DEVELOPMENT OF LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN WORKING LIFE PROJECTS

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One of the main missions of universities is to train future working life experts and leaders. Professional leadership skills are not learned only by reading theories but also by practicing leadership in real life situations and with team members. Modern leadership skills include self-confidence, courage, communication skills, creativity, innovative and solution-oriented thinking, resilience, openness to change, appreciation and respect.

Laurea University of Applied Sciences (LUAS) has developed a unique project learning model, called Peer to Peer (P2P), where students practice leadership and project management skills by leading teams in real working life assignments and in business development projects. P2P is based on Laurea´s pedagogical strategy called Learning by Developing (LbD), meaning authentic co-operation between working life, students, and lecturers of LUAS. The P2P model is used in the bachelor studies of Business Administration on two campuses at LUAS.

This article examines how the leadership skills of project managers develop when they study project management and leadership in P2P projects. The target group of the study are student project managers who lead business development P2P projects assigned by the working life partners. Partners represent different business fields, and the size of the companies vary from SMEs (small and medium-size enterprises) to large multinational companies.

The aim of the P2P model is that the working life partner gets benefits for its business from the project, and on the other hand, students learn business and working life skills during the project. The student teams consist of groups of students where one is working as a student project manager. Project teams are coached by the senior lecturers. The working life partner´s role is to assign the project, participate in the project and give feedback on the milestones in order to meet the goals set for the project. The student project managers are supported by various coaching methods.

The theoretical background of this article consists of the Learning by Developing strategy, the P2P model, and development of leadership skills. Earlier studies of the P2P model show that working as a student project manager supports the development of many leadership skills. This article also takes a closer look at how leadership skills are created through student project manager experiences.

The main research question of this study was: What kind of leadership skills do students learn when they work as project managers in P2P projects? The study methods utilised were a quantitative electronic survey and the final feedback workshop of the Project Manager Coaching Course. The electronic survey was conducted in autumn 2021. The survey was answered by 37 student project managers. The workshop was organised for 10 student project managers conducting the course.

The main result of the study shows that leadership skills were strengthened among the student project managers such as trusting one's own abilities, resilience and openness to feedback. The results of this study will be used in the further development of working life-connected leadership education.

Keywords: Leadership skills, leadership learning, working life projects, Learning by Developing, Peer to Peer

1   INTRODUCTION

Learning by Developing (LbD) is a pedagogical model of Laurea University of Applied Sciences [1] (LUAS). LbD is based on real and authentic co-operation between working life partners, students and lecturers of LUAS. From a practical perspective, LbD means that students of Laurea are studying during the projects assigned to them by working life organisations [2].

LbD has also been a point of interest in a considerable amount of research. According to Raij [3], LbD is based theoretically on characteristics presented in Figure 1. Partnership refers to authentic co-operation with working life and university students and lecturers. Authenticity directly refers to working life co-operation. The context of higher education is connected to the research-oriented approach. The experimental nature of LbD can be understood, e.g., as a constructive way to learn. At the same time, the creativity means bringing something new as a result of LbD.

Figure 1. The characteristics of the LbD model [3].

It is important to understand that LbD is actually much more than thesis works or traineeship. The LbD strategy has been integrated into all fields of education in Laurea. LbD can be described as an action model too. It is also connected to all kinds of distinctive forms: daytime studies, online studies and blended learning. The LbD model is based on genuine assignments of real-life tasks or development tasks which are related to Laurea's research, development and innovation projects [1]. An LbD course typically consists of the roles, which are students, lecturer and working life partner. The lecturer settles on the project assignment before the course, supports the students and exposes the student to their expertise. The working life partner gives an assignment to the students. The students plan and implement the assignment (also called a *project*) for the company [4].

1.1 Peer to Peer Project Learning Model

Project learning model "Peer to Peer" (P2P) is one form of LbD. The P2P model is used in two campuses in bachelor studies of business management at Laurea. In the P2P programmes, students have an opportunity to learn in an authentic business environment and learn how to solve companies´ real problems in the projects. Typical development projects are conducted in such business areas as sales, marketing, financial, service design and human resource management [5]. The P2P projects are based on collaborative work between three parties (see Figure 2): lecturers (also called *project instructors*), a working life partner and a P2P student team [6]. A P2P team consists of a project manager, a secretary, persons in charge of communications and the welfare and multiple active team members. The duration of the P2P project is typically one semester and the scope of the project is 15 ECTS credits [7].

Figure 2. The roles in a P2P project.
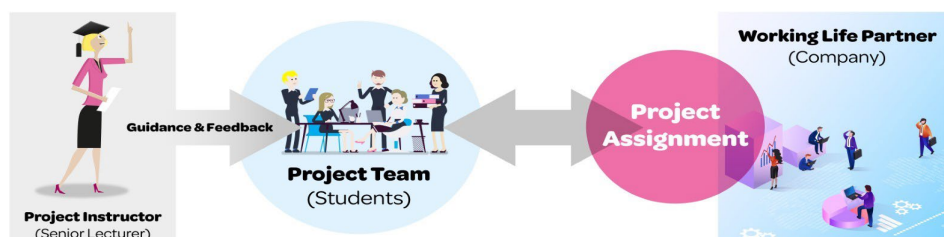
The P2P teaching philosophy is based on coaching leadership [8]. Coaching leadership is a form of leadership that emphasises purposefulness, valuing other people and inclusive guidance. The goal of coaching leadership is to develop and support the student team so that the employee's best abilities come to the fore and are freed up for the use of the team. In return, the potential of the team supports the success of the employee [9].

In the P2P, the coaching approach is realised in a guidance relationship in which the lecturer does not primarily determine the student team's working methods, goals or solutions, but seeks to support the team's own insight and discovery of solutions through appreciative interaction. Coaching guidance is based on listening, asking, being present, encouraging, and giving feedback. The key goal of mentoring is to strengthen the team's ability, self-confidence, enthusiasm and insights. In the learning process of P2P, the lecturer is a parallel walker, reachable and open to discussion. The role of the lecturer is also to encourage and ensure that everyone is involved in brainstorming and development but to avoid too many direct instructions or answers. The lecturer also coaches and encourages a culture of experimentation and utilising collective team intelligence [8, 10].

As outlined above, a project manager has the overall responsibility for seeing the project through although the project team should be active and self-leading in reaching the set objectives. The team and instructor have regular weekly meetings with the agenda drawn up in advance. The lecturer also monitors the development of the team's competence and provides continuous assessment. Figure 3 illustrates the typical phases of a P2P project.

Figure 3. The primary phases of a P2P project.
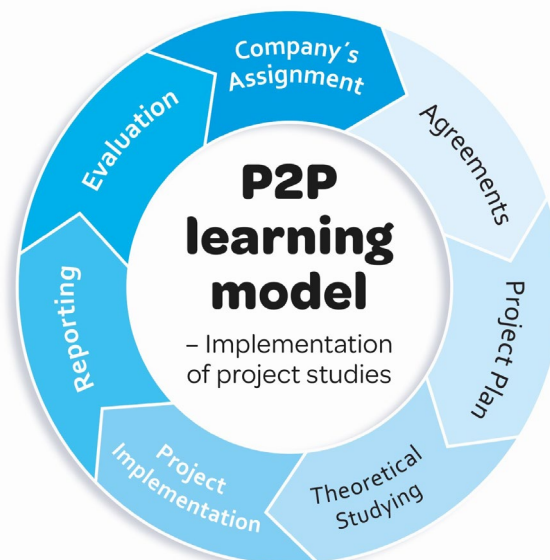
A lecturer negotiates with a working life partner about the project assignment in advance. The project begins with a meeting of each student team and the lecturer where the team agrees on the roles and rules of the group. The project work begins when the working life partner assigns the project goals to the student team. In the next phase, the student project manager (SPM) and the team create a project plan for the project. Before the project practical implementation, the team studies theoretical background by reading suitable academic books and material for the project and writing a knowledge basis for the project. The project continues in terms of practical implementation towards the agreed upon goals and producing results for the working life partner. The project evaluation and the assessment of the students is determined from three different perspectives such as the students' self-assessment, their working life partner's feedback and the lecturer's evaluation [6, 7].

As a studying method, P2P equips students with many benefits and skills. P2P learning is a conscious growth process that the students implement through personal learning within a project team and examines the fact that P2P provides many general working life skills such as communication, creativity, teamwork, leadership and negotiation [11]. Dickinson [6] found in his research that by studying in a working life-connected P2P project, the students' "business reality gap" decreases. He also emphasises

in his study that students get a better understanding of business rules and practices by studying during P2P projects.

The P2P project could also be described as an authentic learning environment where theory is not studied for itself but to solve the working life partner´s real-life problems in the project (12). The interesting perspective of learning is that the working life partner of the P2P project learns as well. This perspective is mentioned, but not heavily studied, e.g., in the conclusions of the article "Why are small businesses are important in P2P Business Management studies?" [13].

Executing real working life projects provide the students a lot of opportunities for self-development, personal growth, and professional networking, all while providing substantial business knowledge and project management. An advantage of P2P is the capabilities it provides to the student project manager. A particularly significant finding is that P2P offers an authentic opportunity for students to practice and strengthen their leadership skills in a variety of ways during their studies with support from project lecturers [11].

1.1 Learning to Lead

The development of good leadership skills is a long and demanding process without a single right means. Leadership skills are not just innate abilities but can be studied and developed with determination. Many personal characteristics such as sociality, intelligence, self-confidence, stress tolerance, and charisma support leadership skills but are not enough. A skilled leader develops him or herself in a planned manner and follows the changing needs of working life. It is also important for the leader to boldly try new doctrines related to leadership in practice. As with many other things, learning by doing works well. Development also requires honesty and the ability to observe and evaluate one's own actions and be prepared for genuine change in one's own actions. Also, an important skill for a leader is the ability to receive feedback and be grateful and interested in it. Sometimes a prerequisite for development is the ability to admit to having "failed" [14, 15, 16].

One important aspect of a leader´s development is the ability to self-manage. In leadership work, self-management is most notably the ability to manage life and time, resilience, and self-knowledge. Leadership can be built by being aware of and considering the background factors that affect one's own leading approach, such as values, attitudes, motives, and experiences. The better the leader knows him/herself, the better he/she have chances to succeed in the leadership [17].

A good starting point for goal-conscious leadership development is to first determine what kind of leader a person would like to be. A good exercise for this is to think about what he/she would like to remember as a leader when he/she retires. Another way to think is how the leader likes his/her staff to talk about him/her to a new employee as a manager. The most important thing, however, is to ask him/herself, would he/she like to be subject to him/herself? [16].

The work of a leader is subject to many different competence requirements, therefore, becoming a good leader requires a long-time span, strong will, vigor and motivation. Success comes through hard work, so there must be a strong desire and interest in supervisory work. The leader also requires continuous retraining. Developing as a leader is a process that lasts a lifetime. Many different types of coaching methods have been developed for leadership training and development such as 360 assessments, mentoring and coaching [17]

1.2 The leadership skills in a work of the project manager

P2P provides a learning environment to practice and develop in leadership and managerial skills. Working as an SPM for one semester, piloting a team of seven people, develops the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the SPM in many different ways. The role of a student project manager includes a variety of leadership and management tasks. The SPM plans, communicates, schedules, and monitors the progress of the project towards the set goals. Above all, the student project manager invests in leading his/her team by encouraging, motivating, and supporting team members to find answers to advance their own activities. The hallmarks of a successful project manager in their work are many of the key practices of coaching management. Below are quotes published in the previous study on how team members have phrased the hallmarks of good leadership work [18].

"Enthusiastic, inspiring and solution-oriented"
"Ask, listen and encourage"
"Brave, empathetic and open"
"Situational awareness - informs, works for and supports the team"
"Stubborn and determined, daring to lead"
"Anticipate and look at the whole - looking at the goal"
"Builds trust and invests in a good team spirit"

According to SPMs´ feedback, working as a project manager has been instructive and inspiring but also challenging and demanding. The student project manager has taught problem solving, the ability to make decisions and team leadership skills. Challenges to the work have been brought about by strengthening the abilities of the different members of the team and directing them to co-development towards jointly set goals. In projects, every team member and manager faces situations where, for example, uncertainty about the right direction of the project forces them to cross their own boundaries or look for a new direction. On the other hand, it is these challenging moments and the success experiences that have come through it that have rewarded and taught project managers the most in their work. These aspects emerged from a study that examined the benefits of a real problem-solving environment (P2P) in working life [11].

1.3   Coaching Course for Student Project Managers

According to SPMs' feedback gathered from P2P projects, a novice SPM needs special support and coaching to develop in his or her leadership role. For this need, the course called Project Manager Coaching, worth 10 ECTS credits, has been developed in the P2P. The aim of the course is to coach SPMs in the general leadership and management skills needed in the successful leadership work of future working life [19].

The core aim of the course is to provide modern leadership tools for SPMs, such as a solution-oriented and coaching-oriented mindset, resilience in leadership work and facilitation skills. Other themes of the course include agile project management methods, effective communication, solving challenging team situations, remote leadership, and project financial management [19].

In the Project Manager Coaching course, the SPMs have regular contact meetings. The themes are learned by using a flipped learning method. The contact meeting contains a lecture on the theme and practical training in groups. After the each meeting, the SPMs apply the method or tool in practice in the P2P project. At the end of the course, the themes are pulled together, and students reflect on their own learning outcomes from the course [19].

2   METHODOLOGY

The study was implemented during autumn 2021. The target group of the study was the 40 student project managers who were leading P2P projects. To collect the data, two methods were used: a quantitative electronical survey and a thematic analysis.

The electronic query was sent to the SPMs by email and Teams chat messages in November 2021. The query was open during 29.11.-10.12.2021. The electronic query contained background questions (study time, experience of leadership at work and working remote or live). In the second part of the query, there were presented 16 statements which described a modern leadership. All statements were presented as the following example: "I can inspire people". The answerer could give his/her opinion on the statement on a five-point scale (not at all, little, some, quite much and very much). The respondent also had the possibility to comment on leadership in the open question. The SPMs were also asked about the challenges they encountered when leading a P2P project. Additionally, there were questions concerning the usefulness of the Project Manager Coaching course and Project Manager Discussion, which is a personal meeting between the lecturer and the SPM.

The qualitative part of the study joined to the Project Manager Coaching course. Ten SPMs attended the course. All the SPMs, except one person, led the P2P project team during autumn 2021. The final assignment of the SPMs of the course was to prepare a "room board" with 10 theses to guide their own leadership and management in the future. The content of the room boards was based on the combination of their learning in the course and their experiences working as a student project manager in a P2P project.
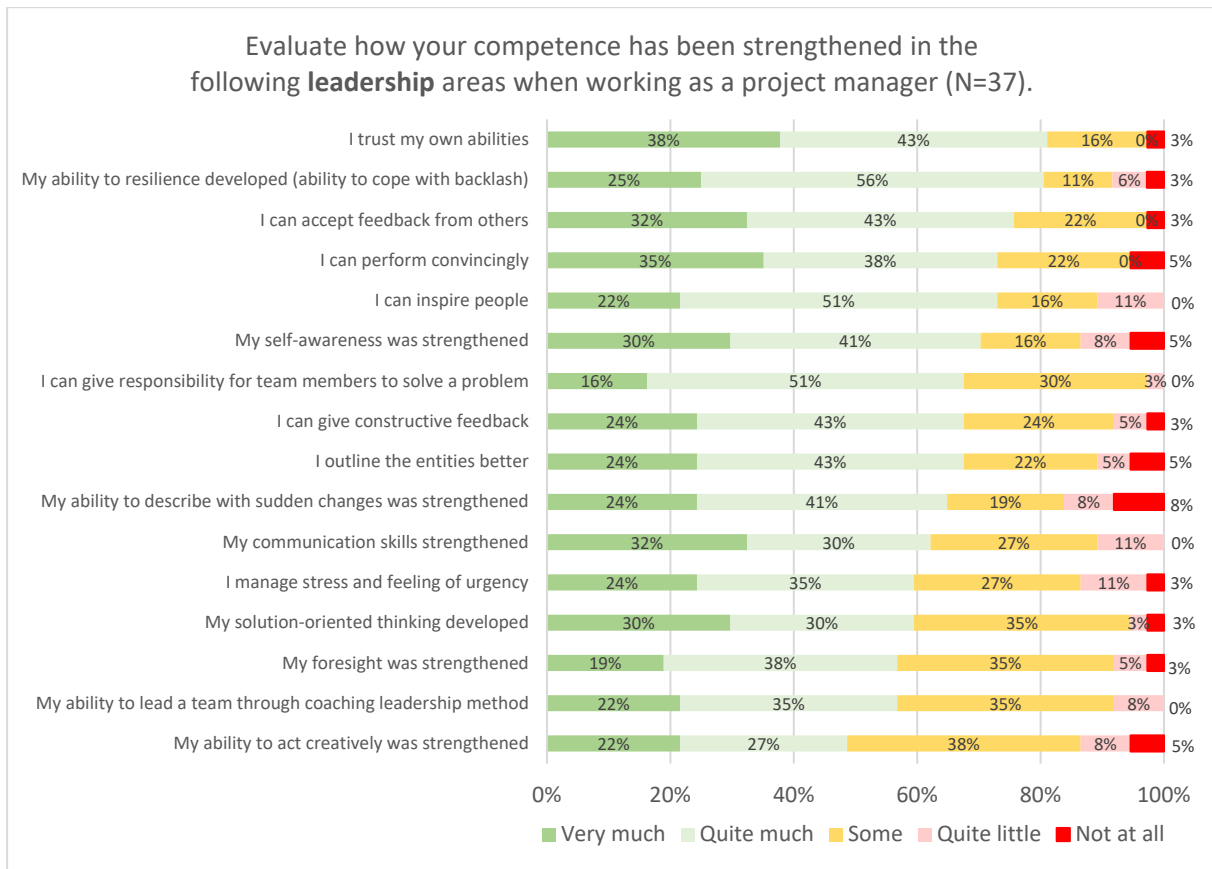
3   RESULTS

The result of an electronic query consists of 37 student SPMs´ responses. The response rate of the SPMs was 92.5%. The results of thematic analysis were based on the room boards of 10 SPMs. In the following chapters, the results are analysed and presented by the query and room boards.

3.1   How the Student´s Leadership Competences Develop in the P2P Project?

The student project managers were asked to evaluate how their competence in different leadership areas were strengthened when they working as SPMs. Generally speaking, the results were positive. According to Figure 4, the respondents (81%) evaluated their trust in their own abilities and resilience skills were strengthened the most. When looking at just the areas which were strengthened "Very much", there can be seen six main leadership skills: trust in one's own abilities, accepting the feedback from others, performing convincingly, strengthening self-awareness and communication skills, and developing solution-oriented thinking.

Only a few student project managers felt that their skills in different leadership areas did not develop when they were working as SPMs. From the results, it can be seen that there are four leadership areas which more than 13% of respondents did not feel developed at all or only a little. The statement "My ability to describe sudden changes was strengthened" was evaluated the most critically by the SPMs. In response to that question, 18% of the participating SPMs responded, "Quite little" or "Not at all". Other critically evaluated statements described strengthening of self-awareness, management of stress, and feelings of urgency to strengthen the ability to act creatively. However, there are three leadership areas in which SPMs felt at least "only a little" or more. They were inspiring people, delegating responsibility to team members to solve a problem, and strengthening communication skills.

Figure 4. Student project managers' self-evaluation of their leadership skills.

Evaluate how your competence has been strengthened in the
following **leadership** areas when working as a project manager (N=37).

Statement	Very much	Quite much	Some	Quite little	Not at all
I trust my own abilities	38%	43%	16%	0%	3%
My ability to resilience developed (ability to cope with backlash)	25%	56%	11%	6%	3%
I can accept feedback from others	32%	43%	22%	0%	3%
I can perform convincingly	35%	38%	22%	0%	5%
I can inspire people	22%	51%	16%	11%	0%
My self-awareness was strengthened	30%	41%	16%	8%	5%
I can give responsibility for team members to solve a problem	16%	51%	30%	3%	0%
I can give constructive feedback	24%	43%	24%	5%	3%
I outline the entities better	24%	43%	22%	5%	5%
My ability to describe with sudden changes was strengthened	24%	41%	19%	8%	8%
My communication skills strengthened	32%	30%	27%	11%	0%
I manage stress and feeling of urgency	24%	35%	27%	11%	3%
My solution-oriented thinking developed	30%	30%	35%	3%	3%
My foresight was strengthened	19%	38%	35%	5%	3%
My ability to lead a team through coaching leadership method	22%	35%	35%	8%	0%
My ability to act creatively was strengthened	22%	27%	38%	8%	5%

According to open answers, the skill and enthusiasm to use coaching leadership stands out the most. In addition, students emphasise that they have developed skills in creating the big picture and the ability to react quickly to changing situations. After working as an SPM, the students describe themselves as stronger to stand behind their own decision and words but are also able to listen to the opinions of team members. Also, SPMs see the importance of giving feedback, thanking the team members for a good performance. The following quotation of one respondent describes the response generally:

> *"Learning about yourself and your own knowledge has been the biggest benefit of working as a student project manager because you can already guess your own reactions to changing situations. In addition, being able to honestly admit to oneself what things are difficult to manage in general."*

Next, students were asked to name other potential skills that had been strengthened from the perspective of team leadership. Five students (n=17) felt that they had developed the most in the ability to change and in the ability to manage entities. Coaching leadership skills were also developed, as were self-confidence, the ability to receive feedback, team support, and work breaks.

Eleven respondents estimated that in project work as a project manager, the different abilities and courage of team members to take responsibility challenged them most (n=21). Eight students mentioned that supporting, inspiring, and motivating the work of the team requires perseverance from SPM (n=21). The difficulties had also been turned into victory by utilising coaching guidance. Four students also mentioned time management as a challenging skill (n=21). The following quotation describes one typical challenge of SPMs´ work.

"Sharing responsibility evenly for everyone, some took more responsibility and others didn't really want to take it. Constructive feedback should have been given earlier".

3.2 Students´ Experiences and Learning Outcomes of the Project Manager Coaching Course

The students (n=10), who attended the Project Manager Coaching course in autumn 2021 and led the P2P project, were asked to name the 10 most important leadership competences for the "room board". The named competences were based on their experiences as SPMs and learning outcomes in the P2P projects. The most important leadership skills of the project manager work were the following: raised development of the feedback culture was mentioned nine times. The next most important leadership skills were maintaining a good team spirit, inspiring, and encouraging the team. They were mentioned eight times. Additionally, the traditional tasks of the project manager such as looking at the big picture of the project, planning and scheduling were also mentioned eight times.

SPMs also find an important attribute in taking responsibility and sharing responsibilities (six mentions), making decisions, courage, and self-confidence (seven mentions). The room boards revealed that the SPM is considered important in modern leadership skills like communication, interaction and listening, solution-oriented thinking (five mentions of both) and coaching the team (three mentions).

"Focus on solutions, not problems"
"Try it, mumble, look in the mirror and develop"
"Admit your mistakes"
"Take on challenges"
"Clear rules of the game for the team"
"Focus on the essentials"
"See the potential of the individual"

3.3 How Does Working as a Student Project Manager Affect a Student´s Future Career Views?

One of the interests of the study was also how the working and studying as an SPM has affected students' interest to work as a leader in the working life in the future. Figure 5 shows that working as an SPM in the P2P project has mainly positive effects on their interest in a leadership career. Even 81% of all respondents find that they are willing to work very much or considerable amount in the context of leadership. Only two respondents (6%) answered quite little or not at all. Overall, 13% of all respondents had a neutral opinion on the question.

Figure 5. The respondents' interest to work in leadership tasks in their working life.
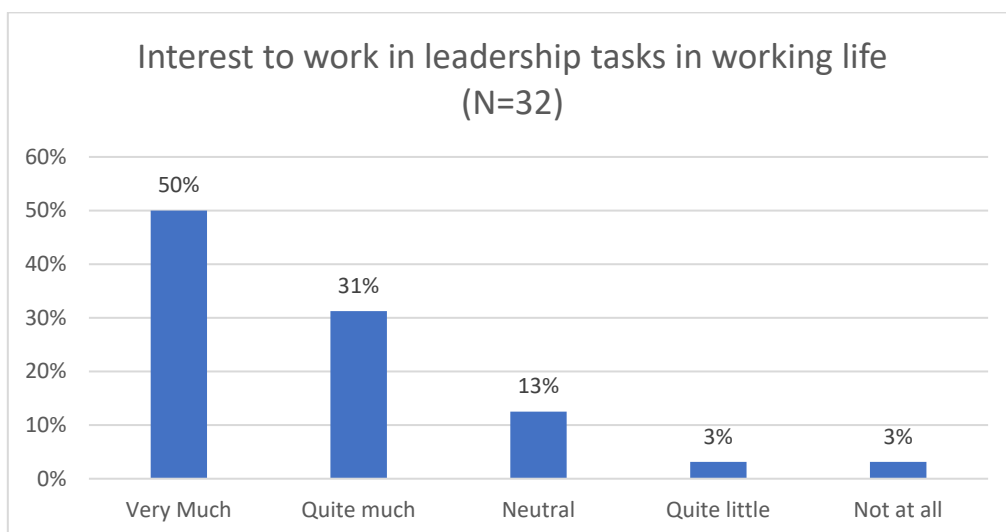
Below is presented a quotation concerning a student´s experience of working as an SPM and her/his career views.

> *"An interesting experience and an awesome to challenge myself. I hadn't considered myself suitable for any role as a supervisor or project manager, but interest thereof arose during the P2P project."*

4   CONCLUSIONS

Based on this study, it can be concluded that the leadership studies of universities should include theory and also practical working as a leader, for instance, in working life projects. In the P2P studying model, practical and theoretical learning of leadership can be combined. The survey pointed out that the student project managers´ competence developed especially in modern leadership skills like coaching and inspiration skills, creativity, communication and solution-oriented thinking.

The study also shows that students' belief in their own leadership skills was strengthened as they managed the challenging situations. Students considered it important that they will be given practical tools to support their own leadership work, e.g., coaching and how to give feedback. Encouraging, supporting and motivating team members were highlighted as important as traditional project manager tasks such as planning, scheduling and delegation.

Creativity and courage emerged as the creation of an experimental culture. Student project managers considered that it is important that the team dares to try, test and make mistakes by learning from them. They also focused on goal-oriented working. The desire to find solutions makes things forward more than hanging on to problems. According to the results, respect, appreciation and feedback should be focused on when working with a team.

Student project managers see that the experience of leading a real working life project has developed their modern leadership skills and provides practical competence for one's future working life. In higher education, the opportunity to strengthen the skills for professional work and to receive professional support is a significant added value that can be given to students. This encourages students 'transition to working life because the gap between working life and university studies is lower. It can also be concluded that working as a student project manager encourages students´ career plans of working in a leadership and project management capacity in the future.

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