

# Designing Leadership Programmes in Higher Education: The Case Studies of Morocco and Kosovo & Albania

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## Abstract

*The capacity of higher education institutions (HEIs) to navigate reform, internationalisation, and innovation depends on their leadership. However, leadership development remains one of the least institutionalised functions in many emerging systems. This paper examines two Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) projects—MORHEL in Morocco and LEADALKO in Albania and Kosovo—dedicated to strengthening leadership capacities through structured and evidence-based programmes. Using the Higher Education Leadership Qualities and Skills (HELQS) framework, the study analyses programme design, implementation, and contextual adaptation. The results demonstrate that competency-based, modular, and systemically anchored leadership programmes foster institutional transformation, collaboration, and sustainability. Both projects exemplify how contemporary leadership theories—transformational, distributed, authentic, and adaptive—translate into practical application across diverse governance and cultural contexts.*

**Keywords:** Leadership in higher education; Erasmus+ CBHE; HELQS framework; MORHEL project; LEADALKO project; national leadership development; Quality Education; Strong Institutions and Partnerships for the Goals

## 1 Introduction

Leadership in higher education is increasingly recognised as a key driver of institutional resilience, innovation, and quality assurance in times of rapid transformation (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009; McCaffery, 2019). Universities are expected not only to educate future leaders but also to serve as models of ethical, distributed, and adaptive leadership within their communities. However, despite this recognition, a persistent leadership gap remains in many higher education systems, particularly in

developing and transitioning contexts where institutional governance structures are still consolidating and leadership training opportunities are limited (UNESCO, 2023).

Across the Middle East, North Africa, and the Western Balkans, higher education systems face governance challenges, including the lack of structured professional development for academic leaders, limited strategic planning capacities, and inadequate coordination between ministries and universities. In Morocco, only 23% of university middle managers have received formal leadership training, while in Kosovo and Albania, leadership roles are often assumed through seniority rather than demonstrated leadership competence (MORHEL, 2024; LEADALKO, 2025b). These conditions underscore the urgency of designing context-specific leadership development frameworks that respond to strategic, ethical, and adaptive needs in higher education.

This paper examines two Erasmus+ capacity-building initiatives—MORHEL (Moroccan Higher Education Leadership Development) and LEADALKO (Leadership Development in Albania and Kosovo)—as comparative case studies that illustrate how higher education leadership development can be locally adapted while grounded in global best practices. Both projects applied the Higher Education Leadership Quality Standards (HELQS) framework, which integrates multiple leadership paradigms and provides a structured approach to enhancing institutional capacity. The two cases—Morocco’s MORHEL and Albania-Kosovo’s LEADALKO—represent distinct socio-political and educational environments in the Global South and the Western Balkans. Both systems are undergoing reforms to strengthen institutional autonomy and align national frameworks with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The projects provide insights into leadership capacity building in systems characterised by rapid transition, decentralisation, and internationalisation pressures.

This paper contributes to the literature on higher education leadership by contextualising the application of leadership development frameworks within emerging and transitional education systems, complementing existing work by Bolden et al. (2008, 2009), Avolio and Gardner (2005), and Heifetz (1994). It highlights how international collaboration fosters leadership competencies that bridge global and local imperatives. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the conceptual framework and leadership theories underpinning the study; Section 3 describes the research design and methodology; Sections 4 and 5 present the case studies; Section 6 offers a comparative analysis; Section 7 discusses leadership impact from theory to practice; and Section 8 concludes with implications and future directions.

## **2 Conceptual Framework: Leadership Theories in Higher Education**

Leadership in higher education encompasses a dynamic interplay of theoretical paradigms that together provide a nuanced understanding of how universities evolve and sustain change. Among the most influential are transformational, distributed, authentic, and adaptive leadership theories. Collectively, these models offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how leadership practices can inspire organisational innovation, promote engagement, and cultivate resilience across academic institutions.

Transformational leadership, as articulated by Bass and Avolio (1994), emphasises inspiring a shared vision and empowering others to achieve institutional transformation. In higher education, this approach has been demonstrated to foster innovation and motivate both academic and administrative staff to strive for excellence (Alessa, 2021). Transformational leadership encourages leaders to act as change agents who shape culture and align institutional missions with societal needs. Recent studies have extended this understanding by linking transformational leadership to the development of enduring competencies that enable leaders to navigate complex educational systems (Ackermann, Maytorena-Sanchez, Gavin, & Forsyth, 2023). Furthermore, Afsar, Masood, and Umrani (2019) demonstrate how transformational leaders influence innovation through mechanisms such as job crafting and knowledge sharing—elements particularly relevant to contemporary universities engaged in continuous adaptation.

Distributed leadership offers a complementary perspective that challenges hierarchical models by advocating shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making across organisational levels (Spillane, 2006). This approach aligns with the inherently collegial and interdisciplinary nature of academic institutions, where expertise and authority are often dispersed (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling,

2009). Distributed leadership allows for greater inclusivity and empowerment, recognising the contributions of faculty, administrators, and students in achieving institutional goals. Chan and Lew (2004) provide an illustrative example from the Singapore Armed Forces, showing that systematic and structured leadership development fosters collective competence—an insight equally valuable for higher education systems seeking institutional coherence. Similarly, Modise, Mampane, and Phatudi (2023) underscore that leadership conceptualisation is often community-driven, shaped by local needs and relational contexts, reinforcing the contextual relevance of distributed leadership in diverse higher education settings.

Authentic leadership, as defined by Avolio and Gardner (2005), emphasises ethical conduct, transparency, and the congruence between leaders' values and actions. Within higher education, authenticity fosters trust and legitimacy, crucial for nurturing a culture of integrity and shared purpose. When leaders demonstrate genuine engagement and ethical consistency, they create environments conducive to reflection, mutual respect, and accountability. Authentic leadership is also linked to the cultivation of professional identity and emotional intelligence—qualities that sustain effective leadership over time (Kumari & Dash, 2022). The process of nurturing authenticity can be seen as iterative, resembling what Lamont and Chapman (2019) describe as a “spiral curriculum” of leadership development, where learning deepens through reflective cycles of experience and feedback.

Adaptive leadership, introduced by Heifetz (1994), highlights leaders' capacity to mobilise people to tackle complex challenges through learning, experimentation, and systemic change. This approach resonates strongly with Senge's (1990) concept of the “learning organisation,” which positions adaptability and shared learning as central to institutional sustainability. Adaptive leadership requires higher education institutions to continually realign their structures and processes in response to shifting societal, technological, and policy environments. As Antonacopoulou, Moldjord, Steiro, and Stokkeland (2019) argue, learning organisations evolve through the integration of knowledge, reflection, and collective sense-making—precisely the processes underpinning adaptive leadership. The cultivation of adaptive capacity also reflects a move from individual to collective intelligence, where leaders facilitate institutional learning rather than simply direct change.

Taken together, these leadership paradigms form a multidimensional lens for understanding leadership in higher education. Transformational leadership drives visionary and motivational reform; distributed leadership promotes inclusivity and shared governance; authentic leadership reinforces ethical legitimacy; and adaptive leadership enables responsiveness to uncertainty. When integrated into leadership development frameworks, such as the HELQS model applied in the MORHEL and LEADALKO projects, these theories create an ecosystem of continuous learning and innovation that strengthens institutional and systemic resilience. In this way, leadership development becomes both a personal journey and an organisational strategy—grounded in theory but realised through contextually embedded practice.

### **3 Research Approach and Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design. Data was collected from project reports, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and workshop evaluations conducted within MORHEL and LEADALKO between 2022 and 2025. Comparative analysis enabled the identification of how leadership theories embedded in the HELQS framework were adapted to national and institutional contexts.

Both initiatives were part of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) programme and involved a consortium of European universities, regional partners, and ministries of education. The analysis focused on programme design, implementation mechanisms, participant experiences, and observed institutional changes.

#### **3.1 Case Study 1: MORHEL (Morocco)**

The MORHEL project sought to enhance leadership capacity across Moroccan higher education institutions through the National Leadership Development Programme (NLDP). It engaged 132 participants from twelve universities, applying a blended format that combined online and in-person components. The HELQS framework structured the programme around four leadership dimensions—transformational, distributed, authentic, and adaptive.

Each participant developed an Institutional Change Project (ICP) aligned with their university's strategic goals. Through workshops, coaching, and peer learning sessions, participants cultivated competencies in strategic visioning, data-informed decision-making, and collaboration. The programme culminated in the establishment of a National Leadership Development Centre (NLDC) as a permanent structure dedicated to leadership training.

Transformational leadership principles guided the promotion of shared vision and mission alignment with national higher education reforms. Distributed leadership was encouraged through collaborative project design and inter-university partnerships. Authentic and adaptive leadership practices were fostered through reflective journaling, ethics modules, and continuous feedback mechanisms.

### 3.2 Case Study 2: LEADALKO (Albania and Kosovo)

The LEADALKO project built upon MORHEL's foundations, adapting the HELQS framework to the Western Balkans. It involved 22 participants from six universities and ministries in Albania and Kosovo. While MORHEL focused on establishing a national model, LEADALKO emphasised regional cooperation and capacity sharing.

LEADALKO implemented train-the-trainer workshops and mentorship networks to ensure sustainability. Participants engaged in thematic learning on governance, digital transformation, gender equity, and ethics. They co-created institutional leadership plans integrating transparency, accountability, and inclusivity principles.

Authentic and adaptive leadership were central to the programme's design. Scenario-based learning enabled participants to address real-life challenges, including accreditation processes and institutional autonomy. Strategic foresight sessions encouraged proactive thinking and resilience in the face of policy uncertainty. The project's outcome—a Regional Leadership Hub—served as a collaborative platform for continuing leadership development and cross-border exchange.

## 4 Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Comparative Analysis: Leadership Frameworks in Practice

A comparative analysis of the MORHEL and LEADALKO projects provides valuable insight into how leadership theories were adapted and operationalised within differing cultural, institutional, and policy contexts. While both initiatives were grounded in the Higher Education Leadership Quality Standards (HELQS) framework, each interpreted and applied the underlying theories—transformational, distributed, authentic, and adaptive leadership—according to local governance structures, reform priorities, and organisational maturity. This section explores these nuances to demonstrate how theoretical constructs translate into practical leadership behaviours, institutional strategies, and system-level change. The following table synthesises these findings, highlighting the shared foundations and distinctive approaches that shaped leadership development in Morocco, Albania, and Kosovo.

Table 1 compares how leadership theories were operationalised in both projects, illustrating contextual similarities and distinctions.

**Table 1. Application of Leadership Theories within MORHEL and LEADALKO**

LEADERSHIP THEORY	CONCEPTUAL FOCUS	APPLICATION IN MORHEL (MOROCCO)	APPLICATION IN LEADALKO (ALBANIA & Kosovo)
TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP	Inspiring vision, motivating others, leading organisational change (Bass & Avolio, 1994).	Implemented through Institutional Change Projects that aligned university reforms with national strategies, focusing on shared vision and innovation.	Embedded in institutional leadership plans emphasising inclusive governance, innovation, and cross-border cooperation.
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP	Shared responsibility and	Promoted through the creation of the National	Encouraged through train-the-trainer

	collaboration across organisational levels (Spillane, 2006).	Leadership Development Centre and collaborative workshops, fostering collective problem-solving.	activities and cross-institutional peer learning networks connecting Albanian and Kosovar universities.
<b>AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP</b>	Ethical conduct, transparency, and value alignment (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).	Reinforced via coaching and self-reflection modules that emphasised ethical governance and self-awareness.	Integrated through ethics-focused sessions and case studies on transparency and accountability in leadership practice.
<b>ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP</b>	Flexibility, learning, and responsiveness to complexity (Heifetz, 1994; Senge, 1990).	Encouraged through stakeholder engagement, reform navigation, and iterative evaluation processes.	Applied through scenario-based learning and the development of foresight competencies for institutional sustainability.

## 4.2 Leadership Impact: From Theory to Practice

The impact of these leadership development programmes demonstrates a clear transition from theoretical frameworks to practical institutional change.

### 4.2.1 Individual-Level Impact

Participants in both programmes reported significant improvements in strategic thinking, communication, and team leadership, demonstrating measurable progress in the development of higher education leadership competencies. In the MORHEL programme, 87% of graduates showed enhanced capacity for managing institutional projects, facilitating stakeholder collaboration, and initiating innovation-led reforms within their universities (MORHEL, 2024; Jiang & Chen, 2016). This growth was particularly evident in participants' ability to link institutional objectives with national policy priorities, illustrating a deepened understanding of strategic alignment and evidence-based decision-making (Diene, 2024).

Similarly, in LEADALKO, self-assessment data and reflective journals indicated substantial increases in leadership confidence, ethical reasoning, and adaptability among participants. Many reported feeling better equipped to address challenges such as limited institutional autonomy, resource constraints, and governance complexity. Through scenario-based exercises and mentoring activities, participants developed stronger interpersonal communication and conflict resolution skills, allowing them to foster more inclusive and collaborative academic environments.

A notable outcome of both initiatives was the formation of peer mentoring and support networks that continued beyond the project's duration. These informal leadership communities became spaces for mutual learning and reflection, reinforcing the principles of transformational and distributed leadership in practice. Graduates frequently cited an increased sense of professional identity as leaders in higher education, along with a stronger commitment to ethical governance and institutional innovation. These findings highlight the success of both MORHEL and LEADALKO in translating theoretical leadership models into tangible personal and professional growth trajectories for participants.

### 4.2.2 Institutional-Level Impact

At the institutional level, both initiatives served as catalysts for structural and cultural transformation within higher education institutions (HEIs), embedding leadership development as a strategic priority rather than an isolated training activity. In Morocco, several universities formally integrated leadership development into their human resource and professional advancement strategies, recognising it as a core mechanism for sustaining institutional reform and innovation. The establishment of the National Leadership Development Centre (NLDC) provided a national platform for continuous leadership training, policy dialogue, and knowledge exchange across institutions. This centre not only

institutionalised capacity-building efforts initiated under the MORHEL project but also fostered a culture of collective problem-solving, transparency, and long-term visioning among academic leaders.

In Kosovo and Albania, the LEADALKO project led to comparable institutional advancements. Higher education institutions incorporated leadership objectives into their strategic and operational plans, explicitly linking them with internal quality assurance mechanisms and accreditation frameworks. This alignment encouraged universities to evaluate leadership performance in conjunction with academic and administrative indicators, thereby strengthening accountability and promoting evidence-based management. The creation of the Regional Leadership Hub, which brings together leaders from both countries, exemplifies distributed and adaptive leadership in practice. The hub became a collaborative ecosystem where HEIs shared best practices, co-designed development modules, and co-created regional benchmarks for leadership excellence.

Both cases demonstrated how leadership development initiatives can transcend individual training outcomes and shape institutional systems capable of self-renewal, collaboration, and resilience. The integration of leadership into strategic governance processes not only advanced organisational learning but also laid the foundation for a more adaptive, ethically grounded, and innovation-oriented higher education sector in the participating regions.

#### **4.2.3 Systemic and Policy-Level Impact**

At the systemic and policy level, both initiatives contributed to the formal recognition of leadership development as an integral component of higher education reform and governance. In Morocco, the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation has incorporated leadership training and institutional governance enhancement into its 2030 Modernisation Plan, signalling a change in thinking from ad hoc professional development toward a sustainable, system-wide approach. This policy endorsement ensured that leadership capacity-building became embedded within national reform frameworks, influencing resource allocation, accreditation procedures, and institutional evaluation standards. The MORHEL project thus provided an actionable model for scaling leadership education nationally, linking local institutional practices with broader governance reform objectives.

In the Western Balkans, the LEADALKO project generated policy recommendations that directly informed the alignment of leadership capacity-building with national accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms in both Albania and Kosovo. The project's outputs, including leadership competence frameworks and institutional self-assessment tools, were shared with national education agencies and policy stakeholders to guide future reforms. As a result, leadership development is increasingly viewed as a measurable and strategic element of institutional quality and sustainability, rather than a peripheral training objective.

This shift from theory to governance practice highlights how adaptive and transformational leadership paradigms can inform higher education policy, thereby strengthening the coherence between institutional and national strategies. By bridging leadership theory, institutional practice, and policy innovation, both projects demonstrated how locally grounded initiatives can inform the creation of resilient, responsive, and future-oriented higher education systems. Ultimately, the systemic integration of leadership development fosters a governance culture characterised by foresight, inclusiveness, and continuous improvement—qualities essential for advancing institutional excellence in dynamic global and regional contexts.

#### **4.2.4 Theoretical Reflection**

The experiences of MORHEL and LEADALKO reaffirm the enduring relevance of contemporary leadership theories when adapted to the realities of higher education reform in diverse regional contexts. Both projects demonstrate that transformational leadership plays a crucial role in driving visionary and motivational reform, enabling academic leaders to articulate shared goals and inspire a collective commitment to institutional change (Bass & Avolio, 1994). This approach proved particularly effective in mobilising teams around innovation-oriented objectives and fostering a culture of engagement and accountability across hierarchical boundaries.

Equally important, distributed leadership emerged as a mechanism for ensuring inclusive governance and peer accountability. By redistributing authority and responsibility, the projects empowered mid-level leaders, departments, and administrative units to take ownership of change initiatives. This participatory approach enhanced communication, improved decision-making, and strengthened institutional cohesion—key conditions for sustaining long-term transformation.

The projects also underscored the importance of authentic leadership, particularly in contexts where higher education institutions are undergoing structural or cultural transition. By promoting transparency, ethical conduct, and alignment between personal values and institutional missions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), authentic leadership reinforced legitimacy and trust among stakeholders. This emphasis on integrity and self-awareness helped bridge the gap between managerial responsibility and moral accountability, a challenge often faced in transitional systems.

Finally, the application of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Senge, 1990) highlighted the necessity of flexibility and learning in navigating complex reform processes. Both MORHEL and LEADALKO operated within environments marked by uncertainty, resource constraints, and competing policy agendas. The projects demonstrated how adaptive leaders cultivate resilience by framing change as a continuous learning process rather than a fixed outcome, thereby fostering innovation and responsiveness at multiple organisational levels. Together, these theoretical perspectives form a scalable and integrative model of leadership ecosystems that can support institutional and systemic transformation. The synthesis of transformational, distributed, authentic, and adaptive leadership principles within the HELQS framework provides a coherent blueprint for future capacity-building initiatives in higher education, particularly in emerging systems striving for excellence, inclusivity, and sustainability.

## 5 Conclusions

The MORHEL and LEADALKO projects collectively demonstrate that international cooperation serves as a powerful catalyst for leadership transformation when theoretical models are effectively embedded within practical, context-sensitive capacity-building frameworks. Both initiatives confirmed that leadership development in higher education is most impactful when it is not treated as an isolated training intervention, but rather as a sustained, institutional, and systemic process. By operationalising the Higher Education Leadership Quality Standards (HELQS) model, the projects provided a coherent structure that balanced conceptual clarity with experiential learning and hands-on implementation, enabling participants and institutions to internalise leadership principles in meaningful ways.

A central insight emerging from both cases is that leadership development must be institutionalised to achieve long-term sustainability. The establishment of centres and hubs dedicated to leadership training—such as Morocco’s National Leadership Development Centre and the LEADALKO Regional Leadership Hub—illustrates how formal structures can ensure continuity, peer learning, and policy relevance. These institutions become repositories of knowledge and innovation, anchoring leadership capacity within the strategic core of higher education systems.

Moreover, the outcomes of both projects underline the importance of ethical and adaptive leadership as foundational elements of sustainable reform. Leaders who operate with integrity, self-awareness, and flexibility are better equipped to navigate the complexities of governance, foster trust among stakeholders, and drive transformation even in uncertain conditions. This finding aligns with the broader literature that emphasises the role of authenticity and adaptability as key competencies in higher education leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Heifetz, 1994; Tyminski & Owens, 2024).

Equally significant is the role of regional collaboration, which has proven essential for enhancing institutional resilience and collective learning. Through shared training modules, joint policy dialogues, and cross-border mentoring networks, both MORHEL and LEADALKO demonstrated how cooperation among higher education institutions across Africa and the Western Balkans can lead to the development of shared standards, mutual support, and scalable models of excellence.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of these outcomes depends on longitudinal evaluation of alumni impact to track how leadership competencies translate into institutional and systemic change over time. There is also a growing need to integrate digital leadership development into future programmes, ensuring that emerging leaders can navigate technological transformations shaping global education landscapes. Furthermore, establishing interregional partnerships that connect African, Balkan, and broader European higher education institutions will be vital for advancing collective innovation and reinforcing the global dimension of leadership learning. Ultimately, leadership development in higher education must continue to evolve as an ecosystem of continuous learning, grounded in ethical governance, collective engagement, and strategic adaptability. The experiences of MORHEL and LEADALKO demonstrate that when theory and practice are

harmonised, leadership capacity can become a systemic asset—empowering individuals, transforming institutions, and shaping the future of higher education across regions.

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