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‘Leadership Development for Future Leaders in a VUCA World: Defining
the Population and Reimagining Capability Building’

Faculty of Business and Management
MSc in Management

MSc Internship Based Thesis
Academic Year: 2024 - 2025

Supervisor: Richard Kwiatkowski
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of MSc in Management

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this thesis is to first provide definitional clarity for the term 'emerging leader' and second to identify the necessary VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) specific competencies that should be focused on in leadership development for this specific demographic.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A three-pronged approach was taken, first with a modified systematic literature review (SLR) on emerging leadership development and VUCA leadership development, second was a market research review of key emerging leader and VUCA leadership development programmes, and third, primary research utilising a qualitative (interview-based) methodology grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) for data collection and analysis. The participants formed two groups: Group A – Potential emerging leaders (T1), and Group B – Professionals with experience in human resources, talent management, and career management (T2 and T3). These groups allowed for a multi-stakeholder view on the research questions.

Findings – Through the modified SLR, the thesis identified a definitional void for 'emerging leaders' across both literature and practice. The market research review supported the findings of the SLR, while showcasing a lack of programmes that cater to Emerging Leaders in a VUCA world. The primary research found that participants predominantly demonstrated 'reluctant leadership' arising through external recognition rather than self-selection or active ambition, and interpersonal competencies emerged as foundational to VUCA navigation, challenging the existing literature's cognitive emphasis.

Theoretical Contributions – A. Definitional clarity for the term 'emerging leader' which has been a neglected concept in terms of definition. B. Developing a competency framework for leadership development and assessment in VUCA contexts specific to emerging leaders, which extends on existing findings.

Practical Implications - Organisations should redesign talent identification beyond self-nomination to recognise “reluctant leadership” and shift to stage-based rather than tenure-based development. Recruitment and promotion criteria should prioritise interpersonal and adaptive competencies alongside more traditional technical skills. This involves developing integrated competency frameworks that address the specific capabilities required in a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) environment.

Value - The research provides an empirically grounded working definition of 'emerging leaders'. It establishes interpersonal capabilities as perhaps foundational to VUCA leadership rather than supplementary, introduces 'learning through complexity' as a meta-competency, and demonstrates how organisational barriers could systematically undermine development effectiveness.

Keywords - emerging leader, definitional ambiguity, VUCA competencies, competency frameworks, emerging leader development

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Table of Contents

Academic integrity declaration.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Figures.....	viii
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Appendix Figures.....	x
List of Abbreviations.....	xi
1 Introduction	12
1.1 The VUCA Business Reality	12
1.2 The Fundamental Leadership Challenge	14
1.3 The Leadership Development Imperative	15
1.4 The ‘Who’ Question: Identifying Future Leaders for VUCA Contexts.....	16
1.5 Research Context and Organisational Imperative	18
1.6 Research Questions and Theoretical Contribution	19
1.7 Methodological Approach and Contribution	20
1.8 Research Significance.....	21
2 Modified Systematic Literature Review.....	22
2.1 Research Process	22
2.2 Phase I – VUCA Theory and Leadership Development Evolution.....	24
2.2.1 Current Manifestation of VUCA based on the Modified SLR.....	24
2.2.2 Recurring Themes in VUCA Leadership Development.....	24
2.2.3 Essential Competencies for VUCA Leadership	29
2.2.4 Implications for Future Leaders	31
2.2.5 Theoretical Integration Challenges.....	32
2.2.6 Measurement and Assessment Gaps	33
2.3 Phase II – The Definitional Challenge: Who are ‘Emerging Leaders’?.....	34
2.3.1 The Definitional Void.....	34
2.3.2 Methodological Limitations in the Literature.....	36
2.3.3 Target Populations in VUCA Leadership Literature.....	36
2.4 Challenges in Organisational Implementation of Leadership Development Programmes	38
2.4.1 Selection and Identification Barriers	38
2.4.2 Development Programme Design Inefficiencies.....	38
2.4.3 Sector-Specific Adaptation Challenges	40
2.5 Critical Research Gaps and Implications for Primary Research	41
2.5.1 Current Research	41
2.5.2 Future Research	42
2.5.3 Research Priority and Focus of Current Study	43
3 Market Research Review.....	44
3.1 The Case for Market Research Review	44

3.2 Methodology.....	45
3.2.1 Programme Identification and Selection	45
3.2.2 Analysis Approach	47
3.2.3 Sample Characteristics	47
3.3 Findings	49
3.3.1 Absence of Operational Definition.....	49
3.3.2 Inconsistent Experience Requirements.....	49
3.3.3 VUCA-Specific Programmes Provide No Additional Definitional Clarity ..	50
3.4 Discussion.....	51
3.4.1 Definitional Clarity.....	51
3.4.2 The VUCA Context Gap	51
3.5 Overview	52
4 Empirical Research Methodology	53
4.1 Introduction to Methodology	53
4.2 Research Philosophy.....	55
4.3 Research Approach.....	56
4.4 Research Design	58
4.5 Data Collection Methods	59
4.6 Sampling Strategy.....	60
4.7 Data Analysis Approach.....	61
4.8 Ethical Considerations.....	62
4.9 Reliability and Validity	63
4.10 Limitations and Constraints.....	63
5 Data Analysis and Findings.....	64
5.1 Data Collection and Analysis Process	64
5.2 Participant Profile Analysis	66
5.3 Thematic Analysis Results	68
5.4 Research Questions Responses.....	72
5.4.1 Question 1	72
5.4.2 Question 2.....	72
5.5 Contrasting Views in Data.....	76
5.6 Data Analysis Overview	78
6 Discussion.....	79
6.1 Definitional Clarity (Responding to RQ1)	79
6.1.1 The Conceptual Neglect: From Theory to Practice	79
6.1.2 Reluctant Leadership – Challenging Traditional Selection Standards	80
6.1.3 Towards a Working Definition.....	81
6.2 VUCA Competencies – Verification and Critical Extensions (Responding to RQ2)	82
6.2.1 Interpersonal Competencies	82
6.2.2 Decision-Making Under Uncertainty	83
6.2.3 Learning Through Complexity as a Meta-Competency	84

6.3 Critical Tensions and Systematic Barriers.....	85
6.3.1 The Confidence-Uncertainty Contrast.....	85
6.3.2 Technical Skills and Leadership Capability Mismatch	85
6.3.3 The Individual-Collective Development Challenge	86
6.4 Implications and Recommendations.....	87
6.4.1 For Organisational Practices.....	87
6.4.2 For Educational Institutions	87
6.4.3 Future Research	87
7 Conclusion	89
References	91
Appendices	104
Appendix A CURES Ethical Approval Letter.....	104
Appendix B Informed Consent Responses	105
Appendix C Market Research Review Extended	108
Appendix D Interview Questions for Target Groups with Notes	118
Appendix E Sample of IPA Coding Process	122
Appendix F Supporting Quotes for Thematic Coding Analysis.....	132
END OF THESIS	156

List of Figures

Figure 1 – Conceptual Exploration for Relationship and Gap Identification.....	17
Figure 2 - Research Topic Thought Process.....	18
Figure 3 - Modified Systematic Literature Review (SLR) Process.....	23
Figure 4 - Vertical versus Horizontal Development (Adapted from Jones, 2018; Petrie, 2014)	25
Figure 5 - Integrated LEAD Model with Leadership Competencies.....	27
Figure 6 - 'Categorization of VUCA Competencies' for competency assessment (Shet, 2024)	33
Figure 7 - Identification of existing 'Emerging Leader' and VUCA Leadership Development Programmes and Future Skills Reports	46
Figure 8 - Analysis of Existing 'Emerging Leader' and VUCA Leadership Development Programmes and Future Skills Reports.....	48
Figure 9 - Research Onion (Saunders et al., 2023, p.174).....	53
Figure 10 - Research Methodology Approach Adopted from Saunders et al., (2023)...	54
Figure 11 - Primary Data Collection and Analysis Process	64
Figure 12 - Expansion of Shet's (2024) Competency Framework with Thesis Findings	82

Note: Figures created in PowerPoint by author.

List of Tables

Table 1 - VUCA Disruptive Trends for 'Identifying your VUCA' (Baran & Woznyj, 2020)	13
Table 2 - Comparison of Adult Vertical Developmental Models (Jones et al., 2020) ...	26
Table 3 - Summary of Essential Competencies for VUCA Leadership - A Synthesis of Key Authors	29
Table 4 - Disparities Between Business School Curricular and Organisational Expectations (Adopted and summarised from Hall and Rowland, 2016).....	39
Table 5 - Implementation of Abductive Logic	57
Table 6 - Interview Target Groups	59
Table 7 - Participant Demographics and Experience Summary.....	67
Table 8 - Thematic Coding Analysis Results	69
Table 9 - Definitional Analysis of term 'Emerging Leader'	73
Table 10 - VUCA-Specific Competency Framework Analysis	75
Table 11 - Contrasts in Data Summary	77

List of Appendix Figures

Appendix Figure 1 - CURES Consent Form	104
Appendix Figure 2 - Informed Consent Form Responses from Microsoft Forms (no modifications)	107
Appendix Figure 3 - Page 1 of Coded T1.3 Interview	122
Appendix Figure 4 - Page 2 of Coded T1.3 Interview	123
Appendix Figure 5 - Page 3 of Coded T1.3 Interview	124
Appendix Figure 6 - Page 4 of Coded T1.3 Interview	125
Appendix Figure 7 - Page 5 of Coded T1.3 Interview	126
Appendix Figure 8 - Page 6 of Coded T1.3 Interview	127
Appendix Figure 9 - Page 7 of Coded T1.3 Interview	128
Appendix Figure 10 - Page 8 of Coded T1.3 Interview	129
Appendix Figure 11 - Page 9 of Coded T1.3 Interview	130
Appendix Figure 12 - Page 10 of Coded T1.3 Interview	131

List of Abbreviations

VUCA	Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous
LDP	Leadership Development Programme
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
L&D	Learning and Development
RQ	Research Question
T#. #	Target (Group Type). (Participant Number)
S&C	Skills and Competencies

1 Introduction

1.1 The VUCA Business Reality

The modern business environment is marked by increased levels of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), conditions that significantly challenge traditional methods of organizational leadership and development (Tram & Tuyen, 2025), this is also demonstrated by the increased number of publications in relation to “management and leadership in the VUCA world” (Krawczyńska-Zaucha, 2019). Conceptualized initially ‘by the US Army War College in the 1980s to describe the post-Cold War strategic environment’ (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Barber, 1992), VUCA has transcended its military origins to become a defining characteristic of modern organisational reality. Today’s business environment represents what Abidi and Joshi (2018) describe as a context where “VUCA best describes the volatile and chaotic business, economic and physical environment that we all now face and must learn how to manage under” (p.2). This reality is characterised by continuous rather than episodic change (Abidi & Joshi, 2018), where organisations must navigate accelerating technological disruption, global interconnectedness, shifting stakeholder expectations, and unprecedented rates of environmental and social transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified VUCA conditions at scale, forcing organizations to make critical decisions with incomplete information, rapidly adapt their business models, and maintain operations amid unprecedented uncertainty (McKinsey & Company, 2022; Birshan et al., 2022). Hooper and Potter (1997) described this emerging reality as "bewildering change," where "the rate of change is hectic" (p.81), observing how technological advancement created generational divides between "young enthusiastic computer literate" individuals who view the present as "the future–now," and others who have “no comprehension of this new dawn, no confidence in their ability to cope” (p.82). Additionally, Duignan (2020) stated that an

“understanding of leadership in complex organisations is emerging suggesting that...Millennials and the generations following them will have the creative foresight and interpersonal skills to achieve what many of us in this and previous generations have failed to accomplish – reducing complexity to simplicity” (Duignan, 2020).

Although Elkington et al (2017) and Abidi & Joshi (2018) factor digital transformations, climate change impacts, geopolitical instability, and evolving social expectations as VUCA

conditions, these will arguably be ambiguous for organisations to characterise a situation as VUCA if there are no additional breakdowns of what constitutes digital transformations or climate change impacts, for instance. [Baran & Woznyj \(2020\)](#) provide a VUCA identifying framework, the “VUCA Audit”, that can be used to “identify your VUCA” with five categories developed from thirty-five disruptive trends that were surveyed across “1152 business leaders” and “280 different organisations” between 2015 and 2018. The 5 main categories by [Baran & Woznyj \(2020\)](#) are not extensively different from what [Elkington et al \(2017\)](#) and [Abidi & Joshi \(2018\)](#) factor, however, there is more grounded clarity in what they encompass as showcased in [Table 1](#).

Table 1 - VUCA Disruptive Trends for 'Identifying your VUCA' (Baran & Woznyj, 2020)

5 Major Trend Categories (Baran & Woznyj, 2020)	Top 10 disruptive sub-trends of 35 (Baran & Woznyj, 2020)
(1) Technological Advances and Innovations	“Tools for helping people collaborate across dispersed locations” “Economic cycles/recession”
(2) Economic and Financial Issues	“The influence of government on business” “Increasing demands on leaders” “Big Data”
(3) Environmental and Societal Concerns	“Accessing high-quality talent in new geographies” “Differences in working styles across generations”
(4) Geopolitics, Regulations, and Security Issues	“Predictive analytics” “Cyber Security”
(5) Workforce Dynamics	“Changes in expectations of balance between work and non-work life”

1.2 The Fundamental Leadership Challenge

This shift is more than an escalation of existing business challenges; it represents a fundamental change in organisational leadership requirements moving forward. The convergence of these disruptive trends poses a threat to traditional teaching and learning strategies (Bowman, 2019). It is suggested that this is because traditional business schools often maintain outdated educational models that focus primarily on technical skills and profit maximization (Ahmad, 2024). As a result, they may neglect to develop students' capabilities in ethical leadership, social intelligence, and a holistic understanding of the connections between business, society, and the environment. This suggested misalignment may therefore leave graduates ill-prepared to face the complex and ambiguous challenges of today's VUCA world, where responsible decision-making and systemic thinking are crucial for achieving sustainable business success (Ahmad, 2024).

As Duignan (2020) stated, there is a shift in leadership requirements for the future, which is further supported by Tram & Tuyen (2025) who stated that effective leadership in a VUCA world requires flexibility, creativity, and adaptability” (p.5). This necessitates a shift towards leadership styles that can influence, reassure, and support teams through uncertainty, such as democratic, transformational, and even laissez-faire leadership, which allow for broader and creative ideas, increased employee engagement, and autonomy in decision-making (Duignan, 2020; Tram & Tuyen, 2025).

The traditional leadership competencies developed for relatively stable, hierarchical, and predictable environments (Martin, 2018) may prove insufficient for navigating the dynamic and ambiguous contexts that define contemporary business reality (Tram & Tuyen, 2025) (Bowman, 2019). This environmental transformation raises a critical strategic question for organisations: not whether to adapt to VUCA conditions, but rather how to systematically develop leadership capabilities that can operate effectively within this new reality. The answer to this question has profound implications for organisational survival and competitive advantage in an increasingly complex world. Organisations that take pre-emptive measures to develop their leadership to operate in this new business reality will arguably be more prepared and ready to handle unexpected challenges. Organisations need to establish what the relevant competencies are to focus on for leadership development specific to a VUCA environment.

1.3 The Leadership Development Imperative

Recognizing the VUCA environment as the "new context", rather than a temporary disruption, creates an urgent imperative for organizations to rethink their approach to leadership development (Elkington et al., 2017, pp. 10-12). "Johansen (2017) predicted that in a disrupted and uncertain future 'leadership will be much less centralised and more distributed' [and] hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations and structures 'will give way to shape-shifting organisational forms that function like organisms'" (Duignan, 2020). If this is indeed the case, then traditional leadership development programs, designed for predictable organisational structure, may prove inadequate for preparing leaders who must navigate continuous change, make decisions with incomplete information, and lead through ambiguous and complex challenges (Martin, 2018). This will potentially result in "many traditional hierarchical structures [to] bend and break" causing more diverse workforces to develop "to create new organisational structures that will be more fluid and less rigid" (Johansen, 2017, pp. 1–192).

However, this recognition immediately raises another critical question: *who should be the focus of this new approach to leadership development?* While the need for VUCA-capable leaders is clear, identifying the specific population that should receive priority attention in leadership development efforts is less obvious.

1.4 The ‘Who’ Question: Identifying Future Leaders for VUCA Contexts

Organizations face a strategic choice regarding where to focus their leadership development investments for maximum impact in VUCA environments. Should resources be directed toward current senior executives who hold immediate strategic decision-making authority? Should the focus be on high-potential employees at various career stages? Or should attention be concentrated on a specific demographic or professional cohort that may be particularly suited for VUCA leadership, amongst other concerns.

This question is made complex by the fact that those who will be leading organizations through the most intensive VUCA conditions in the coming years may not be those currently occupying senior leadership positions. The leaders who will guide organizations through the 2030s and beyond are likely to be individuals currently in early to mid-career stages—a population that might be characterized as "emerging leaders" or "future leaders."

Yet, preliminary investigation reveals a striking gap in the literature: while extensive research exists on VUCA leadership competencies (Abidi & Joshi, 2018, pp. 1–177; Codreanu, 2016; Ramakrishnan, 2021; Sarkar, 2016; Shet, 2024; Tram & Tuyen, 2025; Walker & Ramos-Rea, 2025) and traditional leadership development approaches (Northouse, 2022; Tram & Tuyen, 2025), there appears to be limited systematic examination of how to define, identify, and develop this critical population of emerging leader specifically for VUCA contexts. This investigative process is highlighted in *Figure 1*, which showcases the need for additional research exploration and contribution

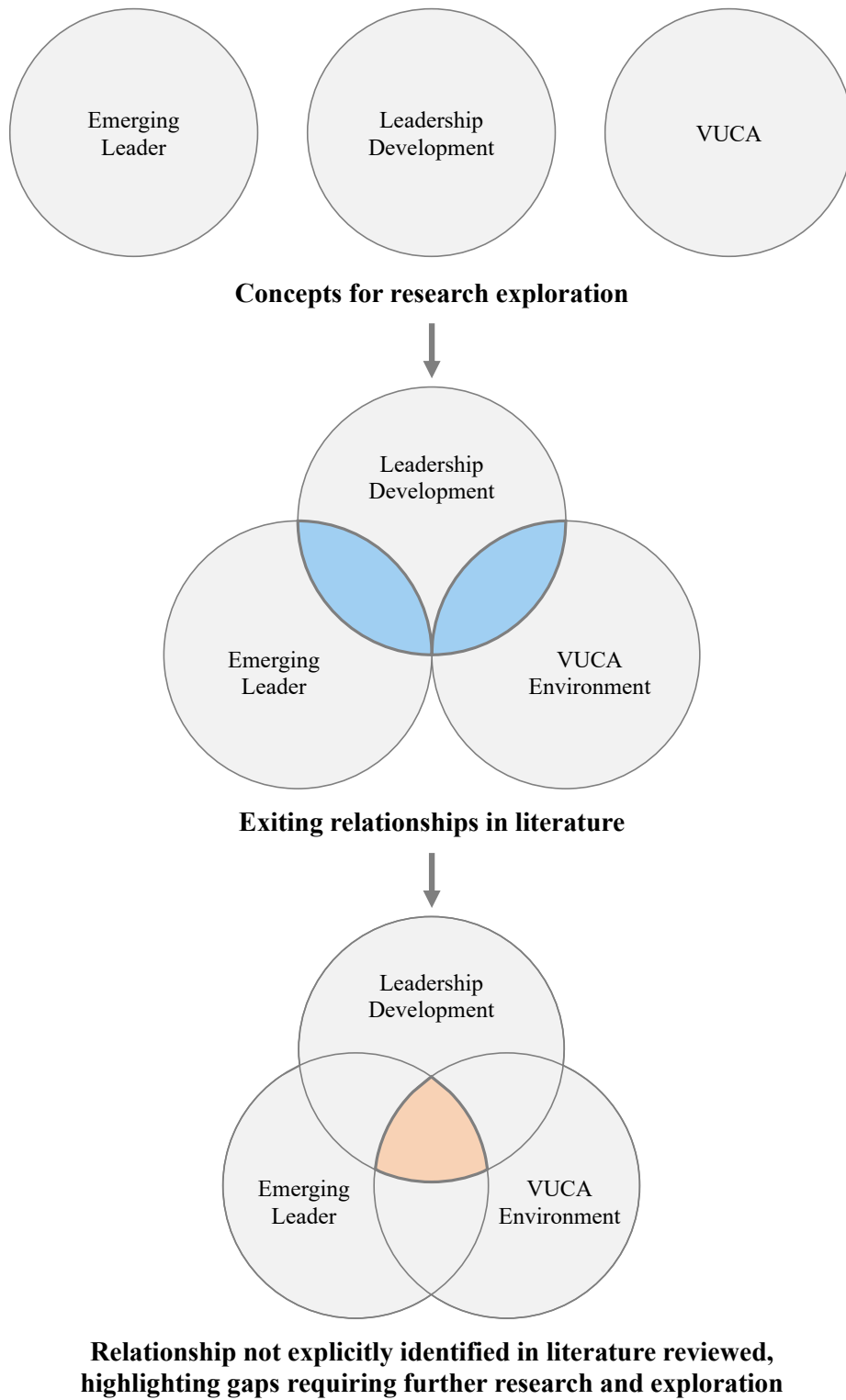


Figure 1 – Conceptual Exploration for Relationship and Gap Identification

1.5 Research Context and Organisational Imperative

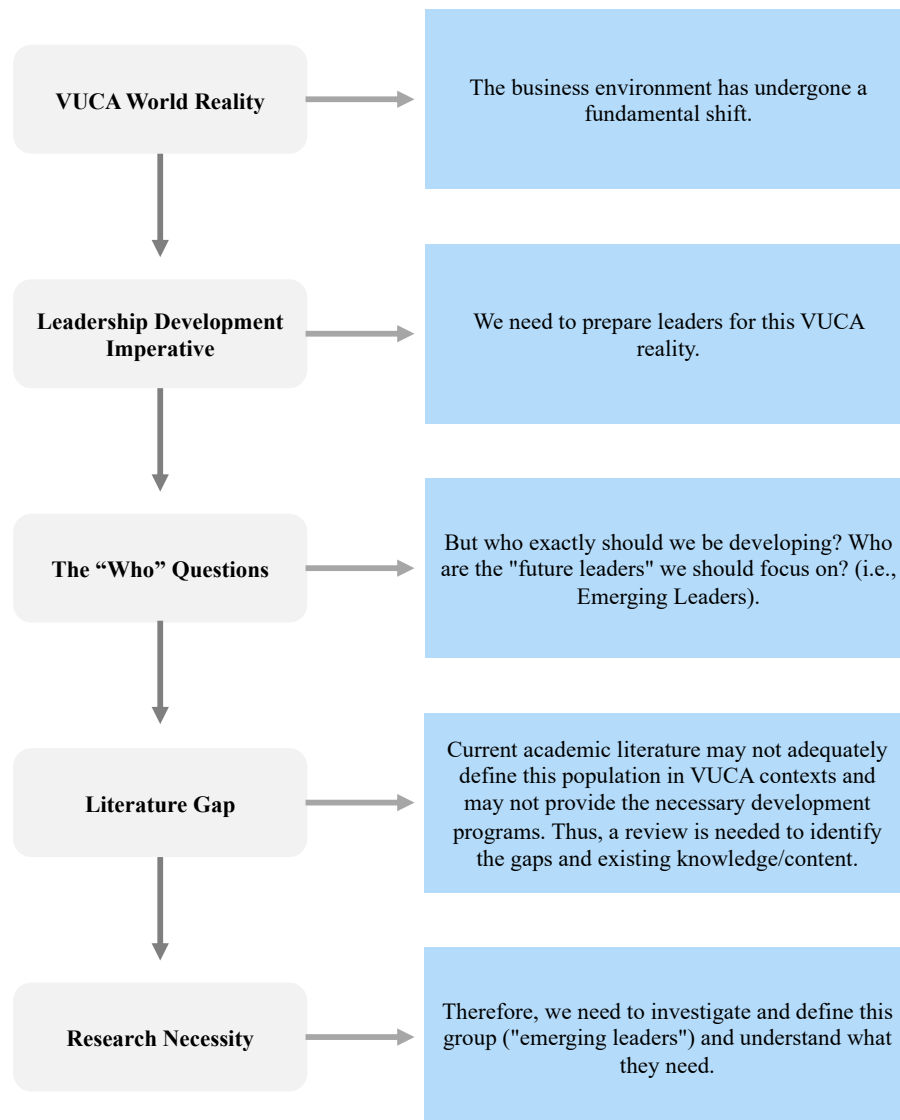


Figure 2 - Research Topic Thought Process

This research is conducted in collaboration with Enriched Leadership, a leadership consulting company specializing in customized leadership development programs for executive and senior leaders, with a particular focus on wellbeing and social impact. Enriched Leadership's current strategic initiative involves designing and developing a comprehensive leadership development program specifically for emerging leaders to prepare them for VUCA environments. An open programme to be conducted directly through Enriched Leadership, and for organisations to have access to for their workforce leadership development.

This organizational context provides both practical urgency and real-world testing ground for the research findings. The challenge facing Enriched Leadership mirrors that which could be confronting many organizations globally: how to systematically identify and develop the next generation of leaders who will navigate unprecedented levels of environmental complexity and ambiguity (*Figure 2*).

1.6 Research Questions and Theoretical Contribution

Based on the identified gaps in literature (*Figure 1*) and practical organisational needs (*Figure 2*), this thesis investigates two primary interconnected questions:

1. How should organizations define and identify "emerging leaders" who will be responsible for navigating future VUCA conditions?
2. What VUCA-specific competencies and capabilities do these future leaders require that may differ from traditional leadership development frameworks?

These questions address both theoretical gaps in academic understanding and practical challenges in organisational implementation, positioning this research at the intersection of leadership development theory and applied organisational practice.

1.7 Methodological Approach and Contribution

This thesis research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a modified systematic literature review, with market research into existing emerging leadership development and VUCA training programmes, with an IPA qualitative primary research approach through stakeholder interviews.

Following this introduction, a comprehensive literature review examines existing research across VUCA environments, leadership development, and emerging leadership concepts to identify current knowledge and gaps, followed by a market research review. Primary research through semi-structured interviews with potential future leaders, and industry experts (HR and career development professionals) provides empirical insights into current practices, challenges, and effective approaches.

The intended contribution of this research:

Theoretical contribution – advancing academic understanding of the intersection between emerging leadership and VUCA contexts, particularly addressing the definitional void in current literature regarding who constitutes an ‘emerging leader’ in contemporary organisational contexts.

Practical contribution – Providing information on potentially actionable frameworks and tools for organisations seeking to systematically identify and develop leadership capabilities for uncertain futures, including specific guidance for program design and implementation.

1.8 Research Significance

The significance of this research extends beyond academic contribution to address urgent organisational needs in an increasingly complex world. As VUCA conditions intensify and traditional leadership models may prove inadequate ([Martin, 2018](#)), organisations may well require systematic approaches to developing the next generation of leaders who will navigate unprecedented challenges.

By addressing the fundamental question of ‘who’ should be developed alongside the equally important questions of ‘what’ they need and ‘how’ they should be developed, this research aims to bridge critical gaps in both theoretical understanding and organisational practice. The integration of systematic literature analysis and market research review with stakeholder-focused primary research provides a foundation for evidence-based approaches to leadership development that can adapt to evolving environmental conditions while maintaining practical relevance for organizational implementation.

The need for this research is highlighted by the reality that organisations cannot afford to wait for perfect theoretical frameworks before beginning the work of developing VUCA-capable leaders. The leaders who will guide organisations through the coming decades are already in the workforce, and their development must begin with systematic understanding of who they are and what they need to succeed in an uncertain future.

2 Modified Systematic Literature Review

2.1 Research Process

The Modified Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology employed in this thesis adheres to established frameworks and best practices outlined by authorities in systematic review research (Fink, 2020; Fisch & Block, 2018; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Tranfield et al., 2003). The research process commenced with the identification of a comprehensive set of keywords aligned with the research questions, which were subsequently applied across multiple academic databases, including EBSCO, ProQuest, and Google Scholar (Figure 3).

The initial search results underwent systematic filtering through predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, with examination of article titles and abstracts. A two-stage screening process was implemented, where articles were first assessed based on their title and abstract content for relevance to the research topic and questions, followed by a full-text review of those meeting the preliminary criteria. The literature review was not limited to academic journal articles but also included relevant ‘grey’ literature, such as book publications in the fields of business, management, and psychology, with subjects pertinent to the research topic. The systematic approach to the review was followed by snowball screening with article reference lists being screened for relevant literature, which also lead to the identification of specific publications including Bennis and Nanus (1985), Hooper and Potter (1997), Bennis et al. (2001), and Middleton (2007); these publications provided other insights to VUCA.

The literature review was structured into two interconnected, yet distinct, phases:

Phase I examined the evolution of VUCA theory and its implications for leadership development, with further exploration into key competencies focused on or highlighted as relevant for future needs.

Phase II investigated the specific challenge of defining and identifying ‘emerging leaders’ within VUCA contexts. This dual approach enabled an analysis of both the environmental context and the target population for leadership development.

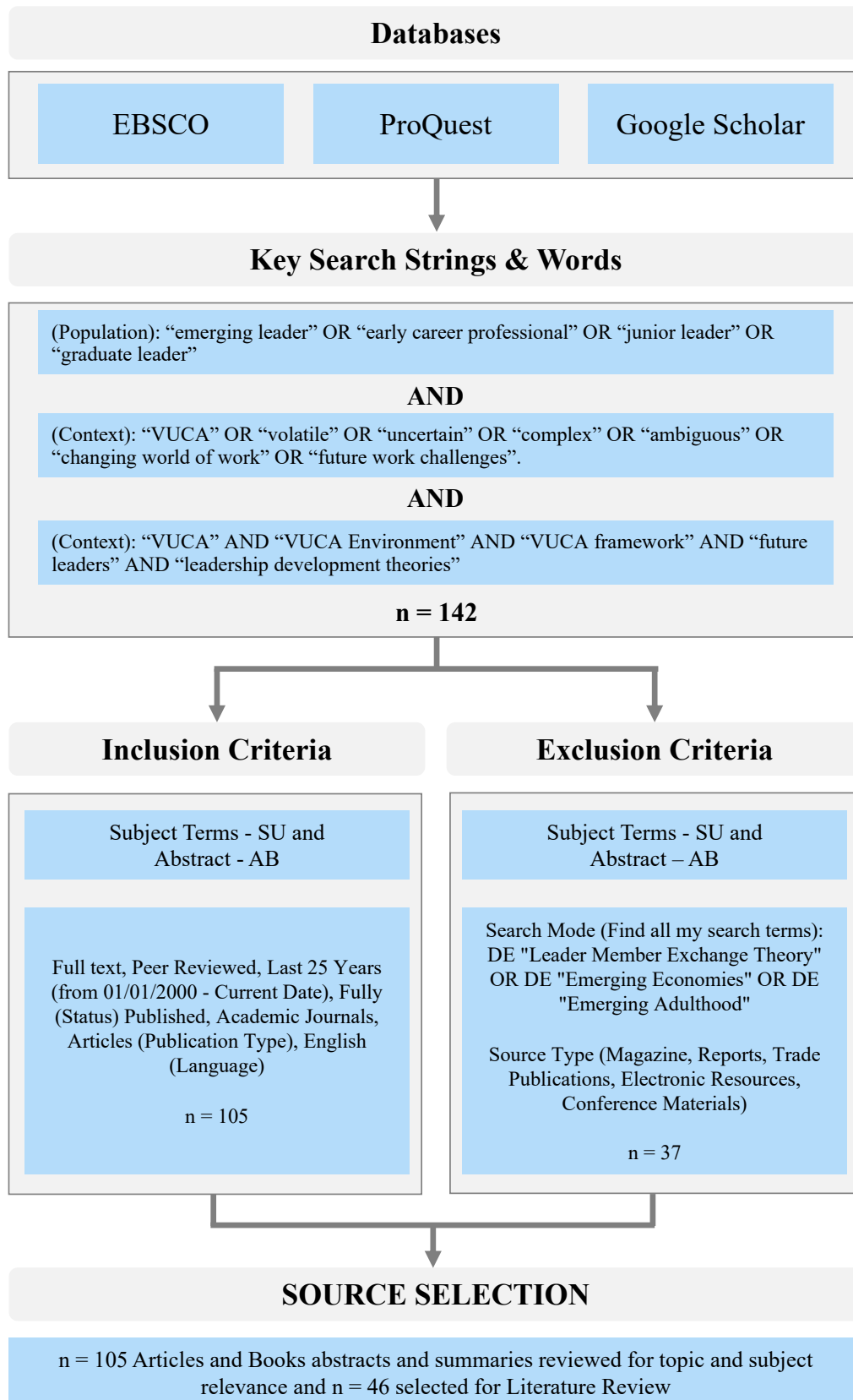


Figure 3 - Modified Systematic Literature Review (SLR) Process

2.2 Phase I – VUCA Theory and Leadership Development Evolution

2.2.1 Current Manifestation of VUCA based on the Modified SLR

Contemporary business environments exemplify VUCA conditions through multiple interconnected factors. [Abidi and Joshi \(2018\)](#) characterize the modern business landscape as one where "globalisation, technology, and market disruptions create unpredictable and interconnected challenges that businesses must learn to navigate" (p.2). Organisations are encouraged to view VUCA factors as catalysts for innovation and competitive advantage ([Abidi & Joshi, 2018](#)). Research by [Esenyel \(2024\)](#) shows how VUCA theory has expanded to encompass digital transformation and generational dynamics, requiring integration of multiple leadership paradigms; for instance, "leveraging technological prowess will significantly improve an organisation's agility in VUCA environments" (p.10), and "incorporating new generation values into leadership techniques can improve employee engagement and retention" (p.12). These scholars emphasize reframing VUCA conditions as opportunities rather than merely obstacles, echoing the military's evolution in thinking about strategic environments, where situations should be assessed and approached with a reflective and adaptive mindset ([Szelwach et al., 2023](#)). The hypothesised transformation from traditional to modern leadership approaches is further supported by [Tram & Tuyen \(2025\)](#), who emphasise that fixed traits and hierarchical authority are insufficient for navigating VUCA environments, as these approaches "fail to keep up with ongoing changes, rapid technological advancements, and stakeholders' increasing demand for transparency" (p.5). The shift to modern leadership is necessary because effective leadership today requires not only authority but also the ability to influence, reassure, and support teams through uncertainty, enabling organisation to address the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity that characterise contemporary business environments through more collaborative and adaptive approaches ([Tram & Tuyen, 2025](#)).

2.2.2 Recurring Themes in VUCA Leadership Development

From individual capability to collective emergence, the literature reveals a fundamental shift in how leadership development must be conceptualised for VUCA environments, moving beyond traditional skill-based approaches towards more sophisticated developmental frameworks ([Bushe & Marshak, 2016](#); [Jones, 2018](#); [Jones et al., 2020](#); [Szelwach et al., 2023](#); [Tram & Tuyen, 2025](#); [Walker & Ramos-Rea, 2025](#)).

2.2.2.1 Adaptive and Vertical Leadership Development

Central to this evolution is the recognition that leaders operating in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous contexts require enhanced cognitive complexity and meaning-making capabilities (Jones et al., 2020; Jones, 2018). This ‘vertical’ development approach, represents a departure from conventional horizontal skill acquisition, demanding instead what these scholars’ term “significant personal and organisational commitment” (Jones, 2018) to transform how leaders fundamentally process and respond to challenging situations (Figure 4).

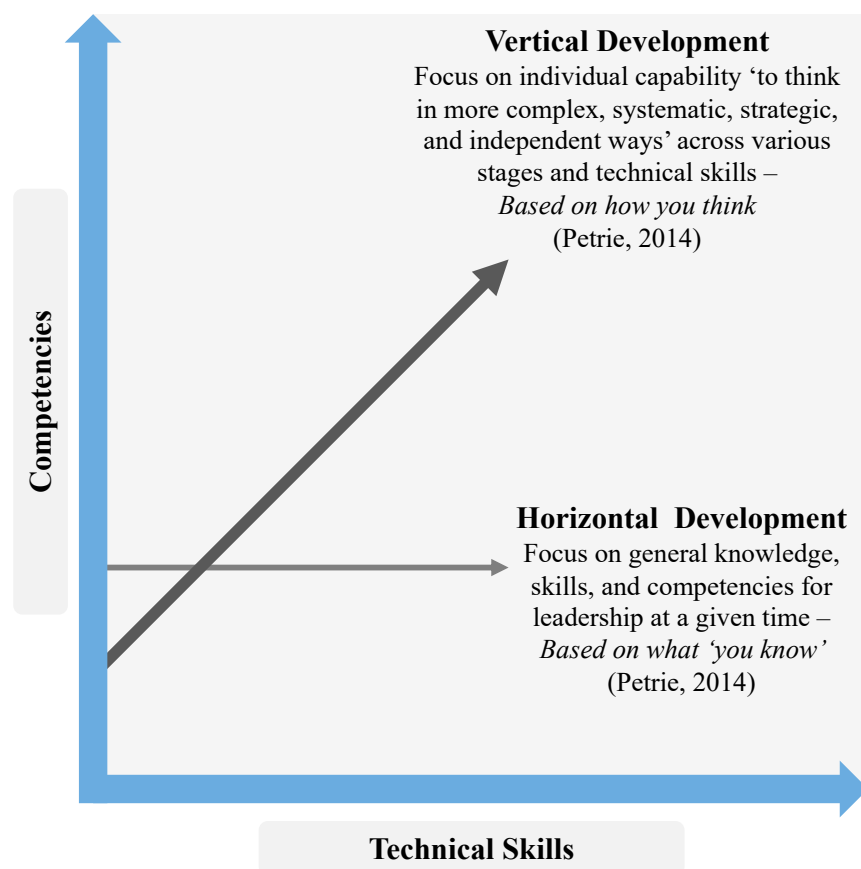


Figure 4 - Vertical versus Horizontal Development (Adapted from Jones, 2018; Petrie, 2014)

Vertical development as suggested by Jones (2018) and Jones et al. (2020), was based on Kegan’s ‘Orders of Consciousness’, ranging across five orders, with higher orders demonstrating greater self-awareness and the ability to hold multiple perspectives (Love & Guthrie, 1999), to Torbert’s ‘Action Logics’, which highlights seven levels that are distinguished by how leaders see the world and process information (Rooke & Torbert, 2005) (Table 2).

“Vertical development...refers to the stages that people progress through in regard to how they make sense of their environment [and with] each stage of development, individuals see the world in a different way, developing an increasingly complex and inclusive point of view” (Jones, 2018, p.15).

Table 2 - Comparison of Adult Vertical Developmental Models (Jones et al., 2020)

Kegan’s Orders of Consciousness (Cognitive Development)	Torbert’s Action Logics (Ego Development)
First Order: Impulsive Mind	
Second Order: Imperial Mind	<i>Opportunist</i>
Third Order: Socialised Mind	<i>Diplomat</i>
	<i>Expert</i>
	<i>Achiever</i>
Fourth Order: Self Authoring Mind	<i>Individualist</i>
	<i>Strategist</i>
Fifth Order: Self-Transforming Mind	<i>Alchemist</i>

This theoretical foundation is put into practice through institutional programmes like the U.S Coast Guard Academy’s LEAD model (Learn, Experience, Analyse, Deepen). This model combines theory, practice, and experiential learning into a comprehensive developmental framework aimed at navigating VUCA environments (Szelwach et al., 2023) (*Figure 5*). The model's emphasis on embodied leadership development demonstrates how vertical development theory can be operationalised, bridging the gap between cognitive complexity and practical application in high-stakes environments.

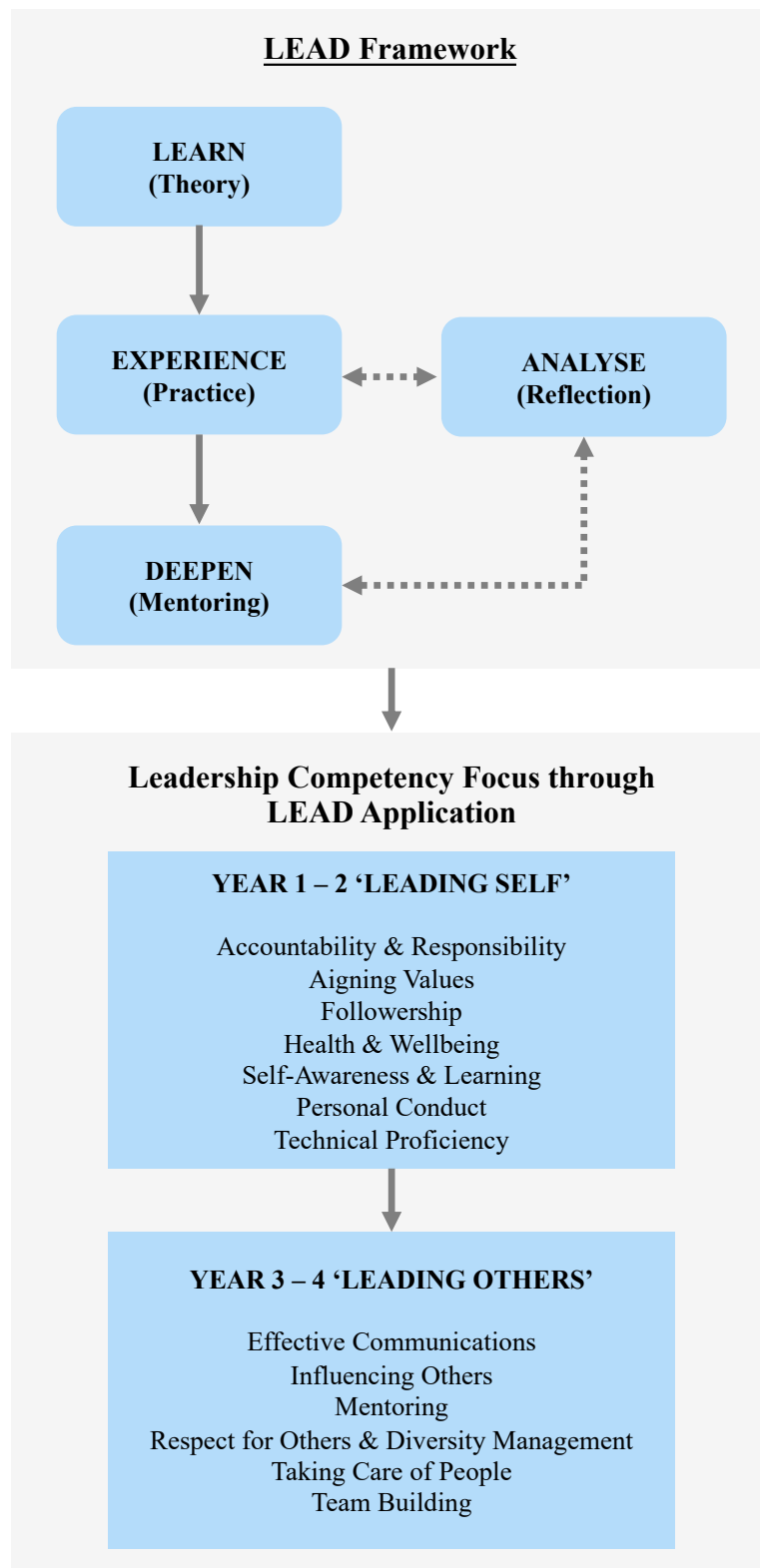


Figure 5 - Integrated LEAD Model with Leadership Competencies

(Adapted from Szelwach et al., 2023)

2.2.2.2 Crisis Leadership and Resilience

However, the literature suggests that even sophisticated individual development approaches may be insufficient for the full spectrum of VUCA challenges. The synthesis of crisis leadership research over four decades reinforces this complexity, with comprehensive frameworks identifying ‘decision-making under uncertainty, emotional intelligence, communication strategies, resilience-building, and ethical leadership’ as interconnected rather than discrete capabilities (Walker and Ramos-Rea, 2025). This approach bridges academic insights with practical tools for VUCA navigation, suggesting that effective leadership development must address individual cognitive capacity alongside interpersonal and organisational systems.

2.2.2.3 Dialogic and Emergent Leadership

The traditional paradigm of developing exceptional individual leaders—what might be characterised as the "visionary leader" model—faces fundamental limitations when confronted with truly emergent and unpredictable situations, because it relies on fundamentally flawed assumptions about predictability and control (Bushe & Marshak, 2016). In VUCA environments “things are too complex and changing in our multi-cultural, global world for any executive to know...how best to structure and manage their organization” (Bushe & Marshak, 2016, p.39). This recognition has prompted a parallel evolution toward more collaborative approaches, with scholars advocating for a "Dialogic Mindset" that emphasises emergent change processes and collaborative leadership approaches rather than relying solely on individual visionary capabilities (Bushe and Marshak, 2016). This shift acknowledges that VUCA environments often require leadership responses that emerge from collective intelligence rather than individual direction.

These converging themes point toward a critical reconceptualization of leadership development for VUCA environments. The literature indicates a need for fundamentally different frameworks that integrate individual vertical development with collaborative emergence and systemic resilience. This suggests that organisations preparing leaders for VUCA contexts must design developmental experiences that simultaneously build cognitive complexity, foster dialogic capabilities, and embed learning within authentic crisis scenarios. The implications extend beyond individual leader preparation to encompass organisations that can support and sustain such multifaceted developmental approaches.

2.2.3 Essential Competencies for VUCA Leadership

Across many authors (Barber, 1992; Hooper & Potter, 1997; Johansen, 2007; Gardner, 2010; Abidi & Joshi, 2018; Groves & Feyerherm, 2022; Shet, 2024; Walker & Ramos-Rea, 2025), there are common characteristics with an emphasis on cognitive flexibility and complex thinking, importance of emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, continuous learning as foundational capability, and integration of strategic vision with practical implemental skills. A synthesis of competencies across key authors is consolidated in [Table 3](#).

Table 3 - Summary of Essential Competencies for VUCA Leadership - A Synthesis of Key Authors

<i>Competency Category</i>	<i>Author(s) & Year</i>	<i>Key Competencies & Descriptions</i>
<i>Cognitive Competencies</i>	Barber (1992)	Complex cognitive skills, multidimensional thinking, and decision-making in ambiguous situations.
	Shet (2024)	Cognitive Flexibility, agility mindset, and personal ambidexterity.
	Gardner (2010)	Five Minds Framework: Disciplined, synthesizing, creative, respectful, and ethical minds as cognitive foundation.
	Johansen (2007)	Complex emergent qualities including vision, understanding, clarity, and agility for facing VUCA environments.
<i>Interpersonal & Emotional Competencies</i>	Groves & Feyerherm (2022)	“People savvy” as critical behavioural competency.
	Walker & Ramos-Rea (2025)	Empathy and transparency as distinguishing factors for successful crisis leaders.
	Shet (2024)	Cross-cultural intelligence and collaboration capabilities for diverse, global work environments.
<i>Adaptive & Learning Competencies</i>	Abidi & Joshi (2018)	Continuous learning as the only competency that matters for developing agile and resilient employees.
	Shet (2024)	Continuous Learning and adaptive mindset as core personal effectiveness competencies.

<i>Strategic Change Management</i>	Hooper & Potter (1997)	Key Leadership Roles Framework: Sound awareness of present and future trends. Effective resource management beyond physical assets. Managing “levels of aspiration, inspiration, motivation and morale.” Recognition that “inspiration and alignment are fundamental to effective management of organisational energy.”
	Hooper & Potter (1997)	Comprehensive Competency Framework: Setting direction, setting example, effective communication, creating alignment, bringing out the best in people, change agency, and decision-making/action in crisis or uncertainty.

2.2.3.1 Cognitive Competencies

Multiple studies identify cognitive flexibility as fundamental to VUCA leadership. [Barber \(1992\)](#) emphasizes "complex cognitive skills, multidimensional thinking, and decision-making in ambiguous situations." This is reinforced by [Shet \(2024\)](#), who categorizes cognitive competencies as cognitive flexibility, agility mindset, and personal ambidexterity. [Gardner's \(2010\)](#) framework of five minds—disciplined, synthesizing, creative, respectful, and ethical—seeks to provide a cognitive foundation for VUCA leadership development. [Johansen \(2007\)](#) describes these requirements as "complex emergent qualities" necessary to face the VUCA world, specifically identifying "vision, understanding, clarity, and agility" as critical attributes (pp.1-200). These qualities reflect the multifaceted nature of leadership challenges in uncertain environments.

2.2.3.2 Interpersonal and Emotional Competencies

The literature also emphasizes emotional intelligence and certain interpersonal skills as essential for leadership development. [Groves and Feyerherm \(2022\)](#) identify "people savvy" as a critical behavioural competency, while [Walker and Ramos-Rea \(2025\)](#) highlight empathy and transparency as distinguishing factors for successful crisis leaders. Cross-cultural intelligence and collaboration capabilities are identified by [Shet \(2024\)](#) as essential for increasingly diverse and global work environments.

2.2.3.3 Adaptive and Learning Competencies

Continuous learning emerges as a meta-competency (Sheikhbahaeddinzadeh et al., 2025) across multiple studies. Abidi and Joshi (2018) state that "to develop agile and resilient employees, the only competency that will matter is continuous learning." This is supported by Shet (2024), who identifies continuous learning and adaptive mindset as core personal effectiveness competencies.

Abidi & Joshi (2018) do not establish a clear timeline between what is considered 'yesterday' and a 'VUCA world', however, this clarification can be achieved through Baran & Woznyjs' (2020) VUCA identifying framework (Table 1).

2.2.3.4 Change Leadership

Effective leadership in uncertain environments requires a comprehensive approach that balances present awareness with future planning. Hooper and Potter (1997) provide a practical framework for managing uncertainty through their identification of five key leadership roles. Leaders must maintain "sound awareness of the present" and "sound awareness of trends for the future" while managing resources effectively beyond just physical assets to include "levels of aspiration, of inspiration, of motivation and morale" (p.40). They emphasize that "inspiration and alignment are fundamental to the effective management of organisational energy" and that "the way towards the vision is just as vital as the vision itself" (Hooper & Potter, 1997, p.40).

Their comprehensive competency framework encompasses "setting direction, setting an example, effective communication, creating alignment, bringing the best out of people, leaders as a change agent, and decision [making] and action in crisis or uncertainty" (Hooper & Potter, 1997, pp.99-112).

2.2.4 Implications for Future Leaders

The target audience for VUCA leadership development extends beyond traditional senior executives to include individuals who have "had a highly successful career to date" and exhibit "potential for future considerations" (Barber, 1992, p.4). The convergence of these findings indicate that future leaders require a blend of personal resilience, cognitive flexibility, strategic thinking, and continuous learning capabilities to thrive in VUCA environments.

The competency requirements span both individual psychological traits and practical organisational skills, suggesting that leadership development programmes must address

various competencies simultaneously to prepare future leaders for contemporary challenges. This approach reflects the reality that VUCA environments demand leaders who can simultaneously manage their own mental complexity (cognition and emotion) while managing collective organisational responses. The integration of [Gardner's \(2010\)](#) five minds framework with [Hooper and Potter's \(1997\)](#) strategic change management competencies illustrates how personal psychological development – such as synthesizing and creative thinking – must be coupled with practical skills like setting direction and creating alignment.

Furthermore, the emphasis on continuous learning as a meta-competency ([Sheikhbahaeddinzadeh et al., 2025](#)) ([Abidi & Joshi, 2018](#)) suggests that development programmes cannot be static; they must create adaptive learning systems that evolve alongside changing environmental demands. The literature's emphasis on both personal ambidexterity ([Shet, 2024](#)) and organisational energy management ([Hooper & Potter, 1997](#)) indicates that effective leaders must develop the ability to operate fluidly across individual and collective levels of an organisation and systems. Moreover, the recognition that “what was best for yesterday is obsolete in a VUCA world” ([Abidi & Joshi, 2018](#)) implies that development programmes must themselves embody the adaptive, continuous learning principles they seek to instil, creating feedback loops between individual development and organisational capability building.

2.2.5 Theoretical Integration Challenges

Despite the increase of VUCA leadership theories, the literature reveals significant challenges in theoretical integration. [Hall and Rowland \(2016\)](#) note that "VUCA is not yet mainstream in academic thinking" and identify disparities between business school curricula and organizational expectations. It is suggested that business schools are failing to adequately prepare leaders for the complexities of a VUCA world, despite the available knowledge ([Amann et al., 2022](#); [Peters et al., 2018](#)). While there is more knowledge available than ever before, executives and organizations are still experiencing high rates of failure in strategic initiatives, mergers and acquisitions, and digital transformations in times characterised as VUCA environments (i.e. Covid-19 Pandemic period) ([Amann et al., 2022](#)).

“50-90 percent of strategic initiatives fail even if they take place in one's industry with which the leader of the organisation is highly familiar with...M&A figures [have]...a success rate below 30 percent [and]...70 percent of digital transformations fail as well” ([Amann et al., 2022](#)).

These findings were identified by [Amann et al. \(2022\)](#) through their review of relevant literature in an aim to identify if business school “graduates [are] equipped with the right mindsets, skills, and tools to embrace these challenges” (p.15). Business and management education must evolve and develop to incorporate the necessary skills and competencies for future leaders to function in a VUCA world ([Peters et al., 2018](#)).

2.2.6 Measurement and Assessment Gaps

The literature lacks comprehensive frameworks for measuring VUCA leadership competencies. While [Shet \(2024\)](#) provides behavioural dimensions for competency assessment in VUCA conditions ([Figure 6](#)), standardised measurement tools remain underdeveloped for VUCA; even [Shet \(2024\)](#) does not provide a clear assessment methodology or system. This limitation may be inherent to the nature of VUCA leadership itself, as the complex relationship between individual capabilities and contextual factors suggests that standardised tests, may never fully capture the complete picture required for accurate assessment.

Analytical Competencies	Cognitive Competencies	Personal Effectiveness	Cross-cultural Competencies
○ Complex Problem Solving ○ Creativity	○ Cognitive Flexibility ○ Agility Mindset ○ Personal Ambidexterity	○ Personal Resilience ○ Continuous Learning ○ Adaptive Mindset	○ Cross-cultural Collaboration ○ Cross-cultural Intelligence

Figure 6 - 'Categorization of VUCA Competencies' for competency assessment (Shet, 2024)

[Shet's \(2024\)](#) four dimensions do not comprehensively incorporate the full range of competencies identified in the currently reviewed literature, indicating a potential need for expansion of the proposed framework to better reflect the breadth of skills and capabilities discussed across different studies. Furthermore, although there is a focus on VUCA specific competencies that is relevant to leadership development overall, there is no clear delineation in terms of skills and competency focus respective to emerging leaders.

2.3 Phase II – The Definitional Challenge: Who are ‘Emerging Leaders’?

2.3.1 The Definitional Void

The most significant finding from the emerging leader’s literature is the absence of explicit conceptual definitions of "emerging leaders" across the research. This gap is not merely theoretical but has practical implications for organisational practice. The literature consistently employs “emerging leaders” as a loose concept – a general notion that readers are expected to intuitively understand – rather than as a rigorously defined construct with measurable parameters. This conceptual ambiguity creates a series of methodological and practical problems.

Without construct validity, researchers cannot establish what specific characteristics, developmental stages, or competency thresholds distinguish an “emerging leader” from other categories such as ‘potential leaders’, ‘high-potential employees’ or ‘junior managers’. The term appears to function as an umbrella concept encompassing various interpretations: leaders early in their careers, individuals showing leadership potential (Coleman et al., 2019) or transitioning into a leadership position (Butler et al., 2024), those classified as ‘managers’ (Bajaba et al., 2021), or simply anyone not yet in senior positions (Brown et al., 2021).

2.3.1.1 Lack of Explicit Definition

The literature consistently demonstrates a pronounced absence of clear, standardized definitions for ‘emerging leaders’ across contemporary research. Researchers often use the term without providing comprehensive theoretical foundations or distinguishing it from related concepts. DeDiego et al. (2022) explicitly acknowledge that participants were "concerned with the lack of feedback and communication within their LDP (Leadership Development Programmes), which left many participants ambiguous about the definition and embodiment of leadership. This included addressing the ambiguity of the term emerging leader" (p. 269). One participant noted, "I feel like the actual content of what this means to be an emerging leader was not clearly defined, nor was it really fostered in this specific programme" (DeDiego et al., 2022, p. 269).

2.3.1.2 Contextual Emergence Rather Than Definition

A critical finding across the literature is the consistent failure to distinguish ‘emerging leaders’ from related talent management concepts such as ‘high potential,’ developing talent,’ or ‘early-career professionals’. Brown et al. (2021) exemplify this pattern, using the term to refer to

‘young, emerging leaders’ specifically in the context of ‘university students’ without providing a clear conceptual definition from contemporary literature or distinguishing it from related concepts. Similarly, [Bajaba et al. \(2021\)](#) incorporate ‘Emerging Leaders’ in their title, implying that adaptive managers during a crisis represent this concept but provide no formal definition from existing literature.

[Readman and Rowe \(2016\)](#) suggest that “The ‘emerging leader’ label became meaningful to participants during the life of the programme. “We had not anticipated its use or importance as a term, but it came to signify the process of developing understanding about academic leadership that participants and facilitators were engaged in” (p. 1021). This indicates that the meaning of the term developed for the participants within the specific programme context rather than being drawn from established literature.

2.3.1.3 Self-Reported and Subjective Definitions

A significant limitation identified across the literature is the reliance on self-reported and subjective understandings of emerging leadership. [Yeager & Callahan \(2016\)](#) categorise ‘emerging leaders’ as young adults whose early leadership experiences shape their ‘foundational leader identities’, but this understanding is based on retrospective self-reports that could be biased, rather than an objective, externally validated definition. This pattern of subjective operationalization is evident across multiple studies, limiting the development of objective, externally validated criteria for the emerging leader category.

2.3.1.4 Sector-Specific Limitations in Literature

The literature fails to provide comprehensive demographic, experiential, and organizational characteristics that would enable systematic identification of emerging leaders across different sectors and contexts, for example:

- a. [Brown et al. \(2021\)](#) focus exclusively on “first-year undergraduates enrolled in an elite, private university in the southwestern U.S” (p. 28).
- b. [Coleman et al. \(2019\)](#) describe “19 participants including 4 primary care providers, 4 RNs, 6 MAs, and 5 administrators” from specific healthcare practices (p. 5).
- c. [Bajaba et al. \(2021\)](#) present “116 full-time managers in Saudi Arabia, collected during the summer of 2020, with 32% female, ages ranging from 25 to 74 (average 43)” (p. 5).

2.3.2 Methodological Limitations in the Literature

Several methodological issues add to the definitional problem. Self-report bias presents a significant challenge, as many studies rely heavily on self-reported data, where participants describe their leadership development experiences in their own terms, rather than against specified criteria. [Round et al. \(2024\)](#) acknowledge a “low response rate (32%) for the post-programme survey” (p. 6), while [Bajaba et al. \(2021\)](#) note the potential for CMB (common method bias) in their self-reported attributes (p. 8). The absence of control groups further complicates the research findings, as most studies lack control groups, making it impossible to distinguish what uniquely defines ‘emerging leaders’ versus other developmental categories. Additionally, cross-sectional limitations restrict researchers’ ability to understand the sequential development of leadership emergence. [Bajaba et al. \(2021\)](#) acknowledge that their “cross-sectional nature” means they cannot “establish a temporal sequence for how an individual ‘emerges’ into a leadership role” (p. 8). While the studies exhibit methodological limitations ([Bajaba et al., 2021](#); [Round et al., 2024](#)), these constraints reflect practical research challenges rather than indicating fundamentally flawed or exploratory work by non-researchers. The definitional ambiguity represents a more significant theoretical gap than the methodological limitations, indicating that the concept itself remains poorly defined rather than under-researched.

2.3.3 Target Populations in VUCA Leadership Literature

Despite the definitional void in emerging leader literature, the broader VUCA leadership development literature provides some insights into target populations. Where emerging leader studies fail to operationalize their target population, VUCA leadership research demonstrates more details in identifying and characterising the individuals who require development for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments. This clarity emerged during Phase I of the literature review, which focused on VUCA theory and leadership development, and suggests that the problem lies not in researchers’ ability to define target populations, but in the conceptual neglect surrounding the ‘emerging leader’ category. It is important to note that literature on VUCA and leadership does not clearly define what an emerging leader is, however, certain characteristics for potential leaders are highlighted.

2.3.3.1 ‘Emerging Leaders’ and Early-Career Professionals

The VUCA leadership literature demonstrates a more systematic approach to identifying ‘emerging leader’ populations, providing clearer criteria for inclusion. [Barber \(1992\)](#)

establishes specific parameters for targeting individuals with “highly successful careers to date” and “potential for future contributions”, offering measurable indicators rather than vague assumptions. More recent studies have refined this focus, emphasizing early-career professionals as primary beneficiaries of VUCA leadership development, but crucially, they do so with reference to career stage and having a ‘portfolio of portable skills’, i.e. skills development (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011) (Borg et al., 2020).

2.3.3.2 Millennial and Next-Generational Leaders

The literature shows more focus when addressing generational cohorts as target populations. Rodriguez and Rodriguez (2015) specifically address the challenges of leading millennials in VUCA environments, introducing the concept of “Cloud Leadership” as a metaphor for adaptive, technology-enabled leadership approaches. This clear demographic focus demonstrates how VUCA leadership research can begin to identify target populations when it chooses to do so, using generational characteristics, technological fluency, and contextual expectations as defining parameters. The contrast with generic ‘emerging leader’ terminology is striking—here we see clear population boundaries based on observable characteristics.

2.3.3.3 Organisational Leaders Across Levels

The VUCA literature also provides clarity about developmental scope and inclusion criteria across organizational hierarchies. Gardner (2010) explicitly notes that mindset development is relevant “from senior executives and managers to teachers and students,” indicating a deliberately inclusive but clearly articulated range of individuals requiring VUCA leadership development. This inclusive approach maintains conceptual clarity by specifying organisational positions and professional roles rather than relying on ambiguous terms.

The clarity found in the definition of the VUCA leadership population sharply contrasts with the vague understanding of emerging leaders. This indicates that the definitional issue is not only a general problem within leadership development research, but rather a specific oversight regarding the concept of emerging leaders in existing literature.

2.4 Challenges in Organisational Implementation of Leadership Development Programmes

2.4.1 Selection and Identification Barriers

The definitional void for the term ‘emerging leaders’ creates significant practical challenges for organizations. [Quaglieri et al. \(2007\)](#) note that “participants are nominated by their organizations, who select them based on their leadership potential,” yet provide no criteria for assessing this potential. This represents what [DeDiego et al. \(2022\)](#) describe as participants being “unclear about how organizations characterized LDPs [leadership development programmes] and what such programmes would entail before they applied” (p. 268).

Furthermore, the lack of clear definitions leads to programme design misalignment. [DeDiego et al. \(2022\)](#) found that “many participants noted the LDPs seemed designed for early career doctoral students; however, the requirements or competitive nature of the programme seemed to favour a more advanced student with more professional experience” (p. 269). This mismatch suggests that without clear definitions, programmes cannot effectively target their intended populations, which might indicate a systematic issue within the design of leadership training.

2.4.2 Development Programme Design Inefficiencies

The literature reveals significant challenges in translating VUCA leadership theory into practical development programmes. [Hall and Rowland \(2016\)](#) identify “disparities between business school curricula and organizational expectations,” highlighting the theory-practice gap that organizations must navigate ([Table 4](#)). [Amann et al., \(2022\)](#) argue for a “leadershift,” a significant reorientation by institutional leaders towards a strong focus on “practical wisdom” as a central learning outcome to better prepare leaders for the VUCA environment.

[Garavan et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasize that “learning and development in highly dynamic VUCA contexts” requires “a new framework for the L&D function,” yet the literature provides limited guidance on how to implement this framework. The absence of standardized measurement tools, as noted by [Shet \(2024\)](#), compounds these challenges by making it difficult to assess programme effectiveness.

**Table 4 - Disparities Between Business School Curricular and Organisational Expectations
(Adopted and summarised from Hall and Rowland, 2016)**

Disparities (Hall and Rowland, 2016)	What it means (Hall and Rowland, 2016)
Content-driven vs. process-focused	Many business school syllabuses are content-driven rather than process-focused, which contrasts with the agile leadership needed in a VUCA world (p.1).
Cognitive skills vs. behavioural skills	While some universities are skilled at developing and accessing cognitive skills, they are less equipped to deliver the behaviours and soft skills required in a VUCA world (p.10).
“High, hard ground” vs. “swampy lowland” problems	Some business schools tend to stay on the “high, hard ground” of research-based theory and technique, which may not address the “swampy lowland” problems of greatest human concern that are typical of a VUCA world (p.10).
Case studies vs. real-life situations	The use of traditional case studies, which simplify complexity and reduce ambiguity, may bear little relationship to real-world managerial situations (p.10-11). In contrast, live consultancies are suggested as a more beneficial development experience that can help graduates make an immediate contribution to organizations (p.7-8).
Lack of innovative approaches	Initial research found few examples of “curricula that showed innovative approaches to agile leadership that are congruent with the VUCA view” (p.7-8). Many educational establishments are not sufficiently responding “to the needs of a fluctuating business landscape” (p.11).

2.4.3 Sector-Specific Adaptation Challenges

The literature demonstrates that VUCA leadership requirements may vary significantly across sectors. [Eiser \(2008\)](#) focuses exclusively on “technical professionals” with “M.D. or scientific Ph.D. degrees” in “major global pharmaceutical companies”, while [Butler et al. \(2024\)](#) address “teachers transitioning into formal instructional coaching roles”. These sector-specific findings suggest that a generic VUCA leadership framework may not be sufficient and require substantial adaptation for different organizational contexts.

However, the literature lacks systematic examination of how VUCA leadership competencies translate across different industries, sectors, and organizations. This gap creates challenges for organizations seeking to implement evidence-based leadership development programmes.

2.5 Critical Research Gaps and Implications for Primary Research

The modified systematic literature review has revealed four fundamental gaps in the current understanding of emerging leadership development within VUCA contexts. These gaps represent both theoretical and practical limitations that constrain the field's ability to effectively identify, develop, and assess emerging leaders for volatile business environments.

2.5.1 Current Research

2.5.1.1 Definitional Clarity

Research Gap 1: The absence of clear, operationalised definitions of 'emerging leaders' in VUCA contexts.

Current State: The literature lacks consensus on what constitutes an 'emerging leader' specifically within the VUCA environments, representing a form of conceptual neglect in the field. Existing definitions are often generic, failing to capture the unique characteristics, competencies, and developmental stages relevant to volatile and uncertain contexts.

Research Implications: This gap requires a foundational approach to primary research that begins with conceptual clarification. The research must establish a clear, contextually relevant definition that distinguish emerging leaders in VUCA settings from traditional leadership development theories.

Primary Research Considerations:

- a. Establish definitional boundaries that are both theoretically sound and practically applicable.
- b. Empirical methodology to understand stakeholder perspectives on emerging leadership.
- c. Examination of the intersection between leadership emergence and VUCA factors.

2.5.1.2 Competency Verification

Research Gap 2: Limited empirical verification (practical application and testing) of VUCA-specific leadership competencies for 'Emerging Leaders'.

Current State: While theoretical frameworks propose various competencies for VUCA leadership, there is insufficient agreement, or indeed empirical verification of which competencies are genuinely required or may be critical for emerging leaders in these contexts. The gap between theoretical suggestions and practical application remains substantial.

Research Implications: This gap demands rigorous empirical investigation to examine, validate, refine, or challenge existing competency models. The primary research must move beyond theoretical speculation to examine real-world application and effectiveness of proposed VUCA leadership competencies among emerging leaders.

Primary Research Considerations:

- a. Identify the leadership skills and competencies being focused on in existing emerging leadership development programmes.
- b. Investigate what VUCA competencies are required in the industry at present and the relation to future skills needed to operate in the changing world.
- c. Identify if there is a connection between the two sets of competency requirements.

2.5.2 Future Research

2.5.2.1 Developmental Approaches

Gap 3: Insufficient understanding of effective development methodologies for VUCA leadership.

Current State: Limited understanding exists regarding which development methodologies effectively prepare emerging leaders for VUCA environments. Traditional leadership development approaches, which tend to be more horizontal (Peters et al., 2018) may be insufficient for the unique challenges posed by volatile contexts, which require organisations and individuals to be capable of managing ‘crises and changes over shorter periods of time’ (Amann et al., 2022; Hall & Rowland, 2016).

Future Research Rationale: Due to dissertation time constraints, this gap will be addressed in future research. However, the primary research findings regarding definitional clarity and competency verification will provide essential foundational knowledge for subsequent investigation of development approaches. Understanding what emerging leadership means in VUCA contexts and which competencies are critical will inform more targeted development methodology research.

2.5.2.2 Measurement Tools

Gap 4: Lack of standardised assessment instruments for VUCA leadership potential.

Current State: The absence of validated, standardised instruments for assessing VUCA leadership potential limits both research advancement and practical application in organisational settings.

Future Research Rationale: Once definitions are clarified and competencies confirmed through the primary research, future studies can develop and test appropriate measurement instruments. The current research will aim to provide the theoretical and empirical foundation necessary for creating robust assessment tools.

2.5.3 Research Priority and Focus of Current Study

The thesis will concentrate on addressing Gaps 1 and 2, which represent fundamental prerequisites for advancing the field.

2.5.3.1 Proposed Research Sequence to Address the Gaps

1. **Definitional Clarity:** Establish the conceptual foundation for ‘Emerging Leader’ which can be used by organisations and institutions to identify ‘Emerging Leaders’.
2. **Competency Verification:** Identify the VUCA-specific competencies that are critical to this leadership segment.
3. **Development Approaches (Future):** Apply validated competencies to test and create effective development methods.
4. **Measurement Tools (Future):** Develop assessment instruments for validated competencies.

3 Market Research Review

3.1 The Case for Market Research Review

The market research review examined 22 leadership development programmes to assess how “emerging leaders” are defined and operationalised within the current training landscape. The analysis focused particularly on programmes addressing emerging leader development and VUCA contexts, complementing the systematic literature review which identified a significant gap in definitional clarity. By examining programme descriptions, target audience, and selection criteria, this review provides empirical evidence of how the concept of ‘emerging leader’ is understood and applied in practice. Additionally, future skills reports were reviewed for skills and competency clarification.

The market research was conducted as part of the internship for Enriched Leadership, which required the design and development of a leadership development programme for emerging leaders in VUCA environments. This review serves as a gap analysis to identify considerations for programme development and act as secondary research complementing the systematic literature review. The purpose of examining existing leadership development programmes for emerging leaders and VUCA environments, and skills reports, is to understand what is currently taking place in industry and practice that may not be directly reported through academic literature.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Programme Identification and Selection

Programmes were identified through a snowball sampling approach, beginning with programmes conducted with the United Kingdom and Europe, then extending to North American and other global regions (*Figure 7*). No language restrictions were imposed; however, all identified programmes were predominantly conducted in English, with alternative languages available for some based on locality and international reach.

The primary inclusion criterion were programmes that included the term ‘emerging leader’ in the programme title or references to ‘future leaders’ in the programme descriptions. This approach yielded 20 emerging leadership development programmes and 2 VUCA leadership programmes, selected based on programme title and content focus.

Programme review was intentionally limited to information published on provider websites, including programme overviews and brochures. This limitation reflects a methodological decision to examine the primary information that prospective participants use to self-identify and determine programme suitability. Programme acceptance mechanisms varied from competitive selection based on submitted applications to open enrolment with immediate registration upon payment (*Appendix C.1- Table C-1*).

Six future skills reports published by industry specialists (DEFI, 2022; Dondi et al., 2021; Kingston University, 2025; Leopold, 2025; NCUB, 2024; OECD, 2019) were examined to identify skills prioritised for future and developing leaders. These reports were selected for review based on their high frequency in search results and companies and organisations referring to them. Additionally, these reports focused on general application and were not geographically specific. These skills and competencies were cross-referenced with those covered in the leadership development programmes to identify gaps and overlaps¹.

¹ These findings are specific to the internship and are not analysed for the thesis, however, a summary can be found in *Appendix C*.

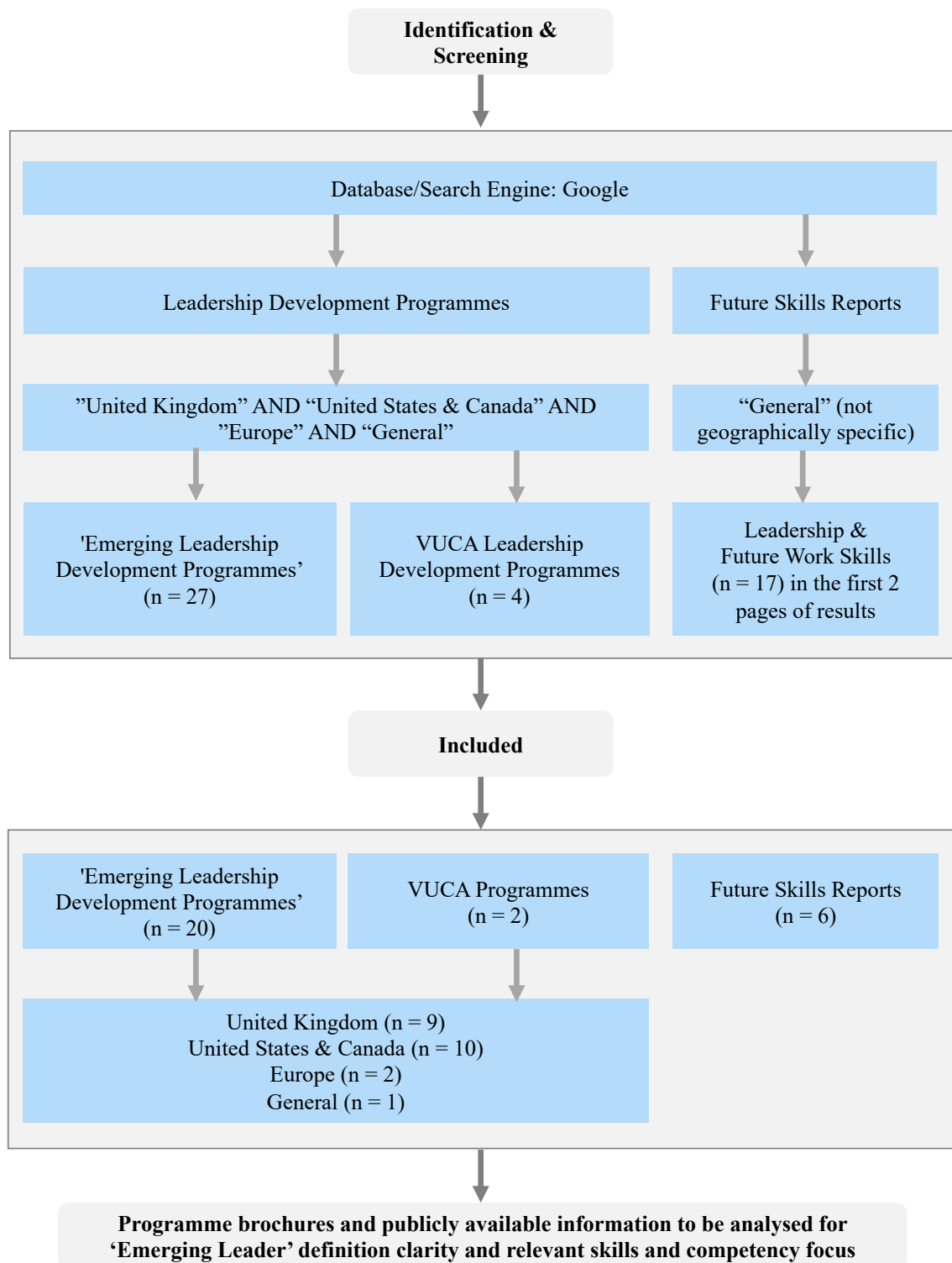


Figure 7 - Identification of existing Emerging Leader' and VUCA Leadership Development Programmes and Future Skills Reports

3.2.2 Analysis Approach

The analysis focused on identifying how emerging leaders are defined and whether operational definitions are utilised (*Figure 8*). Target audience and selection criteria served as key variables for clarifying the intended demographic and determining whether programmes are sector-agnostic or sector-specific. Additional variables including duration, format, and cost were examined for the internship project, but are not reported here as they fall outside the scope of the thesis research question.

3.2.3 Sample Characteristics

The programmes reviewed spanned different industries and provider types, from academic institutions to corporate training organisations. Target audiences varied from general demographics to specific sectors, professions, and organisational positions (*Table C-1*). A notable distinction emerged during the review, programmes were associated with either emerging leaders or VUCA contexts, no programme was identified that explicitly catered to both factors simultaneously or presented itself as addressing both dimensions in an integrated manner.

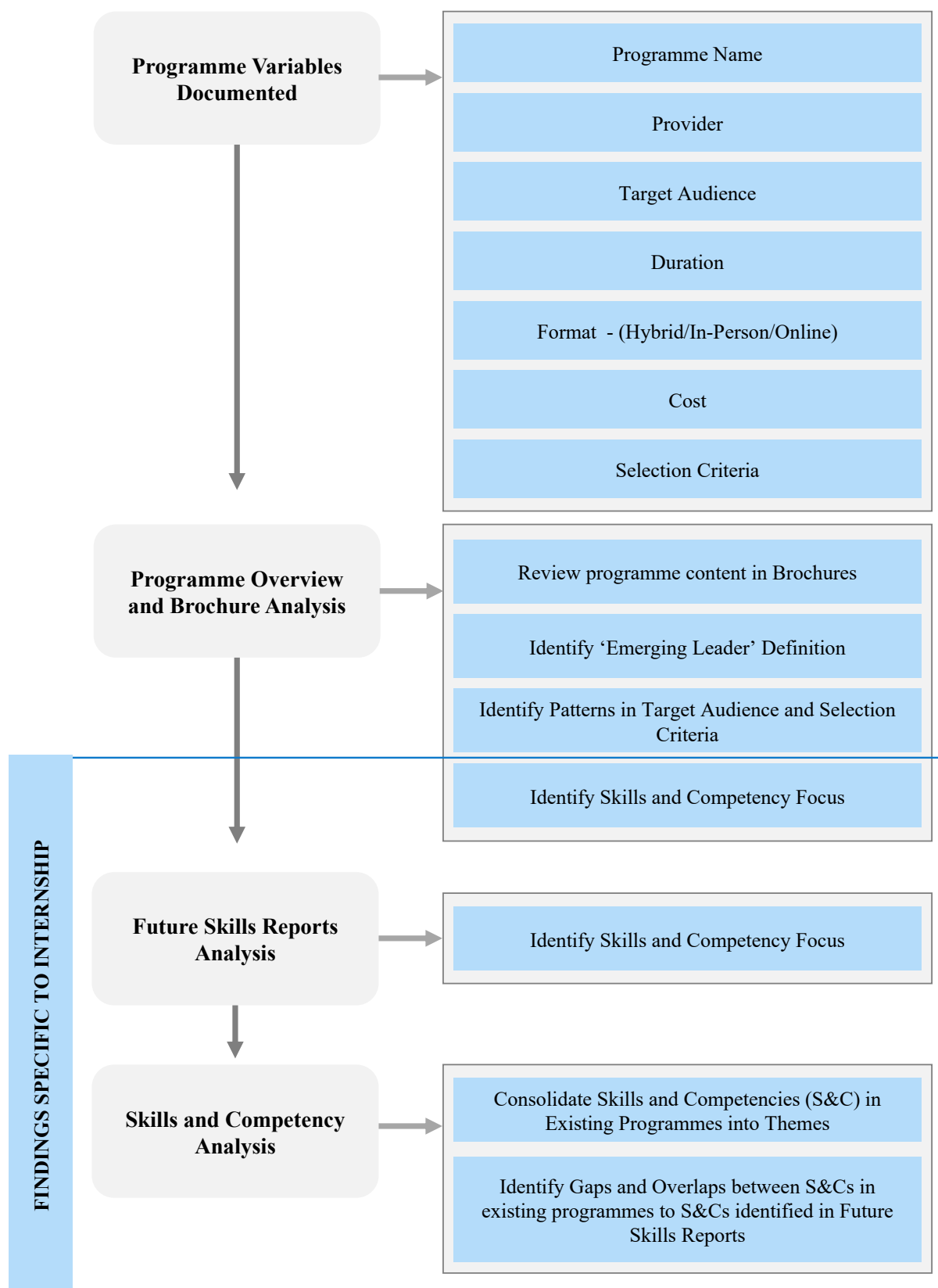


Figure 8 - Analysis of Existing 'Emerging Leader' and VUCA Leadership Development Programmes and Future Skills Reports

3.3 Findings

3.3.1 Absence of Operational Definition

The most striking finding from this review is the absence of an operational definition for “emerging leaders” across all 22 programmes examined. While each programme articulates a target audience, none provide a clear, theoretically grounded definition of what constitutes an “emerging leader” or what distinguishes this cohort from other leadership development participants. Programmes describe ‘who’ should attend but fail to define ‘what’ makes someone an emerging leader, suggesting that the term functions more as a marketing descriptor than an academically meaningful construct. This finding supports the conceptual neglect identified in the literature review, where definitional ambiguity was highlighted as a significant barrier to both research and practice. The lack of clarity extends from academic discourse to practical settings, potentially indicating a field-wide gap rather than an isolated theoretical gap.

3.3.2 Inconsistent Experience Requirements

Analysis of the target audience criteria reveals considerable inconsistency in the experience levels associated with the “emerging” leadership status. The programmes demonstrate numerous variations:

- a. *Entry Level* – Programme 19 ([McGill University, 2025](#)) targets current students with no professional experience requirement mentioned.
- b. *Early Career* – Programmes 3, 6, and 9 specify 3-5 years of professional experience ([London Business School, 2025](#); [Harvard Kennedy School, 2025](#); [Harvard Business School, 2025b](#)).
- c. *Mid-Career* – Programmes 4, 8, and 16 focus on middle managers and mid-career professionals ([Queen’s University Belfast, 2024](#); [Harvard Business School, 2025a](#); [The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2025](#)).
- d. *Senior Leadership* – Programme 7 targets individuals with 10-20 years of experience in high-responsibility roles ([Harvard Business School, 2025c](#)).

This wide range, from zero to twenty years of experience, suggests that ‘emerging’ is being applied across virtually the entire leadership development spectrum. The lack of characterised conditions makes it difficult to distinguish emerging leaders from either aspiring leaders or established leaders seeking advancement. The terminology appears to be highly inclusive rather than identifying a distinct cohort with shared characteristics or development needs.

3.3.3 VUCA-Specific Programmes Provide No Additional Definitional Clarity

The two programmes (21 and 22) explicitly addressing VUCA contexts do not provide additional definitional clarity. Programme 21 ([Oxford Management Centre, 2025b](#)) targets “directors, senior managers, middle managers, identified talent, high potentials and future leaders,” which is an expansive list that spans multiple career stages. Programme 22 ([GLOMACS, 2024](#)) focuses on “senior leadership, executives, heads of departments, and senior management,” positioning VUCA leadership development at the senior level rather than the emerging level.

This finding is particularly significant given that the literature review identified VUCA contexts as requiring distinct competencies and development approaches. The market evidence suggests that VUCA leadership development has not been integrated with emerging leader development in meaningful ways, representing a missed opportunity to address the specific challenges faced by newer leaders navigating volatile and uncertain environments.

3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 Definitional Clarity

The market research findings substantiate the literature review's conclusion that "emerging leader" lacks definitional clarity. The term appears to function as a flexible label applied across a wide range of experience levels, organisational roles, and developmental stages. This flexibility may serve marketing purposes by broadening the potential participant pool, but it undermines the theoretical and practical value of the concept.

The inconsistency across programmes suggests that organisations interpret 'emerging' specific to their needs rather than applying a shared framework. For some, 'emerging' denotes the transition from individual contributor to team leader ([INSEAD, 2025](#)), and for others, it describes senior executives approaching C-suite roles ([Kellogg School of Management, 20205](#)).

3.4.2 The VUCA Context Gap

The disconnect between VUCA-focused programmes and emerging leader programmes represents a significant gap in the market. While the literature increasingly recognises that volatile and uncertain environments require distinctive leadership capabilities, the programmes reviewed do not integrate these insights into emerging leader development. The two VUCA programmes identified target established leaders rather than those in formative stages. The gap aligns with the literature review finding that VUCA leadership development and emerging leader development remain largely separate streams of research and practice. The absence of programmes explicitly addressing "emerging leaders in VUCA contexts" reflects this conceptual divide and points to an underserved market segment.

3.5 Overview

The market research review demonstrates that the conceptual neglect identified in the academic literature extends into professional practice. none of the 22 programmes examined provides an operational definition of ‘emerging leader’, and target audience descriptions vary so widely as to encompass virtually the entire leadership development spectrum. The term appears to serve a branding function rather than denoting a specific, theoretically grounded developmental stage.

These marketing findings complement the literature review by providing empirical evidence that definitional clarity represents not only an academic concern, but a practical challenge affecting programme design, participant selection, and potentially development outcomes. Addressing this gap could enhance both the theoretical foundations and practical effectiveness of emerging leader development initiatives.

4 Empirical Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction to Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology (Saunders et al., 2023) (Silverman, 2013a) (Silverman, 2013b) grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2022) to address the critical research gaps identified in the systematic literature review. The overall structure of the methodology is informed by Saunders et al.'s 'Research Onion' (2023) (Figure 9)²; the research onion provides a sequence of approaches which can be customised based on the research intent (Figure 10). The methodology is designed to explore and understand the lived experiences and perspectives of various stakeholders regarding emerging leadership in VUCA contexts.

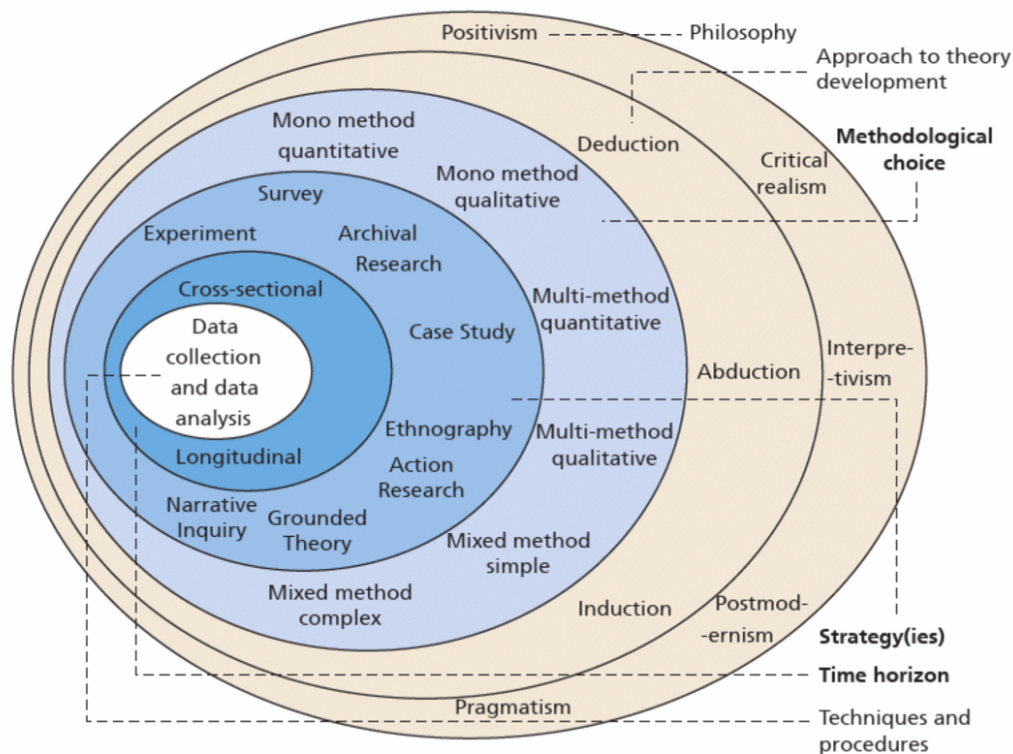


Figure 9 - Research Onion (Saunders et al., 2023, p.174)

² Introduced in Evidenced-Based Management Module (EBM) for Thesis Preparation.

The research approach will build upon a preliminary market research study on existing emerging leadership development and VUCA-specific leadership programmes, and an analysis of industry reports on future skills needed in leadership.

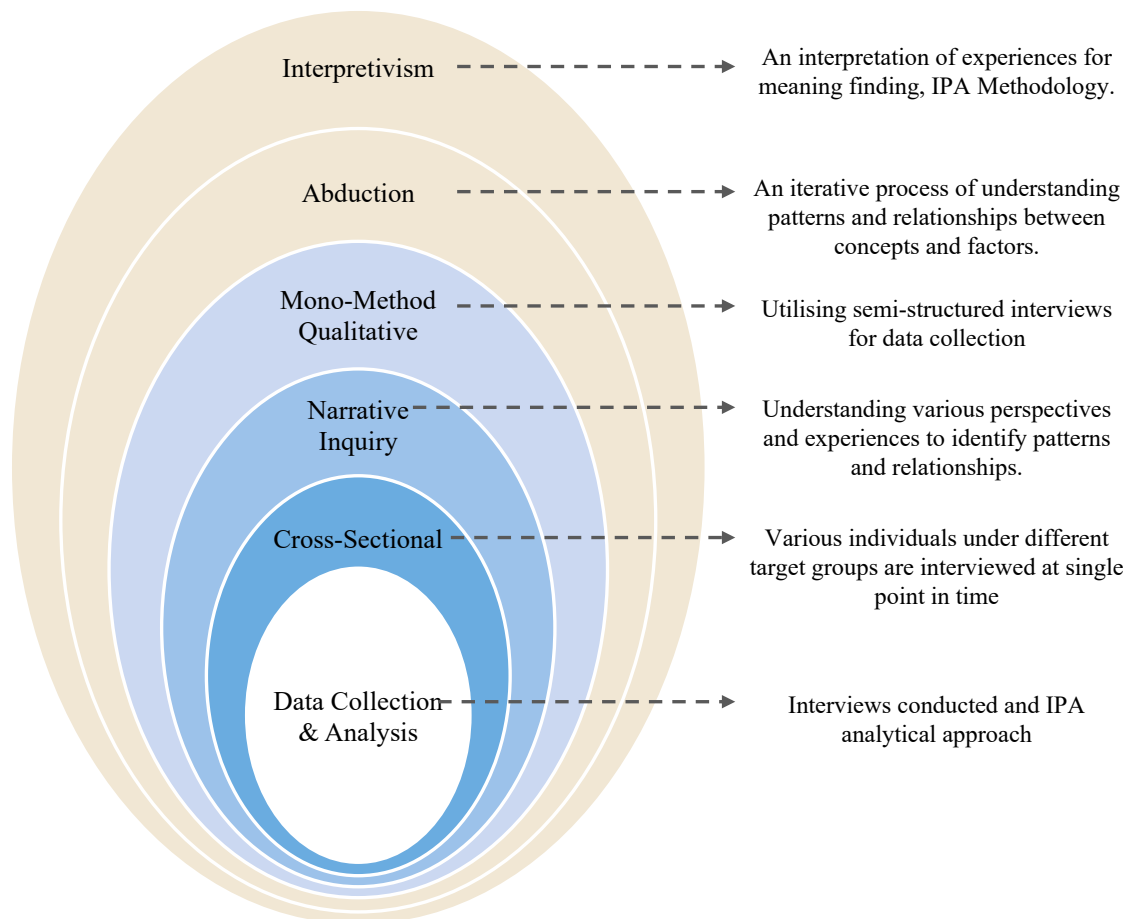


Figure 10 - Research Methodology Approach Adopted from Saunders et al., (2023)

4.2 Research Philosophy

Philosophical Foundation: Interpretivism

This thesis adopts an interpretivist research philosophy (Bell et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022, pp. 1–240), recognising that understanding emerging leadership in VUCA contexts requires deep exploration of subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations held by different stakeholders. This philosophical stance is particularly appropriate for this research as it acknowledges the inherently complex and contextual nature of leadership experiences within volatile business environments.

The interpretivist philosophy helps to address the identified research gaps:

1. *Definitional Clarity Gap*: Understanding how different stakeholders conceptualise and define emerging leadership (which is inherently interpretive).
2. *Competency Exploration Gap*: Exploring how competencies are experienced, applied, and valued in practice, which requires access to subjective interpretations.

Emerging leadership is not an objective, measurable entity but rather a socially constructed concept that exists through the interpretations, interactions, and sense-making processes of individuals within organisational contexts. The literature has produced no measurable definition for this concept. In the VUCA environment, this concept might become more complex and redefined through multiple and collective insights.

The VUCA contexts create unique experiential realities that vary significantly across individuals, organisations, sectors, and cultural contexts (Baran & Woznyj, 2020). What constitutes ‘volatility’ or ‘uncertainty’ in one organisational setting may be interpreted differently in another. An interpretivist approach recognises that these subjective interpretations are not limitations to be overcome but rather essential data for understanding how emerging leadership is conceptualised and experienced in practice.

Multiple perspectives are necessary to develop comprehensive understanding. The research acknowledges that HR professionals, career advisors, and emerging leaders themselves may hold fundamentally different interpretations of what emerging leadership means in VUCA contexts. Rather than seeking a single ‘correct’ definition, interpretivism embraces these multiple perspectives as legitimate and valuable sources of understanding, recognising that comprehensive knowledge emerges from the synthesis of diverse viewpoints.

4.3 Research Approach

Approach to Theory Development: Abductive Reasoning

This thesis adopts an abductive research approach, given the partial theoretical foundation and the need to develop practical solutions for real-world challenges in emerging leadership development within VUCA contexts.

Several key factors distinguish this research from purely inductive or deductive approaches. While leadership development theories (e.g. transformational, authentic, adaptive leadership) and VUCA conceptual frameworks exist independently, their integration in the context of emerging leadership remains theoretically underdeveloped. The research cannot proceed purely deductively because comprehensive theory is lacking, nor purely inductively because relevant theoretical foundations do exist. The systematic literature review and market research revealed surprising gaps that require explanation. Despite widespread organisational discussion of VUCA challenges, only two VUCA-specific leadership programmes were identified from the 22 leadership development programmes analysed. Although theoretical competency models exist, there is a lack of empirical verification in VUCA contexts.

Table 5 - Implementation of Abductive Logic

Phase 1 – Theoretical Foundation
Existing leadership development theories and VUCA frameworks provide initial theoretical framework.
Systematic literature review identifies gaps and incomplete explanations.
Market research reveals empirical puzzle requiring explanation.
Phase 2 – Empirical Investigation
Multi-stakeholder interviews explore real-world experiences and perspectives on emerging leadership in VUCA contexts.
IPA methodology enables deep understanding of how participants make sense of their experiences.
Data collection seeks to understand occurrences that existing theory cannot fully explain.
Phase 3 – Theory-Data Integration
Integration of theoretical knowledge with empirical insights through interpretative analysis.
Development of working definitions that synthesise existing theory with new empirical understanding.
Verification of competencies through the lens of both theoretical frameworks and lived experiences.
Phase 4 – Theoretical Refinement
Contribution to knowledge that is both theoretically sound and practically relevant.

This abductive approach ([Table 5](#)) allows the research to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The thesis will produce findings that combine academic knowledge with real-world insights, creating results that are useful for both researchers' studying leadership and organisations developing emerging leaders in VUCA environments.

4.4 Research Design

Methodological Choice: Mono-method Qualitative

The research employed a qualitative design approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the primary methodological framework. The design choice is informed by limited existing empirical research and the need to explore and understand complex, subjective experiences of emerging leadership. This exploration aims to develop a functional definition through various stakeholders' perspectives and to clarify VUCA leadership competencies for development.

IPA, as presented by [Smith et al. \(2022, pp. 1–240\)](#), is particularly suited to this research because it focuses on how participants make sense of their lived experiences and allows for the exploration of complex experiences like leadership emergence. IPA will provide a detailed comprehension of both individual perspectives and shared experiences. Furthermore, this approach supports the development of theoretical understanding from empirical data.

4.5 Data Collection Methods

Primary Data Collection Strategy: Semi-Structured Interviews³

Semi-structured interviews provide for flexibility to explore participant's experiences while maintaining focus on research objectives. This approach allows for deep exploration of individual perspectives and experiences, flexibility to follow emergent themes during conversations, and consistency in core topics across different stakeholder groups. The research will employ a multi-stakeholder data collection strategy involving two distinct groups ([Table 6](#)), where Group B is split into two professional segments.

The secondary data sources are the market research review presented in Chapter 3.

Table 6 - Interview Target Groups

Target group	Purpose	Focus area	Sample size
Potential Emerging Leaders (A - T1)	Understanding first-hand experiences and self-perceptions of leadership emergence.	Personal development journeys, VUCA experiences, competency self-assessment.	6-8 participants at various stages of leadership emergence.
HR and People Management Industry Experts and Professionals (B - T2)	Understanding organisational perspectives on emerging leadership identification and development.	Current practices, challenges in VUCA contexts, competency requirements.	Approximately 4 participants from diverse industries and organisational sizes.
Career Advisors and Development Professionals (B - T3)	Exploring guidance and development perspectives on emerging leadership.	Career transition patterns, skill development needs, VUCA preparedness.	Approximately 4 participants from various advisory contexts.

³ Refer to Appendix D - Interview Questions for Target Groups with Notes.

4.6 Sampling Strategy

Target Population and Sampling Frame

- a. Population: Professionals involved in or affected by emerging leadership development in VUCA contexts.
- b. Sampling Frame: Accessible professionals across the stakeholder groups within relevant industries and contexts.

Sampling Technique: Purposively

Purposive sampling is appropriate for IPA studies as it enables selection of participants who have relevant lived experiences and can provide rich, detailed accounts of the phenomenon under investigation (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 48).

Sampling Criteria

The inclusion criteria consisted of interviewing industry professionals with at least 5 years of experience in leadership development or talent management, including career advisors actively engaging in leadership/career development with emerging professionals. Potential emerging leaders must currently be in or transitioning into leadership roles with experience in complex and changing environments. The exclusion criteria included participants without direct experience in leadership development or VUCA contexts, individuals unable to participate in English-language interviews, and those with potential conflicts of interest with the research objectives.

Sample Size

Total Target: 10-12 participants across two groups; this sample size aligns with IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2022, pp. 51) for meaningful analysis while ensuring adequate representation across stakeholder groups. The range allows for flexibility based on data saturation principles.

4.7 Data Analysis Approach

Analytical Framework: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The analysis will follow [Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's \(2022, pp.79-107\)](#) IPA analytical framework:

Step 1 – ‘Reading and Re-reading’ (Individual case analysis)

Step 2 – ‘Initial Noting’

Step 3 – ‘Developing emergent themes’

Step 4 – ‘Searching for connections across emergent themes’

Step 5 – ‘Moving to the next case’

The software tools employed will include Microsoft Excel for participant tracking, Microsoft Word for transcript documentation and coding processing, along with NVivo for data management, and thematic coding documentation.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

Institutional approval was obtained from the university ethics committee on the 2nd of August 2025⁴, prior to data collection, ensuring full compliance with institutional research ethics guidelines. Informed consent was secured through both verbal and written means, with participants being briefed on the research purpose, process, and their right to withdraw during and after the interview. During the interviews, consent was obtained for audio recording, with clear communication that recordings would serve research purposes only.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the thesis. All participants' identities were anonymised in transcripts and reporting, with audio files and transcripts securely stored and scheduled for deletion upon thesis completion. Access to raw data was restricted to the researcher and supervisor only, ensuring data protection.

As this constituted a minimal risk thesis involving professional participants, ethical safeguards were straightforward. These measures ensured that the research was conducted with integrity, respecting participant autonomy and maintaining the highest ethical standards throughout the research.

⁴ Refer to Appendix A- CURES Ethical Approval Letter.

4.9 Reliability and Validity

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, this thesis utilised multiple credibility measures aligned with established qualitative research standards (Smith et al., 2022). Triangulation was achieved through incorporating diverse stakeholder perspectives, while regular debriefing sessions with the research supervisor provided ongoing critical review of emerging interpretations. Dependability was maintained through a comprehensive audit trail, documented using both NVivo software and manual analytical logs⁵. Following IPA procedures ensured methodological consistency. Transferability was strengthened through detailed contextual descriptions and purposive sampling with explicit criteria.

4.10 Limitations and Constraints

The research had methodological and practical limitations. Qualitative findings are sometimes said to lack statistical generalisability; thus, an in-depth IPA approach to analysis was utilised for reliability and transferability of findings. Reliance on self-reported participant data, a common constraint in prior research, was addressed by including industry professionals and aspiring leaders. Single-point data collection prevented longitudinal competency development assessment. Practical challenges included participant availability and timeline constraints. Mitigation strategies emphasised theoretical transferability through conceptual contributions over statistical generalisations, while incorporating diverse in-depth stakeholder perspectives.

⁵ Refer to Appendix E for Sample IPA Process.

5 Data Analysis and Findings

5.1 Data Collection and Analysis Process

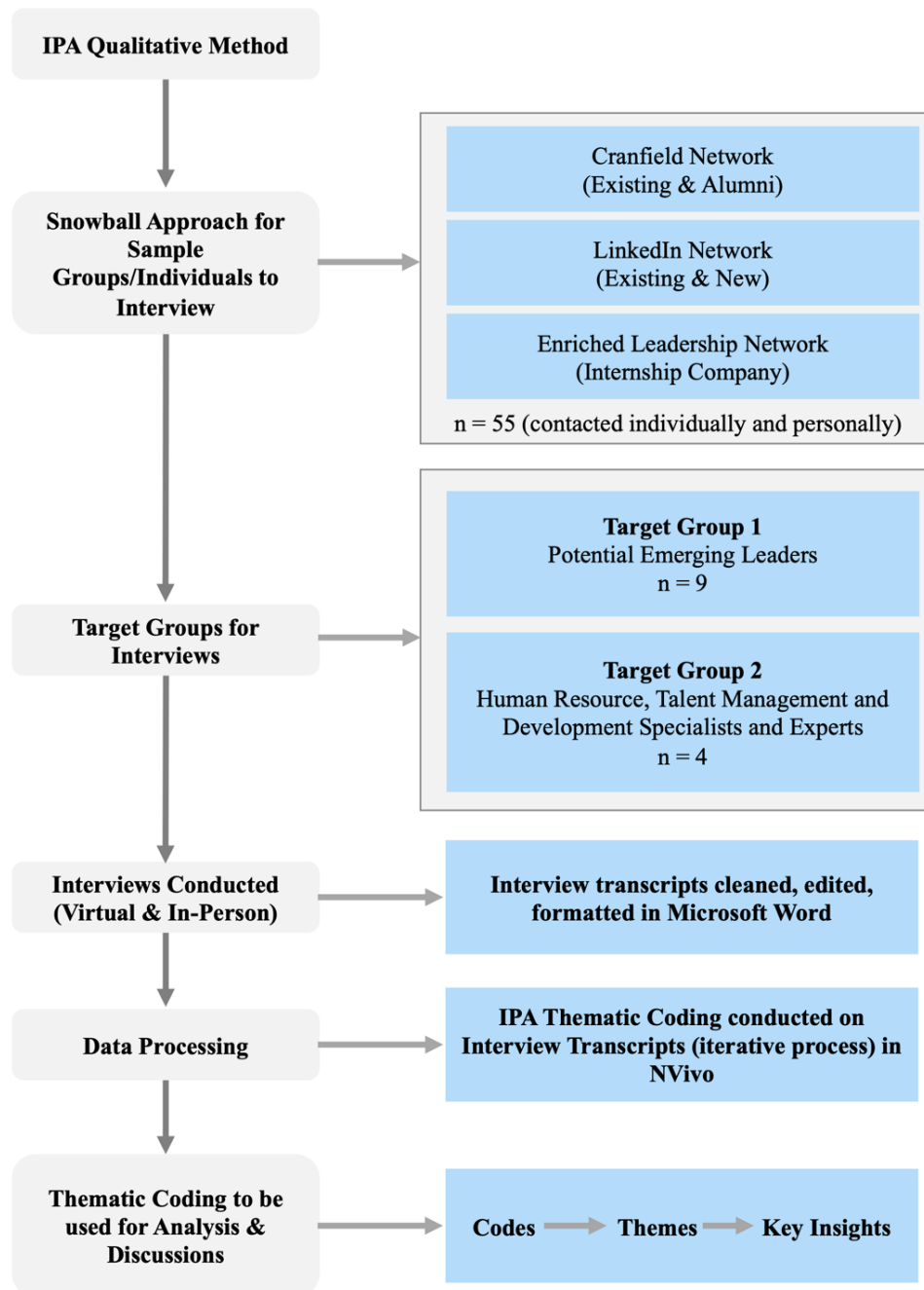


Figure 11 - Primary Data Collection and Analysis Process

This chapter presents the findings from an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study exploring the experiences of developing leaders' experiences in VUCA based contexts. The research addresses two primary questions: definitional clarity of 'emerging leaders' and

identification of VUCA-specific leadership competencies. Data was collected from nine developing future leaders (Target Group A: T1.1 through T1.9) with professional experience ranging from 6 months to +6 years and leadership exposure spanning 3 months to 6 years. Additionally, four industry specialists in the field of human resource and talent management, and career development (Target Group B: T2.1-T2.2 and T3.1-T3.2) with professional experience over 10 to 30 years. The findings are presented systematically through the participants profiles, thematic analysis results, research question responses, and pattern identification, maintaining separation between data presentation and interpretation. The primary data collection and analysis approach is briefly outlined in *Figure 11*. The analytical approach for the IPA was facilitated through [Smith et al.'s work on the IPA method](#), who convey a step-by-step process in analysing qualitative data to identify 'emergent themes' (2022, pp.90-107).

5.2 Participant Profile Analysis

The participant group for Target Group A (T1) represents diverse professional backgrounds with experience levels ranging from 6 months to 6 years (*Table 7*). Leadership exposure varies significantly, from 3 months formal leadership experience to 6 years of leadership involvement. Professional contexts span corporate environments, volunteer opportunities, various industries, and academic settings. Educational backgrounds include participants currently pursuing or having completed post graduate degrees in business and management studies, with varying degrees of leadership development. Participants from Target Group B primarily feature experienced human resource and people management specialists (T2), and career management specialists (T3) (*Table 7*). Although not focused on in the analysis, the participants across all target groups represent 5 different countries i.e. Italy, France, India, United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Ireland), Ukraine. Most of the participants are female; however, this is not included in the analysis as the responses were based on participant responses and availability to be interviewed; gender is included for the purpose of transparency.

Table 7 - Participant Demographics and Experience Summary

Participants	Gender	Professional Experience	Industry	Leadership Experience	Current Status
T1.1	M	6 years	Animation & Design	Most of the time (self-assessed – not assigned)	Business & Management Student
T1.2	M	9 months	Engineering	90% of social interactions	
T1.3	M	4-5 years	Education	Technically on paper but did not identify as one	
T1.4	M	0-1 years	Finance & Economics	1-2.5 year	
T1.5	F	+3 years	Real Estate	+1 year	
T1.6	M	3 years	Human Resources	1.5 years	
T1.7	F	0 years	Marketing	Volunteer & academic primarily	
T1.8	F	4.5 years	Computer Science & Engineering	1.75 years	
T1.9	F	+1 years	Banking and Technology	3 months	
T2.1	F	+15 Years	HR in Consulting	+15 Years	Chief of People, Human Resource and Management
T2.2	F	+25 Years	HR in Consulting	+25 Years	
T3.1	F	+20 Years	Education	+15 Years	Career Management & Development
T3.2	F	+10 Years	Education	+5 Years	

5.3 Thematic Analysis Results⁶

The IPA Analysis revealed seven major themes with multiple codes supported by evidence across participants, presented in [Table 8](#), key words and sentences were linked to sub-themes or codes which were then associated with overarching themes. Theme frequencies range from high occurrences (11/13) to notable exceptions (3/13). It is important to note that frequency is not an indication of importance or hierarchy as stipulated by [Smith et al., \(2022, pp.98\)](#), in terms of numeration documentation. Each theme demonstrates distinct behavioural patterns and developmental characteristics, with direct participant quotes supporting all findings. The themes encompass leadership emergence patterns, identity development processes, VUCA navigation strategies⁷, interpersonal competencies, and learning through complexity, leadership development challenges and tensions, providing comprehensive coverage of the emerging leader experience. The key insights in [Table 8](#) provide clarity in terms of what the codes mean.

⁶ Evidence (quotes) for themes is present in Appendix F - Table C-1

⁷ Situations that exhibited a combination of volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous characteristics were used to identify common strategies and approaches taken by participants to manage those situations.

Table 8 - Thematic Coding Analysis Results

	Themes	Codes	Frequency	Participants	Key Insight
1	Situational Leadership Emergence	1.1 Reluctant Leadership	9/13	T1.1, T1.2, T1.3, T1.4, T1.5, T1.6, T1.7, T1.9, T3.2	Participants described stepping into leadership roles not by choice, but by necessity or external recognition.
		1.2 Situational Ad-hoc Leadership	5/13	T1.2, T1.5, T1.6, T1.7, T1.9	Participants consistently described taking on the leadership role when others would not step forward.
		1.3 Power and Control Motivation	1/13	T1.8	Participant showcased interest in control and power that came with leadership due to a lack of control and power in their personal life.
2	Evolving Leadership Identity	2.1 External recognition before self-recognition	9/13	T1.1, T1.2, T1.3, T1.5, T1.6, T1.7, T1.8, T1.9, T2.2	A pattern emerged where others identified leadership qualities before participants recognized it in themselves.
		2.2 Confidence building through experience	7/13	T1.1, T1.4, T1.5, T1.6, T1.8, T2.2, T3.2	Leadership identity developed through iterative experiences and feedback loops.
3	VUCA Navigation Strategies	3.1 Adaptability and Flexibility	10/13	T1.1, T1.2, T1.3, T1.4, T1.5, T1.9, T2.1, T2.2, T3.1, T3.2	Participants demonstrated various approaches to handling uncertainty and change.

		3.2 Decision-Making Under Uncertainty	9/13	T1.1, T1.2, T1.3, T1.4, T1.5, T1.7, T1.9, T2.2, T3.2	Participants showed different comfort levels with incomplete information.
		3.3 Creative Problem-Solving in Crisis	4/13	T1.4, T1.8, T1.9, T2.2	Evidence of innovative approaches during challenging situations.
4	Interpersonal Leadership Competencies	4.1 Empathy and People-centricity	11/13	T1.1, T1.2, T1.3, T1.5, T1.6, T1.7, T1.8, T1.9, T2.1, T3.1, T3.2	Strong emphasis on understanding and working with diverse people.
		4.2 Communication as an Essential Competency	9/13	T1.2, T1.3, T1.4, T1.5, T1.6, T1.7, T2.2, T3.1, T3.2	Communication emerged as a fundamental across all participants.
		4.3 Emotional Intelligence and Self-Management	10/13	T1.1, T1.2, T1.3, T1.4, T1.5, T1.7, T1.8, T1.9, T2.2, T3.1	Managing and understanding yourself is integral and necessary when working with and leading others.
5	Learning through complexity and feeling overwhelmed	5.1 Breaking down complexity	6/13	T1.1, T1.3, T1.4, T1.9, T2.2, T3.2	Participants developed strategies for managing complex situations and being overwhelmed, with some participants nothing breaking down tasks into manageable components.
		5.2 Growth Through Difficult Experiences	10.13	T1.1, T1.2, T1.3, T1.4, T1.5, T1.7, T1.8, T2.1, T2.2, T3.2	Challenging situations were viewed as a developmental opportunity.
		5.3 Learning from role-models and mentors	8/13	T1.1, T1.4, T1.6, T1.7, T1.8, T1.9, T3.1, T3.2	Participants mentioned learning about leadership from good/positive seniors; observational learning.

		5.4 Self-awareness and Reflection (Introspection)	12/13	All Participants except T2.2	Engaging in introspection to becoming a better leader, participants displayed self-reflection and open mindednesses towards improvement.
6	Systematic Leadership Development Challenges	6.1 Recruitment/Promotion-Leadership Skills Mismatch	3/13	T2.1, T2.2, T3.2	There is a disconnect between technical competence and leadership capability in organisational promotion and recruitment decisions.
		6.2 Organisational Culture as a Barrier	4/13	T2.1, T2.2, T3.1, T3.2	Organisational culture and structure can inhibit authentic leadership development despite commitments to provide leadership development opportunities and sometimes lack of foundations and systems to support development.
		6.3 Management Expectations Issues	3/13	T1.1, T1.9, T3.2	There is a disconnect between what is expected of the role and what is actually done, which tended to overwhelm people.
7	Generational and Demographic Complexity	7.1 Age and Experience based Leadership Assumptions	3/13	T2.2, T3.1, T3.2	The conventional or expected relationships/correlation between age, experience, and leadership readiness is challenged; traditional age-based expectations for leadership development may be counterproductive and exclusionary.
		7.2 Gender-Specific Development Challenges	1/13	T2.2	Gender-specific leadership programmes can create both opportunities and backlash, requiring careful design and implementation.

5.4 Research Questions Responses

5.4.1 Question 1

RQ1 – Definitional Clarity of ‘Emerging Leaders’

During the interview process, participants were asked about their experience and exposure to leadership through a series of questions, which was then followed by asking their views on what they defined and characterised an ‘Emerging Leader’ to be. Participant definitions and responses reveal common elements including developmental (growth) mindset, situational responsiveness (adaptation), emotional intelligence and self-awareness, adaptive mindset capabilities, and empowerment focus (*Table 9*). The findings showcase common themes while also acknowledging individual variation in identity comprehension, providing insights from both future leaders and practitioners. Definitional themes show high importance around learning focus, contemporary adaptation, skill development through practice and training, and growth through challenges. Notable variations exist in perspectives on natural versus developed leadership characteristics. Consensus areas include emphasis on continuous learning, people-centricity, and adaptability, while divergence appears in views on inherent traits versus situational development.

5.4.2 Question 2

RQ2 – VUCA Specific Leadership Competencies

The analysis reveals three categories of competencies based on evidence frequency: universal competencies, core VUCA-related competences, and developmental competencies (*Table 9*). The frequency does not denote hierarchal importance, merely the numeration across the interviews. Universal competencies across most participants include self-awareness, empathy, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and communication. Competencies related to VUCA-specific situations and environments, among 5 - 9 participants, include decision-making under uncertainty, resilience, problem-solving through deconstruction, creating problem-solving, and change leadership. Emerging competencies, or developing based competencies include cultural intelligence, mentoring and coaching, and inclusivity. Cross-participant patterns show universal importance for self-awareness and widespread emphasis on interpersonal skills

Table 9 - Definitional Analysis of term 'Emerging Leader'

Theme	Participant	Participant Definition	Key Characteristics
Developmental (Growth) Mindset	T1.1	“Anyone who is in their education phase or building their skills...training towards being capable of calling the best shots possible”	Learning-focused, development-oriented, non-hierarchical leadership.
	T1.3	“Someone who is learning the skills to become a future leader...combination of learning and application”	Skill development through practice, experiential learning.
	T1.5	“Having some natural characteristics of a leader, and going through the MSc in Management programme enhances them”	Natural traits enhanced by education and structured development.
	T3.2	“You can be an amazing leader as well, without all the technical capabilities, you can be an amazing leader and be hungry to learn and develop yourself in that area.”	Desire for self-development and improvement.
Situational Responsiveness (Adaptation)	T1.2	“Emerging leaders are the leaders of today, might be different from leaders from 20 years ago”	Contemporary adaptation, technology-aware, socially intelligent.
	T1.7	“Not something you have grown with, but you are developing time to time...series of actions happening in your life”	Gradual development through accumulated experiences and situations.
	T2.1	“I want people to be inquisitive and curious because we are not – we do not ask all of those. I want because to be able to immediately solve problems. I want them to go in and say, ‘I have got some data, and I have not got a lot of data, and I am going to make a decision, but I am going to do it with good faith.”	Resourceful through curiosity and creativity.
Emotional Intelligence and Self-Awareness	T1.8	“If an emergent leader knows themselves, if they want to do something and they feel like they could be good at it, they will reach out to you”	Self-aware, proactive, potential focused.

	T3.1	“if you were coaching individuals...and they were not able to self-reflect, and they were unable to dig deep into what makes them who they are and their values, would they ever succeed and become a leader? Because if you are a leader and are not in tune with your own emotions and feelings, how then can you recognise them in other people?”	Introspection as a means to better work with others.
	T2.1	“I think it is also that mixture of the moral compass, which again, HR should not have to do that...[they] shouldn’t have to be the moral compass for these leaders...it’s the moral, it’s that integrity, all of those.”	Internal moral perspective and integrity.
Adaptive Mindset	T1.4	“It’s about getting out of the comfort zone and getting into the first leadership roles”	Growth through challenge, discomfort as development catalyst (drive).
	T3.2	“I personally feel that is the difference between established leaders and emerging leaders. Established leaders have been in their role for a while and they are a little bit too comfortable with the authority or the decision main, whereas it is nice to see that open-mindedness and curiosity within emerging leader.”	Open-minded and curious.
Empowerment Focus	T1.6	“Someone who can work really well with people and can make sure they are comfortable”	People-focused, creating comfort, inclusive practices.
	T1.9	“Seeing the unique potential in others and yourself and then working to empower that potential...transitioning from an individual contributor to a mentor and facilitator”	Empowerment and transitioning into leadership.
	T3.1	“I am very passionate that we should not define people or pigeonhole people because of their age in particular, and because of their gender importantly, whether they have been down the academic or non-academic route, or because of their background, and perhaps their life experiences.”	Non-discriminatory and inclusive.

Table 10 - VUCA-Specific Competency Framework Analysis

Competency Category	Competencies	Insight	Frequency
Universal Competencies	Self-awareness	Understanding one's strength, limitations, and impact on others.	13/13
	Empathy	Understanding different perspectives and cultures.	11/13
	Emotional Intelligence	Managing emotions and relationships effectively.	12/13
	Adaptability	Ability to adjust to changing circumstances and diverse individuals and cultures.	10/13
	Communication	Clear, contextual communication across diverse groups.	13/13
Core VUCA-related Competencies⁸	Decision-making under uncertainty	Making decisions with incomplete information.	10/13
	Resilience	Managing stress and bouncing back from setbacks.	8/13
	Problem deconstruction	Breaking complex challenges into management parts.	6/13
	Creative problem-solving	Finding innovative solutions in crisis.	6/13
	Change Leadership	Leading through transitions and disruptions.	8/13
Emerging Competencies	Cultural Intelligence	Managing across different backgrounds and contexts.	7/13
	Mentoring and Development	Empowering others to grow.	10/13
	Inclusivity	Creating comfortable/safe environments for diverse team members and for people to voice their opinions.	7/13

⁸ Focus on competencies related to and needed to address the four parts of VUCA.

5.5 Contrasting Views in Data

There are significant contrasts that emerged in the data (*Table 11*). *Natural versus Developed leadership* perspectives reveal ongoing debate over innate traits versus situational leadership development, with participants having varying views on their leadership origins. *Confidence versus Uncertainty* manifestations reveal participants needing to project confidence while acknowledging, internally and externally, incomplete knowledge. *Individual versus Collective* focus show participants balancing personal development while empowering others. *Structure versus Flexibility* demonstrates the need for both clear processes and adaptability. *Reluctant versus Power-Seeking Leadership* shows majority of the participants demonstrating reluctance to leader while T1.8 explicitly seeks control. *Technical versus Interpersonal Skills* showcases how participants have the challenge of navigating between being recognized for their technical, or domain-based skills, rather than the soft skills required of leaders; this was especially conveyed through the practitioners working with emerging leaders.

These nuances have been identified to showcase the complexity of emerging leadership, and the need for further studies to understand and potentially propose resolutions for some of the contrasts. Additionally, these contrasts could impact the working definition proposed for the ‘Emerging Leader’.

Table 11 - Contrasts in Data Summary

Contrasting Theme	Description	Evidence	Implications
Natural vs. Developed Leadership	Debate over innate traits versus intentional leadership development.	T1.4, T1.5, T1.7, T1.6, T3.1	There are multiple pathways to leadership emergence, not a singular track.
Confidence vs. Uncertainty	Need to project confidence while acknowledging access to incomplete information.	T1.1, T1.3, T1.5, T2.2	Leadership requires comfort with ambiguity and recognises authentic vulnerability as a strength.
Individual vs. Collective Focus	Balance personal development with empowering others.	All participants showcase both	Emerging leaders develop through serving others.
Structure vs. Flexibility	Need clear processes while maintaining adaptability and flexibility.	T1.4, T1.5, T1.7, T2.1, T2.2, T3.2	VUCA contexts require both stability and agility.
Reluctant vs. Power/Control Seeking Leadership	Reluctance to take on leadership when not assigned versus desiring it for sense of control.	T1.8	Different motivational pathways to leadership.
Technical vs Interpersonal Skills	Recognition, whether it is recruitment or promotion, based on technical versus people leadership skills need.	T2.1, T2.2, T3.2	There are systematic gaps and bias that requires change.

5.6 Data Analysis Overview

The analysis revealed seven major themes characterising emerging leader experiences in VUCA contexts. *Situation Leadership Emergence* shows predominantly reluctant leadership assumption driven by necessity rather than ambition. *Evolving Leadership Identity* demonstrates external recognition preceding self-awareness in leadership development. *VUCA Navigation Strategies* encompass adaptability, uncertainty tolerance, and creative problem-solving approaches. *Interpersonal Leadership Competencies* emphasize empathy, communication, and emotional intelligence are core capabilities. *Learning Through Complexity* reveals how challenging situations become developmental opportunities and catalysts. *Systematic Leadership Development Challenges* and *Generational and Demographic Complexity* highlight the systematic challenges and biases that can impact leadership development.

6 Discussion

This research addresses a critical gap in leadership development literature: the absence of definitional clarity around "emerging leaders" and the lack of validated competency frameworks for VUCA environments within this leader category. Through a systematic triangulation of literature reviews, market research, and interpretative phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of thirteen participants, this thesis provides empirical evidence that challenges existing assumptions and offers additional insights for both academic and organisational contexts.

6.1 Definitional Clarity (Responding to RQ1)

6.1.1 The Conceptual Neglect: From Theory to Practice

The convergence of three independent data sources confirms that definitional ambiguity surrounding 'emerging leaders' represents a systematic challenge rather than an isolated theoretical gap. The literature review revealed an absence of operational definitions, with scholars employing the term as a loose concept rather than a rigorously defined construct. The market research demonstrated that none of the 22 leadership development programmes provided a precise definition despite prominently featuring 'emerging leader' terminology, with target audiences spanning from current students to senior executives with 20 years of experience. Most significantly, the primary research revealed that even experienced HR professionals with 10-30 years in talent development could not definitively articulate standardized definitions.

This three-way study demonstrates that if experienced practitioners cannot define the segment, and if programme designers operate without conceptual precision, then organisations lack the foundational framework necessary for effective identification, selection, and development of future leaders. The definitional void identified by [DeDiego et al. \(2022\)](#), where participants were 'ambiguous about the term', stating that "the actual content of what this means to be an emerging leader was not clearly defined, nor was it really fostered in this specific [LDP] programme" (p.269), extends beyond programme-specific confusion to represent fundamental conceptual neglect in the field.

6.1.2 Reluctant Leadership – Challenging Traditional Selection Standards

The most striking empirical finding challenged assumptions in leadership development; 9 out of 13 participants described ‘reluctant leadership’, where they stepped into leadership not by ambition or design, but by necessity or external recognition. This pattern fundamentally contradicts the selection mechanism employed by programmes reviewed in the market research, which predominantly rely on self-nomination, competitive application, and expressed leadership ambition.

The finding of reluctant leadership has profound implications both theoretically and practically. Suppose many effective emerging leaders are identified by others before they self-identify, with external recognition preceding self-awareness, as observed in nine participants. In that case, organisations may systematically overlook significant leadership potential through selection systems that prioritise expressed ambition. This not only challenges programme selection criteria, but also the assessment frameworks used by organisations in their talent management.

The findings partially reconcile the definitional void. If emerging leadership is fundamentally situational and externally recognized rather than hierarchically determined or self-declared, traditional definitional approaches based on experience levels, organizational positions, or formal selection will inevitably fail to capture this experience. The literature’s inability to define emerging leaders may reflect the construct’s inherently emergent and contextually dependent nature rather than conceptual neglect alone.

6.1.3 Towards a Working Definition

Synthesizing the findings across all data sources, this research proposes a working definition that addresses the conceptual void while remaining empirically grounded:

‘Emerging leaders are individuals in the early-to-mid stages of their leadership journey (regardless of career tenure) often entering leadership roles through external recognition rather than self-selection, who demonstrate adaptive capabilities, interpersonal skills (such as emotional intelligence), and a self-developmental mindset while navigating the multiple transitions from individual contribution to enabling and supporting others to perform, and who require ongoing development to build confidence and capability for increasingly complex contexts (e.g. VUCA)’ (Author).

The definition incorporates five critical elements that are currently absent from existing literature and practice. First, it incorporates five consistent thematic elements from the primary research (developmental mindset, situational responsiveness, emotional intelligence, adaptive capabilities, and empowerment focus), providing observable indicators rather than potentially vague ones. Second, it acknowledges the reluctant leadership pathway, challenging organisations to develop recognition systems beyond self-nomination. Third, it explicitly positions emerging leaders as requiring a continued self-developmental mindset as a distinguishing factor from established leaders. Fourth, it prioritizes the developmental stage over tenure, addressing the impossible 0-20-year experience range found across existing programmes (Chapter 3) by focusing on the transition from individual contribution to collective enablement. Finally, it links the definition to VUCA navigation requirements, addressing the integration gap between emerging leaders and VUCA leadership development.

This preliminary definition has immediate implications for the systematic barriers identified in the literature. First, organisations can utilise the definition to identify the target individuals, focusing on developmental-stage rather than tenure-based selection criteria, and then redesign the selection and promotion criteria to evaluate both adaptive and interpersonal competencies alongside technical proficiency. Additionally, there is the opportunity for clear communication of what it means to be an ‘emerging leader’.

6.2 VUCA Competencies – Verification and Critical Extensions (Responding to RQ2)

The competency analysis both verifies existing theoretical frameworks and reveals extensions grounded in lived experiences. The three-tier structure identified, universal competencies (self-awareness, empathy, emotional intelligence, adaptability, communication), core VUCA-related competencies (decision-making under uncertainty, resilience, problem deconstruction, creative problem-solving, change leadership), and emerging competencies (cultural intelligence, mentoring, inclusivity), partially aligns with Shet's (2024) four-dimensional framework while revealing specific differences and omissions (Figure 12).

<i>FOUNDATION (Develop Initially)</i>	<i>SIMULTANEOUS DEVELOPMENT (Develop on top of Interpersonal Competencies)</i>			
<i>Interpersonal Competencies</i>	<i>Analytical Competencies</i>	<i>Cognitive Competencies</i>	<i>Personal Effectiveness</i>	<i>Cross-Cultural Competencies</i>
○ <i>Communication (with others)</i> ○ <i>Emotional Intelligence (EQ)</i> ○ <i>Self-Awareness</i> ○ <i>Empathy</i>	○ Complex Problem Solving ○ Creativity ○ <i>Communication</i> ○ <i>Decision-Making under Uncertainty</i> ○ <i>Problem Deconstruction</i> ○ <i>Change Leadership</i>	○ Cognitive Flexibility ○ Agility Mindset ○ Personal Ambidexterity	○ Personal Resilience ○ Continuous Learning ○ Adaptive Mindset ○ <i>Developmental Mindset</i>	○ Cross-cultural Collaboration ○ Cross-cultural Intelligence ○ <i>Empowerment Focus</i> ○ <i>Mentoring and Development</i> ○ <i>Inclusivity</i>

Figure 12 - Expansion of Shet's (2024) Competency Framework with Thesis Findings

6.2.1 Interpersonal Competencies

The most significant finding challenges the emphasis on competency in the existing literature. The literature synthesis highlighted cognitive competencies, such as ‘complex cognitive skills, multidimensional thinking’ (Barber, 1992) and ‘cognitive flexibility, agility mindset’ (Shet, 2024), as fundamental to VUCA leadership.

In contrast, the primary research revealed that interpersonal competencies are most universally present and highly emphasized in. Empathy was coded in 11 of 13 participants, emotional intelligence in 12 of 13, and communication in all 13 participants, with a greater depth than cognitive competencies.

This finding has theoretical significance; rather than representing one category among many, interpersonal competencies may constitute the foundational layer for developing VUCA capabilities.

Participants consistently framed VUCA-based navigation as fundamentally interpersonal rather than primarily cognitive, describing effectiveness through curiosity, resourcefulness, and working with incomplete information—capabilities that depend on interpersonal connection and collaborative intelligence rather than individual cognitive capacity.

This finding validates and extends [Bushe and Marshak's \(2016\)](#) 'Dialogic Mindset' by demonstrating that emerging leaders instinctively gravitate towards collaborative approaches when navigating VUCA situations, often before they have received formal training. The finding challenges competency frameworks organized into discrete categories, as participants experienced self-awareness, empathy, communication, and decision-making simultaneously rather than as separate capabilities.

6.2.2 Decision-Making Under Uncertainty

While interpersonal competencies were predominant, decision-making under uncertainty emerged as a critical VUCA-specific competency, validating [Hooper and Potter's \(1997\)](#) emphasis on “decision [making] and action in crisis or uncertainty”. However, the primary research revealed important nuances. Participants demonstrated widely varying comfort levels with incomplete information, challenging the assumption that decision-making under uncertainty represents a single trainable skill. Some participants exhibited high tolerance for ambiguity and rapid decision-making, while others required a structured approach to manage uncertainty-related anxiety.

Participants consistently linked effective decision-making under uncertainty to emotional intelligence and self-awareness, recognizing when discomfort with ambiguity affected judgment, acknowledging limitations openly, and projecting confidence while communicating uncertainty. This integration of competencies simultaneously reinforces the limitations of frameworks that separate cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions.

6.2.3 Learning Through Complexity as a Meta-Competency

The research identified a meta-competency limitation in existing frameworks, which is the capacity to transform overwhelming complexity into developmental opportunities. Ten of thirteen participants described ‘Growth Through Difficult Experiences’, demonstrating consistent ability to reframe VUCA-based challenges as learning catalysts rather than merely problems to solve. Six participants specifically described ‘breaking down complexity’ as a deliberate strategy for managing complex situations while feeling overwhelmed.

This finding extends [Abidi and Joshi’s \(2018\)](#) emphasis on continuous learning by revealing how emerging leaders actively construct learning from complex situations. The learning through complexity competency has implications for vertical development theory ([Jones, 2018](#); [Jones et al., 2020](#)). While these scholars emphasize “significant personal and organisational commitment” ([Jones, 2018](#)) to transform meaning-making capabilities, the primary research suggests that emerging leaders may already possess an innate preference for complexity as a developmental opportunity, indicating that programs should recognize and build upon existing preferences rather than instilling continuous learning from scratch.

6.3 Critical Tensions and Systematic Barriers

Significant tensions emerged that existing frameworks do not adequately address, alongside systematic barriers that affect effective development, regardless of the programme's quality.

6.3.1 The Confidence-Uncertainty Contrast

Participants described the need to project confidence while simultaneously acknowledging incomplete knowledge. This contrast challenges conventional frameworks emphasizing confidence through competence development. The VUCA context demands leaders maintain credibility and provide direction while remaining transparent about ambiguity and limitations. Neither [Walker and Ramos-Rea's \(2025\)](#) emphasis on 'transparency' nor [Johansen's \(2007\)](#) focus on 'clarity' resolves how leaders maintain clarity while acknowledging uncertainty. Participants who managed this tension effectively were confident in their approach to handling uncertainty, rather than just being confident regardless of the uncertainty. This has implications for development, where participants develop confidence through uncertainty, versus being confident regardless of whether the situation is uncertain or not.

6.3.2 Technical Skills and Leadership Capability Mismatch

Three of four industry specialists identified a systematic 'Recruitment/Promotion-Leadership Skills Mismatch', where organizational promotion prioritizes technical competence over leadership capability. Organisations promote based on technical expertise, then expect individuals to demonstrate interpersonal adaptive competencies they were not selected for and may not have developed.

This supports [Hall and Rowland's \(2016\)](#) criticism that business schools remain 'content-driven rather than process-focused', while revealing that this is not merely an educational issue but a systematic organizational problem prevalent in talent management. The implication is important, even if programs successfully build identified competencies, organizational systems may continue to undervalue these capabilities. This may create a fundamental misalignment between leadership development theory, programme design, and organisational practice.

6.3.3 The Individual-Collective Development Challenge

While the literature emphasizes a shift from individual development to collective emergence (Bushe & Marshal, 2016), participants experienced significant tension between their own development needs and responsibility to develop others. Ten participants emphasized mentoring as an emerging competency, describing leadership as ‘empowering others to grow’ while simultaneously navigating their own developmental uncertainties.

These findings reveal a gap in existing frameworks that treat vertical development (Jones, 2018; Jones et al., 2020) and collective leadership (Bushe & Marshall, 2016) as distinct pathways without addressing the challenges faced by individuals who must engage in both simultaneously. Emerging leaders find themselves in a paradox in which they must facilitate others’ growth while undergoing their own developmental process.

6.4 Implications and Recommendations

6.4.1 For Organisational Practices

Organisations should implement multiple recognition systems beyond self-nomination, training other managers to identify reluctant leadership emergence. This requires redesigning recruitment and promotion criteria to explicitly evaluate interpersonal and adaptive competencies, not merely technical proficiency. Stage-based development pathways should replace tenure-based approaches, assessing readiness through demonstrated capabilities and developmental stage, rather than relying solely on years of experience. Additionally, organisations must address the technical skills-leadership capability mismatch through fundamental changes to talent management systems, rather than merely improving development programmes. Without systematic change, effective programme design will remain insufficient.

6.4.2 For Educational Institutions

Some business schools should address [Hall and Rowland's \(2016\)](#) criticism by incorporating process-focused pedagogy that develops behavioural competencies alongside content knowledge, aligning with [Amann et al.'s \(2022\)](#) call for 'leadershift' toward practical wisdom. Integrated competency frameworks should replace frameworks based on discrete categories, reflecting how participants experience capabilities simultaneously. Institutions should develop programmes that explicitly integrate emerging leader development with VUCA capability building, addressing the market gap where these remain entirely separate.

6.4.3 Future Research

There are still some aspects to the research and findings of this thesis which necessitate further investigation. Longitudinal studies tracking individuals from their initial emergence through established leadership roles could validate the proposed working definition. Additionally, further developing the working definition in conjunction with existing leadership development theories to provide more theoretical grounding. A cultural context investigation could examine whether reluctant leadership patterns exists across cultures in the Global North and the Global South, which have different norms regarding leadership ambition and hierarchy. Gender was not a primary focus of the

thesis; however, research could consider gender-based leadership and development. Building on the definitional clarity and competency verification established here, future research should rigorously test development methodologies (Gap 3) and create validated assessments that capture the integrated nature of VUCA competencies (Gap 4).

7 Conclusion

This research makes several contributions. First, the working definition addresses a conceptual gap, confirmed through the triangulation of a modified systematic literature review, market research, and primary findings. This definition offers a foundation for more coherent identification, selection, and leadership development practices. Second, the findings on reluctant leadership challenge existing assumptions, suggesting that organizations may systematically overlook significant leadership potential by using selection mechanisms that emphasize expressed ambition, whilst individuals are in not formally assigned leadership positions. Third, positioning interpersonal competencies as foundational rather than parallel to cognitive capabilities represents a revision of VUCA leadership frameworks, with practical implications for programme sequencing and design.

The competency framework established extends existing literature, revealing that interpersonal competencies function as a foundational layer (*Figure 12*). Decision-making under uncertainty operates as a core VUCA-specific competency, requiring integration with emotional intelligence, and ‘learning through complexity’ represents a meta-competency that enables other capabilities.

The identification of systematic tensions, particularly the confidence-uncertainty contrast and the technical skills-leadership capability mismatch, demonstrates that preparing emerging leaders requires complex frameworks that embrace contradictions rather than offering simplified competency lists or linear development pathways.

This thesis addressed research Gap 1 – Definitional clarity and Gap 2 – Competency verification, which potentially provide a foundation moving forward to address Gap 3 – Developmental approaches, and Gap 4 – Competency assessment tools.

For both academic research and organizational practice, this thesis shows that having a clear definition is essential for effective leadership development. Without clear definitions, organisations cannot systematically identify emerging leaders; without appropriate competencies, programmes cannot effectively develop them; and without addressing systematic barriers, even well-designed programmes will fail to produce adaptive, people-centric leaders that contemporary VUCA environments demand. This

thesis provides one step toward addressing that gap. However, substantial work remains to be done in translating these insights into effective practices that prepare emerging leaders for the complex and uncertain future they will navigate.

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Appendices

Appendix A CURES Ethical Approval Letter



2 August 2025

Dear Miss Jazeel ,

Reference: CURES/26206/2025

Project ID: 29490

Title: Leadership Development for Future Leaders in a VUCA World: Defining the Population and Reimagining Organisational Capability Building

Thank you for your application to the Cranfield University Research Ethics System (CURES).

We are pleased to inform you your CURES application, reference CURES/26206/2025 has been reviewed. You may now proceed with the research activities you have sought approval for.

If you have any queries, please contact CURES Support.

We wish you every success with your project.

Regards,

CURES Team

Appendix Figure 1 - CURES Consent Form

Please Note: In the CURES Application form, I stated “I plan to use Grammarly when I am reviewing my thesis instead of relying on the review feature in Microsoft Word or the Office Suite in general. I will not be using the AI feature in Grammarly, but I recognise that the platform already has an embedded feature that provides better writing suggestions regarding sentence structure.”

Appendix B Informed Consent Responses

Informed consent as per CURES was obtained verbally and/or in written form. All participants for the research gave verbal consent when informed about the research at the start of the interview, and for the request to use information in the thesis research. Participant information has been anonymised in the informed consent forms.

B.1 Informed Consent Form Questions

Questions (adapted from Cranfield Consent Form Template) were provided through Microsoft Forms with the following:

Title: Leadership Development for Emerging Leaders

Brief: This research investigates how leadership development programmes can better prepare emerging leaders for the challenges of today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. A key component of this study is to define and identify the characteristics that qualify individuals as 'emerging leaders,' establishing clearer parameters around this segment. The study aims to identify effective strategies, competency gaps, and best practices for developing leadership capabilities in this define group of professionals within the context of VUCA environments.

Thank you for participating in this research project as part of my MSc in Management Thesis Research at Cranfield University.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me, and I will provide any additional information.

Questions (with 'I agree' and 'I disagree' response options)

1. I confirm that I have been informed about this research project, and I have been allowed to ask questions.
2. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to participate, and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.
3. I understand that information I provide will be used for research, reports, and publication, and the development of a leadership programme.

4. I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name, job position and information, will not be shared beyond the study and will be anonymised.
5. I agree that the information I provide can be quoted in the research outputs, and no identifying information will be published alongside unless otherwise agreed upon.
6. I understand that, if other participants in the research project are identifiable and/or are made known to me throughout the course of my participation in this research project, I confirm that I agree to maintain their confidentiality and will not divulge any personal data or comments made that may allow them to be identified.
7. I understand that the data I provide will be stored on Cranfield University's network that can only be accessed by authorised users, in line with UK Data Protection Act 2018 whilst the research project is in process.
8. Interviews will be recorded and securely stored on the Cranfield University network as audio files. These audio files will be securely deleted as soon as they are no longer required. The recordings will be transcribed and saved as text files. These files (and any backups) will also be securely deleted as soon as they are no longer required. Anonymised transcripts will be created, by removing or replacing identifiers such as names, age, and location. These anonymised transcripts may be quoted from or published in full, in support of findings (e.g. in journal articles, conference papers).
9. Analytical software will be used to aggregate the results of the research, and every reasonable step will be taken to anonymise the data. I understand that the aggregated data will be published in support of the research findings.
10. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided on this form and give my consent to taking part in this research and confirm that I will abide by any stipulations, therein, required of me.
11. Participants Name and Email (*content redacted*).

B.2 Informed Consent Form Responses

11/13 Participants filled out the informed consent form in addition to giving verbal consent. Information is as presented based on Microsoft Forms survey output.

Id	Start time	Completion time	Email	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
1	2025-08-18 13:02	2025-08-18 13:03	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
2	2025-08-18 14:09	2025-08-18 14:11	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
3	2025-08-18 15:56	2025-08-18 15:56	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
4	2025-08-19 1:32	2025-08-19 1:33	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
5	2025-08-21 15:30	2025-08-21 15:32	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
6	2025-08-22 8:59	2025-08-22 9:00	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
7	2025-08-25 20:41	2025-08-25 20:42	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
8	2025-08-25 20:48	2025-08-25 20:53	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
9	2025-08-27 9:34	2025-08-27 9:34	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
10	2025-10-12 15:32	2025-10-12 15:32	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree
11	2025-10-12 15:50	2025-10-12 15:51	anonymous	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree	I agree

Appendix Figure 2 - Informed Consent Form Responses from Microsoft Forms (no modifications)

Appendix C Market Research Review Extended

C.1 Existing Programme Information

For the existing programmes, direct quotes of information was extracted and reviewed to avoid misinterpretation of data.

Table C-1 - Emerging Leader's Programmes and VUCA Leadership Development Programmes with Target Audiences and Selection Criteria Focus

Table C-1			
	Programme	Target Audience	Selection Criteria
1	'Future Female Leaders'	"Young women between 16-18 years" (<i>Immerse Education, 2025</i>)	Online Application
2	'The Oxford Emerging Leader Development Program'	"Catered to a wide range for professionals but will prove more beneficial for: new personal being groomed for leadership, managers looking to grow their leadership potential, supervisors and shift managers, and senior staff to shape and sharpen their leadership." (<i>Oxford Management Centre, 2025a</i>)	No set criteria, the option to sign up for the course is immediate based on availability.
3	'Strategy for Emerging Leaders'	"This course is designed for new and incoming leaders who want to understand and apply core business strategy concepts to their own business areas and the wider organisation... Participants should have at least 3 years of professional experience and have recently taken on, or plan to take on, a strategic role in the near future." (<i>London Business School, 2025</i>)	Online Application with at least 3 years of professional experience required.
4	'Emerging Leader Programme'	"Participants may be middle managers, leaders of a functional department or are executives with general management responsibilities. The programme is ideal for those who are keen to	Online Application with a required personal statement of interest.

		learn new leadership skills, develop greater self-awareness and motivate their teams.” <i>(Queen's University Belfast, 2024)</i>	
5	‘Developing Emerging Leaders’	“Professionals across industries who are progressing from being in an individual contributor role to leading a team of individual performers... Emerging leaders who are having to adapt to the demands of managing people and forming collaborations in a fast-changing digital environment.” <i>(INSEAD, 2025)</i>	Online Application
6	‘Emerging Leaders’	“Candidates can be early in their career with 5-15 years of professional experience or senior leaders further in their career looking to raise their performance or make a change.” <i>(Harvard Kennedy School, 2025)</i>	Online Application
7	‘High Potential Leadership Program’	“Top-performing individuals with 10-20 years of experience in high-responsibility roles.” <i>(Harvard Business School, 2025c)</i>	Selection is based on ‘professional achievement, organisational responsibility, and specific admission criteria for the programme’
8	‘Ascending the Peak – Finding the Leader Within’	“Leaders at mid-career or emerging senior leaders looking to hone their leadership skills and enhance their capabilities to work effectively with others.” <i>(Harvard Business School, 2025a)</i>	Selection is based on ‘professional achievement, organisational responsibility, and specific admission criteria for the programme’
9	‘Developing Yourself as a Leader’	“Emerging leaders who want to develop the tools and techniques to take control of their leadership trajectory and grow their influence and impact across their organization... Early- and mid-career professionals who want to assess where they are in their professional development and map out an aspirational plan to take their role and responsibilities to the next level—even if that level is lateral... Top-performing and high-potential individuals with 5-15 years of experience in executive roles of increasing responsibility.” <i>(Harvard Business School, 2025b)</i>	Selection is based on “professional achievement, organisational responsibility, and specific admission criteria for the programme... and no formal education requirements”
10	‘Future Leaders’	“Whether you are a functional manager, a team leader or want to start your own business, you will leave this program feeling inspired, transformed as a leader, and with the confidence to create change.” <i>(IMD, 2025)</i>	Candidate’s profiles are matched against the programme for fit.

11	‘People Management for Emerging Leaders’	“People Management for Emerging Leaders is designed for current and transitioning managers globally, including: Managers who are experiencing challenges; Transitioning managers adapting to new teams or new team infrastructure; New and aspiring managers in a variety of areas including the corporate sector, government, health care, international agencies, and nonprofit groups.” <i>(The Wharton School, 2025)</i>	Main requirement is fluency in written and spoken English.
12	‘Leadership and Change’	“This course is for existing and aspiring business leaders across a range of industries in both the private and public sectors.” <i>(LSE Executive Education, 2025)</i>	No set criteria, the option to sign up for the course is immediate based on availability.
13	‘Emerging System Leaders Programme’	Healthcare professionals, and mid-level leaders. <i>(NHS, 2024)</i>	Application and nomination process.
14	‘Beacon’	For high-potential leaders who are “individuals who demonstrate the potential to excel in leadership roles and make significant contributions to their organization’s success, now and into the future.” <i>(Common Purpose, 2025)</i>	Application based with diverse backgrounds encouraged.
15	‘UKGBC’s Future Leaders Programme’	“Designed for forward-thinking professionals with 5-10 years’ experience in the built environment industry - ambitious, high-potential professionals from across industry, local government and civil society.” <i>(UK Green Building Council, 2025)</i>	Competitive process with only two applicants from an organisation selected.
16	‘Emerging Leaders Program: Becoming a Transformational Leader’	“High potential, mid-level managers. Experienced leaders seeking to improve their personal leadership skills.” <i>(The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2025)</i>	Online Application.
17	‘Emerging C-Suite Leaders Program’	“The Emerging C-Suite Leaders Program is ideal for executives who aspire to contribute to enterprise-wide strategy and growth, beyond leading a specific function. This program is specifically designed for high-potential mid-level and senior executives who are currently in or aspiring to take up their first leadership role.” <i>(Kellogg School of Management, 2025)</i>	Minimum 8yrs of experience with international exposure preferred, and fluent in written and spoken English.

18	‘Emerging Leader Program’	“Applicants must showcase: Demonstrate Leadership Potential, Leadership Potential after the Program, Breadth of Perspective on Issues, Open Minded Potential to be a Productive Participant, Potential to Work Effectively with People Commitment to Participate” (<i>Michigan State University, 2025</i>)	As noted in ‘Target Audience’
19	‘Emerging Leaders Program: A Suite of Leadership Development Workshops’	Current McGill students. (<i>McGill University, 2025</i>)	Internal application and reference based.
20	‘Emerging Leaders’	“This program is designed for individuals engaged in team leadership positions or professionals transitioning into leadership, including technical specialists, operational leads, emerging project leaders/managers, and entrepreneurs spanning various sectors.” (<i>The University of British Columbia, 2025</i>)	Online Registration.
21	‘Leading through VUCA’	“Suitable for a wide range of professionals in leadership roles but will greatly benefit: Directors, Senior Managers, middle managers, identified talent, high potentials and future leaders in business.” (<i>Oxford Management Centre, 2025b</i>)	No set criteria, the option to sign up for the course is immediate based on availability.
22	‘Executive Leadership in an Agile and VUCA World’	Suited to a range of professionals but will be suited for ‘senior leadership, executives, heads of departments, and senior management.’ (<i>GLOMACS, 2024</i>)	Online Registration.

C.1.1 Additional Information on Market Research Analysis – Skills and Competency Focus

Note: The information contained in this section was specific to the internship with Enriched Leadership; a modified extended version of this content is accessible to the company.

The market research consisted of reviewing current leadership development programmes and reports on skills and competencies to be focused on for the future, refer to Table C-1 for references. Twenty-two leadership development programmes, including 20 emerging leader-focused programmes and 2 VUCA-based leadership programmes, were reviewed alongside six future skills reports (*Table C-2*). The purpose of the review was to assess current market focus, identify correlations or gaps between existing programmes, and determine which skills need to be developed and prioritized (*Table C-4*).

The process of analysing the programmes involved reviewing the brochures to gain insights into what would be taught and which skills and competencies (S&C) would be focused on. A list of S&Cs was compiled for each programme, followed by a frequency check on each to determine the patterns of hierarchy and focus (*Table C-2*). There were a total of 23 recurring skills and competencies identified, with 20 singular mentions across the 22 programmes. Six leadership styles were identified – VUCA, Effective, Authentic, Transformational, Agile – with a frequency of 8 mentions. The 20 different skills and competencies included technical and domain-specific skills.

Table C- 2 - Existing Programmes Skills and Competency Analysis

ID and Colour Legend	Skill & Competency (Grouping)	Frequency
A	Change (Management, Driving, Leading, Balancing, Embracing, Navigating Disruption, Uncertainty)	17
B	Communication	16
C	Self-Awareness (Self Improvement, Self Reflection)	14
D	Influence (Building, Inspire, Power, Authority)	14

E	Team Leadership & Development	15
F	Collaborative & Collaboration (Team, Organisation, Relationship Building)	15
G	Resilience & Emotional Resilience	9
H	Growth Mindset (Personal Growth)	9
I	Decision Making (Strategic, Ethical, Evidence Based)	16
J	Leadership & Leadership Development	12
K	Innovative & Creative	9
L	Diversity & Culture	8
M	Emotional Intelligence	8
N	Adaptability & Adapt	6
O	Empathy (Compassionate & Inclusive)	5
P	Coaching and Mentorship	5
Q	Empower and Enable	4
R	Ethics and Moral Leadership	4

S	Complexity (Navigating)	4
T	Confidence & Confidence Building	2
U	Conflict Resolution & Management (Risk)	3
V	Performance Management	2
W	Ambitious	6
X	LEADERSHIP STYLES	8
Y	<i>Anomalies (Single Mention)</i> <i>[Developmental, Market Analysis, Industry Analysis, AI and LLM Strategic Insights, Hybrid/Remote Workplace, Employee Value Proposition, Leveraging Internet Technologies and Social Media, Policy Analysis, Career Trajectory Management, Design Thinking for Career, Business Finance, Digital Marketing, Customer Centricity, AI and Digital Resilience, Value Chains, Business and Society, Project Management, Financial Acumen and Global Macroeconomics, Leading for Common Good, Organisational Excellence]</i>	20

Following this analysis, a review of 6 future skills reports were identified, with a focus on the skills and competencies required for the future, with no specificity in terms of leadership level. 4 reports catalogued the skills and competencies into groups and themes (Dondi et al., 2021; Leopold, 2025; OECD, 2019; DEFI, 2022) (Table C-3), while the remaining reports, ‘Kingston University Future Skills Report 2025’ (Kingston University, 2025) and ‘Collaboration for Future Skills’ (NCUB, 2024), listed out the overall skills and competencies.

Table C- 3 - Skills and Competency Themes Highlighted in Future Skills Reports

Reports	Skills and Competencies Themes
“Defining the skills citizens will need in the future world of work” by McKinsey and Company (Dondi et al., 2021)	‘Cognitive, Interpersonal, Self-Leadership, Digital’
“Future of jobs report 2025: The jobs of the future” by the World Economic Forum (Leopold, 2025)	‘Cognitive Skills, Engagement Skills, Ethics, Management Skills, Physical Abilities, Self Efficacy, Technology Skills, Working with Others’
“OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 - Skills for 2030” by OECD (OECD, 2019)	‘Cognitive and Meta-Cognitive Skills, Social and Emotional Skills and Collaboration, Practical and Physical Skills’
“DEFI Future Skills Report” by DEFI (DEFI, 2022)	‘Higher-Order Thinking Skills, Dialogue Skills, Digital and STEM Literacy, Values, Self-Management, Lifelong Learning, Leadership, Enterprise Skills, Flexibility’

A comparative analysis between the existing and future skills and competencies provided a brief overview of the gaps and overlaps between what is currently being taught and what is needed to be taught moving forward (*Table C-4*). The insights from this analysis were used in the design and development of the leadership development programme for Enriched Leadership. The programme for Enriched Leadership would primarily focus on essential skills and competencies, not technical or domain-based skills i.e. Digital and Technology Fluency, and Financial Literacy.

Table C- 4 - Comparative Analysis of S&Cs in Existing LDPs and Future Skills Reports

Key Skill Categories	Specific Future Skills	Presence/Emphasis in Current Programs	Gap/Opportunity
Cognitive Agility	Critical Thinking, Analytical Skills, Problem Solving, Creative Thinking	Strong Alignment (Problem-Solving & Decision-Making)	Minor gap in explicit "Creative Thinking" theme
Interpersonal & Influence	Communication Skills, Ability to Build Relationships, Leadership and Social Influence, Empathy and Active Listening	Strong Alignment (Communication & Influence, Leading & Developing Others, Self-Leadership)	Strong alignment
Self-Mastery & Resilience	Resilience, Self-awareness and self-management, Motivation, Self-efficacy, Growth Mindset, Mindfulness	Strong Alignment (Self-Leadership & Personal Mastery)	Strong alignment

Digital & Technological Fluency	Digital Skills, AI and Big Data, Networks and Cybersecurity, Technological literacy, Programming, Computational Thinking	Partial Coverage (General "Digital Skills" implied)	High Gap: Need for explicit focus on AI, Cybersecurity, Advanced Digital Literacy
Strategic & Systems Thinking	Planning and ways of working, Systems Thinking, Resource management and operations	Partial Coverage (Strategic & Organizational Acumen, VUCA Leadership)	Medium Gap: Need for explicit "Systems Thinking"
Learning & Adaptability	Adaptability, Mental flexibility, Curiosity and lifelong learning, Learning-to-learn, Metacognition	Partial Coverage (Adaptability & Navigating Change, Growth Mindset)	Medium Gap: Need for explicit "Learning-to-learn" and "Metacognition"
Values & Global Citizenship	Ethics, Citizenship, Sustainability, Global Awareness, Environmental stewardship, Global citizenship	Partial Coverage (Ethical & Values-Based Leadership)	High Gap: Need for explicit "Global & Sustainable Leadership"
Entrepreneurial & Proactive	Initiative, Entrepreneurship, Goals achievement, Enterprise Skills, Courage, Financial Literacy	Partial Coverage (Innovation, Innovator Mindset)	Medium Gap: Need for explicit "Entrepreneurial Leadership," "Financial Literacy"

Appendix D Interview Questions for Target Groups with Notes

D.1 Target Group 1 – Current/Potential Emerging Leaders

Opening & Context Setting

1. Can you tell me about your journey into leadership? What led you to where you are today?
 - a. *IPA Focus: personal narrative and meaning making.*
 - b. *Research purpose: definitional clarity through lived experience.*
2. Describe a moment when you first felt like you were stepping into a leadership role. What was happening, and what was that experience like for you?

Emerging Lader Identity & Experience

3. Tell me about a time when someone else saw you as a leader before you saw yourself that way. What was that experience like?
 - a. *IPA Focus: external recognition vs. internal identity.*
 - b. *Research purpose: understanding emerging leader characteristics.*
4. Can you walk me through a situation where you felt you were ‘emerging’ or growing into your leadership role? What was changing for you?

VUA Challenges & Competencies

5. Describe a leadership situation that felt particularly unpredictable or chaotic. Talk me through that happened and how you experienced it.
 - a. *IPA Focus: personal experience of volatility/uncertainty.*
 - b. *Research purpose: VUCA competency identification.*
 - c. *Follow-up: what was most challenging about that situation? How did you navigate through it?*
6. Tell me about a time when you have to make a leadership decision without having all the information you wanted. What was that like for you?
 - a. *Follow-up: how did you cope with the uncertainty?*
7. Can you describe a situation where you felt overwhelmed by the complexity of a challenge you were facing as a leader? How did you experience that?
 - a. *Follow-up: what helped you work through it?*

8. Think of a time when the ‘rules of the game’ seemed to change while you were trying to lead. What was that experience like?
 - a. *IPA focus: ambiguity and adaptation.*

Development & Learning

9. Describe your most significant learning moment as a leader. What happened, and what made it so impactful for you?
 - a. *Follow-up: how has that experience shaped how you see yourself as a leader?*
10. Do you think there are particular competencies and skills that are essential for an emerging leader?
11. What does being an ‘emerging leader’ mean to you, based on your own experience?

Questions added during the first interview

12. How long have you worked for professionally? If you have not worked in a professional capacity, then any internship or volunteer position?
13. For that period of time, how much of it were you a leader for, or identified as a leader?
14. What have you done, or are you doing to expand on your leadership skills and competencies?

D.2 Target Group 2 – Industry Professionals (HR, Chief of People Officer, Head of Talent Development etc.)

Note: For this target group, the interviews were less structured, and questions were adapted and modified based on the content the participant(s) were providing. Not all questions were addressed.

Opening & Strategic Context

1. Tell me about your journey into people leadership and talent development. How did you come to focus on emerging leader development in your organisation?
2. Can you describe a specific initiative or programme you have implemented for emerging leader that really stands out to you?

Strategic Recognition & Development

3. Think about a time when your organisation identified a cohort or group of emerging leaders. What was your experience of that talent identification process?
4. Describe a situation where you had to make a strategic decision about emerging leader development investments. Walk me through that experience.
5. Can you tell me about a time when your emerging leader development strategy did not work as expected. What was that experience like for you?

VUCA Leadership & Organisational Response

6. Describe your experience of preparing emerging leaders for uncertainty and rapid change in your organisation.
7. and how did the emerging leaders respond?
8. Can you describe your experience of how the leadership challenges in your organisation/industry have evolved?

Strategic Reflection & Meaning Making

9. Based on your strategic experience, what does ‘emerging leadership’ mean in your organisational context? How do you recognise and define it?
10. What has been your most significant learning experience about emerging leader development? What made it meaningful for you?

Adjusted questions

11. Tell me about a specific emerging leader development programme you designed or implemented.
12. Describe your experience working directly with emerging leaders.
13. Can you tell me about a time when you had to adapt your approach based on feedback from emerging leaders.

D.3 Target Group 3 – Career Development Professionals

Opening & Professional Context

1. Tell me about how you came to work in career development. What drew you to supporting emerging leaders?
 - a. *IPA focus: personal professional journey.*

2. Can you describe a particular emerging leader you have coached or supported?
What was that experience like for you?

Emerging Leader Identification & Development

3. Describe a moment when you realised someone you were working with had real leadership potential.
 - a. *Research purpose: definitional clarity through professional observation.*
4. Tell me about a time when an emerging leader you were working through has a breakthrough or significant development moment.
 - a. *IPA focus: witnessing transformation.*
5. Can you describe an emerging leader who challenged your assumptions about leadership development?

VUCA-Related Challenges

6. Describe a situation where you helped an emerging leader navigate a significant uncertainty or change.
 - a. *Research purpose: VUCA competency development.*
7. Tell me about a time when an emerging leader came to you feeling overwhelmed by the complexity in their role.
8. Can you describe your experience of how the challenges facing emerging leaders have evolved?
 - a. *IPA focus: professional experience of changing landscape.*

Professional Insights & Reflection

9. Based on your experience, what distinguishes an ‘emerging leader’ from other professionals you work with?
 - a. *Adjusted: emerging leader versus and established leader.*
10. What has been your most meaningful experience working with an emerging leader?

Appendix E Sample of IPA Coding Process

1 of 13

August 9th, 2025 – T1.3

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your journey into leadership? What led you to where you are today?

Participant T1.3:

Could you clarify what you mean by that like?

Interviewer: From a technical side, how much of professional experience do you have?

Participant T1.3:

OK, so I graduated in 2019, so I have got about four to five years of experience working initially as a teacher. There is a lot of leadership skills that you need to have in terms of leading a class and managing individuals as well. I've also worked for a couple of education companies and working on projects and leading small groups. And most recently I managed an education centre where again leadership and management were essential. So yeah, that's a little bit about my background.

↳ GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY AND EITHER MENTIONS OR INDICATION OF LEADERSHIP.

Interviewer: From that timeframe, from the four to five years that you have worked, how much of it do you think you identified yourself as a leader? Would you have considered yourself a leader in any of those experiences?

Participant T1.3:

→ THERE IS A SELF-DOUBT IN ACKNOWLEDGING BEING A LEADER.

Well, technically written on paper, yes. I was a manager and a leader. Would I consider myself a leader, I would say technically on paper. Yes, I was a leader. I don't think I was a very an amazing leader, at least not in my role at 'Education First' last year, during the summer, mainly

↳ SELF-AWARENESS AND ABILITY TO VOCALIZE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES.

Appendix Figure 3 - Page 1 of Coded T1.3 Interview

because that was one of the hardest leadership roles I had. But yes, I do identify myself as a leader. I guess on paper, yes. How I would identify it depends on what you define leadership as really, I do not know what you define leadership in that sense. I would say on paper, yes, and I do identify it in moments where I am a leader, where you are leading people, you have a vision, you want to try and motivate individuals to go to towards a certain goal.

Interviewer: I have to clarify. There are so many different definitions of what a leader is. In some of my initial background research there were different definitions of what a leader is and what leadership is. It varies from person to person and which one they resonate with. Hence why, I do not try to establish a clear definition because it could mean very different things to each individual.

Interviewer: Describe a moment when you first felt like you were stepping into a leadership role. What was happening, and what was that experience like for you?

Participant T1.3:

Maybe the example I could give is directing a show during my undergrad. I was co-directing it with a with a friend, that was one of the one of the major leadership roles that I took on. Do you want me to walk you through the whole experience, is that is that what you want?

Interviewer: Yes, walk me through the experience. What did it feel like? What were you going through?

Participant T1.3:

I mean it's very stressful leading because you have got a lot of responsibilities. You don't know if what you're doing is right. You don't know if you're going in the right direction and you're

going to be confident in that direction, even if it's the wrong direction. Yeah, because people look up to you and you need to make sure that the vision is clear to them and that they have someone they are confident in because you are the person they look up to, and the person who should have all the answers, even if you do not technically have the answers. You have to **ADAPT TO THE SITUATIONAL NEEDS.** sometimes make them up or at least give them the best answer that you think at that moment in time. **→ EXTERNAL VS. INTERNAL CONFIDENCE WHEN LEADING.**

So yes, it is very difficult being a leader for a variety of reasons. Uncertainty is another one because you do not know whether what you are doing is right or whether you are going in the right direction. You have got to put on a facade or at least look like you are confident and competent.

Interviewer: Would you classify that particular moment as unpredictable and chaotic?

(Describe a leadership situation that felt particularly unpredictable or chaotic. Take me through what happened and how you experienced it.)

Participant T1.3:

I mean, yeah, I would say there was a lot of them. It was the first time I was directing a show, **"EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING"** so it's very unpredictable, a lot of procedures that I did not know about; 'how to create a proposal, how to deal with different departments within the theatre going from stage managers all the way to props, the venue, the lighting,' all that kind of things.

NEW LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY → LEARNING ON THE SPOT.

So that was very uncertain because I didn't know exactly how it all worked properly, at least from a director's perspective because I had only acted before. So, it's very uncertain, and then there were a lot of things outside of our control such as events where a few members in our

**→ HIGHLY UNCERTAIN
+ POTENTIALLY
OVERWHELMING.
→ STRESS-INDUCING.**

Appendix Figure 5 - Page 3 of Coded T1.3 Interview

'EMPATHETIC'
↳ PEOPLE-FOCUSED

cast when through difficulties including deaths, individuals actually being put into prison, that affected our cast. → DRASTIC & UNPREDICTABLE CIRCUMSTANCES

↳ VOLATILE, UNCERTAIN, & COMPLEX.

That was very unpredictable, how to react to that, and how to react to the cast who were going through difficult moments, how to lead them, and how to be able to support them. It was very unpredictable for numerous reasons, those were two, and the third one was obviously we were doing our thesis and working alongside doing this job (directing), and a lot of uncertainty in terms of what would happen after we completed our undergraduate degree.

→ HOW DO YOU PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT? → STRONG DISPLAY OF EMPATHY.

Appendix Figure 6 - Page 4 of Coded T1.3 Interview

Interviewer: Tell me about a time when someone else saw you as a leader before you saw yourself that way. What was that experience like?

Participant T1.3:

Tough questions, I'm not going to lie.

Participant T1.3:

Yes, for sure. Generally, when you are in a leadership position you sometimes do not understand how people view you as. You still feel like the same person, you are still an individual, you are still yourself, but with a leadership position. Others will start to see you in a very different way because you are technically the leader, the person that should have the vision, the person who should be the point of contact when something serious happens. It happened last year where I was managing a centre, where lots of individuals saw me as a manager, the leader of the centre. Whereas I obviously knew I was but did not see myself as a leader compared to how others did.

HOW YOU PRESENT YOURSELF MATTERS.

↑
PERCEPTION

EXTERNAL VS. SELF RECOGNITION

↳ EXTERNAL VALIDATION?

→ LACK OF RESOLVE IN LEADERSHIP IDENTITY. EXTERNAL VS. INTERNAL.

Interviewer: Can you walk me through a situation where you felt you were "emerging" or growing into your leadership role? What was changing for you?

You have mentioned where other people have identified you as a leader, but what about when you knew you were transitioning into a leader.

Participant T1.3:

So, during my MSc in Management, we were put into learning teams and in the learning team, there were about five to six of us. I was pushed into a leadership position without really applying for it. But that is just because of maybe the skills that I had, the way I communicated maybe. I was put into a leadership position without wanting to be one during that period. It was

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY

↳ WHEN DOES SOMEONE IDENTIFY AS A LEADER?

→ NOT REALLY ASSIGNED FORMALLY

↳ THERE IS A RELUCTANCE TO TAKING ON LEADERSHIP.

"RELUCTANT LEADERSHIP"

Appendix Figure 7 - Page 5 of Coded T1.3 Interview

→ A CHALLENGE ASSOCIATED W/ LEADERSHIP

obviously very difficult taking on that role because I did not apply for it and was forced into it.

I definitely learned a lot through that.

→ THERE IS SOME POSITIVE REFLECTION

LEARNING THROUGH

EXPERIENCE → POSITIVELY PERCEIVED.

↓
SELF-REFLECTION.

Interviewer: Tell me about a time when you had to make a leadership decision without having all the information you wanted. What was that like for you?

Participant T1.3:

Yeah, of course. Every time you have to make decisions where you're not 100% sure whether

it's the right one or not. I mean, in leadership or in life in general, you're never going to have

100% certainty when making a decision.

→ YOU HAVE TO BE COMFORTABLE
W/ UNCERTAINTY IN DECISION-MAKING.

For example, during my MSc in Management, I was in a learning team where we had to decide

on what topic or what company to go with for one of our modules. And there again we went

LEADING BUT ENSURING EVERYONE HAS INPUT → OPEN COMMUNICATION.

about it in a democratic way where everyone would pitch their own company and from that we

would make a decision. We had a process of how to make that decision as best as possible,

everyone would do their research and come and pitch their company and then come up with a

decision. But ultimately you will have some companies where you have more information on

and then you decide a company is better than the others. However, ultimately once you have

chosen it, you do not know for certain if that was the right decision because you might go down

the line and might realise actually that there is something that you missed initially.

→ NOT ALL OF THE INFORMATION

WILL BE AVAILABLE PRIOR TO MAKING A CHOICE.

→ DECISION-MAKING
IN UNCERTAINTY &
LACK OF INFO.

Interviewer: Can you describe a situation where you felt overwhelmed by the complexity

of a challenge you were facing as a leader? How did you experience that?

Participant T1.3:

BREAKING DOWN COMPLEXITY

Go and do sports is very important to deal with the feeling of getting overwhelmed or stressed.

I think doing sports is very important, making sure you're grounded. Grounded breathing exercises is really important when you feel overwhelmed. Breaking down tasks is useful,

breaking tasks down to more something more manageable because 'I can deal with these small

tasks, I will break it down to this and do this today.'

DECONSTRUCTING ISSUES & TASKS,
REDUCING COMPLEXITY

Bit by bit, I'll get to completing a task that is super overwhelming, and I think sometimes

realising the bigger picture of like sometimes might help when you are dealing with something overwhelming. So, realising that something is overwhelming is important, but in the grand

scheme of things you think of the bigger picture, and you start to think you are giving too much importance to something which is why it is super overwhelming.

REFLECTION AND OBSERVATION OF THE SITUATION

BEING ENVIRONMENTALLY
AWARE.

Interviewer: Do you think that same philosophy or method would be applicable to you being in a position of leadership?

Participant T1.3:

So, you're asking whether all these techniques I mentioned would be applicable to leadership position? Absolutely. I would also include talking and discussing with people, socialising as way of dealing with something that is overwhelming. Having structured ways of approaching overwhelming frameworks would be useful apart from breaking down tasks. There are all kinds of soft skills I mentioned, breathing, sports, walking, socialising, etcetera.

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING & SELF MANAGEMENT

Interviewer: Think of a time when the "rules of the game" seemed to change while you were trying to lead. What was that experience like?

Participant T1.3:

What do you mean by 'Rules of the game' have changed?

Interviewer: For example, you have an assignment to do and suddenly you find out you need to start over because you've been working with the wrong brief. Essentially the rules have changed overnight and you have to start from scratch. How have you ever been in that particular type of scenario when you were leading a team or a project?

Participant T1.3:

I would say no, I haven't experienced any massive changes where the rules of the game have completely changed and therefore, I've had to adapt.

GROWTH MINDSET IN
DIFFICULTY +
CHANGE

OK, no, there has been one. So, downsizing obviously is a big one, right. So, you work in the company, and you are in a team of 15 one day, and then only 7 left the next. So obviously the

rules of the game slightly changed in the sense that there are more tasks and less of us. So how

do you deal with that? How do you adapt? That is very much about having a different approach,

and how you react to it. It is very important to react positively when something changes.

POTENTIAL DISPLAY OF GROWTH.

Initially it might be negative, but then you have to go back into a positive mindset in terms of

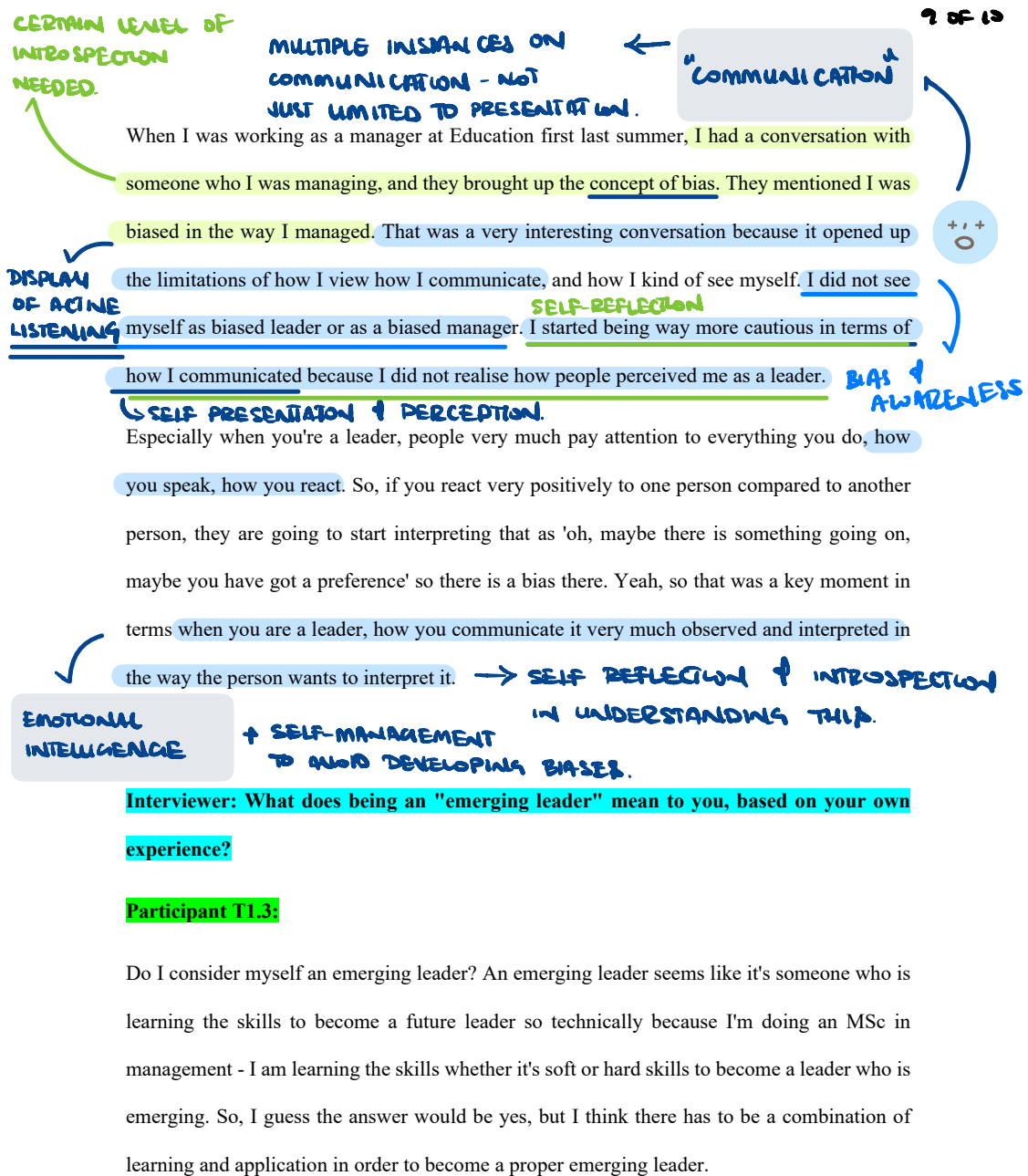
approaching the new rules of the game. → ADDRESSING CHANGES AND POTENTIAL CHALLENGING SITUATIONS.

For example, with the downsizing. It is not ideal that you have got more tasks but try and be more efficient in trying to figure out way to cut out certain things that do not have to be done.

Certain things can be done quicker, other things not necessary can be removed. So being positive through that.

Interviewer: Describe your most significant learning moment as a leader. What happened, and what made it so impactful for you?

Participant T1.3:



Appendix Figure 11 - Page 9 of Coded T1.3 Interview

Interviewer: Do you think there are particular competencies and skills that are essential for an emerging leader?

Participant T1.3:

GROW WITH
THE CHANGING
WORLD.

ADAPTABILITY ↑
FLEXIBILITY (AGILE?)

An emerging leader is a leader who is just coming up and growing and learning. I am not sure if that is your definition, but that is how I understand when you say emerging leader. In terms of the skills that we need to have in the future is adaptability. You know we are living in a world where there is a lot of uncertainty. So being adaptable to change and resilient as well is a very important soft skill to have. You have to have other soft skills such as clear communication and being visionary.

RESILIENCE

SKILL AND COMPETENCIES TO FOCUS ON
IN ENVIRONMENTS CHARACTERIZED AS VUCA.

Knowing exactly where you are going and how you're going to get there is very important as a leader as well and that comes from also understanding the environment that you're in, understanding what are the difficulties, what are the changes that's going to happen and how can we see them as a leader and navigate through them effectively.

Those are the main ones, adaptability, resilience, communication, and being visionary.

END OF INTERVIEW

Appendix Figure 12 - Page 10 of Coded T1.3 Interview

Appendix F Supporting Quotes for Thematic Coding Analysis

Theme 1 – Situational Leadership Emergence		
Codes	Participant	Quote
1.1 Reluctant Leadership	T1.1	“I haven’t really thought about being a leader, that was never the goal”
	T1.2	“Sometimes if I am not really interested in the project, do not want to be a leader...I usually naturally take it because I think that is my nature”
	T1.3	“I was pushed into a leadership position without really applying for it...It was obviously very difficult taking on that role because I did not apply for it”
	T1.4	“At that point you realise for some occasions you need to stop relying on others, and you need to be the one that they rely on essentially”
	T1.5	“If I see there is a problem and I see that no one can take the lead, I will step up and deal with it”
	T1.6	“it was very visible that I have to be the leader in the group because I could see and sense that nobody else in the group was going to take ownership”

	T1.7	“I am not the one who takes initiatives, but the situations were where people chose me”
	T1.9	“I never thought ‘ok, I need to take up the leadership role’...That is when I started taking the lead, but I never thought ‘I am the leader’”
	T3.2	“some people believe they are ready for a leadership position before they are quite there”
1.2 Situational Ad-hoc Leadership	T1.2	“I worked with people that were not really motivated and did not do their job. That’s why taking the leadership role, I like it to be honest, but I don’t like it if I work with people that do not.”
	T1.5	“while you are stepping in as a leader in one particular situation, you do not necessarily act as one outside of this situation...we were not assigned leaders”
	T1.6	“it was very visible that I have to be the leader in the group because I could see and sense that nobody else in the group was going to take ownership”
	T1.7	“my other colleague did not want to take the leadership position, so someone has to commit”
	T1.9	“If nobody else is going to do it, some[one] has to do it...I was doing it just for the sake of my learning”
1.3 Power and Control Motivation	T1.8	“I like having control, I like having power...it felt like I had control, and it felt nice having some sort of control over situations...I feel like because I did not have control in my house, so then having control in other aspects of my life made me feel very empowered”

Theme 2 – Evolving Leadership Identity		
Codes	Participant	Quote
2.1 External Recognition before Self-Recognition	T1.1	“I was given the job of seeing through an entire project...without any higher up supervising me. I remember being sceptical. I remember telling my producer that I'll probably need help. And she said, ‘That's OK, you can ask for help but try to do it as much as you can by yourself.’”
	T1.2	“From an external point of view, they would usually go towards me... At that moment I liked it. I enjoy when people give me responsibilities because it means people trust in you”
	T1.3	“Others will start to see you in a very different way because you are technically the leader... Whereas I obviously knew I was but did not see myself as a leader compared to how others did.”
	T1.5	“I was never considering myself a leader until my mother has started bringing this up. She would just say ‘you are a natural leader, so why would you not take a lead?’”
	T1.6	“When I have my one-on-one with my manager later than month, he was the one who told me that it was really good to see me stepping up. I had that leadership ability to step up”
	T1.7	“Students in my class said, ‘let her be the representative’ and it was quite a surprising part for me that people are saying that on behalf of me, and it was quite surprising that the Professor also said the same thing.”

	T1.8	“I feel like she was pushing me to be that person. I think she did see the potential before I did”
	T1.9	“one of my team members mentioned that I have been doing well having taken on this leadership role...I think that was the first time I realised ‘this person is seeing me as a leader before I completely recognise myself as a leader that way.”
	T2.2	“A large part of me becoming a leader who asserted herself to be a Managing Director was because of that leadership programme, I would say that with no qualms.”
2.2 Confidence building through experience	T1.1	“I think that confidence builds up slightly slowly... it's a feedback loop, right, I'll say something, and I'll look at the reaction of other people”
	T1.4	“You actually push yourself to learn and do the best that you can, not only for yourself, but for the team”
	T1.5	“I would say this mostly happened within a situation. So, if I see there is a problem and I see that no one can take the lead, I will step up and deal with it...That was probably the biggest difficulty around that experience and stepping in as a leader.”
	T1.6	“once I stepped into those shoes, it initially took me a while; the first month was a little bit uncomfortable for me to get into that role, but after that, once I understood how everyone works, which was not an easy assimilation, it was easier going forward. With each month I can say it got easier.”
	T1.8	“the recognition just doubles down on... And then a boss or a superior says I am doing a good job – that just make me feel like whatever I am doing is right”

	T2.2	“A large part of me becoming a leader who asserted herself to be a Managing Director was because of that leadership programme”
	T3.2	“I have never seen an individual with a so much perseverance or resilience. She has gone for multiple roles and been knocked back every time...You know, some people would give up, and be very negative, etcetera. She did not have that attitude”

Theme 3 – Evolving Leadership Identity		
Codes	Participant	Quote
3.1 Adaptability	T1.1	“Doing things like breaking the problem into smaller chunks, seeing if you can chip away at it, slowly taking your time, taking breaks”
	T1.2	“Emerging leaders would fit into today's society and today's society changes might be a lot about new technologies and influenced a lot”
	T1.3	“In terms of the skills that we need to have in the future is adaptability. You know we are living in a world where there is a lot of uncertainty. So being adaptable to change and resilient as well”
	T1.4	“These things definitely happen, and you have to go into it with an open mind.”

	T1.5	“Adaptivity to change, to people, to the situation, to new environments, to absolutely anything. You have to be reactive and adaptive.”
	T1.9	“I decided to change this by example. So instead of just telling my team to use the new software, I took the time to learn the system myself”
	T2.1	“the people I've worked with are naturally risk averse, and I think that is a real clash, because we're never in a steady state, nobody's in a steady state.”
	T2.2	“We recognised agility as a big issue and for that technology helps a lot in being agile. There are a lot of organisations I know in India which struggled because they did not already have agile leadership.”
	T3.1	“the world is more global, getting smaller with technology, so multicultural, so diverse, it is about knowing how to get on with everybody.”
	T3.2	“especially now that AI has become prevalent within the industry, I think that is a big question mark...So I feel people are kind of feeling the pressure, thinking ‘I am up against candidates and colleagues that all have these technical skills, and I only have got these soft skills to show.’”
3.2 Decision-making Under Uncertainty	T1.1	“I don't think there's any single instance where you have all the information, you just try to collect as much information as you can, and then make the decision based on that information”
	T1.2	“You have to take a decision. Many times, you have so many uncertainties, I would say, always, you can never know everything.”

	T1.3	“Every time you have to make decisions where you're not 100% sure whether it's the right one or not. I mean, in leadership or in life in general, you're never going to have 100% certainty when making a decision.”
	T1.4	“ time is never enough to be honest, so try to understand the big picture - know enough to make a decision I would say, a justifiable decision.”
	T1.5	“I constantly feel that I am working in the dark, and trying to navigate myself, and make the decisions and get on with it and see how it plays out, despite the fact that I hate this approach.”
	T1.7	“If I have to make a decision in an emergency, then the person who is going to be affected by that, if they are nearby to me, I will take the time to listen to their story”
	T1.9	“I made it a priority to observe, learn from experienced colleagues during quieter moments...I started experimenting with different sales pitches...and I think it was all a process of trial and error.”
	T2.2	“Normal standard operating procedures did not work, none of them worked. Even the most experienced leaders were facing this for the first time. So, a lot of decision making got centralised which meant some leaders had to be trained to also not feel insecure in some ways.”
	T3.2	“So you have got to have those abilities to problem solve. It is a soft skill that emerging leader and leadership should have. Because when something goes wrong, you are the person that everyone turns to for the solution, so therefore they need to have good problem-solving abilities, strategic decision making,”

3.3 Creative Problem-Solving Crisis	T1.4	“if the initial point is not the best that you can get...then whatever work you do is possibly in the wrong direction then everything else gets messed up.”
	T1.8	“they were just holding up the delivery of the project. So, then I looked into the incident management within AWS, and then I looked for a work around because it is not possible for AWS to have this whole cloud computing platform without incident management inbuilt. I just looked at it and then I found it and tested it on my phone”
	T1.9	“which led me to implement more creative and interactive methods, like using storytelling and art projects to teach basic concepts.”
	T2.2	“We did identify what are the changes that we want in this current state...you do not just come and teach, but you let them experience some of the real-world scenarios and make decisions, and solve for it, and then we debrief on it. So, it was a very simulated environment we created,”

Theme 4 – Interpersonal Leadership Competencies		
Codes	Participant	Quote
4.1 Empathy and People-centricity	T1.1	“But some factors I think are more important than others. Your ability to empathise, your ability to understand different cultures. Your ability to not be judgmental. You should be able to get along with people”

	T1.2	“you cannot manage people the same way, there is not set pattern. There are no set rules, with different profiles you have to adapt, which makes the beauty of it, the complexity of it”
	T1.3	“how to react to the cast who were going through difficult moments, how to lead them, and how to be able to support them.”
	T1.5	“you have to maintain the friendly relationship with your teammates but do not overstep the professional boundaries.”
	T1.6	“someone who can work well with people and can make sure that they are comfortable in the work that they do, no matter what experiences they have, no matter where they come from, just making sure it is an easy environment for them to work”
	T1.7	“if you are very empathetic and you can feel people’s [emotions], you will realise that you will never let it happen to other people, what happened to you...People should be confident in what they are doing, and at the same time they should be empathetic.”
	T1.8	“You also have to understand that the people you are working with have a life, and if something happens in their life – sometimes it is hard to separate life and work – and they bring that into work, you need to have the EQ to ask them or be there for them. You need to understand what is going on and try to help in any way”
	T1.9	“if I had to choose the most special, I'd say it is empathy followed by listening in a nonbiased manner.”

	T2.1	“You have to have this empathy for people, and that does not mean you are not commercial.”
	T3.1	“I really enjoyed working with these students I guess who would just be written off by society and given huge, you know, complexes if people didn't believe in them. And so, for me, it's about believing in that individual and the power in that individual, giving them the tools and the knowledge... It is about empowering –for me to have the belief and knowledge in their dream.”
	T3.2	“Working with different students constantly and the relationships that you build with certain students in particular, and then seeing them again at graduation, nothing beats that feeling of seeing the students you care about succeed.”
4.2 Communication as an essential competency	T1.2	“It depends on the profiles of people, just because it works with certain profiles, does not mean it will work with all... there is no rule to determine which kind of profile a person is and how you can talk to them, this is actually of social intelligence basically.”
	T1.3	“You have to have other soft skills such as clear communication”
	T1.4	“clarity and communication. This is really important because at the end if everything starts from you”
	T1.5	“Communication, as I explained, it's very essential for a leader to communicate with your teammates”

	T1.6	“I believe communication is super important in the team, you need to be able to communicate. If you can communicate, I think already have a lot of what people lack; so, communication is key.”
	T1.7	“the only thing that I thought was that there should be no misunderstanding and miscommunication”
	T2.2	“focused on professional skills: time management, communication, prioritisation. The basics. ...I think it was very important for communication to be as transparent and as clear as possible.”
	T3.1	“communication, that's key...Going back to the skills and competencies I've mentioned, communication”
	T3.2	“There are a lot of soft skills that I think emerging leadership needs to have. Communication for me is the biggest thing, you should be communicating with those you are working with constantly.”
4.3 Emotional Intelligence and Self-Management	T1.1	“If you're an anxious mess of a leader most of the time, yeah, you're not going to be much of a leader.”
	T1.2	“My learning is that you cannot manage people the same way, there is not set pattern. There are no set rules, with different profiles you have to adapt, which makes the beauty of it, the complexity of it. A good leader must adapt to who he is managing.”
	T1.3	“I did not see myself as biased leader or as a biased manager. I started being way more cautious in terms of how I communicated because I did not realise how people perceived me as a leader... how

		you communicate it very much observed and interpreted in the way the person wants to interpret it.”
	T1.4	“being self-aware and understanding yourself and then trying to look back at things and understand what could have been better, what was ok, what could be improved for next time.”
	T1.5	“you cannot be a boss around people who you see as [junior] to you, because people do not like when they are being ruled.”
	T1.7	“when you are angry you don't know what you are saying, so be silent at that point. When something has happened, there will be a lot of things going on in my head, so I just take my time, have my anxiety and [feel through my emotions], and after I few hours, I will think about the situation, ‘what happened? How can I solve it?’”
	T1.8	“I feel like EQ plays a huge role in this. If you feel like you do not have a high EQ, you cannot be a good leader”
	T1.9	“My mentor didn't just teach me the mechanics of the job. She showed me what it meant to lead with kindness and humility. By watching her, I understood that a leaders true impact comes from building genuine relationships and treating every person with respect”
	T2.2	“what I found most effective was really leaders, including top leadership, exhibiting authenticity, exhibiting vulnerability to some.”
	T3.1	“emotional intelligence – that is something that we need to have. Not just in the here and

		now, and how you manage your own feelings and emotions, but of those around you.”
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Theme 5 – Learning Through Complexity and Feeling Overwhelmed		
Codes	Participant	Quote
5.1 Breaking Down Complexity	T1.1	“Doing things like breaking the problem into smaller chunks, seeing if you can chip away at it, slowly taking your time, taking breaks,”
	T1.3	“Breaking down tasks is useful, breaking tasks down to more something more manageable because 'I can deal with these small tasks’”
	T1.4	“try to understand the big picture - know enough to make a decision I would say, a justifiable decision.”
	T1.9	“My first step was to sort of deconstruct the problem. Instead of trying to fix the entire project at once, I broke it down into smaller, more manageable parts.”
	T2.2	“you let them experience some of the real-world scenarios and make decisions, and solve for it, and then we debrief on it. So, it was a very simulated environment we created”
	T3.2	“Strategic decision making, difficult decision making...So you have got to have those abilities to problem solve.”

5.2 Growth Through Difficult Experiences	T1.1	“I think those are the situations that make you the best. So, if you're making decisions in a very chaotic or unpredictable environment, that's when you are defined as a leader”
	T1.2	“For me, it is realising how much of an impact I can have on someone else...I grow because I realise how much I can have an impact on someone else.”
	T1.3	“It is very important to react positively when something changes. Initially it might be negative, but then you have to go back into a positive mindset”
	T1.4	“These things definitely happen, and you have to go into it with an open mind.”
	T1.5	“Currently my decisions are guided mostly by my experience and lack of practical industry knowledge, which overwhelmed me quite a lot.”
	T1.7	“I was so overwhelmed to the point that I started crying...My professor asked if everything is right in the group, and in front of everyone, I said that it is not going well because people are not cooperating...I think at this point, you should not go behind peoples back, you should confront it all together and talk about it”
	T1.8	“If I'm really pushed through it and there's a deadline and I have to do it, I probably do much better than I would have if I had a month to do it”
	T2.1	“The thing is, nothing sits in abstract, everything is part of something bigger. So, I always thought about my levers, you pull various levers, and nothing is in isolation.”

	T2.2	“what I found most effective was really leaders, including top leadership, exhibiting authenticity, exhibiting vulnerability to some. We all became comfortable with online zoom calls where our kids would walk into the room and all of it. A little bit of humane leadership in some ways.”
	T3.2	“I have never seen an individual with a so much perseverance or resilience. She has gone for multiple roles and been knocked back every time...You know, some people would give up, and be very negative, etcetera. She did not have that attitude”
5.3 Learning from Role Models	T1.1	“Anything that I can inform myself with that would allow me to be more compassionate, and to be able to understand where the person in front of me is coming from.”
	T1.4	“Seeing and learning from them was quite helpful. You have the opportunity to lead, but in a different way, also because at that point you have the opportunity to be behind them, such as the Hult Prize – The MBAs led that mostly. Seeing how they operate, how they think, how they deal with things.”
	T1.6	“for my first job that I had my leader always made me feel comfortable from the start. That's the first trait which I try to keep in mind to make sure you make the person feel comfortable..., I loved my leader. She was great. When I think of a leader, I would think of someone like her always.”
	T1.7	“Because they are kind of leaders at some point or some stage. So, I want to meet them to know their mindset; I have some relatives and friends who are doing this job.”

	T1.8	“Seeing a woman in a leadership role, standing up for herself in front of a product owner like the client gave me a lot of motivation to become like her. So, I reached out to her, I told her I wanted to do this, I wanted to do what she did and wanted to understand how she did it”
	T1.9	“My mentor didn't just teach me the mechanics of the job. She showed me what it meant to lead with kindness and humility. By watching her, I understood that a leader’s true impact comes from building genuine relationships and treating every person with respect”
	T3.1	“I see the best in everybody; I want to see the best in everybody.”
	T3.2	“Seeing their success for me personally is what makes it significant...There is nothing I find more satisfactory than watching them get and sign that contract and asking me to check the contract for them.”
5.4 Self-Awareness and Reflection (Introspection)	T1.1	“Those kinds of things decrease your confidence, but at the same time when you do something right, you get praised for it. You get told that you did a good job, your motivation improves. I think the impacts are mental on your confidence. The impact is more intrinsic than on your ability to make good decisions, that does not get impacted too much, but your confidence does. Do you trust in yourself? Are you able to relax, and sleep?”
	T1.2	“I would react more in an offensive way. You would be more defensive and internalise it, and I would express it a lot, and maybe pressurise them and express that I am not going to do their work – so confrontation. You do the thing and then confront, I confront and then do the thing”

	T1.3	“I had a conversation with someone who I was managing, and they brought up the concept of bias. They mentioned I was biased in the way I managed. That was a very interesting conversation because it opened up the limitations of how I view how I communicate, and how I kind of see myself...that was a key moment in terms when you are a leader, how you communicate it very much observed and interpreted in the way the person wants to interpret it.”
	T1.4	“being self-aware and understanding yourself and then trying to look back at things and understand what could have been better, what was ok, what could be improved for next time.”
	T1.5	“despite the fact that we were not assigned leaders, none of us were, there were moments where I needed to step in and just react to the team dynamics, to the team problems, and just take the lead...That was probably the biggest difficulty around that experience and stepping in as a leader.”
	T1.6	“I could kind of reflect on what we worked on that month, and I could see the leadership qualities which I had implemented with that month or two. It was a bit of an eye opener because I did not realise it immediately.”
	T1.7	“When something has happened, there will be a lot of things going on in my head, so I just take my time, have my anxiety and [feel through my emotions], and after I few hours, I will think about the situation, ‘what happened? How can I solve it?’”
	T1.8	“Because as much as you want to believe that that is true - that not everything is in your control, you still want to be in control. And that it's very hard to let go of that control. So, this is a lesson I am still learning.”

	T1.9	“I think my approach to expanding my leadership skills has always started with more of an internal work. I have learned that you can't lead others effectively unless and until you you're not managing yourself properly.”
	T2.1	“you would have to have this empathy for people... Whatever you do in terms of whatever you build, and in terms of this emerging market, there will be lots of things that you have to think about as well that go with that, which is the health and the well-being piece”
	T3.1	“self-reflection is such an important component...if you were coaching individuals, the MBAs for example, and they were not able to self-reflect, and they were unable to dig deep into what makes them who they are and their values, would they ever succeed and become a leader?”
	T3.2	“For me it is usually their mindset, how they see things going all the way...That is where I say the mindset of some because I think you have got to have a very open mindset to be a leader. If you are tunnel visioned, then you are not letting other people's perspective or the people you are leading have an input or anything like that.”

Theme 6 – Systematic (or Organisational) Leadership Development Challenges

Codes	Participant	Quote
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6.1 Recruitment and Promotion Leadership Skills Mismatch	T2.1	“Emerging leadership is really important because most of the time when you're working with your boards and your exec, or with senior leadership teams, they invariably do not get to where they are because they're good with people and they're really good leaders and that's the big thing, they get promoted because they're technically good at what they do.”
	T2.2	“At COMPANY D, it was pretty streamlined, there were milestone programmes, in the sense identification was based on when you got promoted, to what level you got promoted, and therefore what training from a leadership development perspective, you needed to go through.”
	T2.2	“What you should not do is, rely on the current performance appraisal and performance of an individual to determine whether they are ready for the future. While potential identification does play a role and you should consider it, there are lot of times when you're clouded with the current performance and people may be in the wrong roles.”
	T3.2	“especially now that AI has become prevalent within the industry, I think that is a big question mark and it is the same with coding skills - how many jobs talk about coding, Python, R language, etcetera. So I feel people are kind of feeling the pressure, thinking ‘I am up against candidates and colleagues that all have these technical skills, and I only have got these soft skills to show.’ Though that should not be the case”
	T3.2	“I think a lot of students think that just completing a master's and then walking into a leadership role is quite easy, but actually, there are things that you learn in career history, industry experience, that

		any master's or any degree programme cannot teach you. Things like conflict within the workplace and resolving that conflict.”
6.2 Organisational Culture as a Barrier	T2.1	“we do not have an emerging leaders programme’, and we say ok we will create one, because there is an appetite from the business, that tends to be the driver behind that. And then we build from there. Sometimes you will get businesses that say they do not want to do that, and they will just do their own thing”
	T2.1	“That is where I think this becomes a cultural thing, where people say you can be yourself when you are here, but that is not really what they mean, they mean, you can be yourself if you are like them...We talk about brining your authentic self to work, but I have not always seen that. We are very good at these buzzwords in organisations, but actually, it does not always work that way.”
	T2.2	“a lot leadership development is culture building. It is about what organisation structure do you have in place...So, building a culture of openness, culture of courage...Everybody spoke up, it did not matter, you just spoke up. We just needed ideas from everywhere...So are you building a culture where there is psychological safety, are you enabling that culture.”
	T2.2	“we focused on keeping it to women, so there was some backlash around by only women, women themselves did not want it. They said, ‘why are you separating us, why are you putting [only] us through a programme, almost making it seem like we are not good enough.’”

	T3.1	“They provided the platform; they provided the springboard for me to so what I wanted to do and to actually contribute and make a difference. I think that is about the organisation and the environment that you are in.”
	T3.2	“Having worked with people out in the community and there are so many people with chips on their shoulder because school treated them as a second-class citizen. They weren't made to believe in themselves. They didn't have the opportunity to realise actually ‘they are great practical learner and that's how they should be learning.’”
6.3 Management Expectations Issues	T1.1	“I was given the job of seeing through an entire project. It was a small project but seeing through an entire project without any higher up supervising me. I remember being sceptical. I remember telling my producer that I'll probably need help. And she said, "That's OK, you can ask for help but try to do it as much as you can by yourself." And I did do it by myself”
	T1.9	“There was a point when I had to train one of the newcomers who was about to join our team...I was a proper mentor for that person, and it was a bit difficult for me because it had just been three months since I had joined and started working there, so I was figuring out everything out myself at that point. But then it was also a bit frustrating for me because I had to do two things at the same time.”
	T3.2	“I think a lot of students think that just completing a master's and then walking into a leadership role is quite easy, but actually, there are things that you learn in career history, industry experience, that

		any master's or any degree programme cannot teach you. Things like conflict within the workplace and resolving that conflict.”
	T3.2	“When you are bidding for the post, you are working with a lot more senior positions, and it is a very grey area, to be honest with you. That was not the case with my role, there was a very set recruitment process. We have rules within the civil service. You have to abide by and within our area, and that was good. They did not have those roles, and I felt she was very overwhelmed because the level of work that she was doing and the seniority of the people that she was working with, I do not think necessarily reflected the level of the role that she was in.”

Theme 7 – Generational and Demographic Complexity

Codes	Participant	Quote
7.1 Age and Experience based Leadership Assumptions	T2.2	“It also depends on the level. If at the junior level you are still building the very basic skills in your job where you are more focused, and then you move to a new area, you will have to build up. You will have to at least take one or two years to build it up again and probably that may not qualify as an emerging leader immediately.”
	T3.1	“I am very passionate that we should not define people or pigeonhole people because of their age in particular, and because of their gender importantly, whether they have been down the academic or

		non-academic route, or because of their background, and perhaps their life experiences. I am quite passionate about that to be honest; we should all have that opportunity.”
	T3.1	“I have a friend who has an MBA and she did not go to university, and she might have been in her 30’s at the time. [Getting into the MBA] was based on her achievements in the workplace.”
	T3.1	“If they are an emerging leader, what makes them that? Is it their values, their interests, their passions? What are their goals, where do they see themselves going? You try to support them through that. Compared to somebody who is already an established leader – is established with age because they might be in their 50’s, is that established? Because actually it could be someone who has been working for several years and they could be 32 years old, and it is their personality and confidence, but they do not actually take their time to reflect and realise who they are.”
	T3.1	“I created a portfolio career, which is sort of why I retrained to do what I was passionate about, because that is in my DNA. I moved to COMPANY-X in my 40’s...They provided the platform; they provided the springboard for me to so what I wanted to do and to actually contribute and make a difference.”
	T3.2	“Thinking about the different levels of students as well makes it tough, because obviously you have got MBA students who are different levels of MBA students within the MBA. Some have got 20 years of experience; some have got five years of experience. And I think some people believe they are ready for a leadership position before they are quite there.”

7.2 Gender-Specific Development Challenges	T2.2	“there was a lot of criticism about why a women-only programme...women themselves did not want it. They said, ‘why are you separating us, why are you putting [only] us through a programme, almost making it seem like we are not good enough.’ So, there was backlash from that perspective.”
	T2.2	“If you ask me, frankly, there's nothing wrong in having a gender focused programme, because I think there is a need...I do think that men and women lead differently. I mean, while the basic qualities are the same, the competencies you look for in leadership are the same, it is the way you apply those competencies that is different, the way men and women lead are different.”

END OF THESIS