitative thematic analysis. Rather than measuring predefined leadership competencies, it examines how students conceptualize leadership, identifies the educational experiences they perceive as most influential in developing leadership capabilities, explores the challenges they encounter during this process, and analyzes how they relate leadership competencies to workplace success. By providing an in-depth understanding of students' perspectives within the Moroccan higher education context, the study contributes to the growing literature on leadership education and offers practical insights for business schools seeking to strengthen leadership development and enhance graduates' readiness for contemporary organizational environments.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do MBA students conceptualize leadership?
2. What educational experiences contribute to leadership development in MBA programs?
3. What challenges do students encounter while developing leadership competencies?
4. How do students perceive the relationship between leadership development and workplace success?
5. What recommendations do students propose for improving leadership education in MBA programs?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to ongoing discussions concerning leadership education, experiential learning, and workplace preparedness within higher education.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Leadership in Contemporary Higher Education

Leadership theories have evolved significantly over the past decades. Traditional leadership models focused primarily on authority, control, and task management, whereas contemporary approaches emphasize collaboration, empowerment, and interpersonal influence. Among the most influential modern theories is transformational leadership, which highlights leaders' ability to inspire, motivate, and develop followers while promoting shared organizational goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Transformational leadership is crucial within higher education because universities increasingly seek to prepare graduates capable of leading in uncertain and rapidly changing environments. Modern leadership requires emotional intelligence, adaptability, ethical awareness, and the ability to foster collaboration across culturally diverse teams. According to Daft (1999), leadership is characterized by influence within interpersonal relationships, where leaders and followers collectively pursue meaningful change based on shared goals and intentions. Consequently, leadership is no longer viewed as an individual trait alone but as a relational and developmental process.

Higher education institutions play a major role in cultivating these competencies. For Komives et al. (2013), leadership education contributes significantly to students' professional identity formation, interpersonal development, and self-awareness. Leadership development programs within universities encourage students to engage in reflective learning, teamwork, and practical problem-solving activities that mirror workplace realities. Effective communication serves as a foundation for leadership development, enabling leaders to convey messages clearly and influence their audiences (Beniche, 2023a).

MBA programs are particularly associated with leadership preparation because graduates are expected to assume managerial and executive roles. Business schools have therefore expanded leadership-oriented curricula to include organizational behavior, communication, strategic management, negotiation, and ethics. These curricular changes reflect employers' growing expectations for graduates who possess both technical and interpersonal competencies.

However, scholars have also criticized MBA programs for overemphasizing theoretical knowledge while insufficiently addressing practical leadership development. Mintzberg (2004) argued that management education often prioritizes analytical thinking at the expense of reflective practice and human-centered leadership. This criticism has encouraged business schools to adopt more experiential and practice-oriented educational approaches.

2.2 Experiential Learning and Leadership Development

Experiential learning theory, developed by Kolb (1984), proposes that learning occurs through a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This framework has become highly influential in leadership education because leadership competencies are often developed through practice rather than through theoretical instruction alone.

MBA programs increasingly incorporate experiential learning through case studies, simulations, presentations, group projects, and internships, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge while strengthening communication, teamwork, and decision-making skills. At the same time, Moroccan higher education continues to advance digital learning by improving technological infrastructure, enhancing professors' digital competencies, and promoting students' digital literacy, thereby supporting more effective autonomous learning (Beniche, 2026).

Raelin (2007) emphasized that leadership learning is most effective when students engage collaboratively in reflective and practice-based environments. Leadership cannot be fully understood through lectures alone; rather, it emerges through interaction, feedback, and real-world problem-solving experiences.

Group projects and multicultural teamwork are particularly important within MBA education because they expose students to diverse perspectives and interpersonal dynamics. Deardorff (2006) argued that intercultural competence is increasingly essential in globalized workplaces where leaders must navigate cultural differences and communicate effectively across diverse teams.

In this regard, experiential learning activities improve students' confidence, adaptability, and workplace readiness. Simulations and practical projects also encourage critical thinking and strategic problem-solving by placing students in complex organizational scenarios requiring collaborative decision-making.

2.3 Leadership Competencies for Workplace Success

The competencies required for effective leadership have expanded significantly in response to changes in organizational structures and labor market expectations. Modern leaders are expected to combine technical expertise with interpersonal effectiveness and ethical awareness.

One of the most influential concepts in leadership studies is emotional intelligence, introduced by Goleman (1998). Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to understand and manage one's emotions while also recognizing and responding effectively to the emotions of others. Leaders with strong emotional intelligence are generally more effective in communication, conflict management, teamwork, and organizational motivation.

Communication skills are equally central to leadership effectiveness. Effective leaders must articulate visions clearly, facilitate collaboration, negotiate conflicts, and inspire organizational commitment. Critical thinking and adaptability are also crucial because organizations increasingly operate in uncertain and rapidly changing environments. Critical thinking is an essential 21st-century skill that enables individuals to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and solve problems effectively. In education, it equips learners to question, interpret, synthesize, and assess information critically throughout the learning process (Beniche, 2025).

Employers consistently emphasize the importance of soft skills in addition to technical business competencies. Day et al. (2014) found that leadership development programs incorporating mentoring, coaching, and reflective learning significantly enhance students' employability and workplace preparedness.

Ethical leadership has also become increasingly important due to corporate scandals and growing societal expectations for responsible management. Ethical leaders promote integrity, accountability, and socially responsible decision-making, thereby contributing to organizational trust and sustainability. Ethical leadership refers to a leader's practice of acting in accordance with accepted moral standards in both their behavior and relationships, while also encouraging similar ethical behavior among followers through open communication, reinforcement, and inclusive decision-making processes (Brown et al., 2005).

2.4 Challenges in Leadership Development

Although leadership development offers significant benefits, students frequently encounter challenges throughout the process. Leadership formation often involves overcoming interpersonal, emotional, and organizational obstacles that require resilience and self-awareness.

One common challenge involves communication and confidence. Students may struggle with public speaking, team coordination, or expressing opinions in collaborative settings. These difficulties can limit participation and hinder leadership growth. In this respect, educational settings should offer opportunities for students to challenge assumptions, engage

as responsible citizens, support the public good, and develop the skills needed to make meaningful contributions to their communities (Jacoby, 2009).

Cultural diversity within teams may also create communication barriers and interpersonal tensions. However, diverse group environments simultaneously provide valuable opportunities for developing adaptability, empathy, and intercultural competence. Another challenge concerns balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. MBA students often manage demanding schedules that combine coursework with employment obligations, making leadership participation more difficult.

Despite these challenges, confronting difficult situations contributes positively to leadership development. Leadership growth frequently emerges through reflection, conflict resolution, and practical problem-solving experiences that strengthen emotional resilience and self-confidence. Critical thinking helps students develop into responsible individuals who apply sound judgment in academic and daily life. Universities aim to prepare them as future leaders who contribute to society by raising awareness of social issues, promoting the common good, and engaging in community development. This process fosters key skills and knowledge needed to address complex modern challenges (Beniche, 2023b).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist principles. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring individuals' perceptions, experiences, and meanings because it allows for in-depth examination of social and educational phenomena. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to investigate MBA students' personal understandings of leadership development and workplace preparedness.

The study specifically utilized thematic analysis because it facilitates the identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis provides flexibility while allowing researchers to generate rich and meaningful insights from participants' narratives.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method because they encourage detailed participant responses while maintaining consistency across interviews. This approach allowed participants to discuss leadership experiences freely while ensuring alignment with the study's research objectives.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 40 MBA students enrolled in leadership-oriented business programs. Students came from diverse academic, professional, and cultural backgrounds, enabling the study to capture varied perspectives regarding leadership development.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants capable of providing meaningful insights into MBA leadership education. Participants were chosen based on their enrollment in MBA programs and their exposure to leadership-related learning experiences such as teamwork, presentations, case studies, and managerial projects.

The diversity of participants contributed to the richness of the data by incorporating different professional experiences, career aspirations, and educational expectations.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data were obtained through individual semi-structured interviews conducted with participants at the end of Semester 1 in 2026. The interviews addressed several key themes:

- Motivations for joining MBA programs
- Definitions and perceptions of leadership
- Leadership development experiences
- Challenges encountered during leadership learning
- Perceptions of workplace preparedness
- Recommendations for improving MBA leadership education

The interviews encouraged participants to reflect critically on their educational experiences and leadership growth. Open-ended questions enabled respondents to provide detailed examples and personal reflections, generating rich qualitative data suitable for thematic analysis.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, and voluntary participation. Responses were anonymized to protect participant identities.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts
2. Generation of initial codes identifying meaningful concepts and patterns
3. Searching for broader themes connecting related codes
4. Reviewing and refining thematic categories
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final analytical report

The researcher systematically examined recurring ideas, perceptions, and experiences related to leadership development. Coding focused on participants' descriptions of leadership understanding, educational experiences, challenges, and workplace preparation.

Themes were developed inductively from the data while also considering relevant theoretical frameworks such as transformational leadership and experiential learning theory.

4. Findings and Thematic Analysis

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Interpretations

Theme	Key Participant Perspectives	Interpretation
Motivation for MBA Enrollment	Career growth, leadership aspirations, entrepreneurship	MBA education is perceived as transformative and professionally strategic
Understanding Leadership	Inspiration, collaboration, ethical guidance	Students adopt transformational and relational leadership perspectives
Importance of Leadership Development	Team management, communication, strategic decision-making	Leadership is considered essential for professional success
Experiential Learning	Case studies, teamwork, presentations, workshops	Practical learning strongly enhances leadership competencies
Challenges in Leadership Development	Communication barriers, confidence issues, diversity management	Leadership growth involves emotional and interpersonal adaptation
Leadership and Workplace Success	Employability, confidence, organizational effectiveness	Leadership competencies enhance career readiness
Suggested Program Improvements	Mentorship, simulations, industry engagement	Students seek stronger connections between theory and practice
Essential Leadership Skills	Emotional intelligence, adaptability, communication	Leadership is multidimensional and practice-oriented

4.1 Motivation for MBA Enrollment

Participants described several motivations for enrolling in MBA programs, including career advancement, leadership ambitions, entrepreneurship, and professional transformation. Many students viewed the MBA as a pathway toward managerial and executive positions rather than merely an academic qualification.

Participants frequently associated MBA education with increased employability and international career opportunities. Several students emphasized the importance of acquiring strategic management competencies that would enable them to navigate organizational complexity and lead teams effectively.

These findings suggest that students perceive MBA education as both professionally transformative and leadership-oriented. The MBA is viewed not only as a source of technical business knowledge but also as a mechanism for personal and professional identity development.

4.2 Understanding Leadership

Students conceptualized leadership primarily as a collaborative and interpersonal process rather than an authoritarian form of control. Leadership was repeatedly associated with motivating others, guiding teams, encouraging collaboration, and supporting collective achievement.

Participants emphasized emotional intelligence, ethical behavior, empathy, and communication as central leadership qualities. Many respondents rejected hierarchical leadership models and instead favored transformational leadership approaches centered on inspiration and empowerment.

These findings align strongly with transformational leadership theory, which highlights leaders' capacity to influence, motivate, and develop followers through interpersonal engagement and shared vision.

4.3 Leadership Development in MBA Education

Participants consistently identified leadership development as one of the most valuable components of MBA education. Students emphasized that leadership competencies are essential for managing organizational challenges, coordinating teams, and making strategic decisions.

Several participants distinguished leadership abilities from technical knowledge, arguing that technical expertise alone is insufficient for long-term managerial success. Leadership skills such as communication, delegation, conflict resolution, and adaptability were viewed as equally important as analytical business competencies.

The findings indicate that MBA students recognize leadership development as integral to workplace preparedness and organizational effectiveness.

4.4 Experiential Learning as a Driver of Leadership Growth

Experiential learning emerged as one of the strongest themes within the study. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of group projects, presentations, simulations, workshops, and case studies in developing leadership competencies.

Students explained that these activities enabled them to practice communication, negotiation, delegation, and problem-solving within realistic collaborative environments. Teamwork experiences particularly contributed to students' understanding of interpersonal dynamics and conflict management.

Many participants stated that experiential learning activities were more impactful than traditional lectures because they provided opportunities for practical application and reflection. These findings strongly support Kolb's experiential learning theory and demonstrate the importance of active engagement in leadership education. Kolb (1984) argues that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience, where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience via reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation.

4.5 Challenges in Leadership Development

Participants identified several challenges encountered during leadership development. Communication barriers, lack of confidence, public speaking anxiety, and interpersonal conflicts within teams were commonly reported difficulties.

Cultural diversity within group work also created challenges related to communication styles, collaboration expectations, and conflict resolution. However, students frequently acknowledged that these difficulties contributed positively to personal growth by encouraging adaptability, empathy, and resilience.

Additionally, many MBA students struggled to balance academic responsibilities with professional and personal commitments. Despite these pressures, participants viewed

challenging experiences as important opportunities for developing emotional intelligence and leadership maturity.

4.6 Leadership and Workplace Success

Students strongly believed that leadership development contributes directly to workplace success and career advancement. Leadership competencies were associated with employability, managerial effectiveness, organizational influence, and strategic decision-making.

Participants emphasized that employers increasingly seek professionals capable of collaboration, communication, and adaptability. Leadership training was therefore viewed as essential for career progression and organizational competitiveness.

These findings indicate that MBA students perceive leadership not merely as a theoretical academic concept but as a practical and highly valued workplace competency.

4.7 Suggested Improvements to MBA Programs

Although participants expressed general satisfaction with their MBA experiences, they proposed several recommendations for improving leadership education.

Students emphasized the importance of:

- Mentorship and coaching opportunities
- Leadership simulations
- Industry partnerships
- Real-world consulting projects
- Networking opportunities
- Leadership-focused internships

Participants argued that stronger connections between academic instruction and workplace realities would significantly improve leadership preparedness and professional confidence.

4.8 Essential Leadership Competencies

Communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, strategic thinking, and ethical decision-making emerged as the most essential leadership competencies identified by participants.

Students emphasized that future organizational leaders must combine technical business knowledge with interpersonal and emotional capabilities. Leadership was therefore viewed as multidimensional, requiring both analytical and human-centered competencies.

The findings reinforce contemporary leadership literature emphasizing the importance of soft skills, emotional intelligence, and collaborative problem-solving in modern workplaces.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that MBA students perceive leadership development as a fundamental component of professional preparation and workplace success. Participants conceptualized leadership primarily through collaborative and transformational perspectives, emphasizing interpersonal influence, communication, and ethical responsibility rather than hierarchical authority.

The prominence of experiential learning within the findings strongly supports Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Raelin's (2007) practice-based leadership framework. Activities such as teamwork, presentations, case studies, and simulations allowed students to apply theoretical concepts in practical settings while simultaneously developing confidence and interpersonal competence.

The findings also highlight the growing importance of emotional intelligence within leadership education. Participants repeatedly emphasized empathy, communication, adaptability, and resilience as critical leadership attributes. These perspectives align closely with Goleman's (1998) argument that emotional intelligence significantly influences leadership effectiveness and organizational performance.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that leadership development extends beyond acquiring managerial knowledge. In 21st-century education, students are expected to acquire

the ability to locate information from diverse sources and to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate it effectively. This process enables them to reach logical conclusions and generate original and innovative ideas (Beniche, 2023b). Students viewed leadership as a developmental process involving self-awareness, reflection, conflict resolution, and interpersonal growth. Challenges such as communication difficulties and multicultural teamwork were not perceived solely as obstacles but also as opportunities for developing resilience and adaptability.

The findings additionally underscore the importance of bridging the gap between academic learning and workplace realities. Participants consistently requested greater industry engagement, mentorship, and practical leadership exposure. This suggests that MBA programs should strengthen experiential and industry-oriented learning opportunities to enhance employability and workplace readiness.

Overall, the study confirms that effective leadership education requires a balanced integration of theoretical instruction, experiential learning, emotional intelligence development, and reflective practice.

6. Implications for Higher Education

The study displays several important implications for MBA curriculum design and leadership education:

1. Universities should expand experiential learning opportunities such as simulations, consulting projects, and case competitions.
2. Leadership development should incorporate emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication training.
3. MBA programs should strengthen mentorship and coaching systems.
4. Institutions should promote multicultural collaboration and diversity-oriented teamwork.
5. Stronger partnerships between universities and industry organizations should be established.
6. Reflective learning and self-assessment activities should be integrated into leadership courses.
7. Leadership education should combine theoretical knowledge with authentic workplace experiences.

These strategies may significantly improve students' leadership effectiveness, employability, and workplace preparedness.

7. Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study relied on a relatively limited sample of MBA students, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data were based on self-reported perceptions and experiences that may be influenced by social desirability bias or personal interpretation.

Third, the research focused solely on the perspectives of MBA students and did not include other key stakeholders involved in leadership development, such as faculty members, program coordinators, university administrators, alumni, or employers. Including these stakeholders could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership competencies are designed, taught, assessed, and applied in professional settings.

Finally, the qualitative design prioritizes depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization. Future studies may adopt mixed-method or comparative approaches across institutions and countries.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that MBA programs:

- Increase opportunities for practical leadership training
- Expand mentorship and leadership coaching initiatives
- Strengthen partnerships with industry professionals
- Integrate leadership simulations and experiential projects

- Encourage reflective learning and self-assessment
- Promote intercultural collaboration and diversity awareness
- Incorporate emotional intelligence development into curricula
- Offer leadership-focused internships and workplace placements

These initiatives may strengthen students' leadership capabilities and improve organizational readiness.

9. Conclusion

This study explored MBA students' perceptions of leadership development and workplace readiness through qualitative thematic analysis. The findings reveal that participants regard leadership development as a fundamental component of professional growth, organizational effectiveness, and long-term career success. Leadership was predominantly conceptualized as a collaborative, transformational, and ethically grounded process that extends beyond technical managerial competence.

The analysis further demonstrated that experiential learning opportunities, including teamwork, case studies, simulations, presentations, and real-world projects, are instrumental in cultivating key leadership competencies such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal effectiveness. Participants also emphasized the importance of mentorship, engagement, and practical workplace exposure in fostering leadership capabilities and facilitating the transition from academic study to professional practice.

These findings carry important implications for leadership education in MBA programs. Business schools should move beyond knowledge-based instruction by embedding experiential learning, reflective practice, partnerships, and leadership coaching throughout the curriculum. Such an integrated approach can foster not only managerial expertise but also the ethical judgment, resilience, emotional intelligence, and collaborative capacity required to lead effectively in increasingly complex and dynamic organizational environments.

Future research should build on these findings by examining leadership development across diverse institutional and cultural contexts using larger and more heterogeneous samples. Comparative and longitudinal studies could investigate how leadership competencies evolve throughout MBA programs and into graduates' professional careers. Additionally, incorporating the perspectives of faculty members, employers, and organizational leaders would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the alignment between MBA leadership education and workplace expectations. Such research would contribute to the development of evidence-based leadership curricula that better prepare future managers to address the evolving challenges of the global workplace.

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