

Development of a Framework for Teaching Resilience at the Individual and Organizational Level to Business Students

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Abstract

Managing environments that are exposed to fast pace changes has become a challenge and a requirement to sustain business health, making organizational resilience an increasingly important characteristic for corporations. At the same time, personal resilience and adaptability became important abilities demanded for the market today. The objective of this study is to develop a framework based on literature to bring personal development classes to the curriculum while keeping a strong connection with the business scenario. The topic of resilience was chosen due to high demand from the market, as well as the variety of personal attributes involved which opens the opportunity to develop a strong skills set. The program allows the students to learn soft skills and at the same time apply them to business practices. This is an exploratory study to identify initial perceptions, difficulties, and the level of absorption of the content and receptivity by the students. The proposed course has a structure containing a set of concepts, mindsets and techniques divided in 4 modules: Clarity, Energy Management, Problem Solving and Connection. Overall, the course was well accepted and embraced by the students. The results indicated a self-perception of increased resilience among the participants, together with a good receptivity for personal development topics in the curriculum.

Keywords: resilience, personal development, business education, soft skills.

1. Introduction

Managing environments that are exposed to fast pace changes has become a challenge and a requirement to sustain business health. However, this is a field still in early stages of construction, and the high amount of different perspectives and definitions impact its effective application and research (Ho et.al. 2014).

Debate over the development of personal resilience has been around for many years, with theories ranging from resilience as an innate ability to one that is learned, while others point to a combination of both (Ginsburg & Jablow, 2006; Jacelon, 1997, Pidgeon, et. al, 2015). Research suggests that some individuals have innate resilience, while others have learned through experience and learning (Pidgeon et. al, 2015).

Dean Robb (2013) on his model for a resilient organization, highlights that “ongoing equilibration of individuals and of human systems is an integrated gestalt — the two processes are inescapably interdependent and intertwined.” Robb envisioned a human system in which system-level and individual-level development are embraced and regarded as co-equal and inseparable. For an organization to be resilient, it needs people who can respond quickly and effectively to change while enduring minimal stress (Mallak, 1998).

Based on the proposal of the strong correlation between an organization showing resilient behaviour, and the people that are part of that business acting resilient on a personal level, this study aims to explore the construction of a framework to develop business students' knowledge and practice in both sides of this spectrum.

1.1 Soft skills in higher education

The importance of soft skills in the preparation for the future of work is becoming more accepted. Today hard skills and experience are not sufficient enough for the ingress and escalation in the corporate world (John, 2009). In current hiring processes, recruiters may prioritize a candidate with more developed soft skills over someone with technical skills (Robles, 2012; Russell, Russell, & Tastle, 2005; Anthony & Garner, 2016).

There is not a globally accepted definition of soft skills, and different disciplines, sectors and countries may define it according to their own needs (Kechagias, 2011). Regardless of this difficulty, the importance of including soft skills in higher education programs can be perceived clearly (Tevdovska, 2015). Soft skills training can include a vast amount of different skills, like assertiveness, negotiation, communication and the ability to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships (John, 2009). According to the Future of Job Report 2020 from the Economic World Forum, resilience is showing and increasing demand from the market, and is expected to be between the top ten skills needed for 2025.

1.2 Personal Resilience

Resilience at the individual level gained different definitions over the years, such as the “individual’s ability to bounce back, learn from, and move forward after a failure or setback” (Walker et.al, 2019), or “a process of moving forward and not returning back” given by Rachel Yehuda (Stephenson et al., 2010). More recently Nassim Taleb (2012) proposed a slight shift in the concept bringing the idea of antifragility, meaning the ability of people to not just bounce back, but become stronger.

Human behaviour involved in resilience has also gained different perspectives, and researchers have proposed a variety of models to describe the main characteristics of a resilient person. Antonovsky described the Sense of Coherence (SOC) theory in the 1970s, representing the way of seeing life and the ability to successfully manage stressors. The SOC has three components: comprehensibility which is the act of seeing the stressor as structured and clear; manageability, which is the perception of having adequate resources to overcome; and meaningfulness, which is the feeling of life making sense emotionally. (Sardu et. al., 2012). Kobasa in the early 1980s, by studying managers reactions towards stress, identified three productive attitudes: commitment, which is the predisposition to be involved with people; control, referring to the influence on the surrounding outcomes rather than showing passivity; and challenge, meaning wanting to continuously learn from any experience (positive or negative) (Maddi, 2002). The BASIC Ph Model proposed by Lahad et.al (2012) brings the idea that each one of us show a unique coping style with a combination of 6 channels, fully or partially developed: belief (core values), affect (feeling or emotions), social (people connections), imagination (creativity), cognition (problem solving), physiology (physical activities) (Harari, 2015). Another recent model is proposed by Linda Hoopes (n.d) that suggests seven characteristics of resilience: positivity, confidence, priorities, creativity, connection, structure and experimentation.

By evaluating the different theories of personal resilience, it can be noticed a similarity in many characteristics identified, with sometimes different terms being used. For example what Antonovsky called manageability is similar to what Kobasa called control, to what the BASIC Ph Model calls cognition, and to what Linda Hoopes identified inside confidence and structure. For the proposed framework used in this study, a combination of these different theories and terms will be used.

1.3 Training and developing Resilience

There are two schools of thought related to teaching ‘soft skills’ (Moore, 2004; Kechagias, 2011). The generalists believe that soft skills are generic and should be taught in any discipline. The specificists believe that these skills need a context of their own in specific disciplines to be developed (Kechagias, 2011).

Some researchers proposed a generalist model to develop resilience in students, such as Walker et.al. (2019) bringing the use of classroom simulations that contain ambiguity and uncertainty making students deal with failure and improve their results. Berg & Carson (2020) suggests four general steps to be considered and applied in the classroom: Accept that failure happens to everyone, lean in to the emotions, elect a positive response, X-Ray or be transparent.

In contrast, many studies with experimentation of specific resilience development programs in the classroom or in the workplace can also be found in literature. Lioussis et al. (2009) suggests a training in six steps: Strengths and Resilience, Cool and Calm, Challenging and Changing Self-talk, Problem Solving Work-life Problems, Preventing and Managing Conflict, and Bringing it Together. Abbott et al. (2009) evaluated the efficacy of an online training program for sales managers that consisted of seven components: emotion regulation, impulse control, optimism, causal analysis, empathy, self-efficacy and reaching out. Coaching practices have also been tested to increase resilience and well-being of grad students and executives (Grant et al. 2009 and Fried et al. 2019).

Many training programs consider the use of mindfulness exercises to improve resilience. Keye & Pidgeon (2013) found mindfulness and academic performance as predictors of resilience. The MARST program targeted core aspects of mindfulness, resilience and positive reappraisal. (Pidgeon et. al, 2015). The CARE program applied a framework to develop resilience in teachers using emotion skills instruction, mindful awareness practices, and compassion building activities (Jennings et al., 2013).

Magnano et al. (2016) found a correlation between emotional intelligence (EI) and resilience, suggesting that programs focused on developing EI should also result in improvements in resilience. Coura and Granon (2018) studied a methodology called DeROSE Method which brings a combination of techniques that act in the physiology (such as mindfulness, meditation and breathing), and concepts that act on the behavioural aspect. They evaluated the impacts of this program on emotional intelligence, mental performance, brain activity, quality of life and self-awareness finding improved results on participants.

1.4 Organizational Resilience

In the context of organizations fewer work has been done, and according to McManus et al. (2007) there is still no consensus regarding what resilience means for this field, and how to take an organization to greater resilience in the face of increasing threats. A resilient organization

must design and implement effective actions increasing the probability of its own survival. (Mallak, 1998)

A framework developed by McManus et al. (2007) defines resilience of an organization as function of situation awareness, management of keystone vulnerabilities and adaptive capacity in a complex, dynamic and interconnected environment. This framework was applied in different contexts such as measuring resilience (Stephenson et al., 2010 and Lee et al., 2013), developing strategies (Seville et al., 2008), assessing and improving resilience management (McManus et al., 2008).

Dean Robb's (2013) work brings a strong influence of people's behaviours and skills into a company's longevity. He suggests that the resilience of an organization can be achieved by creating two subsystems: the performance system containing structures focused on current goals and tasks, and the adaptation system focusing on long-term sustainability generating alternative paths, ideas, operational and behavioural norms to overcome challenges. Both are linked together through a foundation of architecture, skills and culture.

As there is still a lack of deeper understanding of the mechanisms involved and the best strategies to secure a resilient behaviour of organizations, this will be used as an opportunity for the students to explore their own views on the topic. Based on past knowledge from previous business courses such as crisis management, organizational behaviour, strategic management and others, adding the new knowledge from the course on personal and organizational resilience theories, students will be expected to create their own model of a resilient organization.

1.5 Course Framework

The objective of the proposed course is to bring a personal development class while keeping a strong link with the business world, by making a direct connection to organizational management. The program allows the students to learn soft skills and at the same time understand and apply the same concepts to business practices. The topic of resilience was chosen due to high demand from the market, as well as the variety of personal attributes involved which opens the opportunity to develop a strong skills set. Based on literature research around personal and organizational resilience, as well as training for resilience, the proposed course has a structure containing a set of concepts, mindsets and techniques divided in 4 modules: Clarity, Energy Management, Problem Solving and Connection.

1.5.1. Clarity

The first module aims to prepare the participants to understand their process of thinking (conscious and unconscious mechanisms), their mental models, learning to challenge and develop new ones by applying intense critical thinking. The technique applied to this module was mindfulness. As shown in the literature review, there are studies correlating this practice to improved resilience. This first part also contained theory and exercise on finding personal purpose, providing a baseline for the student to set their right priorities in life.

1.5.2. Energy Management

The second module relates to how we manage our energy (physically and emotionally). The course had a big focus on the emotional management aspect as highlighted by different individual resilience models, as well as a strong correlation found between emotional intelligence and resilience by Magnano et al. (2016). The technique related to this model was

breathing exercises, as discoveries show the effects of breathing rhythms in emotional states (Philippot et al., 2002). This part also contained different strategies of managing emotions such as positivity, reappraisal and channelling.

1.5.3. Problem Solving

The third module contained theories and methods related to problem solving, as it relates to increasing the students' self confidence in their abilities to face complex and hard situations. The aim of this section was not to teach detailed problem solving methods, but rather to discuss the different approaches, mainly trial and error and structured methods, knowing when and how to use each with a productive mindset. The technique used for this section was meditation, as some studies show its potential impacts on creativity (Ding et al., 2014; Müller et al., 2016; Horan, R., 2009).

1.5.4. Connection

The role of social connections are present in many of the resilience models and training described in the literature review. The fourth module relates to the social intelligence aspect, bringing the idea of interdependency and the importance of having supportive structures. The techniques learned in this section were active listening and assertive communication, also including the mindsets of collaboration and empathy.

A summary of each module with their content, mindsets and techniques are shown in Tab.1.

Table 1: Summary of the proposed course.

Clarity	Mental Models	Identify Beliefs and Paradigms, Neuroscience of attention
		Technique: mindfulness
	Mindsets: Critical thinking, challenge mental models	
Purpose	Leading with Purpose	
	Technique: identify personal purpose	
Energy Management	Emotions management	The science of emotions
		Technique: Breathing
		Mindsets: Reappraisal, Channel emotions, Positivity
Problem Solving	Methods	Trial and error vs Structured methods
		Technique: meditation
		Mindsets: Learn from failure, adaptation and flexibility, proactivity, intuition
Connections	Building Relationships	Interdependency
		Technique: active listening, assertive communication
		Mindsets: Empathy, collaboration

This is an exploratory study to identify initial perceptions, difficulties, and the level of absorption of the content and receptivity by the students. The questions that will be further explored through this research are:

- Will the application of the framework increase personal resilience of the students?

- Will the students be able to extend and translate the concepts of personal resilience to the organizational context?
- What will be the level of receptivity and implementation of the techniques learned by the students in their lives?

2. Methodology

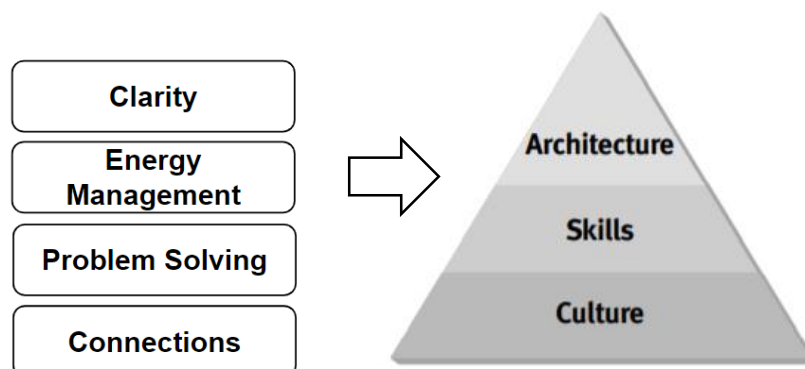
The study started by first conducting a literature review on the topics of personal resilience, training and measuring it, as well as organizational resilience. Based on the findings, a course called “The Resilient Organization” was added to the curriculum as a sector specialization for all International Management students in their last year (semesters 5 and 6). The class had a total of 21 students, and it was taken during a full semester that encompasses one class per week, adding to a total of 12 sessions of 1.5 hours each.

Due to the COVID 19 pandemics, the classes went through changes close to the middle of the semester. It started with a hybrid format, with 10 students present in the classroom, 9 joining online and 2 as asynchronous watching the recordings of the class. With the lockdown imposed by the government, after 2 months the classes changed to online format for all students.

The school has a project based learning approach, and students' final grade for this course consisted of 50% from their participation and 50% from a final project. The participation grade was evaluated through their active participation in class discussions, activities, punctuality and through weekly homework.

The final project contained specific characteristics that allowed the students to practice and develop resilience. It consisted of a group work to develop their own model of a resilient organization, based on the outline shown in Figure 1. Students started the project development after the first module was finished (Clarity), and through brainstorming sessions created ideas that translated the characteristics learned in class into what they would represent for an organization. For example, having a purpose is an important characteristic of a resilient person, and that can be translated into an organization having their clear vision and mission, as well as hiring employees aligned with that. Based on Dean Robb's framework (2013) students identified needs in architecture, skills and culture that would affect the resilience of a business. After each module, a new brainstorming session specific to the new topic was done. As much as it has been provided expectations for the project based on a rubric, the information given left room for uncertainty, providing space for creativity and problem solving skills.

Figure 1: Final Project outline, correlating the course modules with Dean Robb's framework of a resilient organization (2013).



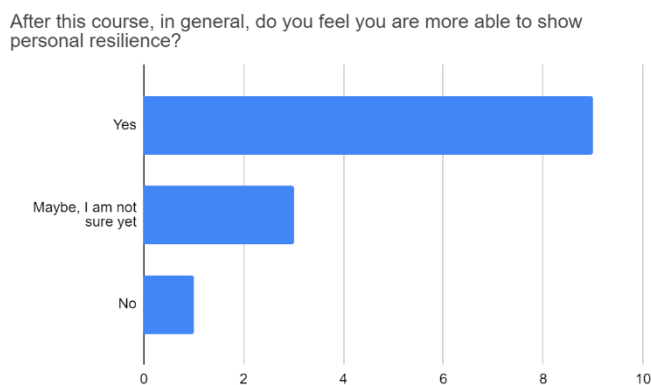
Different teaching methods and a combination of them were used for the sessions such as group discussions and activities, individual reflections and exercises, formal lectures, videos, group problem solving activities, scientific papers reading and guest speakers. All the techniques were practiced during their specific class and the mindfulness exercises were included in the beginning of every class.

After the end of the course, a non-mandatory survey containing six questions was shared with the students. Through the questions, students reflected on their self-perceptions of the impacts on their personal resilience, the main concepts learned, the ability to translate the learnings into the organizational context, the level of implementation of the techniques and their receptivity towards the course. The personal written assignments throughout the semester and the final project results also provided qualitative data to answer the research questions.

3. Findings

As the survey was not a mandatory assignment, 13 participants provided responses. Figure 2 shows the results of the question referring to students' perceptions on the improvement of their own individual resilience. The majority of the responses (9 students representing 69.2%) agreed to have felt an increase in the ability to show more personal resilience. Only 1 person (7.7%) did not feel improvements, and 3 (23.1%) were still not sure of the results.

Figure 2: Students self-assessment on their perceptions of improved individual resilience.

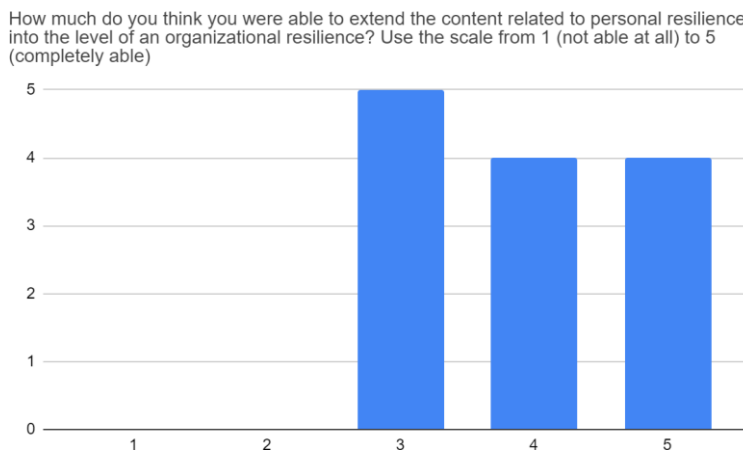


This data shows an indication of a potential development of student's resilience, although still merely qualitative and based on self-perception.

The evaluation of the process of translating the individual resilience concepts into the organizational level is shown in Figure 3. Students rated their own ability to take the topics learned to a business context. Although the results do not indicate a low level of this ability, a mix of perceptions was found, with 38.5% of the respondents choosing the middle of the scale, 30.8% selecting the maximum level of ability, and 30.8% between those two levels. This behaviour was identified throughout the course, as in the first brainstorming sessions (part of their final project), many students showed difficulties and shared worries. Dealing with uncertainty was part of the objective of the final project, and this situation was taken as an

opportunity to discuss and learn critical thinking and problem solving skills. It was also noticed that some students had no difficulties with the sessions, being able to easily translate the topics into the organizational context. There could be different reasons for this situation, for example some students have more practical experience with internships or managing family businesses, which gives them more knowledge about how a company works in reality. Another reason could be that the level of uncertainty within the final project generated insecurities about their own abilities, although the results delivered in the final project showed a higher ability than their perceptions. As these difficulties were noticed, the course plan was adjusted to include more in class activities related specific to resilience organizations with the support of the professor, as well as adding homework with readings about the topic. This result points to the need of finding new and more creative resources for bringing this complex topic, such as guest speakers, educational videos, visits to companies or innovative class activities. Further investigation is needed to better understand the reasons behind the student's difficulties with this matter to find improvements on the teaching methods for this course.

Figure 3: Ability to translate individual resilience into the context of an organization management.

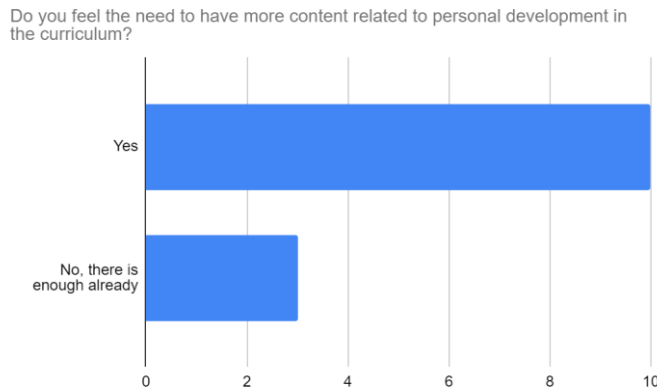


To evaluate the receptivity of the students to a course with a strong focus on personal development skills, it was asked their opinion about the need to have more content of this matter in their educational curriculum. Results in Figure 4 show that from all the respondents, 3 students (23.1%) shared their opinion that there was enough already, and the majority, 10 students (76.9%) indicated that they feel the need to have more of this knowledge in their studies. In some of the written assignments other specific feedback regarding receptivity was identified such as: “I think that these things should be taught from kindergarten onto our continuous education path”, and “I think your classes are very interesting and insightful.” In an open question in the survey conducted it was also identified messages showing the receptivity such as “I believe this course has added a lot to my development as an individual as well as a professional”, or simple statements such as “I liked it” and “Overall a good course”.

The study plan of each major in the school is in constant evolution, and it has other courses that bring some aspects of personal development such as leadership, teamwork, and others, as well as parallel programs with guest speakers focused on these topics and mindfulness sessions. The

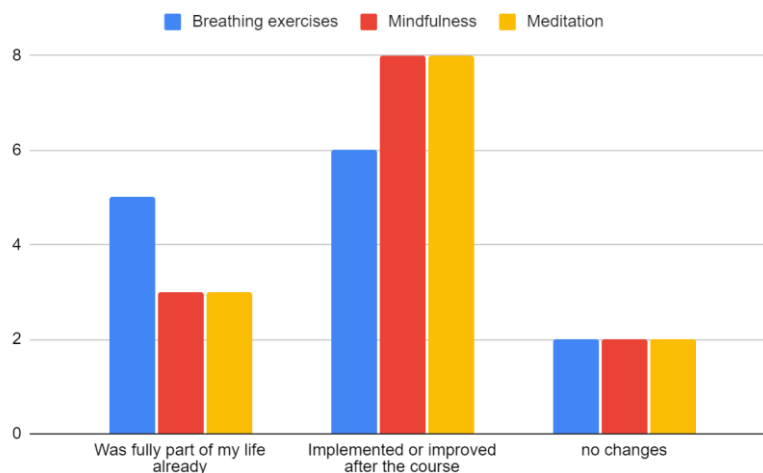
indication from the students of a good receptivity for personal development, points to a need to better structure this content throughout the whole curriculum.

Figure 4: Perceived importance of personal development courses in business education curriculum.



Another objective of this study was to evaluate the level of implementation of the techniques learned, since they were optional and demand personal efforts to change habits. The techniques act on the physiology, providing a base to be able to apply different strategies of emotional intelligence and problem solving, but results are achieved only through constant practice. Figure 5 shows results for the breathing exercises, mindfulness and meditation. It was decided to not include a question related to the last module about connection and the techniques of active listening and assertive communication. Due to the adjustments done in the course during the semester, there was a lack of time to cover the last module well and students did not have enough practice of these two techniques. Respondents indicated for each technique if it was already part of their habits before the course in a full mode, if they had implemented or improved (meaning it was partially part of their lives but the course helped to improve it), or not implemented at all.

Figure 5: Level of implementation of the techniques in students' lives.



All three techniques evaluated showed similar results, with more participants identifying as having implemented or improved it, also a good amount stating it was already part of their lives, and fewer indicating no changes. It is interesting to note that there were a variety of answers, and not the same people indicated that nothing was implemented. All the respondents identified at least one technique either improved or implemented after the course. I would like to reiterate that these data are purely qualitative and based on self-assessments, leaving room for different interpretations of each respondent. To better evaluate this topic, other methods should be conducted in the future, such as implementing exercises for all techniques in every class, including journal assignments for the students to register their activities, and others.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to propose and apply a framework focused on bringing the concept of resilience to business education. By developing a set of personal soft skills involved in acting resilient, students can self-develop and at the same time deepen their knowledge on how corporations work. Overall, the course was well accepted and embraced by the students. The results indicated a self-perception of increased resilience among the participants, together with a good receptivity for personal development topics in the curriculum. The final survey also showed a good level of implementation of the techniques of breathing, mindfulness and meditation learned during class. These techniques have effects on the physiology of the person, and its effectiveness is highly associated with continuous practice and discipline. It is recommended that the school offers complementary programs external to this course offering alternatives to maintain the motivation and new habits of the students.

Results also showed difficulties faced by the students in translating the concepts to the organizational context, demanding an improvement in the methodology used for this objective. Part of this issue could be related to the uncertainty kept for this project, creating an environment that can be uncomfortable but that allows the students to apply what they have learned, such as managing emotions and problem solving skills. The group that had the highest grade was also the one that showed more concerns during the semester and asked more clarification questions. It may be their perception that it was a difficult task, but at the same time they were able to accomplish it well. Nevertheless, there are other reasons that may have impacted this opinion, such as the different level of knowledge from previous courses and experiences. It is suggested as a next step to further investigate and implement different strategies to accelerate this learning process, as the issues ended up affecting available time to other important content planned. The total of 18 hours for this course should be sufficient with some reviews in activities and assignments. It is recommended to create a safe and accepting environment for in class activities and open discussions, to use different methods for introverts to also contribute such as written assignments to share opinions, use of journals for self-reflection, and have guest speakers.

Resilience is a combination of skills to be built over time, and we believe the importance of starting this development early so that the students arrive better prepared for the professional market that is dynamic and in constant evolution. This study proposes a model that involves the development of different soft skills needed for the future leaders, while keeping a strong connection with business concepts.

5. Limitations

This study is intended to have an exploratory focus, using qualitative analysis only, and the results do not reflect a representative population. It has the objective of gathering first perceptions and detecting possible difficulties with the framework proposed. All the data collected from the survey represent self-assessments, and it is submitted to personal bias and limitations to self-perception. The investigation also did not impose any collection of personal information regarding overall life experiences that could have affected students' resilience or another result.

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