

# The Role of Human Dignity Philosophy in TVET Student Representative Council

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## Abstract

The philosophy of human dignity plays a vital role in shaping leadership within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions, particularly in the context of Student Representative Councils (SRC). This conceptual paper explores how the integration of human dignity principles enhances the effectiveness of SRC in TVET settings. Drawing on leadership theories and the challenges faced by young leaders, especially in terms of biases and limited authority, the paper examines how SRCs can foster ethical decision-making and student engagement by upholding human dignity. It also discusses the moderating influence of transformational leadership, emphasizing that leadership practices that inspire, challenge, and include all students can significantly improve the outcomes of human dignity-centered leadership. By embracing these principles, SRC can cultivate an environment where student voices are valued, and future leaders are prepared to engage ethically and inclusively in both academic and societal contexts

## 1. Introduction

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) plays a crucial role in developing human capital, which is essential for Malaysia's aspiration to become a high-income and developed nation (Amin et al., 2023). Leadership by young adults has always been present in schools and community settings, but many students do not naturally see themselves as fitting into the role of a leader (Heenan et al., 2024). The leaders of today are shaped by past educational frameworks (Culduz, 2023). Students who participate in student organizations such as Students Representative Council (SRC) gain valuable experience in areas like motivating peers, collaborating with university administration, event planning, and managing budgets. These experiences can lead to enhanced career prospects in TVET as they acquire and refine these skills. Politically engaged students also strengthen their critical thinking and decision-making abilities. Engaging in policy discussions broadens their understanding of social and political issues, helping them make informed decisions about their futures (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Students' participation fosters dialogue, active listening, and the development of public issue awareness. Additionally, involvement in politics may inspire activism and social change, with politically active students more likely to engage in local advocacy and initiatives (Ginwright et al., 2019). Beyond academics, TVET students contribute to efforts promoting social justice, inclusion, and civic engagement by advocating for change. These students undergo transformative experiences, becoming future leaders in TVET committed to social justice, equity, and the common good. Participation in leadership roles within student government, clubs, and organizations helps students develop leadership skills, expand their networks, and increase their visibility both within the university and in the broader community (Carleton, 2019). Through leadership positions, students in TVET enhance their decision-making, soft skill, gain a deeper understanding of organizational culture, build mentorship skills, and improve their confidence and career opportunities. Align with that, Ministry of Education

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Malaysia (MOE), in collaboration with the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), had launched *Duta Sahsiyah* as catalysts for character building through *Karamah Insaniah* for the year 2023. Consequently, the concept of humanity is also introduced, where each student is encouraged to have empathy and compassion for one another. *Karamah Insaniah* indirectly elevates the human dignity and self-worth of each. Human dignity play a significant role in the daily life of SRC as research by Kyle (2020) underscores how human dignity plays a significant role in the daily functioning of student's leadership. As Malaysia government is very serious about empowering TVET as a career choice, especially among youths, as evidenced by Budget 2022, which allocates RM6.6 billion through various TVET empowerment initiatives by relevant ministries and agencies it is important to producing TVET students with leadership values.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

TVET also suffers from a negative public image, last option schooling, low smart quotient, low academic achievement, and job instability (Ayanwale et al., 2023). According to Bassah (2023), TVET graduates' competencies need to be balanced between technical skills and soft skills. Both are benchmarks of graduates' marketability to the world of work. However, there are several issues related to these soft skills, including social and communication skills, technology skills, teamwork, and leadership. According to industry experts, social skills are also significant for TVET graduates. This is consistent with the findings of Krishnan et al. (2019) which showed that graduates' poor communication skills affected their quality in handling customers. Good social skills and public relations skills in dealing with customers are vital and will be beneficial to the company. The experts also suggested refining competency assessments for TVET graduates to take a more holistic view of their real talents. When leadership issues arise among TVET graduates, the SRC in TVET institution offers a comprehensive scope for study (Murage et al., 2019).

Leadership bias presents a variety of challenges affecting how leaders are perceived and evaluated based on characteristics such as age and gender. Young leaders often receive more negative evaluations compared to middle-aged and older leaders. Older adults are generally perceived to have higher social status due to their age, which is associated with greater competence and expectations for their contributions to a group. For instance, the older age of leaders can enhance their ability to effectively influence others, leading to higher attributions of status and competence (Buengeler et al., 2018). In contrast, young leaders may face biased assumptions based solely on their age, rather than their actual competence, expertise, or other relevant leadership factors (Lianidou & Zheng, 2022).

Academic freedom is essential for fostering students who can think critically and creatively within an educational setting. These restrictions have led to dissatisfaction among some Malaysian students, as the provisions of UUCA 1971 have indirectly silenced their voices due to their status as students (Mohd Basori & Awang Besar, 2020). However, UUCA has been used by the government to limit institutional autonomy, despite its original draft being intended to provide a legal framework for establishing universities. For example, the implementation of UUCA 1971, a legislative act partly administered by the Ministry of Education rather than the Students Union in Malaysia, has imposed constraints.

The 2022 Johor state election was the first real test for Undi18, resulting in a notable addition of 173,177 new voters (Mohd Azlim, 2022). Unfortunately, voter turnout was quite low, with only about five percent participation, as reported by Sinar Harian (Raiham, 2022). According to Free Malaysia Today, this low turnout was mainly due to a lack of interest and motivation to participate in the election, coupled with young voters' distrust in political institutions and parties, leading them to question the value of their votes. Additionally, the Election Commission in Johor did not actively promote Undi18 (Fong, 2022). The much-anticipated 15th Malaysia General Election was another major test for Undi18, with 1.2 million voters aged 18 to 20 years eligible under the initiative. This time, voter turnout was significantly higher at 75%, and these young voters especially in TVET institution were expected to play a significant role in shaping Malaysia's political landscape.

To cultivate future leaders capable of combating such issues, TVET educational frameworks must evolve to emphasize inclusive leadership. The SRC within TVET institutions provides a valuable platform for addressing leadership issues, offering a holistic scope for improving leadership skills and promoting student engagement. By refining the assessment of TVET graduates and focusing on leadership development, institutions can better prepare students for the evolving demands of the workforce and their roles in shaping societal and political change.

## 2. Human Dignity Philosophy

Human dignity can refer to the unique status attributed to the human species, the distinct capabilities associated with rational humanity, or the fundamental entitlements of each person. It is linked to notions such as holiness, independence, individuality, well-being, and self-esteem, resulting in both stringent prohibitions and empowerment of individuals at different junctures (Riley, 2017). According to Gilabert (2024), the concept of dignity does not contribute to these exclusions; rather, it aids us in advocating for a morally and politically

inclusive treatment of all individuals. Jürgen Habermas, a prominent advocate for the concept of human dignity, contextualized it within a democratic framework. He stated that "human dignity" serves as a seismograph, detecting the essential elements of a democratic legal order. These elements are the very rights that citizens of a political community must accord to one another to enable mutual respect as members of a voluntary association of free and equal individuals (Dietrich, 2023). Immanuel Kant is often considered to be the source of the contemporary idea of human dignity, but his conception of human dignity and its relation to human value and to the requirement to respect others have not been widely understood (Kumar, 2021).

## 2.1 The Role of Human Dignity Philosophy

One of the most famous philosophers discussing human dignity is Immanuel Kant. Kant redefined dignity, shifting it from something linked to social status to being an inherent value of every person (Bayefsky, 2013). He stated that every human, as a rational and autonomous being, has dignity, which cannot be bought or exchanged. This means dignity is inalienable, meaning it cannot be taken away or lost. Kant also argued that because people have this inherent dignity, they are morally obligated to treat each other with respect.

In another perspective, dignity can be seen as something based on behavior, where a person's dignity depends on how well they follow certain social norms (Meilaender, 2009). This idea, called "social dignity," has been used in studies of marginalized groups (Oeur, 2016). In this view, dignity varies between individuals, with some being considered more dignified based on their actions (Melden, 1992). Kant, however, maintained that inherent dignity means people have a right to be treated with respect, regardless of behavior, though he also believed people should behave morally to honor their own dignity.

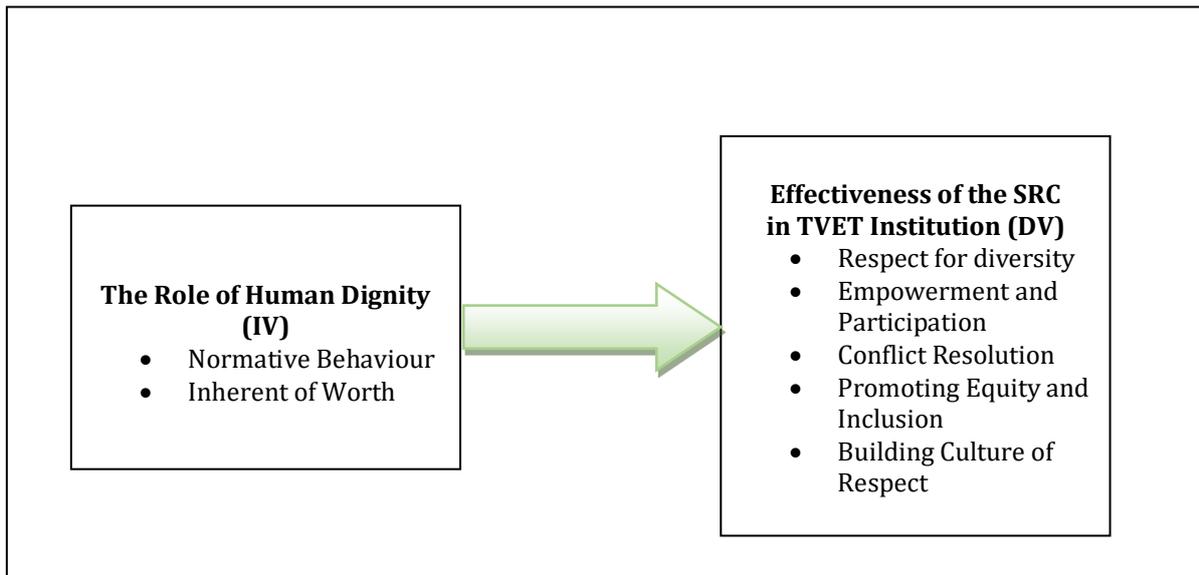
Philosopher Friedrich Schiller, as interpreted by Rosen, added to Kant's ideas by suggesting that we should respect others' dignity, even when we do not feel like it. Baumann (2007), highlighted that dignity as behavior and dignity as inherent worth are distinct but important concepts. He referred to dignity based on behavior as "dignity simpliciter" and dignity as inherent worth as "human dignity." Mitchell (2017) argued that both types of dignity can be understood together through performativity, where the concept of dignity guides actions in organizations. Some scholars also suggest that dignity based on behavior is linked to personal growth and must be developed through appropriate actions (Sison et al., 2016). The two theoretical views are summarized in the table 1 below:

**Table 1** *The summary of theoretical view on the role of human dignity theory*

Theoretical View of the Role of Human Dignity	Summary
Inherent Worth	The view that dignity is an aspect of being human and is defined as one's intrinsic value or worth. This view holds that dignity is universal and independent of one's ability to create value in society.
Normative Behavior	The view that dignity results from the way one behaves or carries themselves in social settings

## 2.2 Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between the Independent Variable (IV) and the Dependent Variable (DV), demonstrating how the implementation of human dignity philosophy impacts the effectiveness of SRC in TVET institutions. The Fig. 1 below show the conceptual framework based on the IV and DV in this study.



**Fig. 1** Conceptual framework the role of human dignity philosophy for TVET SRC

### 3. Methodology

The methodology utilized in this conceptual paper is based on an extensive review and synthesis of existing literature in the field. This approach involved a thorough examination of various scholarly sources, including journals, books, and article review. The initial phase included identifying prominent theories and concepts, followed by a critical analysis to identify gaps, contradictions, or limitations in the existing knowledge.

### 4. Discussion

SRC rooted in the philosophy of human dignity brings significant advantages to the institutional community. It boosts student engagement and participation by ensuring every student feels valued and respected. As per the United Nations (UN), young people can spark change, boost economic growth, and embrace technological innovation (Fadzil, 2020). Thus, youth play a vital role in a country's success and progress. In the context of TVET SRC, the concept of human dignity can play a significant role in shaping the dynamics and effectiveness of such councils.

#### 4.1 Respect for Diversity

Embracing human dignity in SRC involves recognizing and respecting the diversity of all students. It entails creating an inclusive environment where individuals from different backgrounds, cultures, and identities feel valued and respected. By integrating the principles of human dignity into the functioning of SRC, institutional can create a more inclusive, equitable, and empowering environment where all students feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute to the collective goals of the council (Kleindienst, 2024). According to Zwane (2017), applying the philosophy of human dignity in student council activities emphasis on recognizing the value and perspectives of all students, regardless of their background. This aligns with the notion that human dignity involves treating every individual with respect and ensuring their self-worth and well-being are upheld.

#### 4.2 Empowerment and Participation

Upholding human dignity in SRC means empowering all students to participate actively and meaningfully in decision-making processes. It involves giving voice to marginalized or underrepresented groups and ensuring that their perspectives are heard and considered (Rutter et al., 2024). These excerpts highlight the importance of empowerment and participation by involving individuals in decision-making processes, recognizing their unique contributions, and fostering an inclusive environment that values each member's input and collaboration (Wang et al., 2022). This ensures that decisions reflect the needs and perspectives of a diverse student body, promoting fairness and inclusivity. Empowering students in this way strengthens their sense of agency and belonging within the educational community. Furthermore, SRC leaders develop a leadership style that empowers others. This approach creates future leaders who are not only capable themselves but also skilled in mentoring and fostering leadership in others, which is key to sustainable leadership models in the future of TVET (Liao, 2022).

### 4.3 Conflict Resolution

Human dignity can serve as a guiding principle in resolving conflicts within SRC. The pressures and organizational demands of tackling challenges significantly influence the processes and relationships involved in managing change and resolving complex issues (Mahsud et al., 2010; Klus & Muller, 2020; Jameson, 2020). By promoting respectful communication, empathy, and understanding, conflicts can be addressed in ways that uphold the dignity of all individuals involved (Kabadayi et al., 2023). Twenty-first-century leadership necessitates a new approach that incorporates global perspectives, servant leadership, and cultural humility (Alvesson et al., 2017). Leaders must also be adaptable, capable of changing their leadership style according to the situation and the individuals involved (Fagerdal et al., 2022). This practice enhances their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as they must consider multiple perspectives and create solutions that are just and effective. These are essential traits for future leaders who will need to navigate complex decision-making environments. In conclusion, by embracing these principles, SRC can foster an environment of respect and dignity, effectively resolving conflicts and promoting a positive, inclusive culture in the TVET future. This approach not only enhances the council's ability to manage challenges but also ensures that all members feel valued and respected.

### 4.4 Promoting Equity and Inclusion

Human dignity necessitates the promotion of equity and inclusion in SRC. As Sun et al. (2024) emphasizes, inclusive leadership advocates for equity and social justice, aiming to enhance the participation and representation of minority groups within the institutional community. This approach includes involving various stakeholders such as institutional administrators, teachers, parents, and student in policy and decision-making processes. Effective global leaders must consistently operate with an open mindset in complex and diverse environments. In the context of a SRC, a key leadership role involves guiding and nurturing a dynamic culture, thus driving organizational transformation and effectiveness (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023). According to Bogale and Debela (2024), understanding the influence of culture on leadership can enhance critical self-awareness, making student leaders more resilient and dedicated. Inclusive leadership seeks to address the diverse values, beliefs, and cultures of these stakeholders within the institutional environment. It involves addressing systemic barriers, biases, and discrimination to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to engage, lead, and contribute to the council's activities. By promoting equity and inclusion, SRC can create an environment where all members feel valued and respected (Garrick et al., 2024). This inclusive approach fosters a culture of mutual respect and collaboration, ultimately enhancing the council's effectiveness and ability to drive positive change in TVET sector.

### 4.5 Building a Culture of Respect

According to Nouri et al. (2019), fostering a culture of respect and dignity is crucial for creating a positive and supportive environment. This approach promotes empathy, respect, and compassion, which are essential for building harmonious relationships and resolving conflicts peacefully (Kleindienst, 2024). Integrating this philosophy into student council activities can ensure that all students feel valued and respected, thereby fostering a climate of inclusivity and mutual respect. Cultivating cultural humility is also vital to the ethical foundation of global leadership (Wellen, 2023). Within SRC, humility fosters an environment of trust, empathy, and respect. Human dignity involves "protecting individuals from humiliation" and ensuring their self-worth and well-being are respected. Humility requires considering others' perspectives and maintaining a service-oriented approach. Robinson et al. (2020) developed the 5Rs (reflection, respect, regard, relevance, resiliency) conceptual model of cultural humility for healthcare leaders, which can be applied to any setting, especially those engaging diverse cultures. The 5Rs encompass leaders' personality traits and work processes, strengthening professional-client relationships and enhancing leadership effectiveness. In an SRC, cultural humility, driven by empathy, can significantly improve the council's dynamics and effectiveness. This approach is crucial for promoting fair representation of diverse student interests within the council. It involves actively listening to and considering the perspectives and needs of all students, which leads to more equitable and effective policies. Such policies can enhance student engagement and participation by making every student feel that their voice matters. Embedding human dignity into TVET SRC fosters the development of compassionate, ethical, and inclusive leaders. These future leaders will not only excel in technical skills but also bring a human-centered approach to leadership, crucial for navigating diverse and evolving global industries.

## 5. Challenges and Solution

Although SRC's significance is widely acknowledged, it encounters many obstacles that limit its effectiveness and influence especially in TVET sector as negative perception of vocational education: consider TVET as a second-class education system compared to traditional academic programs (Amin et al., 2023). Overcoming these challenges necessitates comprehensive strategies that empower student leaders, encourage diversity and inclusion, and promote collaborative decision-making. Such measures will enable the SRC in TVET to create an

environment that respects and upholds the human dignity of all students, ensuring leadership that is both effective and fair (Day et al., 2020). The investigation identified major challenges in developing effective leaders, crucial for fostering human dignity within SRC. Some found these challenges stimulating and intriguing, while others felt overwhelmed (Muhammet, 2020), leading to self-doubt.

### 5.1 Psychological Flexibility and Adaptability

The dynamic reality of the 21st century demands that leaders be adaptable, continuously learn, and evolve amidst internal and external uncertainties. This necessitates a shift from hierarchical to open and collaborative leadership models (Dumas & Beinecke, 2018). Leaders must develop and maintain psychological flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and act according to their values. This involves being present, practicing cognitive diffusion, mindfulness, and maintaining a flexible perspective (Konte, 2023). These challenges are like those faced in implementing the philosophy of human dignity, which requires comparable adaptability and openness to change in complex social, political, and ethical contexts. Marais et al. (2020) suggest addressing these challenges through training programs aimed at improving the psychological flexibility and adaptability of student leaders. These programs could include workshops, seminars, or coaching sessions designed to foster mindfulness, cognitive diffusion, and a flexible outlook. Additionally, promoting flexible leadership models that emphasize collaboration, creativity, and innovation over rigid hierarchical structures is recommended. Student leaders are encouraged to explore diverse approaches and tailor their leadership styles to meet specific situational demands.

### 5.2 Combating Bias

Leadership bias encompasses a range of challenges that affect the perceptions and evaluations of leaders based on characteristics such as age and gender. Young leaders often face more negative evaluations compared to middle-aged and older leaders. Older adults are generally perceived to have higher social status due to their age, which is often associated with greater competence and expectations for their contributions to a group. For instance, the older age of leaders can enhance their ability to effectively influence others, leading to higher attributions of status and competence (Buengeler et al., 2018). In contrast, young leaders may be subject to biased assumptions based solely on their age, rather than their actual competence, expertise, or other relevant leadership factors (Lianidou & Zheng, 2022). Within the young age group, women are often perceived as less typical representatives of "young adults" compared to men. The gender-based social hierarchy (Ridgeway, 1991) results in young women being viewed as less emblematic members of their age group than young men. This perception arises because men are often seen as the default standard due to their dominant societal position, while women are considered more gender-specific (Bailey et al., 2019). Although there are no gender restrictions for TVET enrolment, racial quota systems for enrolment as well as minimum physical entry requirements exist. There are attempts made toward gender equity and social inclusion through special programmed organized by the relevant ministries to encourage TVET participation among female students, disabled students, and indigenous people (Igbokwe, n.d.). To address these biases, Isaac et al. (2023) recommends conducting workshops, seminars, or training sessions to raise awareness about biases and their impact on leadership evaluations. Education on recognizing and addressing biases based on age, gender, or other factors is essential. Additionally, reviewing and revising evaluation criteria for student leadership positions can help minimize the influence of biases, ensuring fair and objective assessments based on merit and qualifications rather than stereotypes or assumptions (Peter et al., 2024). By doing so, SRC can uphold principles of human dignity, fostering an inclusive and respectful environment where all members are valued and respected regardless of age, gender, or other factors.

### 5.3 Limited Authority

Academic freedom is crucial for fostering students who can think critically and creatively within an educational setting. In a knowledge-based society, individuals should have the right and freedom to express significant opinions and ideas, particularly concerning political leadership. The younger generation plays a vital role in the nation's future leadership. Therefore, educating and training youth with a focus on discipline and responsibility is essential. However, this authority has been restricted. For instance, the implementation of AUKU 1971, a legislative act partly administered by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM) rather than the Students Union in Malaysia, has imposed constraints. These restrictions have led to dissatisfaction among some Malaysian students, as AUKU 1971 provisions have indirectly silenced their voices due to their status as students (Mohd Basori & Awang Besar, 2020). This issue arises when institutions feel they have lost their administrative autonomy due to external legislative control, undermining their ability to create an environment that respects students' voices and perspectives, which is integral to promoting human dignity. According to the United Nations (UN), youth can act as catalysts for change, economic growth, and technological innovation (Fadzil, 2020). However, the laws and policies were made to provides a formal structure for the establishment and functioning of SRC. This framework ensures that SRC operate within a clear legal and institutional framework, promoting proper

governance, transparency, and accountability. (Barrett et al., 2018). Thus, youth significantly contribute to the country's success and development. Addressing these challenges involves advocating for policies that restore academic freedom, ensure students' voices are heard, and reinforce institutional autonomy in alignment with the philosophy of human dignity (Matei et al., 2022). This approach supports the development of responsible and disciplined future leaders who can contribute to the nation's progress.

## 6. Conclusion

The philosophy of human dignity is vital for shaping the leadership dynamics within SRC in TVET institutions. By emphasizing the inherent worth of every individual and their right to be treated with respect, SRCs can create environments where all students feel included, valued, and heard. In a TVET context, where leadership development is crucial for bridging technical and soft skills, integrating human dignity into SRCs can significantly enhance student engagement and foster ethical decision-making. Kant's philosophy of human dignity, which promotes equality, autonomy, and legal protections, provides a robust framework for SRCs to ensure fair representation and participation among students. By recognizing diversity, promoting inclusion, and advocating for fairness, SRC in TVET institutions can become platforms for nurturing leadership skills that respect the dignity of all students. This approach not only helps address welfare concerns but also fosters a sense of community and mutual respect among students, aligning with the principles of ethical leadership. However, challenges such as overcoming biases, adapting to changes, and managing the limited authority often associated with student leadership must be addressed for the philosophy of human dignity to be effectively integrated. By embracing these principles, SRC in TVET institutions can promote a culture of respect, inclusivity, and fairness, ultimately preparing students to become empathetic and just leaders. This fosters an institutional environment where student voices are amplified, and their contributions to the community are recognized and valued, thereby enhancing the overall quality of student leadership and welfare within the institution. These TVET future leaders will not only excel in technical skills but also bring a human-centered approach to leadership, crucial for navigating diverse and evolving global industries.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

## Author Contribution

*The authors are responsible for the study conception, research design, data collection, data analysis, result interpretation and manuscript drafting.*

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