Servant Leadership and Quality Culture in Higher Education Institutions

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***Abstract* — Contemporary higher education institutions operate in an environment shaped by internationalization, increased accountability, diverse stakeholder expectations, and continuous quality enhancement requirements. In this context, leadership approaches that foster trust, participation, and shared responsibility are increasingly important. This conceptual paper examines servant leadership as a framework for strengthening quality culture in higher education institutions. Drawing on a structured conceptual review and synthesis of literature on servant leadership, academic leadership, and quality management in higher education, the paper develops an integrative framework linking servant leadership principles (service orientation, empowerment, ethical stewardship, humility, and community building) with core dimensions of quality culture (shared values, collaborative governance, continuous improvement, evidence-informed decision-making, and institutional learning). The analysis suggests that servant leadership can create conditions for participatory, trust-based academic environments in which faculty members, professional staff, students, and external partners actively contribute to quality enhancement processes. By aligning leadership practices with institutional mission and collectively negotiated values, servant leadership may strengthen institutional coherence, support academic autonomy, and improve long-term organizational effectiveness. The paper concludes by outlining practical implications for university leaders and internal quality assurance offices, and by proposing directions for empirical research on the servant leadership–quality culture relationship.**

***Keywords* — servant leadership, quality culture, higher education institutions, academic leadership, internal quality assurance, stakeholder engagement**

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary higher education institutions (HEIs) face simultaneous pressures to widen access, respond to globalization and internationalization, demonstrate accountability, and continuously improve learning and teaching. In the European Higher Education Area, internal quality assurance is framed as an institution-led responsibility and is increasingly tied to stakeholder engagement and evidence-informed enhancement practices guided by the ESG standards (ESG, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015). While formal quality assurance (QA) systems and procedures are necessary to ensure standardization of quality, research argues that sustainable improvement depends on the "quality culture": shared values and collective commitments that make quality work meaningful, not merely compliant (EUA, 2006; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Developing such a culture is challenging in universities because authority and expertise are distributed, academic autonomy is highly valued and change often relies on collegial negotiation rather than hierarchical control (Bryman 2007; Kezar, et al. 2017).

Given these challenges, leadership approaches that prioritize service, empowerment, ethical stewardship, humility and community building are gaining attention. One of these leadership approaches is a servant leadership. Servant leadership, introduced by Greenleaf as a "servant first" orientation to leading (Greenleaf, 1970), offers a potentially compatible logic for academic environments where trust and participation are essential. Recent studies show growing interest in servant leadership in higher education and its links to engagement, commitment, and performance (Sharma, et al. 2026; Adams, 2025; Aboramadan, 2020).

This paper addresses a practical and theoretical gap. Although servant leadership is often discussed as a values-based leadership model, it is less frequently conceptualized as a mechanism for embedding quality as an organizational culture in HEIs. The aim of this paper is therefore to develop an integrative framework that links servant leadership principles with core dimensions of quality culture in higher education, and to outline implications for leadership practice, internal quality assurance, and future research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent decades, growing attention has been paid to the role of leaders in HEIs, driven both by the increasing societal significance of these institutions and by the profound transformations reshaping the sector, including globalization, internationalization, reduced public funding, and increased academic mobility (Gibbons, 1998). The traditional collegial model of governance has therefore increasingly come under pressure from demands for more effective, accountable, and student-oriented leadership, contributing to the emergence of a stronger managerial culture in higher education (Deem, 1998). At the same time, contemporary leadership in HEIs must be closely linked to quality assurance, particularly considering the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which emphasize student-centered learning, transparent governance, stakeholder participation, continuous improvement, and institutional responsibility for quality (ESG, 2015). While management ensures the technical implementation of ESG standards, leadership ensures that this implementation is met with the growth of trust among employees. In this paper, leadership is defined as a joint process between leaders and followers who strive for a common goal of achieving a adaptive change (Ebener & Jalšenjak, 2021). Ebener and Jalšenjak (2021) argue that "management provide structure to our lives while leadership gives life to these structures". Building on this distinction, this paper argues that servant leadership can help HEIs move

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from procedural quality assurance toward a more deeply embedded quality culture. In this context, servant leadership appears particularly relevant because it emphasizes service to others, ethical conduct, empowerment, collaboration, and the development of an inclusive and values-based academic community (Greenleaf, 1977).

Servant leadership is commonly defined as a moral and relational form of leadership in which the leader's primary motive is to serve others and support their growth, while providing direction and stewardship for the organization (Greenleaf, 1970; Dierendonck, 2011). Building on Greenleaf's foundational work, Spears (2010) synthesized frequently cited characteristics of servant leaders, such as listening, empathy, persuasion, and commitment to the growth of people, that operationalize the servant leader's orientation in practice. Comprehensive reviews further distinguish servant leadership from adjacent approaches (e.g., transformational or ethical leadership) by emphasizing humility, interpersonal acceptance, empowerment, and a long-term stewardship focus (Dierendonck, 2011; Eva, et al., 2019). However, the relevance and effectiveness of this approach may be questioned in an increasingly competitive and profit-oriented environment, in which higher education institutions are also expected to demonstrate performance, efficiency, and measurable outcomes.

Evidence across sectors suggests that servant leadership is associated with desirable organizational outcomes, including trust, work engagement, psychological empowerment, and organizational citizenship behavior (Eva, et al., 2019; Canavesi & Minelli, 2021). These outcomes are especially important in higher education, where quality enhancement depends not only on formal procedures but also on professional autonomy, collegial relationships, and a supportive institutional climate. For this reason, recent literature has increasingly examined servant leadership among academic leaders, department heads, and university managers, particularly in relation to faculty engagement and institutional climate (Adams, 2025). Empirical studies conducted in university settings suggest that servant leadership can strengthen academics' work engagement and emotional attachment to their institution by increasing job satisfaction and perceived organizational support (Aboramadan, 2020). Similarly, recent findings indicate that servant leadership may contribute to faculty engagement by promoting supportive leadership practices and fostering high-quality relationships within academic institutions (Sharma, et al., 2026). These findings suggest that servant leadership may provide an important relational foundation for developing a sustainable quality culture in higher education institutions.

Quality culture in higher education has been discussed as a complement to quality assurance systems, emphasizing "shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment to quality" alongside formal structures and processes (EUA, 2006). The European University Association (EUA) argued that quality culture grows through bottom-up participation and institution-wide dialogue, rather than being imposed through procedural compliance. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) problematized the concept, noting that quality culture is difficult to define and that institutions often oscillate between improvement-oriented cultures and compliance-oriented cultures. Trust is frequently presented as a prerequisite: trust-based quality culture models highlight how transparency, fairness, and participation enable meaningful engagement with enhancement activities (Dzimińska, et al., 2018).

Despite this conceptual compatibility, the relationship between servant leadership and quality culture remains insufficiently theorized. Servant leadership emphasizes relational trust, empowerment, ethical responsibility, and community building, all of which correspond closely with quality culture's focus on shared responsibility, participation, and institutional learning (Dzimińska, et al., 2018; Spears, 2010). However, existing studies in higher education have primarily examined servant leadership in relation to individual-level outcomes (e.g. faculty engagement, job satisfaction, and commitment), while giving less attention to the collective governance practices and cultural mechanisms through which quality improvement is sustained. This gap provides the rationale for this paper, which develops a conceptual framework linking servant leadership principles with the development of quality culture in HEIs. In doing so, the paper does not diminish the importance of management or formal quality assurance systems in meeting ESG standards. Rather, it argues that servant leadership can complement these systems by strengthening trust, participation, and shared commitment to quality as an institutional value.

III. METHODS

This paper applies a conceptual research design based on a structured review and thematic synthesis of the literature. The aim is not to test hypotheses empirically, but to develop a theoretically grounded framework that explains how servant leadership may contribute to the development of the quality culture in HEIs. The review focused on the following bodies of literature: servant leadership, leadership in higher education, and quality assurance and quality culture in higher education. The selection of the sources prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles, relevant books, policy documents, and widely cited conceptual contributions. Particular attention was given to papers that define servant leadership, identify its core dimensions, focus on leadership in HEIs, and conceptualize quality culture in relation to internal quality assurance.

The synthesis followed four analytical steps. First, the literature on servant leadership was reviewed to identify recurring principles relevant to academic institutions, including service orientation, empowerment, ethical stewardship, humility, and community building. Second, literature on leadership and governance in higher education was analyzed to clarify the organizational characteristics of HEIs, particularly distributed authority, academic autonomy, collegial decision-making, and increasing demands for accountability. Third, literature on quality assurance and quality culture was examined to identify core dimensions of quality culture, including shared values, collaborative governance, continuous improvement, evidence-informed decision-making, and institutional learning. Fourth, the two conceptual domains were compared and integrated in order to develop a framework linking servant leadership principles with quality culture dimensions.

The resulting framework was developed through conceptual matching. Each servant leadership principle was

connected to a corresponding dimension of quality culture on the basis of theoretical compatibility identified in the reviewed literature: service orientation was linked with shared values, empowerment with collaborative governance, ethical stewardship with continuous improvement, humility with evidence-informed decision-making, and community building with institutional learning. These links are interpreted as plausible organizational mechanisms through which servant leadership may support quality culture in the HEIs.

Table 1. Integrative framework linking servant leadership and quality culture in HEIs

Servant leadership principle	**Related quality culture dimension**	**Proposed contribution to quality culture**
Service orientation	Shared values	Aligns leadership with institutional mission, academic values, and collective commitment to quality.
Empowerment	Collaborative governance	Encourages participation, professional autonomy, and shared responsibility for quality enhancement.
Ethical stewardship	Continuous improvement	Connects quality processes with responsibility, fairness, and long-term institutional development.
Humility	Evidence-informed decision-making	Supports openness to feedback, reflection, and constructive use of evaluation results.
Community building	Institutional learning	Strengthens trust, dialogue, knowledge sharing, and collective improvement across the institution.

This framework does not imply that servant leadership replaces formal quality assurance or managerial structures. Rather, it conceptualizes servant leadership as a complementary leadership approach that can help HEIs transform quality assurance from a procedural requirement into a shared institutional culture. In this sense, servant leadership may serve as a bridge between the technical implementation of quality standards and the deeper cultural conditions required for sustainable quality enhancement.

The conceptual nature of the paper has two important implications. First, the proposed framework should be understood as an analytical model rather than an empirically validated model. Second, the framework provides a basis for future empirical research, including surveys, interviews, case studies, and longitudinal studies that could test and refine the proposed relationships across different institutional and national contexts.

I. DISCUSSION

Building on the reviewed literature, this paper proposes an integrative framework that links servant leadership principles with the development of quality culture in HEIs. The framework is grounded in the assumption that sustainable quality enhancement in HEIs cannot be achieved solely through formal procedures, standards, and managerial control. While quality assurance systems provide necessary structures for monitoring and improvement, quality culture depends on shared values, trust, participation, institutional learning, and collective commitment to quality (EUA, 2006; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Dzimińska, et al., 2018). In this respect, servant leadership offers a leadership logic that can support the cultural and relational conditions necessary for quality to become embedded in everyday academic practice.

The proposed framework connects five servant leadership principles: service orientation, empowerment, ethical stewardship, humility and community building, with five core dimensions of quality culture: shared values, collaborative governance, continuous improvement, evidence-informed decision-making, and institutional learning. Service orientation contributes to the development of shared values by positioning leadership as a responsibility toward others rather than as the exercise of formal authority. Greenleaf's understanding of servant leadership as a "servant first" approach emphasizes the leader's responsibility to support the growth and well-being of individuals and the organization (Greenleaf, 1970; Greenleaf, 1977). In HEIs, this orientation can help align leadership practices with institutional mission, academic values, and a collective commitment to quality. Since quality culture depends on shared beliefs and expectations regarding quality (EUA, 2006), servant leadership can strengthen the value-based foundations of quality enhancement.

Empowerment supports collaborative governance by encouraging participation, responsibility, and professional autonomy. Universities are characterized by distributed expertise and collegial forms of decision-making, which make hierarchical approaches to change less effective (Bryman, 2007; Kezar, et al., 2017). Servant leadership emphasizes empowerment and the development of people (Spears, 2010; Dierendonck, 2011), making it particularly compatible with academic environments in which faculty members, professional staff, and students need to be active participants in quality processes. Through empowerment, quality assurance can move beyond compliance and become a shared institutional responsibility.

Ethical stewardship contributes to continuous improvement by linking quality enhancement with responsibility, fairness, and long-term institutional development. Servant leadership is strongly associated with ethical conduct, stewardship, and concern for the long-term well-being of the organization (Greenleaf, 1977; Dierendonck, 2011; Eva, et al., 2019). In the context of ESG standards, which emphasize institutional responsibility, stakeholder participation, and continuous improvement (ESG, 2015), ethical stewardship can help ensure that quality processes are not treated as administrative obligations, but as part of the institution's broader responsibility toward students, staff, and society.

Humility supports evidence-informed decision-making by encouraging openness to feedback, dialogue, and critical reflection. Servant leadership is distinguished by humility, listening, empathy, and interpersonal acceptance (Spears, 2010; Dierendonck, 2011). These characteristics are

important in quality culture because evidence-informed improvement requires institutions to recognize weaknesses, engage with feedback, and use data constructively rather than defensively. In this way, humility can reduce resistance to evaluation and support a more developmental understanding of quality assurance.

Community building strengthens institutional learning by fostering trust, collaboration, and relational commitment across the institution. Quality culture develops through bottom-up participation, dialogue, and shared commitment rather than through imposed compliance (EUA, 2006). Trust-based models of quality culture also emphasize transparency, fairness, and participation as conditions for meaningful engagement in improvement activities (Dzimińska, et al., 2018). Since servant leadership places emphasis on community, relational trust, and commitment to the growth of people (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010), it can support institutional learning by creating an environment in which members of the academic community are willing to share knowledge, reflect on practice, and contribute to collective improvement.

The framework suggests that servant leadership can act as a relational and cultural mechanism through which formal quality assurance systems are translated into shared institutional practices. Management remains essential for establishing procedures, responsibilities, and compliance with ESG standards. However, servant leadership complements these managerial functions by fostering the trust, participation, ethical responsibility, and institutional commitment needed for quality culture to become sustainable.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper developed an integrative conceptual framework linking servant leadership with the development of quality culture in higher education institutions. The central argument is that formal quality assurance systems, although necessary for ensuring accountability and consistency, are insufficient for sustainable quality enhancement if they are not supported by shared values, trust, participation, and institutional learning. The analysis suggests that servant leadership can strengthen these cultural conditions by emphasizing service, empowerment, ethical stewardship, humility, and community building. These principles are particularly relevant in HEIs, where academic autonomy, distributed expertise, and collegial decision-making strongly influence institutional change. By fostering trust, participation, and shared responsibility, servant leadership may help transform quality assurance from a compliance-oriented system into a more developmental and learning-oriented culture.

The paper contributes to the literature by shifting attention from individual outcomes of servant leadership toward collective mechanisms that support quality improvement at the institutional level. It also highlights the practical relevance of servant leadership for university leaders and internal quality assurance offices seeking to strengthen quality culture in alignment with academic values and institutional mission. However, the proposed framework remains conceptual and should therefore be empirically tested. Future research should examine how servant leadership influences quality culture across different institutional and national contexts, using qualitative, quantitative, and longitudinal approaches. Such studies would help clarify both the potential and the limitations of servant leadership as a pathway toward sustainable quality culture in higher education.

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