



The Role of Student Led Organizations in Developing Leadership and Soft Skills in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of student organization participation in developing leadership skills and soft skills in higher education. Recognizing that universities must foster not only academic achievement but also competencies relevant to professional needs, the research employs a quantitative survey method using a Likert scale questionnaire distributed to 120 active students from three universities in Bogor, Tuban, and Jakarta. Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression to assess the influence of organizational participation levels. The results indicate that involvement in student organizations has a positive and significant impact on leadership and soft skills, particularly in communication, teamwork, and decision-making. These findings highlight the vital role of student organizations as complementary non-formal learning spaces that provide contextual and practical experiences. The study contributes both theoretically to higher education research and practically by offering insights for universities in designing strategies to enhance leadership and soft skills through student organization empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The modern era requires higher education graduates not only to master academic knowledge, but also to have leadership competencies and soft skills such as communication, cooperation, and problem solving which are recognized as determining factors for career success (Schwab & Zahidi, 2020). Globally, involvement in student organizations has been shown to increase academic resilience and attachment to institutions (BUCS, 2025), while locally data show an increasing trend of students' need for non-formal learning as a complement to the curriculum (Yolanda, Sari, & Ismail, 2023). This phenomenon reinforces the urgency of examining the role of student-led organizations in higher education scientifically and empirically. In addition, the UNESCO report (2022) emphasizes that soft skills are a key competency of the 21st century that must be developed through collaborative learning experiences outside the classroom.

Student-led organizations provide a collaborative space to apply practical skills and social interaction a method of experiential learning that complements formal learning models (Kim & Holyoke, 2022). On many campuses, organizational activities become non-formal social laboratories that foster leadership skills and soft skills in students. However, understanding how much they contribute to shaping such capacity is still descriptive, requiring a quantitative approach to measure it measurably. Recent research has also shown that student organizations contribute to building social identity, confidence, and adaptation skills that are highly relevant in the face of the global world of work (Lopez-Walle et al., 2021).

Studies such as by (Kim and Holyoke, 2022) have found that student participation in extra-curricular activities contributes significantly to the development of value groups in the Social Change Model model, especially collaboration and shared goals. While research from (Sumague, 2023) confirms that participation in clubs and organizations strengthens leadership and communication. However, local studies are still dominated by qualitative methods (Wati, 2023), and have not answered how much of a quantitative effect of participation on soft skills and leadership simultaneously in Indonesian higher education is. This gap shows the need to compile a study that statistically examines the relationship between these variables. This gap is in line with findings (Tang et al., 2020) that emphasize the need for a quantitative approach to evaluate the contribution of organizational activities to students' professional skills.

This study aims explicitly to measure the influence of students' active participation in student-led organizations on the development of leadership skills and soft skills in higher education. A quantitative approach using surveys with multiple linear regression analysis will be used to test the relative and significant contribution of participation in the organization to the two dependent variables.

Theoretically, this study enriches the higher education literature by presenting concrete empirical quantitative evidence that complements the qualitative findings and emphasizes the experiential learning model in leadership development (Kim & Holyoke, 2022; Sumague, 2023). The findings

will provide insight into the strengths and characteristics of the relationship between organizational activity and soft skills development, improving the theoretical foundation in student development education and management. This is also in line with the perspective (Evans, 2021) that emphasizes that organizational experience provides room for self-actualization that accelerates the development of social competence and leadership.

Practically, the results of this research can be used by higher education providers to formulate policies to support student-led organizations as an integrative part of the strategy of establishing graduate competencies. Quantitative data on the influence of organizational participation on leadership and soft skills can be the basis for designing more structured and results-based student organizational support programs, co-curricular curricula, and support interventions.

The findings of this study also have broader relevance in the context of higher education in Indonesia. By examining the correlation between organizational participation and soft skills development, research can be developed across institutions with different social, cultural, and geographic backgrounds allowing for stronger generalizations of outcomes. This is important to build a model of strengthening the role of student organizations that are adaptive to local needs and national policies. Thus, this research is expected to make a real contribution in answering global and local challenges related to improving the quality of higher education graduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Soft Skills and Career Readiness

Soft skills are seen as an important foundation for the career readiness of higher education graduates. Competencies such as communication, collaboration, leadership, problem-solving, and self-management fall into the Career Readiness framework that has been widely adopted in higher education policies and practices (NACE, 2022). Globally, international institutions emphasize that social and emotional skills have a major influence on lifelong learning success and readiness to face post-pandemic challenges (OECD, 2021). Recent research shows that the job market tends to prioritize soft skills over technical abilities alone, so that soft skills are a factor in the competitive differentiation of graduates (Poláková et al., 2023). However, other studies confirm that there is a gap between students' mastery of soft skills and real needs in the world of work (Villegas, 2024; Otermans et al., 2023). This indicates the urgency of a systematic strategy to strengthen soft skills learning in higher education.

Student-Led Organizations as Experiential Learning Arena

Student-led organizations function as an experiential learning arena, which is real-life experience-based learning. Organizational activities encourage students to carry out roles, manage responsibilities, and interact in team dynamics, thus facilitating the internalization of leadership values (Crawford, 2024). In addition, participation in organizations is often motivated by the need

for students to expand networks, increase work competitiveness, and gain practical leadership experience (Underwood, 2025; Dunn, 2024). From a psychological perspective, participation in organizations has been shown to increase students' self-efficacy and confidence in leadership, which in turn supports their readiness to face academic and professional challenges (Griffiths et al., 2021). Thus, student organizations play a dual role: as a means of self-development and as a social laboratory that fosters leadership skills.

Mechanism of Influence of Organizational Participation

The latest literature maps the mechanism of the influence of student involvement in organizations on leadership development. First, participation forms leadership identity, because students internalize the roles and responsibilities they carry out. Second, organizational experience increases self-efficacy, namely students' confidence in their ability to lead and solve problems. Third, the experience strengthens the ability to articulate competencies, so that students can relate the skills acquired to the career context (Kanar & Moulton, 2024). Other research has found that not all forms of organizational engagement have the same effect, but rather depend on the intensity, pattern, and quality of experiences experienced (Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, the effectiveness of student organizations as a means of learning is largely determined by the design of the experience, including the existence of systematic reflection and feedback.

Empirical Evidence of Impact on Soft Skills

Various empirical studies confirm that student involvement in co-curricular activities is positively related to the improvement of soft skills. Cross-country research reports significant improvements in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and student leadership who are active in organizations (Freij, 2024). In addition, the study of employability confirms that soft skills research increasingly emphasizes quantitative evidence that shows a real contribution to the work readiness of graduates (Villegas, 2024). Recent studies have also revealed that experiential learning, both through organizational programs and work practices, strengthens interpersonal and metacognitive competencies that are crucial in the transition to the professional world (Rafiq et al., 2024). Thus, student involvement in organizations not only has implications for the campus experience, but also plays a strategic role in preparing students to enter the job market.

Measurement of Soft Skills and Leadership in Higher Education

One of the main challenges in this study is the measurement of soft skills and leadership competencies. The Career Readiness framework and competency assessment instruments have been used to map the skill profile of students at both the individual and program levels (NACE, 2024). Recent quantitative studies have largely adopted standardized surveys, regression analysis, and configuration approaches to assess the contribution of co-curricular activities to leadership outcomes and employability (Kanar & Moulton, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Furthermore, the validity of research results is strengthened by triangulating data, for example through student self-reports, assessments from

peers or mentors, to evidence of real performance such as portfolios or project artifacts. This approach allows for a more comprehensive evaluation while reinforcing the generalization of research results.

METHODOLOGY

Types and Approaches to Research

This study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory survey design. This design was chosen to empirically test the causal relationship between student participation in student-led organizations and the development of leadership skills and soft skills. The quantitative approach allows for objective measurement of variables as well as analysis of relationships between variables using numerical data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). In addition, explanatory surveys are considered appropriate because they are able to identify patterns of the influence of organizational participation on dependent variables through systematic hypothesis testing (Bryman, 2021).

Population and Sampling Techniques

The population in this study is active students who are members of student organizations at three universities located in Bogor, Tuban, and Jakarta. The sampling technique uses purposive sampling, which is included in the category of non-probability sampling. This selection was made taking into account that only students who have actively participated in the organization in the last two years are relevant to the research objectives (Etikan & Bala, 2023). The number of respondents involved was 120 students, which was considered sufficient to represent a variety of organizational experiences while meeting the needs of multiple linear regression analysis (Hair et al., 2022).

Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected using an instrument in the form of a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This research instrument was compiled based on soft skills and leadership indicators referring to the Career Readiness framework of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2022) as well as empirical findings in previous studies (Nguyen & Le, 2021). To ensure the quality of the instrument, a content validity test was carried out through expert judgment from lecturers in the field of education and management, as well as a construct validity test with confirmatory factor analysis. The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with a value of ≥ 0.70 as an indicator of good internal consistency (Taber, 2020).

Research Procedure

The research was carried out in several systematic stages. First, the preparation stage which includes the preparation of instruments, content validity tests, and licensing to universities. Second, the data collection stage is carried out by distributing questionnaires to respondents through online and face-to-face media according to the conditions of each university. Third, the data verification

stage includes checking the completeness of the questionnaire and coding the answers. Fourth, the data analysis stage is carried out using statistical software. Finally, the conclusion stage is carried out based on the results of the quantitative analysis obtained. The research procedure was structured to maintain internal validity while minimizing the potential for measurement bias (Saunders et al., 2019).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out using multiple linear regression to test the influence of student participation levels in organizations on leadership development and soft skills. Before the main analysis, a classical assumption test was performed which included normality, multicollinearity, heteroscedasticity, and autocorrelation tests to ensure the feasibility of the regression model. The entire analysis was carried out with the help of the latest version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, which is widely used in education and management research due to its reliability in processing quantitative data (Pallant, 2020).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Respondent Profile

A total of 120 active students who are members of student organizations became respondents to this study. The demographic characteristics of the respondents show a representative diversity, thus providing a comprehensive picture of the background of students who are active in the organization. The majority of respondents were in the age range of 19–22 years, which is a developmental phase that is synonymous with the period of identity exploration, strengthening social networks, and improving personal skills. The gender composition is relatively balanced between men and women, which indicates that opportunities to develop leadership and soft skills in student organizations are open to all groups without significant gender bias.

In terms of involvement, around 52% of respondents played the role of active members involved in operational activities, while the other 48% occupied core management positions responsible for decision-making and program management of the organization. This difference in roles is important because it allows researchers to analyze a wider variety of leadership experiences: members gain collaborative and teamwork experience, while core management practices more in managerial, strategic planning, and decision-making.

In addition, the length of student participation in the organization also varies. Some respondents have only joined for one semester, while others have been active for more than four semesters. This variation shows that student organizations function as a forum for continuous learning, where soft skills and leadership can develop along with the duration of involvement. Thus, the respondents' profiles reflect the real conditions of students in higher education which makes the organization a strategic means to grow non-academic skills. To clarify the demographic distribution of respondents, here is a summary table in English:

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–19 years	28	23.3
	20–22 years	74	61.7
	23 years and above	18	15.0
Gender	Male	58	48.3
	Female	62	51.7
Role in Organization	Active Member	62	51.7
	Executive/Leader	58	48.3
Length of Involvement	1–2 semesters	35	29.2
	3–4 semesters	54	45.0
	>4 semesters	31	25.8

The data in the table shows that the largest group comes from students aged 20–22 years (61.7%), which is the dominant group in undergraduate education. A balanced gender composition shows equality of opportunity in the organization. The roles of members and administrators are almost the same, showing that the sample of this study is not biased. Meanwhile, the varying length of participation strengthens the validity of the study because it includes students with different levels of organizational experience.

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

Before being used for the main analysis, the research instrument in the form of a five-point Likert scale questionnaire was first tested for validity and reliability. This process aims to ensure that the measuring tool is truly able to measure the constructs being studied, namely leadership and soft skills, accurately and consistently.

The results of the construct validity test were carried out through factor analysis, which showed that all indicators had a factor loading value above 0.60. This number meets the minimum criteria commonly used in quantitative research, so it can be concluded that each questionnaire item significantly represents the construct being measured. For example, leadership indicators such as "decision-making ability" and "team leadership ability" show a strong load on leadership variables. Likewise, soft skills indicators such as "interpersonal communication" and "teamwork" showed consistency with soft skills variables.

The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which resulted in a score of 0.87 for the leadership variable and 0.85 for the soft skills variable. This value is well above the 0.70 threshold recommended in social research, thus indicating a high level of internal consistency. In other words, if this questionnaire is reused on other groups of students with similar characteristics, the measurement results will remain stable.

Overall, the results of the validity and reliability test confirm that the research instrument used is not only feasible, but also strong in measuring the

variables studied. This is important because subsequent findings regarding the influence of organizational participation on leadership and soft skills will depend heavily on the accuracy of the measurement tools used. To clarify the results of the instrument test, here is a summary in the English table:

Table 2. Validity and Reliability Test Results

Variable	Number of Items	Factor Loading Range	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Leadership	10	0.62 - 0.81	0.87	High Reliability
Soft Skills	12	0.64 - 0.79	0.85	High Reliability

The table shows that the indicators of the two main variables have a consistent loading factor above 0.60. Cronbach's excellent alpha value shows that the questionnaire is not only valid in measuring each construct, but also reliable in providing consistent results.

The Influence of Organizational Participation on Leadership Skills

The results of the study show that the active participation of students in organizations makes a significant positive contribution to leadership skills. The regression coefficient value of $\beta = 0.412$ with a significance level of $p < 0.001$ confirms that the higher the level of student involvement in the organization, the better the leadership skills they develop. This means that organizational experience has a real role in shaping students' capacity to lead, not just a coincidental effect.

The leadership skills observed include several important aspects, namely the ability to make decisions, conflict management, the ability to lead a team, and strategic planning. Students who occupy core management positions are seen to have more prominent abilities in these dimensions than ordinary members. This can be explained because the position of the core management demands greater responsibility, such as leading meetings, dividing tasks, solving internal problems, and managing activity programs. Direct responsibility for organizational dynamics gives them a wider opportunity to practice being a leader in real-world situations.

The regression results also showed a value of $R^2 = 0.30$, which means that organizational participation was able to explain 30% of the variation in student leadership skills. This figure is quite significant in social research, considering that leadership is a complex construct that is influenced by various other factors such as work experience, family environment, and academic activities. In other words, one-third of the student leadership abilities in this study can be attributed to the experience they gained from student organizations.

In addition, the results of the F test showed a value of 34.12 with a significance of 0.000, which indicates that the regression model as a whole is worthy of being used to explain the relationship between organizational participation and leadership skills. This reinforces the belief that student

organizations truly serve as social laboratories where students learn to lead through hands-on practice. To give a more detailed picture, the regression results can be seen in the following table:

Table 3. Regression Analysis: The Effect of Organizational Participation on Leadership Skills

Independent Variable	Beta	t-value	Itself.
Organizational Participation	0.412	5.84	0.000
Model Summary			
$R^2 = 0.30$			
$F = 34.12$			
$\text{Sig.} = 0.000$			

To strengthen these findings, a comparison was made of the average leadership score between core management and ordinary members. The results of the measurement with the Likert scale (1-5) show that the core management scores higher in all dimensions, especially in the aspects of decision making, conflict management, team leadership, and strategic planning. Here's a comparison of the average leadership skills between regular members and the organization's core management:



Figure 1. Comparasion of Leadership Skills by Organizational Role

The Effect of Organizational Participation on Soft Skills

The results of the study show that student participation in organizations not only improves leadership skills, but also contributes significantly to the

development of soft skills. The regression analysis yielded a coefficient of $\beta = 0.378$ with a significance level of $p < 0.01$, which confirmed the positive relationship between the level of involvement in the organization and the students' soft skills ability. The R^2 value = 0.27 indicates that almost 27% of the variation in soft skills can be explained by organizational participation, while other factors outside of this study also influence, such as academic experience, social activities, and part-time work environment.

The soft skills observed include several important aspects, namely interpersonal communication, the ability to work together in a team, and time management. Students who are active as core administrators tend to have higher scores in these three aspects than ordinary members. This can be explained by the fact that core managers often interact across groups, manage activity schedules, and deal with complex teamwork dynamics, thus requiring them to be more adaptive and skilled in managing interpersonal relationships.

The results of the F test with a value of 28.45 and a significance of 0.001 strengthened the validity of the regression model used. This means that organizational participation really has a systematic contribution to improving students' soft skills. These findings are in line with experiential learning theories that emphasize that soft skills can be acquired effectively through hands-on experience and social practice, not just through formal learning in the classroom.

To clarify the differences between groups, the following is a comparison of the average soft skills scores between ordinary members and core administrators using the Likert scale (1–5). The results showed that core managers consistently scored higher on the dimensions of interpersonal communication, teamwork, and time management, compared to regular members.

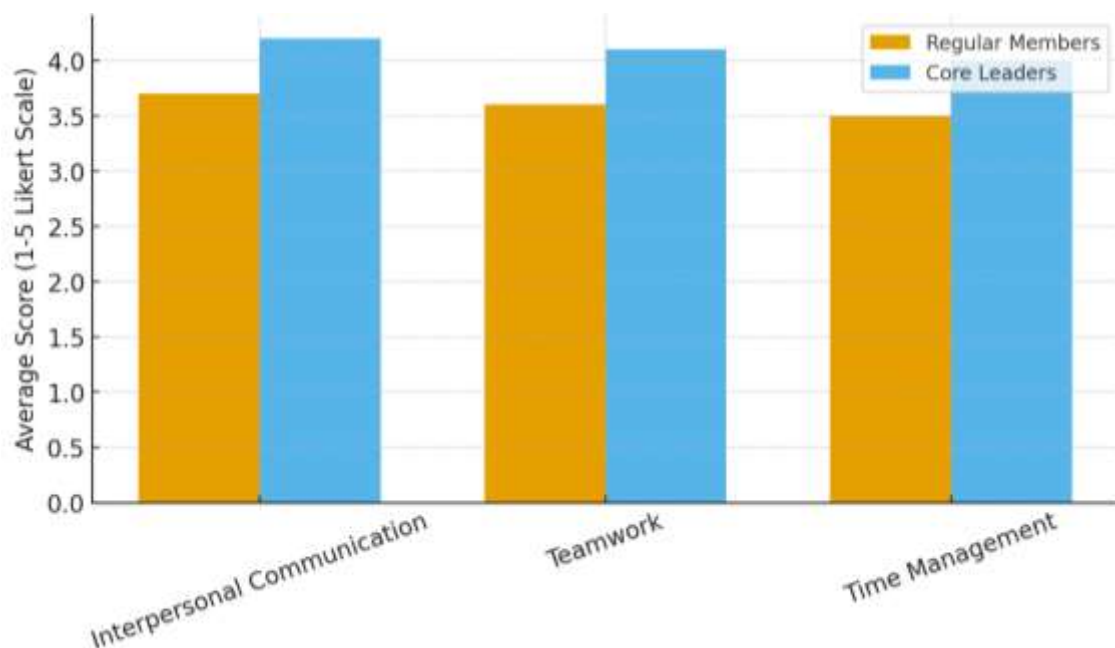


Figure 2. Comparison of Soft Skills by Organizational Role

This graph supports the regression finding that the higher the level of participation in student organizations, the greater the opportunity to develop soft skills that are relevant to the professional world.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the active participation of students in student organizations contributes significantly to the development of leadership skills and soft skills. These findings support the initial hypothesis that student-led organizations are not just a forum for social activities, but function as an effective social laboratory in shaping students' capacity to face academic and professional challenges. Positive and significant regression coefficients in both leadership variables ($\beta = 0.412$; $p < 0.001$) and soft skills ($\beta = 0.378$; $p < 0.01$) confirmed the existence of a strong and consistent relationship between organizational involvement and the strengthening of these competencies.

Theoretically, these results are in line with the concept of experiential learning, which emphasizes that meaningful learning is gained through direct experience, reflection, and application in real-world contexts (Kolb, 2015; redeveloped by Lee & Blanchard, 2022). Students who participate in organizations face complex dynamics such as decision-making, conflict management, and team management, which in turn strengthen leadership skills. Previous research has also underlined that participation in extracurricular activities contributes significantly to the strengthening of students' social identity, confidence, and managerial capacity (Nguyen & Serna, 2021).

The organization's contribution to soft skills is also consistent with the latest literature. A study by (Ortega & Liu, 2023) confirms that students who are active in campus organizations have advantages in communication, teamwork, and time management skills, which are key indicators of employability. Thus, the results of this study confirm that student organizations are a strategic path to complement formal learning, especially in preparing graduates who are competitive in the global job market.

However, the influence of organizational participation on leadership only explains about 30% of the variation, while on soft skills it is about 27%. This indicates that there are still other factors outside the organization that affect the development of these two variables, such as internship experience, interactions within the family, and social activities outside the campus. Previous research has also found that student leadership can be influenced by personality factors, environmental support, and lecturers' teaching styles (Henderson et al., 2022). Thus, student organizations are important, but not the only determining factor in the formation of leadership and soft skills.

When compared to previous research, there are consistency as well as differences. For example, these findings support a study by (Fischer & Stone, 2021) that showed a significant positive relationship between co-curricular participation and improved interpersonal skills. However, in contrast to the findings (Johnson et al., 2020) which stated that the intensity of organizational activities does not always correlate with leadership if it is not accompanied by a

reflection mechanism. This hints that the quality of the organization's experience is more important than the quantity of activities alone.

From the theoretical side, this study enriches the higher education literature by providing quantitative evidence that confirms the role of student-led organizations in developing non-academic skills. From a practical perspective, these results encourage universities to be more serious about supporting the existence of student organizations as an integral part of learning strategies. For example, institutions can integrate soft skills achievement in a co-curricular assessment system or provide additional training for core administrators to strengthen leadership skills.

However, this study cannot be separated from limitations, namely first, sampling is limited to three cities, so the results may not be fully representative of national conditions. Second, the use of self-report-based questionnaires has the potential to cause a subjectivity bias of respondents. This limitation is in line with criticism from (Carter & Mendes, 2022), which emphasizes the importance of triangulating data through direct observation, peer assessment, and portfolio analysis to improve the validity of soft skills research results.

For further research, it is recommended to use a mixed methods method that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis so that the understanding of the mechanism of organizational influence on leadership and soft skills is more comprehensive. In addition, the expansion of cross-regional and cross-institutional sample coverage will strengthen the generalization of the findings. Another recommendation is the integration of mediating variables such as self-efficacy or social identity, which can explain in more detail the relationship between organizational participation and student skill development.

Overall, the study confirms that student organizations have a vital role in the development of leadership skills and soft skills, complementing formal education with relevant practical experience. This empirical contribution not only strengthens the academic literature, but also provides a practical basis for colleges to design more holistic student development strategies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This research proves that the active participation of students in student organizations plays a significant role in improving leadership skills and soft skills that are relevant to professional demands in the modern era. Regression analysis shows that the higher the level of student involvement in the organization, the better their abilities in terms of decision-making, conflict management, team leadership, interpersonal communication, cooperation, and time management. This confirms that student organizations not only function as a forum for social activities, but also as an effective non-formal learning space in fostering leadership competencies and contextual interpersonal skills.

Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on experiential learning by providing empirical evidence that participation in student organizations is able to complement formal learning in higher education and bridge the gap between graduate competencies and job market needs. Practically, the results of the study recommend the need for universities to strengthen support for student organizations through leadership training programs, co-curricular curricula, and

more structured evaluation of activities. Thus, student-led organizations have an important contribution in forming graduates who are not only academically superior, but also competitive in leadership skills and soft skills, so that they are better prepared to face the challenges of the world of work and social dynamics in the future.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research could explore how different types of student organizations, leadership roles, and levels of engagement influence the development of specific leadership competencies and soft skills. Further studies might also examine the long-term impact of organizational involvement on graduates' career readiness and professional success. In addition, comparative research across various institutional contexts and cultural settings would provide deeper insights into how organizational environments shape experiential learning outcomes. Expanding the investigation to include digital or hybrid student organizations could also reveal new opportunities for fostering leadership and interpersonal skills in evolving educational landscapes.

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