

Impact of a leadership program on the holistic development of university students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The study examines the effectiveness of the SOAR Youth Leadership Program in the 2017-2018 academic year, using a mixed-method approach of both quantitative and qualitative evaluation method. There were 49 university students from three universities completed the evaluation on responding to subjective outcome evaluation form and personal reflection form. A significant percentage of student participants expressed positive responses with the program content, program instructors, and program effectiveness. Consistent with our expectation, there were significant positive correlations among program content, program instructors, program effectiveness, total effectiveness, and overall satisfaction. The participants described the program in positive descriptors and all the related metaphors were positive in nature. The results in this study supported the positive and strong influence of the program in promoting leadership skills and competence for our university students.

Keywords: Service leadership, university students, competencies, characters

Introduction

Fast changes in the economic and political environment led to a growing demand for effective leadership (1). Under the influence of globalization, there is a pressing need to improve the leadership skills in meeting the uprising demands of effective management with reference to challenges and uncertainties (2). Leadership skills are crucial for both personal and professional development, especially in times of crisis. The skills of trustworthiness, collaboration, as well as influencing and inspiring others were considered essential skills by leading experts in both Europe and the United States (3). The concept of leadership is also transforming. As more millennials are progressing into leadership and management role, they become a major influence in transforming from

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traditional hierarchical style to a relatively flat culture with less bureaucracy. The conventional approach to managing a team in a rigid manner has shifted to leading a team with more flexibility and openness (4).

Effective leaders often need to be familiar with personal (e.g., be trustable, caring, and moral) and professional (e.g., setting mission, process, and procedures) leadership behaviors to constantly motivate people to willingly contribute their efforts (5). Benevolent leadership can also bring considerable positive impact and favorable outcomes, such as employees' creativity (6), whereas poor leadership can be destructive and cause losses and damages (7). Nurturing young talents with leadership has become a top priority in every society's development plan to ensure that young people are equipped with skills and competitiveness in making an impact and leading to create a positive influence on the world.

In response to the rapidly evolving environment, the Global Youth Leadership Institute as an education and research hub that was established by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University is dedicated to nurture their university students through a wide range of cross-cultural, innovative and reflective "Service Leadership" programs that focused on positive values and community engagement (8). The institute provides training and courses to equip many university students to become leaders and bring positive influence to society. The key objectives of the institute are 1) to nurture global youth leaders with the vision and competence in thinking globally to make contribution to the society, 2) to develop excellence in youth leadership education worldwide through the implementation of pioneering and innovative youth leadership curricula, and 3) to push forward on researching global youth leadership and service-learning education. The programs can better prepare university students with exceptional leadership qualities and global competencies. Systematic evaluation studies showed that students benefit from the programs.

With the global economic integration that creates enormous room and opportunities in collaboration and operations without worrying geography or distance in modern technological landscape, the institute also attempts to support university students' in building capabilities to make connection to different parts of the world through joining an international platform of the University Social Responsibility Network for

leadership development. The network was established in 2015 that has a total of 16 member institutions worldwide that covered six out of seven continents, including United States, Canada, Brazil, South Africa, United Kingdom, Israel, Kazakhstan, Korea, Japan, China, Hong Kong, and Australia. The missions of the network are 1) to establish a platform for exchanging concepts, resources, policies, practices, difficulties, and solutions to each of the network members, 2) to develop projects in a collaborative manner with varied scopes and scales within the network, and 3) to contribute to discussions and development worldwide through networking and partnership within the network, as well as with other allied institutions.

In Hong Kong, the Global Youth Leadership Institute has teamed up with other universities to carry out non-credit programs, such as the SOAR Youth Leadership Program. The program serves as an international exchange platform for building cultural connection and cross-cultural competence. Sponsored by Si Yuan Foundation and Zeshan Foundation, Global Youth Leadership Institute, Peking University, and Xi'an Jiaotong University jointly organized SOAR (Serving heart, Open-mindedness, Aspiration, Responsibility) Youth Leadership Program. SOAR was an integration of two programs, namely the Global Youth Leadership Program and Silk Road Youth Leadership Program. The Global Youth Leadership Program (GYLP) aims at nurturing students at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Peking University on qualities of service leadership, such as competencies, character and caring disposition. The program attempts to support students in gaining knowledge, experiences, reflection and hands-on experience through lectures, dialogues, personal experience in activities and service in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Cambodia.

In a study using six waves of data on objective outcome evaluation, university students from Hong Kong, mainland China, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and the United States enrolled in the GYLP program. A total of eighty-nine of them completed all the assessments. The results showed that significant improvement was evidenced across outcome measures on positive attributes of development, competencies in service leadership, and increased satisfaction to life (9). With the launch of "Belt and Road Initiative" by the Central Government of China, there was an intro-

duction to Silk Road Leadership Program (SRYLP) in the 2015-16 academic year to students at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Peking University, and Xi'an Jiaotong University. The evaluation on a 3.5-day (21 hours) service leadership program of SRYLP was highly positive on its program content, program instructors, and program benefits, with nearly 90% of the student participants showed program satisfaction (10). The evaluations on different components of the program resulted in significant positive correlations. While perceived program content from the student participants predicted program benefits, the content and perceived program benefits predicted the overall satisfaction that was rated by the students. In a pre-and-post study using objective outcome evaluation that examined changes in university students after attending an intensive program under "Silk Road Youth Leadership Program" in mainland China, results showed that students experienced a positive impact on improving their knowledge on youth development, satisfaction to life, service leadership beliefs and qualities (11). Over three assessment periods (i.e., pre-test before the program, post-test immediately after the program, and 12-day follow-up test after the program), the results also indicated a stable trend of improvement on these measures and significantly or marginally higher scores at post-test and follow-up test.

Evaluation of the leadership programs' effectiveness and participants' recommendation is essential in providing constructive feedback, which can be addressed in the planning and implementation of future programs (12, 13). For example, a study found that particular personal characteristics of a program instructor, such as having a sense of humor and youth engagement strategies, could increase the effectiveness of positive youth development (14). Therefore, the identification of staff members' characteristics and performance on how to engage with youth can provide a competitive edge. Gender differences in relation to leadership development programs were also revealed in other evaluation studies. When participants' reflection in leadership development programs was used as a measure of effectiveness, the results found that there were subtle changes in the behavioral and cognitive responses along the way (15).

As leadership programs are at its infancy in Hong Kong, there is a need for collecting more supporting

evidence on the effectiveness of leadership programs. In this study, we examine the Youth Leadership Program's effectiveness in the 2017-2018 academic year. The leadership program was developed to cultivate students in a holistic manner, including the promotion of their moral character (sense of social reasonability), leadership competencies (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and self-leadership), and caring disposition in maintaining a positive relationship. During the one-year program, the university students that enrolled were introduced to the basic models of leadership, basic attributes of leadership, reflection on their leadership qualities, application of knowledge as a promising leader, and the need for their development. The students also participated in study trips, youth forum, and service learning in the "Belt and Road Initiative" countries with a focus on the concept of service leadership and the development of China, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The opportunity in the discovery that was given in the program supported them to constantly reflect their personal values and build up self-confidence. All the knowledge and experience was important for the students to demonstrate their competencies in leading and understanding the needs of various stakeholders and to utilize their skills to lead others and the society in moving forward.

To assess the program effectiveness at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, we have previously used several approaches for evaluation, such as objective and subjective outcome evaluations and qualitative evaluation. This evaluation study adopted the mixed-method approach (i.e., integration of quantitative and qualitative evaluation method) to assess program effectiveness. Mixed method research employs both approaches to evaluate a program from different perspectives. By integrating the quantitative data with qualitative data, it will provide a more comprehensive picture of the program impact in a more elaborated manner. This approach helps to explore broader perspectives and reveal relationships that occur between the layers of the multifaceted research questions (16). The results of a mixed-method approach can increase findings of reliability and credibility by revealing concepts that are a representation of the phenomenon.

In this study, upon the program completion, the students were asked to provide their personal views

and learning experience of the program. There are several expectations. First, if the program worked well, we would expect a high proportion of the participants showing positive responses. Second, based on previous research, we would expect significant correlations amongst different components of subjective outcome evaluation (i.e., program content, instructor quality, program effectiveness). Third, it was expected that the qualitative data would present the views of the students to be positive in nature.

Methods

In the 2017-2018 academic year, a total of 49 students completed the SOAR Youth Leadership program in Xi'an. There were 17 males (34.7%), 30 females (61.2%), and two students not indicating their gender status (4.1%). The students primarily came from three different universities - 22 from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 12 from Peking University, 13 from Xian Jiaotong University, and two unknowns. The age range of the students was between the age of 17 to 21, with the mean age of 18.9 years.

The effectiveness of the SOAR Youth Leadership program in Xi'an in the 2017-2018 academic year was examined by the mixed-method approach of integrating both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Students' informed consent was obtained before the study, with the emphasis on confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation. They were also being informed of the rights to withdraw from this study without any consequences. All the data were collected by the program instructors that followed a standardized data collection protocol.

Instruments

The Subjective Outcome Evaluation Form targeted to measure students' views of the program. It is a validated measure that was used in previous studies on assessing participants' perceptions (17). There were 10 items each on evaluating program content (e.g., such as objective, content design, and activities) and program instructor (e.g., mastery, preparation, and teaching skills). The possible responses are 1

(Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree), and 5 (Strongly agree). Further, there were 18 items on evaluating program effectiveness (e.g., enhancement on participants' social competence, self-awareness, and resilience). The possible responses are 1 (Very unhelpful), 2 (Unhelpful), 3 (Not sure), 4 (Helpful), and 5 (Very helpful). Following program effectiveness, there were 3 items also using five-point Likert scale that measure the participants' willingness in recommending the program to their peers, willingness in participating similar program from this time forward, and their contentment with the program. At last, there were 4 open-ended questions concerning the participants' program experience, including the most important thing(s) learned in the program, the things that most appreciated, comments about program instructors, and areas for improvement.

The Personal Reflection Form was used to measure participants' responses to the overall learning experience in the program. They were invited to give feedback on the program on a reflection sheet that consisted of two parts: 1) to ask participants to use three words or phrases as descriptors (e.g., interesting, boring, reflective) to describe their feelings, perceptions, and experiences of the program, and 2) to think of an object, an event, or state as metaphors that can be best described the program. (e.g., an enjoyable experience, a compass) and a brief explanation of the meaning of the metaphors they used. This method of narrating in descriptors and metaphors was effectively used in the previous studies (18, 19, 20, 21).

Data analyses

For quantitative data, there were analyses on reliability to examine the internal consistency of the subjective outcome evaluation form. Descriptive statistical analyses were performed to assess the participants' responses to the content, program instructors, program effectiveness, and perceptions of other aspects. Pearson's correlation tests were used to understand any inter-correlation coefficients between the program content, program instructors, program effectiveness, total effectiveness, and overall satisfaction.

For qualitative analysis, data of subjective outcome evaluation form and personal reflection form

were coded and categorized by an independent researcher with training in social sciences, who was blinded and had no involvement in the study. Participants' qualitative responses were categorized into 1) positive, 2) neutral, 3) negative, or 4) undecided. Coding of descriptors and metaphors of the personal reflection form was completed prior to categorization. A statement that consists of two meaningful units was separated into two independent

meaningful units, for instance, "interesting and fruitful" into "interesting" and "fruitful". Meanwhile, two statements with similar meaningful units were grouped into one meaningful unit, for instance, "funny" and "interesting" into "funny/interesting". Descriptive statistical analyses with highlights were performed to examine participants' responses to the program. Inter- and intra-rater reliability measures were computed.

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, Cronbach's alphas, and mean of inter-item correlations

Variable(s)	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha	Mean inter-item correlations
Program content (10 items)	4.24	.55	.90	.47
Program instructors (10 items)	4.33	.51	.91	.52
Program effectiveness (18 items)	4.09	.63	.96	.57
Total effectiveness (38 items)	4.19	.55	.97	.49
Overall Satisfaction (3 items)	3.93	.79	.88	.73

Results

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, and reliability analyses. The internal consistency of the subjective outcome evaluation form was high. Program instructors had the highest mean score (Mean = 4.33, SD = .51), followed by program content (Mean = 4.24, SD = .55) and total effectiveness (Mean = 4.19, SD = .55). The lowest mean score was overall satisfaction (Mean = 3.93, SD = .79). The Cronbach's alpha of program content, program instructors and program effectiveness ranged from .90 to .96. The Cronbach's alpha of total effectiveness is .97, whereas overall satisfaction is .88.

Table 2 to 5 present the results of descriptive statistical analyses. Consistent with our expectation, a significant proportion of the student participants expressed their satisfaction. The evaluation on program content received 77.6% to 98.0% of positive responses that rated agree or strongly agree. The highest percentage of positive responses were pleasant classroom atmosphere (98.0%) and a great amount of peer interaction (95.9%) (table 2). The lowest percentage of positive response on program content was the learning experience that enhanced interest in the lessons (77.6%). The evaluation of

program instructors received 75.5% to 95.9% of positive responses (Table 3). Four items on program instructors received the highest percentage of positive responses (95.9%), including good preparation, encouragement for students to participate in activities, caring for students, and much interaction with students. The lowest percentage of positive response on program instructor was the teaching skills were good (75.5%). A high proportion of student participants (71.4% to 95.9%) gave positive responses to items on program effectiveness (see Table 4). Two items exceed 90% of positive responses – cultivation for compassion and caring (95.9%) and enhancement on self-leadership ability (91.8%). The lowest percentage of positive response on program effectiveness was the program has strengthened self-confidence (71.4%). Further, as shown in table 5, there were 44 out of 49 participants (88.9%) expressed positive satisfaction with the program. More than two-thirds of the participants (77.6%) reported their willingness to recommend other peers in taking the program. A total of 65.3% of participants also expressed their willingness to enroll in similar programs in the future. In summary, they were contented with the program and certain areas of improvement will be needed.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the participants' evaluations on the program content

Your views towards the program contents:	1 Strongly disagree		2 Disagree		3 Neutral		4 Agree		5 Strongly agree		Positive responses (Options 4-5)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1. The objectives of the curriculum are very clear.	1	2.0	4	8.2	0	0.0	31	63.3	13	26.5	44	89.8
2. The design of the curriculum is very good.	1	2.0	10	20.4	0	0.0	26	53.1	12	24.5	38	77.6
3. The activities were carefully planned.	1	2.0	4	8.2	0	0.0	20	40.8	24	49.0	44	89.8
4. The classroom atmosphere was very pleasant.	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	13	26.5	35	71.4	48	98.0
5. There was much peer interaction among the students.	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	4.1	12	24.5	35	71.4	47	95.9
6. I participated actively during lessons (including discussions, sharing, games, etc.).	0	0.0	1	2.0	5	10.2	26	53.1	17	34.7	43	87.8
7. I was encouraged to do my best.	0	0.0	3	6.1	4	8.2	24	49.0	18	36.7	42	85.7
8. The learning experience I encountered enhanced my interest towards the lessons.	1	2.0	2	4.1	8	16.3	25	51.0	13	26.5	38	77.6
9. Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation of the program.	1	2.0	0	0.0	7	14.3	23	46.9	18	36.7	41	83.7
10. On the whole, I like this curriculum very much.	1	2.0	0	0.0	8	16.3	23	46.9	17	34.7	40	81.6

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the participants' evaluations of the program instructors

Your views towards the instructor(s):	1 Strongly disagree		2 Disagree		3 Neutral		4 Agree		5 Strongly agree		Positive responses (Options 4-5)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1. The instructor(s) had a good mastery of the curriculum.	1	2.0	0	0.0	5	10.2	31	63.3	12	24.5	43	87.8
2. The instructor(s) was well prepared for the lessons.	0	0.0	1	2.0	1	2.0	22	44.9	25	51.0	47	95.9
3. The instructor(s)' teaching skills were good.	1	2.0	1	2.0	10	20.4	26	53.1	11	22.4	37	75.5
4. The instructor(s) showed good professional attitudes.	0	0.0	2	4.1	5	10.2	25	51.0	17	34.7	42	85.7
5. The instructor(s) was very involved.	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	6.1	24	49.0	22	44.9	46	93.9
6. The instructor(s) encouraged students to participate in the activities.	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	4.1	17	34.7	30	61.2	47	95.9
7. The instructor(s) cared for the students.	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	4.1	19	38.8	28	57.1	47	95.9
8. The instructor(s) was ready to offer help to students when needed.	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	6.1	23	46.9	23	46.9	46	93.9
9. The instructor(s) had much interaction with the students.	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	4.1	25	51.0	22	44.9	47	95.9
10. Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation of the instructors.	1	2.0	0	0.0	3	6.1	22	44.9	23	46.9	45	91.8

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the participants' evaluations of the program effectiveness

The extent to which the program has helped you:	1 Very unhelpful		2 Unhelpful		3 Not sure		4 Helpful		5 Very helpful		Positive responses (Options 4-5)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1. It has enhanced my social competence.	1	2.0	1	2.0	3	6.1	29	59.2	15	30.6	44	89.8
2. It has improved my ability in expressing and handling my emotions.	0	0.0	2	4.1	6	12.2	25	51.0	16	32.7	41	83.7
3. It has enhanced my critical thinking.	1	2.0	2	4.1	7	14.3	26	53.1	13	26.5	39	79.6
4. It has increased my competence in making sensible and wise choices.	1	2.0	1	2.0	8	16.3	25	51.0	14	28.6	39	79.6
5. It has helped me make ethical decisions.	2	4.1	0	0.0	3	6.1	27	55.1	17	34.7	44	89.8
6. It has strengthened my resilience in adverse conditions.	1	2.0	0	0.0	11	22.4	24	49.0	13	26.5	37	75.5
7. It has strengthened my self-confidence.	1	2.0	2	4.1	11	22.4	19	38.8	16	32.7	35	71.4
8. It has helped me face the future with a positive attitude.	1	2.0	0	0.0	6	12.2	22	44.9	20	40.8	42	85.7
9. It has enhanced my love for life.	1	2.0	1	2.0	11	22.4	23	46.9	13	26.5	36	73.5
10. It has helped me explore the meaning of life.	1	2.0	2	4.1	8	16.3	23	46.9	15	30.6	38	77.6
11. It has enhanced my ability of self-leadership.	1	2.0	0	0.0	3	6.1	31	63.3	14	28.6	45	91.8
12. It has helped me cultivate compassion and care for others.	1	2.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	28	57.1	19	38.8	47	95.9
13. It has helped me enhance my character strengths comprehensively.	1	2.0	1	2.0	6	12.2	27	55.1	14	28.6	41	83.7
14. It has enabled me to understand the importance of	1	2.0	0	0.0	4	8.2	29	59.2	15	30.6	44	89.8
15. It has promoted my sense of responsibility in serving the society.	0	0.0	2	4.1	3	6.1	24	49.0	20	40.8	44	89.8
16. It has promoted my overall development.	1	2.0	0	0.0	7	14.3	29	59.2	12	24.5	41	83.7
17. The theories, research and concepts covered in the program have enabled me to understand the characteristics of successful service leaders.	1	2.0	0	0.0	7	14.3	27	55.1	14	28.6	41	83.7
18. The theories, research and concepts covered in the program have helped me synthesize the characteristics of successful service leaders.	1	2.0	1	2.0	6	12.2	26	53.1	15	30.6	41	83.7

Table 5. Summary of the participants' positive perceptions of other aspects

Item(s)	Positive responses (Options 4-5)	
	<i>n</i>	%
1. Will you suggest your friends to take this program? ^a	38	77.6
2. Will you participate in similar programs again in the future? ^a	32	65.3
3. On the whole, are you satisfied with this program? ^b	44	89.8

Note:

^a 1 = Definitely will not, 2 = Will not, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Will, 5 = Definitely will.^b 1 = Very dissatisfied, 2 = Moderately dissatisfied, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Satisfied, 5 = Very satisfied.

Table 6. Pearson correlations among program content, program instructors, and program effectiveness

Variable(s)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Program content (10 items)	-				
2. Program instructors (10 items)	.81***	-			
3. Program effectiveness (18 items)	.86***	.81***	-		
4. Total effectiveness	.94***	.90***	.97***	-	
5. Overall Satisfaction	.78***	.72***	.76***	.80***	-

Note: *** $p < .001$.

Table 7. Summary of students' written comments on the program

Item(s)	Positive responses	Total responses	Percentage (%)	Highlights
1. The most important thing(s) learned in the program	45	49	91.8	<p>"Respect. Be humble to learn from different people. Serve before leading."</p> <p>"I learned how to care about others"</p> <p>"Different people have different angles; and other classmates/ opinions force me to think critically more."</p>
2. The things that appreciated most in the program	48	49	98.0	<p>"The interactive atmosphere in the classroom, warm up activity also create a good atmosphere"</p> <p>"Instructors always give us many time to share our opinions, to play interactive games and to reflect what we've learnt in the class."</p> <p>"There are a lot of interactions within the students and also with the tutors. "</p>
3. Comments on the instructor(s)	29	49	59.2	<p>"Very good activity planning, meaningful and interesting"</p> <p>"Patient and loving; very professional and caring"</p> <p>"The instructors show a strong sense of caring disposition. She presents the content very well with passion. Listening to their sharing is indeed meaningful."</p>
4. Areas for improvement	43	49	87.8	<p>"The program can be taught with more academic way and more example of real cases about leadership."</p> <p>"More discussion with other groups may be better for us to make new friends and gain more great ideas."</p> <p>"More thorough explanations on theories or practical usages."</p>

Table 6 shows the Pearson correlation analyses. As predicted, significant correlation coefficients were observed in program content, program instructors, program effectiveness, total effectiveness, and overall satisfaction. Both program content ($r = .86$, $p < .001$) and program instructors ($r = .81$, $p < .001$) were positively correlated with program effectiveness. Meanwhile, there was a significant positive correlation between program content and program instructors ($r = .81$, $p < .001$). Total effectiveness also showed a significantly positive correlation with program content ($r = .94$, $p < .001$), program instructors ($r = .90$, $p < .001$), and program effectiveness ($r = .97$, $p < .001$). Regarding overall satisfaction, significant positive correlation was observed with program con-

tent ($r = .78$, $p < .001$), program instructors ($r = .72$, $p < .001$), program effectiveness ($r = .76$, $p < .001$), and total effectiveness ($r = .80$, $p < .001$). To conclude, participants' evaluation on different aspects of the program appeared to be consistent and strongly inter-correlated.

Table 7 summarizes the participants' written comments on the program. A total of 91.8% of participants expressed positive responses to the most important things that they learned in the program, a finding which supports our expectation. For instance, one of the students commented that "Respect. Be humble to learn from different people. Serve before leading.", while another student commented, "Different people have different angles, and other classmates/ opinions

force me to think critically more”. In regards to the things that participants most appreciated in the program, 98% of the respondents expressed their appreciation, with 48 out of 49 participants rated positive responses. The quotes were “Instructors always give us much time to share our opinions, to play interactive games and to reflect what we’ve learned in the class.” and “There are a lot of interactions within the students and also with the tutors.” Meanwhile, 59.2% of the participants commented positively on the program instructors. They described the instructors as “a strong

sense of caring disposition. She presents the content very well with passion. Listening to their sharing is indeed meaningful” and “patient and loving; very professional and caring”. When asking for areas of improvement, there were 87.8% of the participants expressed their views, such as “can be taught with more academic way and more example of real cases about leadership”, “more discussion with other groups may be better for us to make new friends and gain more ideas”, and “more thorough explanations on theories or practical usages.”

Table 8. Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the program

Descriptor(s)	Nature of the response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Fun/funny/interesting/enjoyable/exciting/happy/pleasant/satisfying/cheerful/warm/encouraging/active/energetic/optimistic	35				
Beneficial/benefits of personal all round development/helpful/help me to reflect/help me to understand/help to learn myself better/helpful for finding the meaning of my life/helpful in leadership-learning/helpful to let me interact more with my groupmate/helpful to my character development/helpful to my development/helpful to understand others/useful/useful to my social work discipline	20				
Meaningful/meaningful for me to think more/meaningful for my life	10				
Inspiration/inspirational/inspiring/inspiring new ideas/very inspiring in the end	9				
Reflective/have time for reflection/contemplative/provoking/think-provoking/thought provoking	9				
Fruitful/ fruitful program/full contents/diversified	5				
Interactive/interactive design for many sharing/full of interaction/very very very interactive for the activities and the sharing of students	5				
Informational/informative/intensive	4				
Novel/novel and different from normal program/unusual/different from any other programs I took before	4				
Unforgettable/impressing	4				
Better understanding of each other/building friendships	2				
Good learning opportunity/learn much	2				
Turn over a new leaf/morphing	2				
Well-organized	2				
Other positive responses	22				
Development		1			
Challenge		1			
Love		1			
Time-consuming/sometimes a little bit slow in path/ kind of slow			3		
Sometimes boring/boring at the beginning/ tired			3		
A bit aesthetic/too abstract			2		
A little noisy actually			1		
Less knowledge part will be better			1		
Total Count (N):	135	3	10	0	148
Total Count (%):	91.2%	2.0%	6.8%	0.0%	100.0%

Note: Other positive responses included the positive descriptors once or twice.

Table 9. Categorization of the metaphors used by the participants to describe the program

Metaphor(s)	Nature of the metaphor					Number of codes derived from the metaphor and its nature				
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	Total	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	Total
A sour candy/candy/dark chocolate/pizza/smarties	5					12	1	2		
A window/an open door/key/the key to a new door	5					11		1		
Beacon/beacon light/flash light/light	5					5		1		
A novel trip/an enjoyable tour/an excursion to an old place/navigator/crossroad	5					10				
A big green tree/tree/a seed/fertilizer	4					6				
Book/an English book/dictionary	3					4	1	1		
Friend/a big party/a warm home	3					9	1			
A compass/compass in life	2					7				
A ripple/water surface	2					1	1			
Symphony/a comedy	2					6	1			
The head of fleet/a boat	2					3	1			
Other positive responses (e.g. butterfly, gas station, internet, mirror)	9					16	1	3	1	
Total Count (N):	47	0	0	0	47	90	7	8	1	106
Total Count (%):	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	84.9%	6.6%	7.6%	0.9%	100.0%

Note: Other positive responses included the positive metaphors reported once or twice.

Table 8 presents the categorization of descriptors that were used by the student participants to express their description of the program. A total of 148 descriptors were found, with 91.2% (n = 135) were positive, 2.0% (n = 3) were neutral, and 6.8% (n = 10) were negative. The two positive responses that most frequently bought up by the participants were “funny/interesting/enjoyable/satisfying” (n = 35) or “beneficial/helpful/useful” (n = 20). Other noticeable and positive descriptors were “meaningful” (n = 10), “inspiring” (n = 9), “reflective” (n = 9), “fruitful” (n = 5), and “interactive” (n = 5). Three neutral descriptors were identified, including “development” (n = 1), “challenge” (n = 1), and “love” (n = 1). Negative descriptors were “time-consuming/slow in path” (n = 3), “boring” (n = 3), “too abstract” (n = 2), “a little noisy” (n = 1), and “less knowledge part will be better” (n = 1).

Table 9 is the categorization of metaphors that were used to describe their views on the program and codes that were derived from those metaphors. There were 47 metaphors identified and 106 meaningful codes derived. All the metaphors were positive in nature (100%), such as “candy/chocolate” (n = 5),

“window/key” (n = 5), “beacon light/flashlight”

(n = 5), or “tour/excursion” (n = 5). The nature of the metaphors was also categorized into meaningful pieces and codes. The codes derived from those metaphors were 84.9% positive (n = 90), 6.6% neutral (n = 7), 7.6% negative (n = 8), and 0.9% undecided (n = 1). The examples are as follows:

- Candy/chocolate: “The program is sweet and touch and I met a lot of interested persons in several days.”; “If you pay focus, you will find something useful. Like the sweet taste after a bar of dark chocolate.”
- Window/key: “It helps me to understand myself better and reminds the significant values and qualities to become a service leader. And, it encourages me to be more active and brave to speak out your mind in public”; “It’s hard for me to meet so many new friends from Hong Kong (PolyU) and Peking U and have such a long-term trip with them. This course is just like a key and help

me open a new door for leadership-learning and so many interesting friends.”

- Light/flashlight: “I learn a lot in this program and the program is very different and it is full of energy and fun.” “The course provides a platform that makes it a lot easier for me to understand it in a new way and it is like a flashlight to make my path clearer and brighter.”
- Tour/excursion: “I know more and think more about myself. I have met some interesting friends I have gained lots of fun through the class and game.”; “I have learned some of the knowledge and skills in this course and I am really thankful to know and recall the knowledge that strengthens my skills that can actually replenish the missing part of the previous course.”

Discussion

Considering the SOAR Youth Leadership Program in the 2017-2018 academic year is a non-credit-bearing program, the enrollment of the participants evidently illustrates the potential upsides and the value of this program. In summary, the findings indicated that the program supported the hypothesis of positive and strong influence in promoting leadership skills and competence for our university students. The findings are consistent with past studies that examined similar program in both scale and sub-scale with good reliability (9, 10).

From the descriptive statistical analyses, the findings presented a significant percentage of the students expressed encouraging responses with the program content, program instructors, and program effectiveness. It reinforced the effectiveness of the SOAR Youth Leadership Program. The results of Pearson's correlation analyses also supported that there were significant positive correlations among program content, program instructors, program effectiveness, total effectiveness, and overall satisfaction. The findings of both positive responses and significant positive correlations may further provide evidence of the successful recognition of the program.

The qualitative component of the research echoed the quantitative phase of research, showing positive

responses to the program effectiveness. The comments written by the participants indicated that they learned the important elements of a good leader, such as “respect,” “willing to serve,” “empathy,” and “self-reflection.” Many of them expressed the appreciation and described the program as “interactive” rather than the labeling of “inflexible” and “boring” lectures. More than half of the participants also rated positive for the instructors, with the description of “caring” and “patient and loving”. The participants also provided constructive feedback on future planning and implementation, such as “more example of real cases about leadership” and “more thorough explanations on theories or practical usage”. In line with the quantitative phase, subjective outcome evaluation form captured positive evaluation on the effectiveness and satisfaction with the SOAR Youth Leadership Program in the 2017-2018 academic year.

The data derived from personal reflection form also generated qualitative data that worth investigating more in-depth evidence of the effectiveness and outcome of the program. With over 90% of the descriptors given by the participants were categorized as positive responses, the most commonly used descriptors were “funny/interesting” and “beneficial/helpful/useful.” The results were very encouraging and promising. The results also revealed that the program was not only about having a “pleasant” experience but also providing opportunities to think more about “meaningful” for their lives. If looking into the negative descriptors, we could still find a certain percentage of the participants think that the program was “boring” and “slow.” It is important that the program implementation can be frequently reviewed to ensure that the elements of the program are meeting the needs of the students as much as possible and making necessary age- and gender-specific adjustments. Besides, the metaphors used by the participants in this study also showed great similarities in a previous study (19). The students in both studies described the program as “candy,” opened a “window/door,” guided by “beacon” or “compass,” had a “journey,” fertilized as a “tree,” or read a “book.” The implication of the metaphors resonated with the descriptors.

There are several strengths of the study. First, the results of reliability analyses showed that the internal consistency was high, which indicates a reliable

measure of the subjective outcome evaluation form. Second, the study adopted a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The results of using both analyses provided a more detailed view of the participants towards the program and increased reliability and credibility. Third, this is a continuous program that targeted at promoting positive youth development program of the Global Youth Leadership Institute. The results of the SOAR Youth Leadership Program in the 2017-2018 academic year echoed with studies that were examined in previous years. Such consistencies made the effectiveness of this program more conclusive. Finally, the results of the study allowed the program instructors to make corresponding adjustments that were reflected from the participants' feedback and to contribute to the future planning and implementation of similar programs.

The study also has several limitations. First, as only program instructors, program content and program effectiveness were being evaluated, future studies should consider bringing in other aspects of the program for evaluation, such as administrative arrangement, program engagement, and duration for discussions. Second, the subjective outcome evaluation part can be hugely affected by a person's subjective impression. Third, the study only examined the student participants' perceptions of the program. It could be meaningful to also measure the perceptions of other stakeholders, such as program instructors, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interactions.

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Ethical compliance

The authors have stated all possible conflicts of interest within this work. The authors have stated

all sources of funding for this work. If this work involved human participants, informed consent was received from each individual. If this work involved human participants, it was conducted in accordance with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. If this work involved experiments with humans or animals, it was conducted in accordance with the related institutions' research ethics guidelines.

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