



Leadership as service: developing a character education program for university students in Spain

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Abstract

This paper describes the development and implementation of a character education program at the University of Navarra. The Leadership as Service Program has been developed in collaboration with the Oxford Character Project, and has adapted its Global Leadership Initiative to the Spanish context. The purpose of the Leadership as Service Program is to help students develop a sense of personal purpose, and virtues that are specific to leadership, such as prudence, humility, gratitude, resilience, and service. The methodology of the program follows the seven strategies of character education and includes a mentoring program. In order to adapt the Global Leadership Initiative to the Spanish context, the Leadership as Service Program was integrated as much as possible into the fabric of the University of Navarra by means of (1) facilitating a new initiative to develop workshops on purpose; (2) incorporating an existing mentoring program; (3) positioning local actors as experts, and (4) dialogue with stakeholders within the university. First results indicate that the Leadership as Service Program makes a valuable contribution to the ethical and professional development of students, which corroborates with the findings of the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative.

Keywords Leadership as service · Character education · University students · Sense of purpose · Virtue ethics · Mentoring

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Introduction

Following the successful extracurricular program for postgraduate students developed by the Oxford Character Project called the Global Leadership Initiative (Brooks et al. 2019), the Civic Humanism Center for Character and Professional Ethics at the University of Navarra has developed a similar program for upper undergraduate students called “Leadership as Service: Developing Character and a Sense of Purpose”, in collaboration with the Oxford Character Project. In this paper, we explain how GLI has been adapted in order to develop the Leadership as Service Program within the specific context of the University of Navarra in Spain. The first part of the paper addresses the conceptualization of ‘leadership as service’. The second part of the paper presents the program and the educational methodology. In the third part we elaborate on the individual sessions, and the fourth part explains the mentoring program. This is followed by a thematic analysis of the preliminary findings of the qualitative evaluation of the Leadership as Service Program, which ran as a pilot version in the Spring 2023, and a conclusion. Our focus is both conceptual, asking the question what is a neo-Aristotelian approach to leadership as service, and practical-educational, showing how the sessions and mentoring practices are designed to contribute to the development of leadership as service within the virtue ethical approach.

Leadership as service: a virtue ethical approach

University students are likely to take up positions of leadership in society, whether in the corporate world, law, medicine, politics, or any other field or profession. There is an ethical concern that they do so responsibly, meaning with a sensitivity to the needs of others and with a focus on the good of the whole. The Leadership as Service Program has been developed in order to help students flourish and to help them serve society as leaders in their fields.

The conception of leadership as service resonates with the conception of “servant leadership” developed by Greenleaf (1977). According to Greenleaf, servant leaders are those who put other people’s needs, aspirations and interests above their own. Rather than exerting power and being served and obeyed by others, they are servants first and leaders second both in intent and in self-conception. Servant leaders have the good of their followers in mind, and seek to transform their followers to become wiser, freer, and more likely themselves to become servants (Greenleaf 1977).

Over the years, Greenleaf’s servant leadership proposal has received significant attention but also criticism, not in the least by feminists who understand this form of leadership to be a masculine conception (Reynolds 2014), and those who critique the naiveness of using the word “servant” while ignoring the historically occurring abuse and subjugation of servants (Marina and Fonteneau 2012). Others question the ethical dimension of servant leadership, arguing that the theory

of servant leadership is not sufficiently integrated with a moral philosophy that provides a servant leader with a moral compass (Langhof and Gueldenberg 2021). This may be due to a split between a “dual mode of virtue and action,” whereby virtue is understood as merely “co-existing” with effective leadership (Sousa and van Dierendonck 2017, pp. 13–14). Langhof and Gueldenberg (2021) argue that the lack of an integrated moral philosophy may result in a leader with a narrow and even morally mistaken understanding of whom one serves; this could be another ruler, one’s subordinates, or the common good. Furthermore, it may lead to moral ambiguity, or an overreliance on the moral framework of the followers. Finally, the lack of an integrated moral philosophy may result in a problem of motivation because in reality a leader’s motivation to serve is strongly associated with the particular value system or worldview.

In shifting from ‘servant leadership’ to labelling our program ‘leadership as service’, we seek to avoid the negative association with the historically subjugated servant. In addition, we argue alongside others (Newstead and Riggio 2023, in particular Ferrero et al. 2023; Potts and Quandt 2023; Hackett and Wang 2012; Cameron 2011; Pearce et al. 2006) that a virtue ethical approach to leadership is essential in order to provide leadership with an ethical core. More specifically, the Leadership as Service Program works within the neo-Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics (Kristjánsson 2015a, 2020). Five aspects of a virtue ethical approach are of particular importance. First, from a virtue ethical perspective, a good leader serves others by being oriented towards the common good (Ferrero et al. 2023). Whatever constitutes the common good in concrete circumstances remains a somewhat open question, but we can make two clear stipulations. The first is that the common good is sharply contrasted with a private good of leader(s) themselves. Aristotle (2005) calls organizations focused on the common benefit ‘just’, and those focused on the exclusive benefit of the leaders ‘mistaken’ (*Pol.* 1279a16–20). For example, a leader who uses their position for private enrichment is not a good leader from the neo-Aristotelian perspective. Furthermore, this perspective on the common good provides a substantive claim, in that it is equated with bringing all members of the organization or community closer to the goal of living flourishing lives (Kraut 2002).

The second aspect of the virtue ethical approach of particular relevance to leadership as service is its special emphasis on the development of prudence or practical wisdom (*phronesis*) (Kristjánsson et al. 2021, 2015a; Schwartz and Sharpe 2010). Prudence is the virtue of being able to deliberate well in moral terms about what to do or how to act. It plays a guiding role in the development of any moral virtue, since all these require moral deliberation (Kristjánsson 2015a; Annas 2011). To act gratefully, for example, requires moral deliberation about when to be grateful, towards whom, to what extent, and at what moment, given the circumstances. As Aristotle (2005) noted, prudence is especially relevant to leaders, who often find themselves in a position of making or interpreting rules rather than simply following these (*Pol.* 1277b26; see also Oakley and Cocking 2001). As such, leaders require practical wisdom in order to decide on the right thing to do.

Thirdly, the virtue ethical approach is developmental and lends itself well to an educational setting (Kristjánsson 2015a, 2020; Swanton 2016; Peters 1981). Following the neo-Aristotelian tradition, a virtue is a stable disposition or character trait

acquired through the intentional repetition of good actions: “When good acts are freely and repeatedly performed, the agent is able to ever more keenly perceive the good, deliberate, decide, and act well, and experience emotions in an appropriate way” (Ferrero et al. 2023). The virtues are like skills that are acquired by means of practice, just as learning to play a musical instrument requires practice; human beings become good by doing good. The focus is on development since, after all, the perfectly virtuous person is “a pretty rarefied ideal” (Kristjánsson 2015a, p. 97), and Aristotle himself indicates that the practicing the virtues continues throughout one’s entire life (*NE* 1098a18).

The fourth reason for anchoring leadership as service in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics speaks to the motivation for becoming good leaders. According to Aristotle (2009), the development of virtuous character is a good in and of itself. Students may apply to the Leadership as Service Program because they want to make a difference to the world, help others, and become good leaders of organizations. What they may discover in the course of the program is that these valuable goals translate into the personal goal of flourishing as a human being, which in turn may foster their motivation to grow. Intrinsically motivating factors are those that result in an internal reward, such as learning something for its own sake, growing as a person, developing self-esteem and self-actualization (Guillén 2021). Activities that are pursued for intrinsically motivating factors are more sustainable than those pursued merely for extrinsic rewards. Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics provides leadership as service with intrinsically motivating factors.

Fifthly, the neo-Aristotelian approach has the advantage of being answerable to empirical research (Kristjánsson 2015a; Wright et al. 2021). Aristotle’s naturalism is based on the assumption that moral properties, such as justice or generosity, are not transcendent notions but ontological facts that can be observed empirically in the world. The difficulty is in trying to measure virtue that pertains to the inner condition of the person even though the consequences of a virtuous disposition display themselves empirically in behavior. Despite this challenge, there have been major advances in measuring virtue, in particular from interdisciplinary approaches (Wright et al. 2021). The consensus in neo-Aristotelian character education is that the impact of an educational intervention can be measured empirically, and one of the Leadership as Service Program’s objectives is to measure the impact of the Program on the character of the students.

The virtue ethical approach to leadership has important educational implications. Virtue ethics pays significant attention to the individual student as ‘acting agent’, who seeks to answer questions such as ‘What kind of life is worth living?’ and ‘In performing this action, what kind of person am I becoming?’ (Rocchi et al. 2020). This personal approach to education invites small class settings and individual mentoring, both of which are part of the Leadership as Service Program. The personal approach to education also explains why the Leadership as Service Program dedicates a significant amount of time to workshops on personal purpose. At the same time, within the virtue ethical approach community and friendships play an important role. The virtue ethical approach is relational, in that virtues are developed as part of social relationships in a community that seeks to promote virtues. Therefore, several important strategies of character education include paying attention to the

social context in which students are invited to develop virtues, such as friendships, moral reminders, and moral exemplars (Lamb et al. 2022). In what follows, we will explain the Leadership as Service Program and the educational strategies.

The Leadership as Service Program: content and methodology

The Leadership as Service Program ran as a nine-week-long pilot version during the Spring of 2023. The Program involved 75 min long seminar-style sessions that promoted discussion and personal reflection, and involved activities to practice several of the virtues. For the concluding session of the Program, we invited a guest speaker with significant leadership experience. Next to the sessions, all students in the Leadership as Service Program participated in the Tu&Co mentoring program of the University of Navarra (Lleó et al. 2020).

The Leadership as Service Program was offered to 3rd, 4th, and 5th year students in the Faculty of Economics and Business. Students were recruited by means of a letter from the Faculty's vice-dean for student affairs, which is the ordinary way of informing students about similar activities. The program received 65 applications of which 17 students were selected on a semi-random basis. We made an initial selection of students with the aim to obtain a representative sample of the student population in terms of year, gender, nationality, motivation, and major. From within this pool, a final selection was made randomly to get to the 17 students. We kept the class size small so as to allow for a personal approach to education, ample room for discussion, and because each student is linked to a personal mentor, which involves a significant investment on the part of the faculty connected to the Program. The students who were not selected to the Program were asked to be part of the control group. The pilot-version of the Leadership as Service Program ran as an extracurricular activity, and the students did not receive any credits for participating. A certificate of attendance was offered to those who completed the Program.

The content of the Leadership as Service Program mirrors the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative curriculum in several ways; it trains similar virtues and there is an overlap of readings and other source materials shared by the Oxford Character Project. Both programs make a conscious effort to promote a sense of community, and the Leadership as Service Program offered standing lunches before each session in order to create informal opportunities to socialize, support each other, and share experiences.

Even though the Leadership as Service Program and the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative share a general orientation, theoretical background, and topics and materials, in several ways the two are distinct. Firstly, the Leadership as Service Program dedicates significant and specific attention to developing a sense of purpose. Two purpose sessions were conducted as part of the pilot-program, and it was clear from the evaluations that students found the sessions particularly useful and felt that more time should be spent on the topic. Subsequent versions of the Leadership as Service Program will dedicate three sessions on purpose. Secondly, the Leadership as Service Program has incorporated an existing mentoring program (Lleó et al. 2020) as part of the educational intervention (Table 1).

Table 1 Topics, readings, and activities of the Leadership as Service Program

Nr.	Topic	Discussion material	Activities
1.	What kind of leaders does society need?	Guest lecture by Edward Brooks, Oxford Character Project on 'Character 101'	- Q&A
2.	Personal purpose	Optional: Rey, C., Almandoz, J., Montaner, A. (2019). Nurturing Personal Purpose at Work. In: Rey, C., Bastons, M., Sotok, P. (eds) <i>Purpose-driven Organizations</i> . Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.	- Developing your personal narrative - Identifying your values
3.	Personal purpose	--	- Connecting the dots: the footprint you want to leave on the world
4.	Humility	R. Houghaard & J. Carter. 2018. Ego is the Enemy of Good Leadership. <i>Harvard Business Review</i> , Nov. 6. Accessed 12 March 2024	- Class discussion - Humility journal (7 days): "Who helped to make your day successful?"
5.	Prudence	Barry Schwartz' TED talk on "Using our practical wisdom. How do we do the right thing?'" Accessed 12 March 2024.	- Reflection on personal experience - Class discussion
6.	Resilience	D.Brooks. 2016. 'Struggle.' In: <i>The Road to Character</i> . Penguin.	- Class discussion
7.	Gratitude	David Steindl-Rast's TED talk on "Want to be happy? Be grateful." Accessed 12 March 2024.	- Class discussion - Gratitude journal (7 days) "Daily list a specific blessing, cherished interaction, or obstacle that you avoided or overcame"
8.	Leadership as service	Episode 10 of the HBO series Band of Brothers	- Class discussion
9.	Concluding session	Guest lecture by Miguel Sanz, former president of Navarra on 'leadership as service in politics'	- Q&A

The Leadership as Service Program is based on a specific educational methodology that is appropriate to its virtue ethical approach and shared with the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative, namely, the seven strategies of character education (Lamb et al. 2022). The seven strategies of character education are: “(1) Habituation through practice; (2) reflection on personal experience; (3) engagement with virtuous exemplars; (4) dialogue that increases virtue literacy; (5) awareness of situational variables; (6) moral reminders, and (7) friendships of mutual accountability.” In the table below we show which of the different strategies were applied to which sessions (Table 2).

The Leadership as Service Program: the sessions

The first two sessions of the Leadership as Service Program are devoted to personal purpose. Developing a sense of personal purpose has been shown to be of great importance (Colby 2020; Malin 2018; Malin et al. 2017; Bronk 2014). Young adults often express a need for reflecting on how they want to live their lives and how they want to contribute to the world. Even small educational interventions about purpose are shown to be of benefit (Bundick 2011). At the same time, universities lack structured opportunities to help students think about their life’s purpose (Kronman 2008; Reuben 1996; see for an important exception Mendonça et al. 2024).

Whereas there is increasing attention to the development of personal purpose within the virtue ethical approach to leadership (Ferrero et al. 2023), disagreement exists over whether personal purpose can be considered as a virtue or even as a ‘meta-virtue’ that helps to coordinate virtues (Han 2015; Mendonça et al. 2024), or whether personal purpose should be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition of human flourishing (Kristjánsson 2020). In the latter case, having a sense of personal purpose functions not as a virtue strictly speaking but, rather, as a “blueprint of the good life” that helps a person to orient the virtues and motivate the development of specific virtues (Kristjánsson 2015a, p. 99). As part of the Leadership as Service Program, we take the development of a sense of purpose to be a constitutive element of personal flourishing and a meaningful life (VanderWeele 2017; Damon 2009; Emmons 2003). Having a sense of purpose supplies guidance, coherence, motivation, and meaning to the pursuit of virtues. A sense of purpose orients one’s life as a whole, and everyday actions and decisions within it (McKnight and Kashdan 2009). However, as Kristjánsson (2015a, 2020, p. 41) has pointed out, considering ‘personal purpose’ as a virtue on its own and providing it with a meta-directive role in relation to the other virtues does not sit easily with the meta-directive role of Aristotelian *phronesis*. In the Leadership as Service Program, we understand personal purpose to involve awareness about one’s specific and concrete life-purpose. As Frankl (2004, p.113) indicates, “we should not look for an abstract meaning to life, for each one has his own mission to fulfill in it; each one must carry out the concrete task. Therefore, neither can he be replaced in the function, nor can his life be repeated; his task is as unique as unity is his opportunity to implement it.” At the same time, the Leadership as Service Program recognizes the close connection between developing a sense of purpose and the cultivation of *phronesis* (Malin

Table 2 Strategies of character education (Lamb et al. 2022) of the Leadership as Service Program

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	ACTIVITY
Habituation through practice	Students are invited to practice a particular virtue	Students are assigned to keep a humility journal (session 4) and a gratitude journal (session 7) for one week each
Reflection on personal experience	Students are invited to think about a particular virtue in relation to one's own knowledge, skills, abilities, and/or strengths, and the benefits from operating with this awareness.	Students spend some time responding to a number of reflection prompts that connect to the specific virtue (and, eventually, reading) for that week. How do their personal experiences relate? (sessions 4, 5, 6, 7)
Engagement with virtuous exemplars	Students are invited to think about a particular virtuous example such as a humble leader or generous friend, or they think about an exemplar in the reading.	Students discuss an exemplar with their peers and the class (sessions 6, 8)
Dialogue that increases virtue literacy	Students are invited to discuss the virtue that is the focus of the session, and to talk honestly and openly - in real time and/or after the fact - about one's own experiences with the particular virtue.	Students discuss the character virtues involved and are invited to write a short summary (sessions 4–8).
Awareness of situational variables	Students are invited to explore how one's identity, for example, gender, ethnicity, or religious affiliation, may or may not inhibit the practice of virtue.	Students discuss the situational difficulties encountered by a virtuous exemplar (session 6).
Moral reminders	Students are invited to set time aside to routinely write, share, and/or express the practice of a specific virtue.	Students are assigned to keep a humility journal (session 4) and a gratitude journal (session 7) for one week each.
Friendship of mutual accountability	Students are invited to explore how friendships with classmates, advisors, mentors, and coaches keep you honest about virtue	Students discuss a movie centered around friendship and virtue (session 8).

et al. 2017). One the main roles of *phronesis* is to morally assess the ways towards one's purpose.

Cultivating a sense of purpose transcends self-interest (Bronk 2014). Some have critiqued a conception of leadership based on personal purpose as lacking of a social orientation (Kempster et al. 2011), but in the Leadership as Service Program the social orientation and 'contribution beyond the self' are essential elements of both the conceptualization of personal purpose and the exercises in the Program. We conceptualize purpose as the contribution that a person, from his or her uniqueness, decides to make to others (Lleó et al. 2022). Developing one's personal purpose requires reflection on one's identity, meaning, and mission (Florez-Jimenez et al. 2021). Reflection on one's identity means delving into one's own history and unique reality. This implies an awareness of one's personal narrative and lived experiences, whereby one's life gains in comprehensiveness and coherence (Martela and Steger 2016). Reflecting on meaning entails an awareness of one's personal values and how these are prioritized. Reflecting on mission enhances the awareness of the contribution that one wants to make to others and to the world. We presuppose that each person has unique value and dignity, and from this uniqueness one may derive the distinct way that each person puts one's talents at the service of others (Martela and Steger 2016; Costin and Vignoles 2019). 'Identity' and 'meaning' have a reflective-introspective nature, whereas 'mission' is behavioral-relational and expresses one's service to others.

The two sessions on purpose that are part of the Leadership as Service Program focus, first, on 'identity' in asking students to draw up a chronological axis describing significant moments in their personal history, the people they were with, and the reasons for having selected these moments. The second exercise focuses on 'meaning', asking the students to select five values from a list of 92 (Miller et al. 2001) while thinking about people whom they admire. This thought-exercise helps them to think about the values that these people embody and to prioritize the values that feed into their own sense of purpose. There is a third exercise to work on 'meaning' that asks the students to write to people who know them well, asking them about the student's positive qualities. Students are encouraged to develop an awareness of their talents and cultivate an attitude of gratitude by means of reflecting on the responses. The fourth exercise addresses 'mission and commitment to contribute to society'. The exercise synthesizes the information and insights from the three previous ones, asking students to bring together their personal history, values, and talents in a single narrative. Students are subsequently encouraged to think about how they can contribute to relationships with family, friends, classmates, and the wider world from their own uniqueness.

Following the sessions on purpose, the Leadership as Service Program continues with the sessions on the virtues: humility, prudence, resilience, gratitude, and service. The selection of virtues follows the virtue ethical approach to leadership as service and is based on the division of virtues made by the Jubilee Framework's (2020) into: intellectual (prudence), moral (humility and gratitude), performance (resilience), and civic (service) virtues.

Firstly, humility has been understood as a core virtue in the servant leadership approach (van Dierendonck 2011). Humility is closely connected to self-knowledge,

in that it consists of owning one's limitations, weaknesses, and mistakes. Humble leaders are aware of, and attentive to, their limitations and disposed to acknowledge their reliance on other people in the organization or their communities (Argandoña 2015; de Haan 2016). As Baehr (2021, p. 82) puts it, "humility mitigates and negates the sense of distorted pride that compels us to resist our limitations and to strive for control." The session on humility comprises two strategies of character education: dialogue that increases virtue literacy, and habituation through practice. In order to foster dialogue, students reflected on the notion of 'confident humility,' understood as being secure enough in one's strengths to acknowledge one's weaknesses. We discussed a short article in *Harvard Business Review* (Hougaard and Carter 2018), and students were given the assignment of a humility diary with the instruction to write down the names of all people who were part of making one successful on a particular day.

Prudence (*phronesis*) has a central role in the virtue ethical approach to leadership as service. The unique position of prudence raises the question whether or not it should be, or can be, 'isolated' from the other virtues and trained on its own. We have decided to offer a separate session on practical wisdom in order to enhance virtue literacy and in recognition that *phronesis* has a logic of its own (Kristjánsson and Fowers 2024). During the session, students were asked to identify and write down situations in which they acted with practical wisdom, and situations where they felt they erred. They were then asked to reflect on what, in retrospect, they would change about their reasoning, and whether their error was due to miscalculation, insufficient consideration of alternative solutions, lack of experience, or unsuccessful emotional regulation. Students also watched Barry Schwartz' TED talk on "Using our practical wisdom. How do we do the right thing?" and discussed the saying: "Well, to love well and to work well, you need wisdom ... Rules and incentives are no substitute for wisdom".

The virtue of resilience is considered to be a 'performance virtue' (Jubilee 2020) that helps a person to commit to a moral life. Resilience is an important virtue for the leader who seeks to serve others and do what is right in the face of inevitable difficulties and challenges. Resilience carries with it a certain aspect of classical fortitude, in that a resilient person is able to prudently deal with fears and anxieties, and possesses the ability to realistically bounce back from adversity. The session on resilience promotes virtue literacy and engagement with a virtuous exemplar by having students read, and reflect on, a chapter from *The Road to Character* by David Brooks about the life of American social activist Dorothy Day, focusing on how she deals with the setbacks that come on her path.

The virtue of gratitude has been shown to contribute significantly to human flourishing (VanderWeele 2020). Gratitude involves possessing an authentic sense of recognition and appreciation for the positive realities of one's life and the ability to see that other people have contributed to these positive realities. The session on gratitude focused on moral reasoning and invited a critical discussion of the simplistic idea that feeling grateful is always a positive thing without taking into account its various dimensions, such as whether there should be a benefactor to be grateful to, and whether gratitude can be mixed with feelings of obligation or guilt (Morgan and Gulliford 2022; Morgan et al. 2015; Kristjánsson 2015b). In addition, students were

asked to keep a gratitude journal for a week (taken from Emmons 2013), in order to promote habituation through practice, reflection on personal experience, and the possibility of moral reminders.

The final regular session in the Leadership as Service Program is dedicated to ‘service’, and is meant to bring together the discussions on purpose and on the different virtues. After a discussion of what kind of leadership qualities evoke trust, students watched part of an episode of the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*. Students were asked to distinguish between virtuous leadership and charismatic leadership, and between leadership needed to handle complexity versus leadership needed to handle change by means of reflecting on the virtues - among which humility, resilience, and gratitude - embodied by Sergeant Lipton, one of the characters in the miniseries. Students reflected on how Sergeant Lipton becomes a reference in the battalion, keeps the soldiers united, helps sustain them, comforts them in their performance, and helps them become better people in the process.

The Leadership as Service Program: mentoring

In addition to participating in the sessions, students participated in the Tu&Co mentoring program of the University of Navarra (Lleó et al. 2020).¹ In higher education, mentoring is conceived as a specific component of an educational process that enables personal and professional development (Law et al. 2020; Crespi 2020; Johnson 2015). Personal mentoring helps the development of competencies and skills that unleashes students’ full potential (Schofield 2018). Mentoring programs have proliferated in universities around the world (Law et al. 2020), including in the Spanish context (Queiruga-Dios et al. 2023; Crespi and García-Ramos 2021; Crespi 2020; Lleó et al. 2018; Alonso et al. 2010).

The Leadership as Service Program contains mentoring as part of its educational intervention because it is considered as a tool for character development (Moberg 2014). Mentoring easily fits with several of the identified strategies for character education, such as dialogue that increases virtue literacy, moral reminders, and friendships of mutual accountability (Lamb et al. 2022). The mentoring during the Leadership as Service Program involved six meetings with their personal mentor for each student.

The Tu&Co program is based on developing a set of competencies defined as habitual behaviors that allow one to be successful when acting in different personal and professional spheres, helping students to grow as human beings (Cardona and García-Lombardía 2005). The Tu&Co program involves twelve competences: communication, social skills, teamwork, conflict management, initiative, optimism, time management, self-knowledge, decision-making, self-restraint, emotional balance, and integrity. The list of competences connects to the virtues that are at the heart of the Leadership as Service Program. For example, the competence of ‘decision-making’ is defined in the Tu&Co program as “the ability to understand the causes of

¹ For a more detailed description of the Tu&Co mentoring program we refer to Lleó et al. 2020.

problems and establish criteria to solve them, generating alternatives when having to decide when faced with a problem or action to take. Ability to make decisions appropriately and at the right time” (Lleó et al. 2020, p. 58), which connects to Aristotelian *phronesis*. Other competences that connect closely to the virtues are: the competence of self-restraint and the virtue of moderation, the competence of integrity and virtue of integrity or wholeness, the competences of taking initiative and optimism and the virtue of resilience, the competence of self-knowledge and the role of self-knowledge and self-reflection in developing any virtue, and the competences of communication and conflict management and the virtue of humility.

At the start of the mentoring program, the students self-assess their own competences by means of a questionnaire. In addition, each student asks three people in their proximity such as friends, parents, or colleagues to provide an external assessment of the student’s competences. This allows each student to compare how they see themselves with how others see them. The result of the assessments (self-reporting and other-reporting) are put together in a competency profile. The competency profile provides the basis for the first meeting with the mentor and the development of a feasible and self-motivating action plan for which the student selects one to two competences to work on. For each competence, the Tu&Co program handbook (Lleó et al. 2020) offers a description, a list of characteristic behaviors and concerns, questions for reflection, concrete suggestions for improvement, and resources in the form of articles, video’s, tools, books, and films. Students are provided with a workbook that helps them reflect on their behavior and progress (Lleó et al. 2020).

Throughout the mentoring process, mentors are encouraged to use the Tu&Co handbook at their discretion, and put the student’s needs, hopes, aspirations, and concerns first. This requires a flexible attitude on the part of the mentor, and is essential for maintaining a relationship of trust between mentor and mentee (Johnson 2015; Guillén et al. 2011).

First qualitative findings

In what follows, we report a selection of first findings, which are based on the questionnaire given to the students as part of the selection process, and the open-ended qualitative questionnaire distributed to the participants in the Leadership as Service Program upon completion of the program. We use the methodology of thematic analysis in order to identify, analyze, and report patterns of meaning within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Our concern is with the ‘keyness’ of different themes that capture something important in relation to the overall research question (Braun and Clarke 2006), asking whether the Leadership as Service Program has a positive effect on the students. Thematic analysis has the advantages of usefully summarizing key features and offer a ‘thick description’ of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This said, there is a risk of not applying the method rigorously, and our findings are limited because the response rate (n) is limited. In what follows, we show how the data coheres around several central themes.

The selection process included two open-ended questions. The first was: “Why are you interested in the activity?” Reviewing the responses of the 65 applicants, it

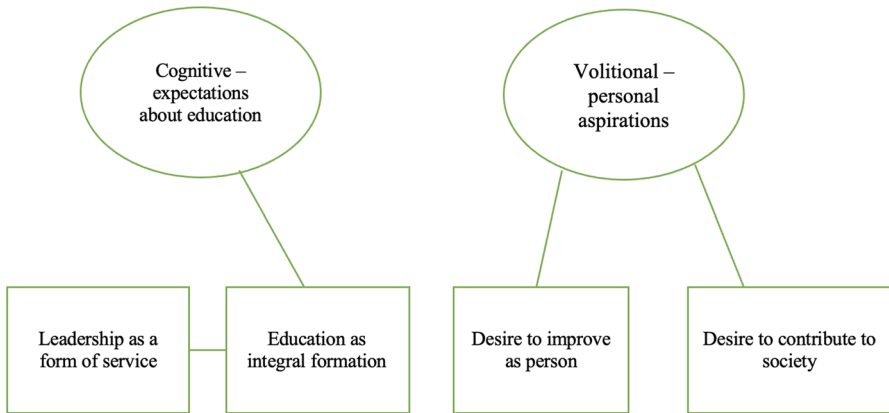
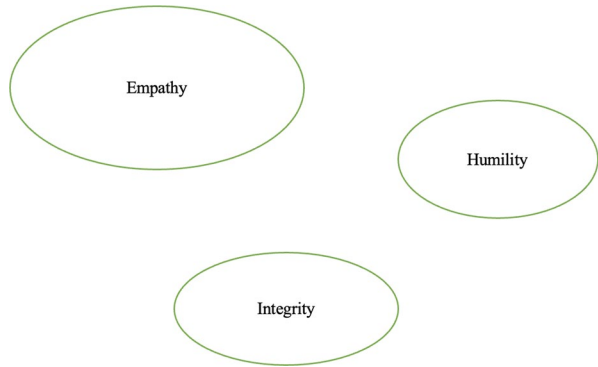


Fig. 1 Thematic map showing two main themes

appears that students were interested in the Leadership as Service Program mainly for the following four reasons: (a) the very idea of understanding leadership as a form of service, which seemed novel to them; (b) because of their desire to improve as people, which they connected to their desire to become a good professional; (c) because of their desire to contribute to society; and (d) because it seemed to them that the Leadership as Service Program was addressing essential aspects of the kind of education that they expected to receive at the University of Navarra. One student explained that “within my education at the university, I do not seek merely technical learning but also a human education and personal development in values that I believe differentiates and distinguishes the University of Navarra from other prestigious universities.” Another noted that “it seems to me that the program embodies very well what the University of Navarra seeks to teach, a desire to become great professionals and great leaders in order to serve society”. Several students observed a link to the Core Curriculum Program of the University of Navarra, that is, several students see the Leadership as Service Program in line with the institution’s commitment to providing a liberal education. For instance, one student wrote “[The Leadership as Service Program] seems a proposal [...] that can lead me to a degree of self-knowledge and personal development superior to that achieved through the core curriculum courses” (Fig. 1).

The second open-ended question of the selection form was: “Indicate what virtues you would consider necessary to exercise good leadership and why. If you have had any personal leadership experience, you can reflect on it.” The vast majority of respondents indicated that the primary virtue is empathy, followed by humility and integrity. One student explained, referring to empathy, that “as a student representative, I have to make an effort in moments/conflicts that may not concern me, but even so, I have to put as much effort into them as if they affected me directly.” Another one said that “humility is fundamental in leadership. (...) A leader must be aware of his or her limitations and weaknesses, and act accordingly.” Finally, a student considered that “integrity is essential to build trust and maintain high ethical standards in the workplace.” (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2 Thematic map showing three central themes



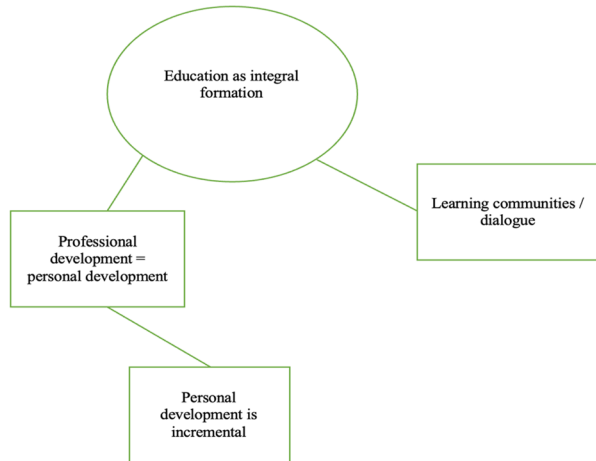
The anonymous open-ended qualitative questionnaire was distributed online to the participants in the Leadership as Service Program at the end of the concluding session. Of the 17 program participants, 13 responses (76%) were received.² The answers indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the program. They highlighted as particularly positive the Tu&Co mentoring meetings, the preparation of the sessions, the trusting environment that was created, and the fact that the dynamics of the sessions had encouraged personal reflection. As areas for improvement, students pointed out that the Leadership as Service Program had been too short, and that the topics covered in the sessions and the development of virtuous habits required more time. They also expressed a desire for more virtuous exemplars in the Program materials. On the average, students indicated that they completed 69% of the activities planned for outside of the sessions (readings, preparation for session discussions, character-building practices, etc.).

Even though the outcomes of the open-ended qualitative questionnaire are highly preliminary, they coincide with the reported results of the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative, which indicate that character education programs “can make valuable contributions to the ethical and professional development of postgraduate students” (Brooks et al. 2019, p. 170). We will highlight the following three themes that crystallized in the Leadership as Service Program open-ended qualitative questionnaire: (a) the relationship between personal and professional growth; (b) the cultivation of reflective practice; and (c) motivation for personal improvement.

Firstly, the participants situate the question “What kind of leader do I want to be?” in the wider context of “What kind of person do I want to be?” (cf. Brooks et al. 2019, pp. 174–175). One participant noted that “sometimes managers do not have the employee or the social impact of [their] actions in mind. [...] I think it is essential that we grow as people and that everything should serve to make a better

² Possibly, no more answers were received because the day of the closing session was close to the BA Thesis submission date and few attendees were present. Those who did not complete it that day could do it online until a month later. The responses were generally not very long, perhaps because of the circumstances mentioned above. However, they helped know the participants’ perception of the program’s development and the extent to which the objectives were fulfilled.

Fig. 3 Thematic map showing one main theme



society.” In general, the responses to the questionnaire refer more to personal growth than to development in the professional field. Another student noted, “It has made me reflect on how important it is [...] to personally develop yourself and think about your contribution to others. Everything has an impact around us.”

Several responses referred positively to the purpose sessions: “I have a clear idea of what I want to do in the future thanks to this program,” and “In fact, it changed my idea of purpose considerably.” This coincides with the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative’s objective of “helping students consider their life path in terms of a ‘sense of vocation’ (...) rather than simply career success” (Brooks et al. 2019, p. 176). Respondents indicate that the Leadership as service Program has helped them to “know yourself better and know your weaknesses and strengths” and to “better understand my biography” (Fig. 3).

Secondly, the Leadership as Service Program’s methodology provided a context for personal reflection through the creation of “learning communities” (Brooks et al. 2019, p. 175). Participants emphasize an appreciation for the climate of collaborative dialogue, facilitated by the pre-session communal meals where everyone could speak and be heard. They note that “all sessions had a strong discussion and listening component” and “built trust.” In addition, students point out that the sessions encouraged them to think for themselves: “The contents were explained dynamically, in such a way that the information was conveyed to us, inviting us to think”, and “[The sessions] make you think, [they are] reflective.”

Finally, based on the responses, we may say that the Leadership as Service Program motivates personal improvement and has succeeded in initiating processes of change. To the central question, “Has this program helped you develop your character and sense of purpose?” all respondents answered “Yes.” One student explained, “After each session, I have spent time implementing what I have learned, and it has been felt over the months.” Several students showed an awareness that character development is a slow maturation process and that it is necessary, as one participant points out, “to keep watering this seed.”

Conclusion

In this paper, we described the design of the Leadership as Service Program: Developing Character and a Sense of Purpose at the University of Navarra, sharing its conceptual approach of ‘leadership as service from a virtue ethical perspective’ and the practical-educational strategies employed.

Based on the first qualitative results, we conclude that the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative, with significant adaptations, works in the context of the University of Navarra. The sessions and materials have proven to be useful for the students, and the preliminary results of the qualitative questionnaire indicate that both programs – the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative and the Leadership as Service Program - have a similar effect on the students. One lesson that we take from the experience of setting up the Leadership as Service Program is the importance of making connections to existing structures at the university, such as the Tu&Co mentoring program. This ensures an initial embeddedness of the program and makes it easier to build a team of teachers and researchers who can run the program.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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