WLVT

We Lead Volleyball Together

Youth Leadership Development in Grassroots Volleyball Clubs

A Cross-National Study of Organisational Pathways, Challenges, and Learning Processes

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WE LEAD VOLLEYBALL TOGETHER

Youth Leadership Development in Grassroots Volleyball Clubs

A Cross-National Study of Organisational Pathways, Challenges, and Learning Processes

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Executive Summary

The We Lead Volleyball Together (WLVT) project is an Erasmus+ co-funded initiative supporting youth leadership development in grassroots volleyball clubs across Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and the Netherlands. This report presents the final evaluation findings, drawing on a pre- and post-

programme survey (132 and 88 participants respectively) and 12 in-depth interviews with club board members and senior leaders across all four partner countries.

The evaluation produces four principal conclusions. The programme's most consistent measured contribution was to strengthen participants' sense of structural agency. The largest observed gains were not on individual competency items but on items capturing whether young people felt heard, supported, and trusted by the adults around them, most notably an approximately 20-percentage-point increase on the item assessing whether adults take young people's opinions seriously. The primary barrier to youth leadership in these clubs is structural rather than individual. The pre-programme baseline data showed a cohort already well-equipped with relational and inclusive leadership competencies, while registering genuine deficits on structural empowerment. Programmes focused solely on individual skill development, without simultaneously addressing club governance conditions, are unlikely to produce sustained change. The mechanisms most consistently supporting youth leadership development (informal identification of motivated young people, personal invitation into graduated responsibilities, and sustained adult mentoring) are organisational practices, not programme activities. These informal relational channels tend to extend leadership opportunities to those already positioned to receive them, with limited reach toward less visible young people.

The programme faces a persistent tension between its transnational design ambitions and the absorptive capacity of the grassroots clubs it serves. Consistent feedback across national contexts identified programme materials as too long and too complex for small, volunteer-run organisations.

Six recommendations follow from these findings. Programme materials should be substantially compressed, prioritising a small number of practically usable activities over comprehensive coverage. Structural empowerment should be framed as an explicit programme goal alongside individual development, with activities directed at club leadership and governance, not only at young participants. National federations and larger clubs should consider investing in dedicated volunteer coordinator roles, even on a part-time or shared basis. Clubs should be supported in developing more systematic approaches to identifying potential young leaders, replacing informal observation with practices that reach less-visible participants. Future evaluations should integrate direct youth voice as a primary data source rather than relying on adult accounts. Finally, the programme partnership should invest in structured cross-national peer learning, enabling clubs at earlier developmental stages to learn directly from those with more established practices.

1 Introduction

Sport has long been understood as a context in which leadership competencies can develop, and a body of research supports the view that structured participation in sport provides meaningful opportunities for young people to acquire skills that extend beyond the sporting context (Gould & Voelker, 2010; Pierce, Erickson, & Sarkar, 2020). However, the translation of this general claim into effective programme design for grassroots volunteer organisations remains poorly understood. Research on experience-based leadership development in sport suggests that leadership grows through authentic organisational participation rather than through training activities alone, and that the conditions enabling such participation vary considerably across club contexts (Frawley, Favaloro, & Schulenkorf, 2018). Programmes that do not consider the actual capacity and culture of the organisations they target risk creating materials and activities that cannot be implemented and executed effectively.

A gender dimension runs through this challenge. Women and girls remain substantially underrepresented in sport leadership and governance roles, including in volleyball, despite constituting a large proportion of participants (Burton, 2015). Targeted programmes aimed at developing young female leaders in sport have shown promise, but the evidence base for what works in grassroots club contexts specifically is limited (Voelker, 2016; Taylor, 2016). The We Lead Volleyball Together (WLVT) project was designed with this gap in mind, focusing in particular on creating pathways for young women to move from participation into leadership within their clubs.

Grassroots sport clubs in Europe face a well-documented and growing challenge in sustaining their volunteer workforce. Coaches, board members, event organisers, and committee volunteers collectively underpin an infrastructure that clubs could not maintain through paid labour alone, yet the conditions that once made voluntary contribution to sport organisations a cultural norm are eroding (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006). Declining volunteer retention, ageing leadership structures, and the difficulty of attracting younger members into governance and organisational roles are recurrent concerns across national volleyball federations and grassroots club networks alike. The capacity to identify and develop young leaders is therefore not a peripheral aspiration for these organisations; it has become a condition of their medium-term survival.

This report presents the findings of the WLVT project's final evaluation, covering all four partner countries: Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and the Netherlands. The evaluation combines a pre- and post-programme survey administered to programme participants with 12 in-depth interviews conducted with club board members and senior leaders. Methodological limitations, including attrition, the absence of a control group, and the exclusive reliance on adult voices in the qualitative component, are addressed in section 6.5.

The report is organised as follows. Section 2 sets out the conceptual framework. Section 3 describes the methodology and its limitations. Sections 4 and 5 present the quantitative and qualitative findings. Section 6 integrates these in a discussion, and Section 7 concludes with recommendations grounded in the evidence.

2 Conceptual Framework

This chapter sets out the conceptual foundation for the WLVT evaluation. Its purpose is to identify the theoretical perspectives that proved most useful for interpreting the programme's design and its outcomes. Readers primarily interested in the empirical findings may wish to move directly to Chapter 3 (Methodology) and return to this chapter when its sub-sections are referenced in the discussion. For those who wish to follow the analytical reasoning in full, the chapter addresses six interconnected dimensions: how youth leadership develops as an organisational process; how club leadership culture shapes the conditions for youth development; how life skills and positive psychology relate to leadership identity; and how gender, age, and programme design function as structural barriers that individual-level interventions alone cannot fully resolve. Together, these perspectives explain why the evaluation pays particular attention to club governance structures and relational practices alongside changes in participants' self-assessed competencies.

2.1 Youth Leadership as a Developmental Process

Youth leadership development in grassroots sport settings is best understood as a gradual, socially embedded process, not a discrete outcome produced by training interventions. The conditions that enable this development, including club culture, organisational capacity, mentoring relationships, and the availability of genuine experiential opportunities, vary considerably between clubs and

across national contexts. This heterogeneity means that the same programme activities can produce very different outcomes depending on the organisation's readiness and relational culture.

Research on experience-based leadership development in sport organisations has consistently identified authentic participation as the primary mechanism through which leadership competencies develop. Frawley, Favaloro, and Schulenkorf (2018) found that leadership develops primarily through on-the-job experience instead of formal instruction, and that the developmental quality of those experiences depends on whether they involve genuine responsibility, challenge, and supported reflection. This insight is particularly relevant to grassroots clubs, where formal training provisions are limited, and the club itself is the primary learning environment.

Cotterill (2017) offers a complementary perspective from a practitioner-researcher standpoint, documenting the implementation of a structured leadership development programme with elite cricketers. The intervention operated across three levels: the development of captaincy-specific skills, broader leadership skill acquisition, and personal growth through self-awareness. A central finding was that effective leadership development requires attention to individual cognitions and beliefs: leaders who develop a more accurate and constructive understanding of their own leadership identity are better equipped to navigate the pressures and ambiguities of real leadership situations. While this study was conducted in an elite sport context, its attention to the psychological dimensions of leadership development is relevant to the grassroots setting, where young people often face the additional challenge of establishing a leadership identity in environments that do not yet recognise or actively support them in that role.

Pierce, Erickson, and Sarkar (2020), drawing on focus group interviews with high school student-athletes, describe a developmental trajectory that moves through three stages: an initial phase of awareness, in which young people begin to recognise leadership potential in themselves and observe it in others; a phase of growing confidence, in which experiential opportunities and social support build self-expectation and readiness; and the adoption of a leadership mindset, in which leadership is understood not as a formal role but as a cross-contextual orientation. They also found that the transfer of leadership skills from sport to other life domains is not automatic. It requires conscious reflection, identified opportunities to lead in non-sport contexts, and social encouragement from adults and peers. When these conditions are absent, transfer is constrained regardless of the quality of the initial development experience. This finding has direct implications for programme design: developing leadership within the club is a necessary but insufficient condition for producing the broader societal outcomes that justify investment in youth leadership in sport.

Cotterill and Fransen (2016) offer important conceptual clarification on the multidimensional nature of athlete leadership. They identify four distinct leadership functions in team sport settings: task roles related to performance preparation and strategic decision-making; motivational roles concerned with inspiring and sustaining team effort; social roles that maintain group cohesion and a positive interpersonal environment; and external roles through which leaders represent their team in the wider organisational and community context. In the grassroots club setting, this multidimensionality means that young people entering leadership often do so initially through social and motivational functions, only later moving into task and governance roles. Programmes that focus exclusively on formal governance participation may therefore miss the earlier, more accessible

leadership experiences through which young people develop the confidence and identity that make later governance involvement possible.

2.2 Leadership Style and Organisational Culture

The way in which senior club leaders and coaches exercise their authority has a demonstrable effect on the motivational climate experienced by younger club members and volunteers. De Clerck et al. (2022) investigated what they term trickle-down effects in sports clubs, examining how the motivating style of club leaders relates to the motivating style adopted by coaches, which in turn relates to members' motivation to participate in organised sport. Drawing on self-determination theory, they found that leaders who adopt an autonomy-supportive motivating style provide meaningful rationale and minimise control were associated, through coaches, with higher autonomous motivation and lower amotivation among club members. The practical implication for the WLVT context is significant: the way senior board members and club leaders engage with young volunteers is a structural matter. Leadership cultures that are controlling or top-down create conditions that are systematically less conducive to young people developing initiative and engagement, regardless of the formal opportunities nominally available to them.

Lee, Hwang, and Choi (2017) provide complementary evidence from a study of coaching leadership style and young athletes' social responsibility. Using data from 204 high school athletes, they found that democratic coaching behaviour was positively associated with athletes' social responsibility, while autocratic behaviour was negatively associated. This suggests that the leadership behaviours modelled by adults in sport settings shape the values and dispositions young people develop through their participation, reinforcing the importance of adult role modelling in grassroots club environments.

2.3 Life Skills Development and Positive Psychology

A substantial body of research has established sport as a meaningful context for the development of transferable life skills, broadly understood as the cognitive, behavioural, and interpersonal competencies that young people carry into other domains of their lives. Gould and Carson (2008) reviewed the evidence base and concluded that sport can reliably produce life skills outcomes, including communication, decision-making, goal-setting, and emotional regulation, but that these outcomes are most consistently achieved when programme design is intentional: leaving life skills development as a by-product of sporting participation is insufficient if the goal is reliable, transferable competency development.

Barnes and Larcus (2015) propose that positive psychology provides a productive framework for designing leadership development in recreation and sport contexts. They argue that a strengths-based approach identifies and builds on what young participants already do well and shifts

attention away from correcting deficits, aligning more closely with how motivation and engagement actually work in sport settings. Positive psychology constructs, including hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy, are particularly relevant because they directly address the psychological barriers that prevent young people from seeing themselves as capable leaders. Barnes and Larcus emphasise the practical application: coaches, teachers, and administrators can create experiences that support both student wellness and leadership development when they explicitly draw on these principles (2015).

Pierce et al. (2020) extend this analysis by examining leadership and the conditions under which life skills develop and transfer. Their findings indicate that transfer is both a conscious and an implicit process: some young people actively reflect on and intentionally apply their leadership experiences in other contexts, while others carry them forward more implicitly through shifts in disposition and identity. Both forms of transfer are facilitated by social support, including encouragement from parents, teachers, and coaches, and constrained by environments that do not recognise or value the leadership role young people have developed.

Cronin, Greenfield, and Maher (2023), in a qualitative study of life skills development in physical education, found that the intentionality of adult facilitation is a critical determinant of whether life skills are developed and internalised. Teachers who explicitly connected sport activities to life skill development, named and reflected on these skills with students, and created space for participants to apply them in varied contexts were more effective in producing genuine life skill outcomes. This finding highlights the importance of intentional program design in WLVT. Club leaders who frame volunteering as a way to develop life skills and encourage reflection in young participants are more likely to achieve outcomes that justify investments in youth leadership programs.

2.4 Structural Barriers to Youth Leadership: Gender

Despite the recognised potential of sport as a context for leadership development, access to that potential is not equitably distributed. Gender is the most extensively documented structural barrier. Burton (2015) provides a comprehensive review of the evidence on the underrepresentation of women in sport leadership, noting that women remain systematically excluded from governance and decision-making roles across sport organisations at all levels, and that this exclusion reflects structural and cultural factors instead of differences in interest or capability. Adriaanse and Claringbould (2016), examining gender equality in sport leadership from the Brighton Declaration to subsequent policy frameworks, found that progress on gender balance in sport leadership has been slow and uneven, and that voluntary commitments without structural accountability measures have limited impact.

Role congruity theory, as developed by Eagly and Karau (2002), offers a powerful explanatory framework for why this underrepresentation persists. The theory proposes that prejudice toward female leaders arises from a perceived incongruity between the characteristics culturally associated with women and the characteristics culturally associated with effective leadership. Leadership is often linked to agentic qualities like assertiveness, authority, and decisiveness. In contrast, women

are typically viewed as having communal qualities such as warmth and cooperativeness. As a result, women pursuing leadership roles encounter a double bind: they risk being seen as lacking the assertiveness needed to lead effectively or as insufficiently warm and approachable to be liked. This dynamic operates even in volunteer-sport settings and helps explain why young women may be reluctant to seek formal leadership positions, even when clubs nominally welcome their participation.

Several studies have evaluated targeted interventions designed to address these barriers. Voelker (2016) argues that physical education and sport provide a uniquely important site for developing young women's leadership identity, precisely because they offer accessible, low-stakes entry points for practising leadership behaviours in a supportive social environment. Taylor (2016), evaluating the Girls on the Move programme in the United Kingdom, found that a structured youth leadership programme for young women attracted young women who would not otherwise have considered themselves leaders, increased the number taking on active leadership roles, and made a positive contribution to their local communities. Taylor's evaluation was underpinned by three principles that resonate with the WLVT design: that everyone can be a leader; that young people can and should lead now; and that youth leadership is intrinsically connected to social justice. The programme's success was associated with the deliberate removal of barriers to entry and the active investment in peer support and mentoring. Duguay, Loughead, and Munroe-Chandler (2016) found significant pre-to-post improvements in leadership behaviours, athlete satisfaction, and peer motivational climate following a structured leadership programme for female varsity athletes, reinforcing the case for targeted, well-designed interventions rather than relying solely on informal pathways.

Megheirkouni and Roomi (2017) examined the factors influencing the transformational learning experience of female managers in sport settings and found that institutional support, mentoring relationships, and structured access to leadership opportunities were the most consistent predictors of whether women's leadership development was genuinely transformational. They conceptualised transformational development as producing lasting shifts in identity and practice, as opposed to superficial skill acquisition. Their findings highlight the importance of the organisational context in which leadership programmes are embedded: even well-designed interventions produce limited lasting change if the host organisation does not actively support and sustain the leadership role of the women involved.

2.5 Structural Barriers to Youth Leadership: Age and Volunteering

Age presents a parallel structural challenge that has received less systematic attention in the sport leadership literature but is directly relevant to the WLVT context. Wilson (2000), in an influential review of volunteering, identifies time constraints, competing life commitments, and the perceived formality and exclusivity of established volunteer structures as key factors limiting younger people's participation in voluntary organisations. These structural conditions are particularly acute for young people aged 16 to 25, who face competing pressures from education, early career development, and the social transitions of early adulthood.

Cuskelly, Hoye, and Auld (2006) argue that effective volunteer management in sport requires deliberate organisational investment in recruitment, induction, support, and recognition. They further

contend that organisations treating these functions as incidental instead of strategic consistently struggle to develop and retain a capable volunteer base. Their framework identifies a cycle of volunteer disengagement in which unclear expectations, insufficient support, and lack of recognition combine to reduce motivation and increase dropout, particularly among newer and younger volunteers. Breaking this cycle requires proactive effort from club leadership, not simply the removal of formal barriers.

2.6 Programme Design and Its Limits

A final dimension of the conceptual framework concerns the conditions under which external leadership development programmes can be expected to produce sustained change in grassroots clubs. Frawley and colleagues (2018) observe a persistent gap between leadership programme design at the organisational or strategic level and the absorptive capacity of the clubs these programmes are designed to serve. Programmes that assume a level of organisational infrastructure, dedicated meeting time, and administrative capacity that most volunteer-run clubs do not possess are unlikely to be fully implemented, regardless of their theoretical quality. This constraint is not unique to sport: it reflects a broader challenge in translating well-designed interventions into contexts with limited capacity. The conceptual implication for the WLVT evaluation is important: observed variation in programme uptake and outcomes across clubs should be interpreted partly as a reflection of differences in baseline organisational readiness, rather than solely as differences in programme quality or participant motivation. Figure 1, which can be seen in section 3.1, illustrates the full conceptual framework as applied to this study.

The six dimensions outlined in this chapter converge on a single practical implication that runs through all subsequent sections of this report: effective youth leadership development in grassroots volleyball clubs depends less on the content of a training programme than on the organisational conditions in which that programme is embedded. Whether young people can exercise genuine initiative, whether adults create space for graduated responsibility, and whether club governance structures actively recognise and support youth involvement are questions of culture and structure, not questions that training alone can answer. The findings in Chapters 4 and 5 are most productively read with this framing in mind.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods design, combining a quantitative pre- and post-programme survey with a series of semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews. The two components are designed to address complementary questions. The quantitative strand examines whether, and in what direction, participants' self-assessed leadership skills and programme attitudes changed over the course of the WLVT intervention, providing a broad picture of change across the full sample.

The qualitative strand examines the conditions under which youth leadership develops in grassroots clubs from the perspective of those responsible for creating and sustaining those conditions, providing contextual depth that survey data alone cannot offer. The two components are presented separately in the findings and integrated analytically in the discussion.

Observed changes in self-reported leadership skills between the pre- and post-survey cannot be attributed with certainty to the WLVT programme, since other factors affecting participants' experience of their clubs and their own leadership development may have changed during the same period. This limitation is acknowledged throughout the analysis and shapes the language used to describe findings.

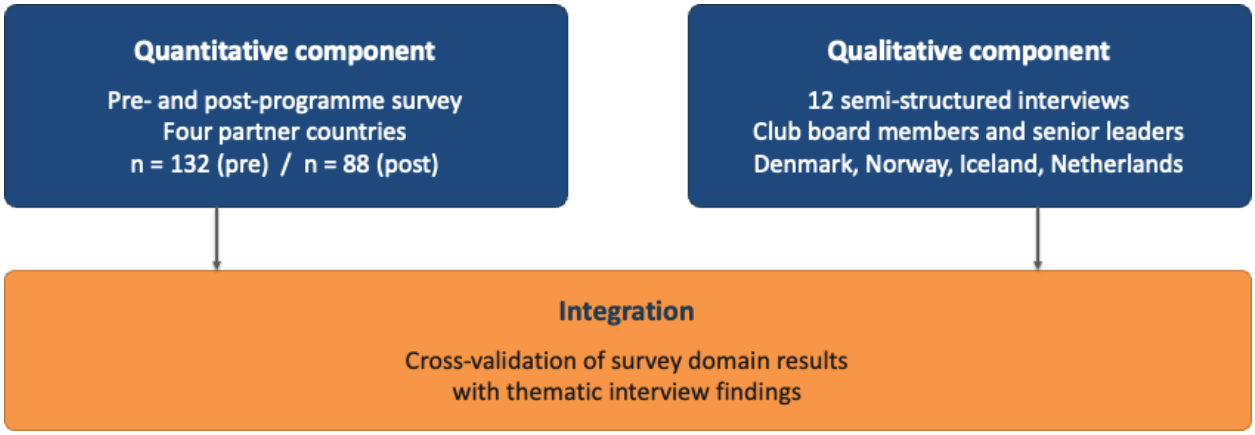


Figure 1: Mixed-methods evaluation design, combining the quantitative survey and qualitative interview components, with integration of findings at the analysis stage

3.2 Quantitative Component

3.2.1 Survey Instrument Development

The survey instrument was developed specifically for the WLVT project and draws on two distinct measurement traditions. The first concerns participants' attitudes toward the programme itself, and the second concerns self-assessed leadership skills across five theoretically grounded domains.

The attitude scale consists of four bipolar items assessed on a five-point scale: beneficial versus useless; enjoyable versus boring; easy versus difficult; and relaxing versus stressful. This scale structure is adapted from attitude measurement within the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which conceptualises attitudes as evaluative appraisals of a behaviour or experience. Bipolar scale formats of this kind have been used in sport and physical activity research to capture the affective and instrumental dimensions of participants' orientations toward programmes and interventions. The items were administered in forward form before the programme ("I think participating in the WLVT programme will be...") and in retrospective form after its completion ("I think participating in the WLVT programme was..."), allowing direct comparison of anticipated and actual experience.

The leadership skills self-assessment draws on five conceptually distinct domains developed to reflect the multidimensional nature of youth leadership in a grassroots sport context. Each domain contains between 6 and 9 items rated on a 5-point agreement scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The first domain, Understanding Barriers and Opportunities, contains nine items addressing structural agency: the degree to which young people feel heard, trusted, and able to exercise genuine influence within their clubs. This domain was designed to capture the structural dimension of leadership development that existing instruments tend to underweight. Items in this domain include whether adults take young people's opinions seriously, whether participants feel they have influence on club decisions, and whether experience and seniority are perceived as barriers to leading. The inclusion of these items reflects the conceptual framework's emphasis on structural empowerment as a prerequisite for meaningful youth leadership, consistent with research on the role of adult gatekeeping and organisational culture in enabling or suppressing youth initiative (Pierce et al., 2020; De Clerck et al., 2022).

The second domain, Exploring Talents, contains seven items addressing life skills and cross-contextual leadership transfer: communication, time management, confident decision-making, feedback orientation, and the application of leadership skills beyond sport. This domain reflects research demonstrating that life skills developed through sport are most developmentally significant when they transfer to other life domains, and that this transfer is an explicit and measurable outcome rather than an automatic by-product of participation (Gould & Carson, 2008; Pierce et al., 2020).

The third domain, Practice and Build Skills, contains seven items addressing practical leadership competencies: goal-setting, organisation, delegation, problem-solving, initiative, and managing pressure. These items are grounded in the practitioner-oriented leadership development literature, which identifies concrete task management and decision-making skills as central to effective leadership in sport organisational contexts (Cotterill, 2017; Frawley et al., 2018).

The fourth domain, Teamwork Leadership, contains seven items addressing relational and transformational leadership behaviours: setting a positive example, encouraging others, resolving conflict, building trust, and inspiring teammates to reach their potential. These items reflect the motivational and social dimensions of athlete leadership identified by Cotterill and Fransen (2016), and are consistent with the positive psychology framework proposed by Barnes and Larcus (2015), in which effective leadership in sport builds on participants' existing social and relational strengths.

The fifth domain, Inclusive Leadership, contains seven items that address inclusive behaviours: ensuring all team members have opportunities to contribute, recognising diversity, managing inclusion-related conflict fairly, and making leadership opportunities accessible. The inclusion of this domain reflects the WLVT programme's particular focus on gender equity in volleyball leadership and is grounded in research demonstrating that inclusive leadership behaviours are both teachable and measurable in sport settings (Voelker, 2016; Duguay et al., 2016).

The questionnaire was translated from English into Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Dutch using "Grammarly" as an initial AI-assisted translation tool. Each translated version was subsequently reviewed independently by at least two native speakers of the target language, who checked for accuracy of meaning, terminological consistency, and naturalness of expression in the relevant national context. Reviewers were asked to flag any items where the translation altered the intended meaning or where local phrasing conventions might affect how respondents interpreted the question. While it does not constitute formal back-translation with psychometric equivalence testing, the native speaker review stage provided a meaningful check against systematic translation errors and ensured that the instrument was appropriate for administration in each partner country.

3.2.2 Administration and Sample

The survey was administered digitally to programme participants at two time points: immediately before the start of the WLVT intervention and upon its completion. A total of 132 participants completed the pre-programme questionnaire across all four partner countries. Of these, 88 completed the post-programme questionnaire, representing a retention rate of approximately 67 per cent. Among pre-programme respondents, 97 identified as female and 35 as male; among post-programme respondents, 68 identified as female and 20 as male. The mean age was 19.4 years (SD = 4.3) at baseline and 19.9 years (SD = 4.1) at follow-up.

For reporting purposes, scale responses were collapsed into three categories: positive (responses 4 and 5), neutral (response 3), and negative (responses 1 and 2). This approach simplifies interpretation but reduces the precision of the data and should not be taken to imply that movements between adjacent scale points carry equivalent significance.

3.3 Qualitative Component

3.3.1 Interview Design and Sample

The qualitative component comprises 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews with club board members and senior leaders from grassroots volleyball organisations participating in the WLVT project, three from each partner country.

The sampling logic was purposive. All interviewees held formal governance or senior leadership roles, including board members, chairpersons, and club managers. This is an important scope condition with direct analytical implications. The interviews capture the perspectives of those responsible for organisational strategy and volunteer management, not those of the young people who participated in the programme, nor those of coaches who work directly with young players. Claims about life skills, leadership development, and programme impact that appear in the findings therefore reflect adult interpretations of what young people experience, not self-reports from the young participants themselves. This is a substantive limitation that affects the validity of several thematic findings, particularly those concerning life skills development and the longer-term trajectories of young leaders.

The decision to interview club leaders instead of participants was pragmatic. Club leaders were more accessible, their institutional perspective was central to understanding the organisational conditions for youth leadership, and they held a breadth of club-level knowledge that individual young participants could not provide. However, a comprehensive evaluation would complement this perspective with direct interview evidence from young people and, ideally, from coaches.

3.3.2 Interview Instrument

The interview question guide was developed by the project team and organised around eight thematic areas: the current situation and vision for youth leadership; empowerment and delegation; inclusion and diversity; sustainability of leadership development; international cooperation; organisational culture and capacity; life skills and broader impact; and future priorities and success criteria. The shared guide was designed to enable systematic cross-club and cross-national comparison, while the semi-structured format allowed interviewees to elaborate on issues most relevant to their particular context.

The question guide was informed by the project's conceptual framework and by established practices in qualitative sport management research. However, it was not subject to a formal pilot phase with comparable respondents prior to the main data collection, and several questions were interpreted differently by different interviewees, particularly those concerning diversity and inclusion, reflecting the varying degrees to which these issues are organisationally salient across the four national contexts.

3.3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in the interviewees' first language: Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Dutch, or English. Icelandic and Dutch interviews were subsequently translated and summarised into English for analysis. Where direct quotations are used in the findings section, they have been translated as faithfully as possible while preserving the meaning and register of the original. Attribution throughout refers to the club name rather than the individual interviewee to protect privacy while maintaining traceability of claims to specific organisational contexts.

Analysis was thematic and followed a recursive process of familiarisation, coding, and pattern identification across the 12 transcripts. Both within-country and cross-country patterns were examined, with attention to divergences as well as convergences. The analytical goal was to move beyond descriptive summary toward interpretation: connecting what interviewees said to the broader organisational and structural conditions that shape youth leadership in grassroots sport. A clear distinction is maintained throughout the findings between claims grounded directly in interview evidence and contextualising insights drawn from the literature.

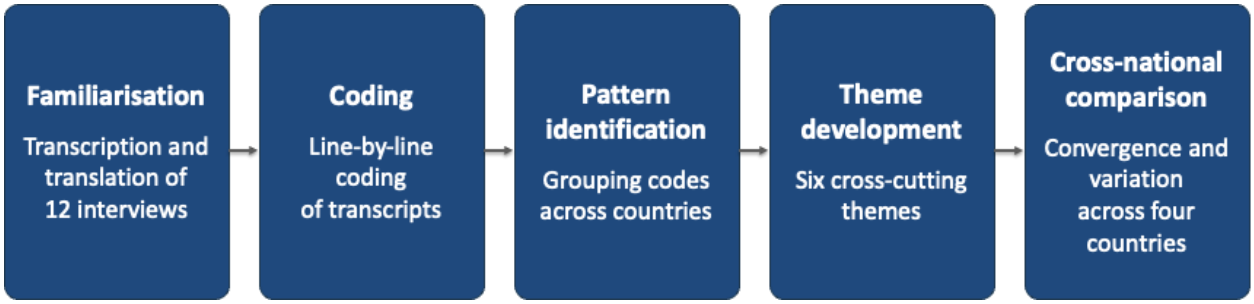


Figure 2: Thematic analysis process applied to the twelve qualitative interviews

Participating clubs were self-selected for their orientation toward youth leadership, and interviews with club leaders about their own programmes carry an inherent risk of social desirability bias. Both considerations are discussed in full in section 6.5.

3.4 Partnership Approach and Knowledge Transfer

The original project application envisaged a collaboration with university partners in Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, who would have contributed to the data collection and analysis process in their respective national contexts. In practice, this arrangement proved unworkable. The demands placed on academic collaborators, including ethical approval procedures, institutional coordination, and the time required to familiarise external researchers with the project's conceptual and methodological framework, proved too extensive relative to the scope of involvement that was realistic for partner universities. Following a collective discussion among the project partners, the consortium agreed not to continue with this model.

The approach that replaced it proved better suited to purpose. The research team at The Hague University of Applied Sciences trained the national federation staff directly in survey administration and interview procedures. Federation representatives received practical instruction on when and how to administer the questionnaires, how to conduct semi-structured interviews, and how to ensure consistent data quality across the four national contexts. This approach resolved the practical coordination challenges associated with engaging external university partners. Federation staff gained direct familiarity with applied evaluation methods, building organisational capacity that extends beyond the WLVT project itself. From a European partnership perspective, this model of embedded capacity building, in which the research institution equips practitioner partners to carry out data collection themselves.

4 Quantitative Findings

4.1 Sample Characteristics

A total of 132 participants completed the pre-programme survey across all four partner countries, of whom 88 completed the post-programme survey, representing a retention rate of approximately

67 per cent. Among pre-programme respondents, 97 identified as female and 35 as male; among post-programme respondents, 68 identified as female and 20 as male. The mean age was 19.4 years (SD = 4.3) at baseline and 19.9 years (SD = 4.1) at follow-up. The gender distribution is consistent with the WLVT programme's focus on young women's leadership pathways, while also reflecting the broader demographic composition of youth volleyball in the four partner countries, where female participation substantially outnumbers male participation in the targeted age ranges.

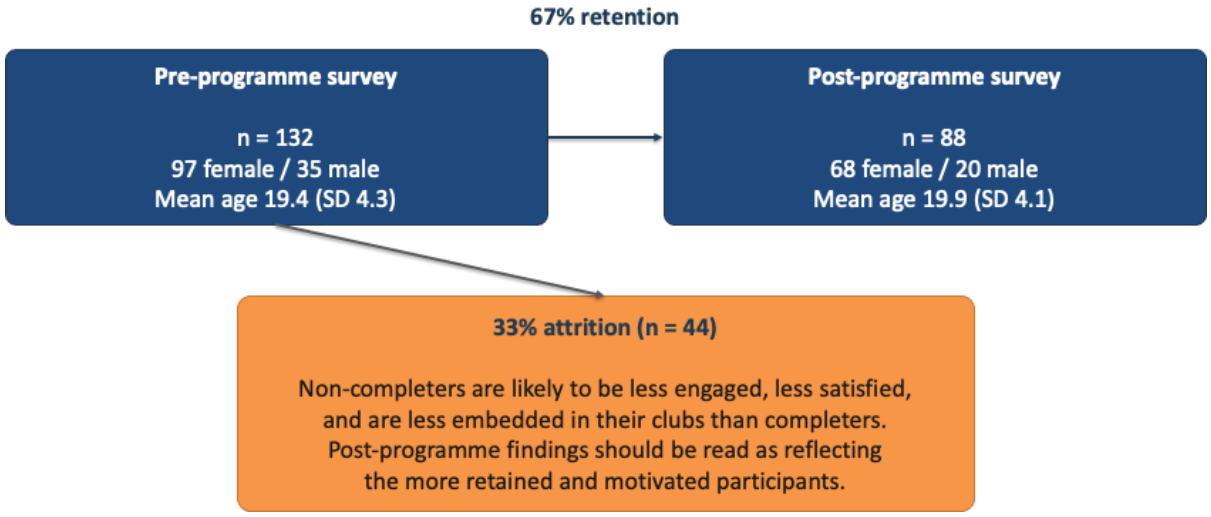


Figure 3: Survey sample composition and attrition between the pre- and post-programme waves

4.2 Programme Attitudes

Before the programme began, participants held broadly positive expectations. The majority anticipated the experience to be beneficial (89 per cent positive) and enjoyable (78 per cent positive). Expectations regarding ease and relaxation were considerably more cautious, with the majority selecting the neutral midpoint on both dimensions, suggesting that participants entered the programme with realistic rather than idealistic expectations about its demands.

Post-programme responses present a nuanced picture. Perceived enjoyment increased marginally (78 to 81 per cent positive), and the perceived benefit of the programme remained high, though it declined slightly from 89 to 80 per cent positive. This modest fall in the beneficial rating warrants attention: it suggests that for a proportion of participants the programme delivered somewhat less than anticipated. The most notable shift was on the demanding dimension. The share of participants describing the programme as stressful rose from 14 to 22 per cent, and the proportion rating it as relaxing fell from 36 to 32 per cent. This should not be interpreted purely as a sign of poor programme design but is consistent with research suggesting that effective leadership development involves meaningful challenge and discomfort (Frawley et al., 2018).

4.3 Leadership Skills: Baseline Profile

Before the programme, participants entered with a pronounced asymmetry in their self-assessed leadership profile. Items attracting the highest levels of agreement were almost exclusively

relational in character. Confidence in building relationships to create leadership opportunities attracted approximately 92 per cent positive agreement, listening to others before making decisions attracted approximately 91 per cent, appreciating diverse backgrounds and perspectives attracted approximately 91 per cent, and supporting others to perform at their best attracted approximately 90 per cent. This profile is consistent with a cohort of young volleyball players already socialised into team-oriented and pro-social behaviours through their sport participation, and is broadly expected given the inclusive leadership domain was designed, in part, to capture pre-existing relational strengths.

The lowest-scoring items clustered sharply around structural agency within the club. Only 28 per cent of participants agreed that experience and seniority were not a barrier to leading when they wanted to. Only 30 per cent felt they should be given more chances to take on leadership roles. Just 36 per cent reported having genuine influence on decisions made within their volleyball club. A secondary cluster of lower scores appeared on practical competency items: handling pressure with calm and focus attracted approximately 53 per cent agreement, and confident decision-making in personal and professional settings approximately 52 per cent.

This baseline pattern has two important implications. First, the relational and inclusive dimensions were already well-developed in this cohort, which limits the potential magnitude of change the programme could produce in those domains. Second, the items registering genuine deficits were structural: not individual confidence or interpersonal skill, but the sense of being heard, trusted, and given meaningful agency within the club. This configuration suggests that the primary barrier to youth leadership in these clubs is not one of individual competence but of structural empowerment.

4.4 Domain-Level Results: Pre- to Post-Programme Change

Across all five domains, post-programme scores equal or exceed pre-programme scores, and no domain shows a negative shift. However, the magnitude of change varies considerably, and the pattern is analytically informative.

The largest domain-level gains occurred in Inclusive Leadership (+5 percentage points, from 81 to 86 per cent positive) and Understanding Barriers and Opportunities (+5 percentage points, from 61 to 66 per cent positive). These are also the domains that underwent the most substantial redistribution: in both cases, neutrality fell while agreement rose, suggesting not merely a marginal shift but a meaningful consolidation of positive response. Teamwork Leadership showed a modest gain of 3 percentage points (75 to 78 per cent), and both Practice and Skills (+1 pp) and Exploring Talents (+1 pp) remained essentially flat.

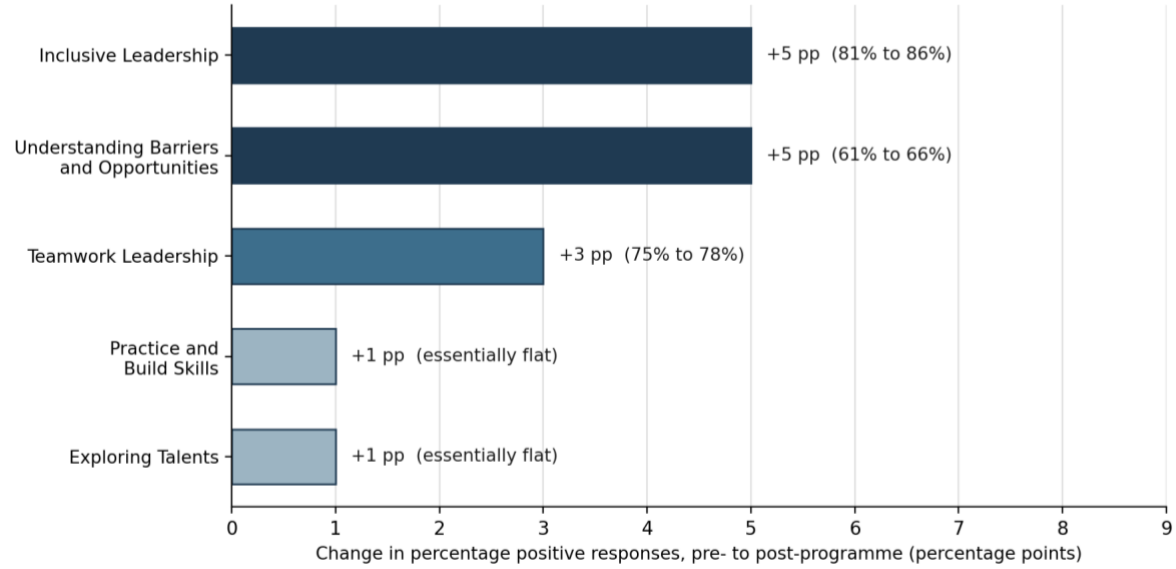


Figure 4: Domain-level change in self-assessed leadership skills, pre- to post-programme

The near-zero change in Practice and Skills is particularly notable given that this domain, which covers goal-setting, organisation, delegation, problem-solving, and handling pressure under competition, represents the area of greatest pre-programme deficit on individual items. The absence of meaningful gain here suggests either that the programme did not substantially develop these practical competencies, or that participants' self-assessments in this domain remained anchored to a demanding standard that the programme did not move them toward. Either interpretation points to a gap between the programme's potential contribution and its demonstrated effect on practical leadership skill.

The most striking individual-item shift was recorded on the statement that adults in the volleyball club take young people's opinions seriously and support them in taking initiatives, which rose from approximately 54 to 74 per cent agreement, a gain of approximately 20 percentage points and the largest single movement in the dataset. Influence on club decisions rose by approximately 11 percentage points (36 to 47 per cent), and perceived opportunities to step up and lead gained around 5 percentage points (69 to 74 per cent). These shifts are substantively significant, but two interpretive cautions apply. These shifts are substantively significant. One interpretive caution applies, however: both items measure perceptions rather than objective conditions: a genuine cultural shift in how clubs treat young people and a change in how empowered young people feel are not the same thing, and the survey cannot distinguish between them.

Taken together, the quantitative findings indicate that the programme's most consistent measured contribution was to strengthen participants' sense of structural agency: their feeling of being heard, supported, and trusted within their clubs. Whether this reflects actual changes in club governance culture, improved communication between generations, or a shift in young people's confidence in asserting their existing informal influence remains an open question that the qualitative evidence helps to address.

5 Qualitative Findings

The following section presents thematic findings from the 12 in-depth interviews conducted with club board members and senior leaders across Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and the Netherlands. Six cross-cutting themes are identified, followed by a section on cross-national observations. All attributions refer to club names rather than individuals. Where interviews were conducted in Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, or Dutch, quotations have been translated as faithfully as possible while preserving meaning and register. One methodological reminder applies throughout: all findings reflect adult perspectives on youth leadership, not the direct experience of young participants.

5.1 Youth Leadership as Organisational Necessity

Across all 12 interviews, youth leadership was framed not as an educational aspiration but as a practical condition for the club's continued viability. Interviewees in all four countries linked the development of young coaches, board members, and event organisers directly to succession planning, volunteer renewal, and long-term sustainability.

"If we can't develop our own coaches and leaders, we don't have a club." (Rødovre Volley, Denmark)

"They are the ones who will grow and eventually take over. Enthusiastic volunteers don't just appear naturally; they need to be developed." (Namsos VBK, Norway)

"Young leaders are important to keep everything going. As assistant coaches, as role models, and just as help in general." (THF, Iceland)

The strength and consistency of this framing across national contexts is analytically significant. It suggests that the organisational sustainability argument for youth leadership is not culturally specific but reflects a shared structural reality of volunteer-based grassroots sport. However, the convergence in rhetoric did not translate uniformly into practice. The KA interviewee in Iceland acknowledged directly that their club currently offers young leaders no meaningful formal role, that empowerment remains insufficient, and that the club has not yet developed the culture or knowledge needed to change this:

"No, not really. I think that as things stand, there is a lack of knowledge in this area." (KA, Iceland)

This candid self-assessment is important precisely because it disrupts the otherwise consistent framing. Recognising the necessity of youth leadership and actually building the conditions for it are distinct challenges, and several clubs in this study are more advanced on the former than the latter.

5.2 Informal and Relational Pathways into Leadership

No club in the sample described a formal, institutionalised pipeline for identifying and developing young leaders. In every case, potential leaders were noticed through everyday participation and invited into roles through personal relationships rather than open recruitment.

"You can always clearly see who loves volleyball — people who arrive far too early for training, who stay after, who show up to watch matches even when they're not playing." (Amager Volley, Denmark)

"It's rarely about singling one person out — it's more like: you three, wouldn't it be great if you did this together? Suddenly it doesn't feel so scary." (Amager Volley, Denmark)

The Dutch interviews both confirmed and analytically sharpened this pattern. Leo Boonen at Zaanstad described recruitment as essentially word of mouth and direct personal contact at training sessions, noting that general announcements rarely produce responses. Esmee Nieuwenhuizen at VVH Harderwijk described a more systematic approach: using annual member surveys to map skills, study backgrounds, and interests as a basis for targeted personal approaches, effectively institutionalising what would otherwise remain entirely ad hoc. Paola at RVV Katwijk offered the most precise formulation, drawing an explicit distinction between young people being given space to lead — which she rated at 7 out of 10 — and young people actively taking that space — which she rated at 5 out of 10. This gap between opportunity availability and opportunity uptake captures a tension that is visible across the full dataset but is rarely articulated so clearly.

The reliance on informal, relational pathways carries an important equity implication that was not directly addressed in any of the interviews. Young people who are socially well-connected, visibly committed, and already embedded in club networks are more likely to be noticed and invited in. Those who are less visible, less confident, newer to the club, or differently positioned in terms of age, background, or family connections are systematically less likely to be identified through informal observation alone. The interviews describe how the existing system works for those it works for, but are largely silent on who it does not reach.

5.3 Graduated Responsibility and Mentorship

Across all 12 interviews, the combination of graduated responsibility and personal mentoring emerged as the mechanism most consistently associated with effective youth leadership development. The principle appeared in similar terms across all four countries: do not ask young people to take on full leadership roles immediately; build through small tasks; provide support without taking over.

"What we have succeeded with is giving everyone space and follow-up so they see results and feel safe. Rookie leaders need a lot of help and guidance." (Steinkjer VBK, Norway)

"You must not throw young people into the deep end too early. But there also shouldn't be too much support — it shouldn't be curling. You grow by being given real responsibility." (Rødovre Volley, Denmark)

The VVH Harderwijk interviewee offered the most vivid account of deliberate non-intervention as a developmental strategy. She described intentionally allowing young participants to encounter practical problems during programme activities without stepping in, including a situation where participants nearly ran out of ice cream at a club event and had to cycle to a nearby supermarket to resolve it. The observation that real learning happens in moments of managed difficulty, combined with genuine availability for support when asked, aligns with what Pierce et al. (2020) describe as the conditions necessary for leadership awareness and confidence to develop. It also, however, rests entirely on the interpretation of one adult who chose to frame the episode positively. Whether the young participants experienced it as a productive learning moment or as a stressful failure is not known.

The Icelandic picture is more varied. HK described a structured youth council and a deliberate practice of assigning young members to lead specific events, with broadly positive outcomes. KA, by contrast, acknowledged that while individual club members could recognise and encourage talent, no consistent mechanism existed for doing so, and that this remained an aspiration.

5.4 Barriers to Sustainable Youth Leadership

All 12 interviews identified structural barriers that systematically complicate youth leadership development. Four recurred across the full dataset.

Educational mobility was the most frequently cited challenge and the one most resistant to programmatic solutions. In clubs outside major urban centres, particularly in Norway and Iceland, young leaders routinely leave for higher education, taking their commitment with them. Several interviewees noted that some do eventually return, but the disruption to club continuity is significant and the gap between departure and return can span several years.

"Some of our best young leaders will most likely move to Aarhus for university. The advantage now is that some of them are starting to come back." (Bedsted Volleyball Club, Denmark)

"Most of them will move away when they start studying. If they're still here, or once they're done, I think we'll use them in all kinds of roles." (Steinkjer VBK, Norway)

Time constraints were noted across all four countries. Those most willing and capable of taking on leadership responsibilities were often already the most over-committed, and the time expectations

associated with formal roles were identified as a deterrent for potential volunteers who might be willing to contribute in more limited ways.

The perceived formality and intimidation associated with leadership titles was raised in multiple interviews. Several interviewees described deliberately reframing leadership as helping and contributing rather than as holding a position. This practice implicitly acknowledges a cultural barrier that formal programme activities alone are unlikely to resolve. The dynamic resonates with role congruity research: the agentic qualities culturally associated with leadership can feel misaligned with how young people, and particularly young women, understand themselves and their position in club hierarchies (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

"Some think it can be scary — 'leader' sounds a bit serious. We try to explain what it involves and let them try." (Namsos VBK, Norway)

Parental engagement emerged as a distinctive barrier in the Dutch and Icelandic interviews and was notably absent from the Scandinavian material. At RVV Katwijk, the interviewee argued that mobilising young volunteers is structurally linked to parental attitudes: families that normalise voluntary contribution to the club and actively encourage their children's involvement create conditions that families with more passive or indifferent orientations do not. The THF Iceland interviewee offered a parallel observation. Whether this reflects national cultural differences in how sport club membership is understood, or differences in the age profile of participants, is not clear from the available data.

"It is just as hard to get parents to do volunteering jobs as it is getting the kids — so if that is not going well, then we are never getting the kids to help us." (THF, Iceland)

5.5 Volunteer Coordination as a Structural Solution

A distinctive and consistent theme in the Dutch interviews was the identification of a dedicated volunteer coordinator role as the most practical structural response to the challenge of retaining young leaders. This theme appeared independently in all three Dutch clubs and was not matched as explicitly in any of the other three countries.

"I think a coordinator role — someone who invests in this, who regularly checks in with the young people, who helps them understand what they can do and how." (RVV Katwijk, Netherlands)

"We had a volunteer coordinator. The role was to go around the teams, organise recognition for volunteers, and be a bridge between committees and the board. That position is currently vacant and we feel the absence." (VVH Harderwijk, Netherlands)

The coordinator role as described is relational in function rather than administrative. Its value lies in maintaining contact, clarifying expectations, providing recognition, and serving as a point of continuity across the inevitable disruptions of season changes and shifting club populations. The VVH

Harderwijk case is particularly instructive: the club had invested in this role, experienced its benefits, lost it, and could articulate precisely what they were now missing. That experience provides a degree of counterfactual evidence not available in clubs that have never held the role.

The absence of a parallel discussion in the Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic material is worth noting. It may reflect differences in club size and organisational capacity, differences in national sport club management cultures, or simply that these clubs have found informal equivalents in the mentoring relationships described in section 5.3. However, it may also reflect a blind spot: clubs that have never had a structured coordination function may not recognise its absence as a problem in the way that VVH Harderwijk, having experienced and lost it, clearly does.

5.6 Life Skills and Transferable Competencies

All 12 interviews addressed the competencies young people develop through club leadership involvement, and all 12 described outcomes that extend well beyond volleyball. Communication, planning, financial awareness, problem-solving, resilience, and the ability to work constructively across different ages, backgrounds, and perspectives were the most commonly cited.

"It's a kind of small company you step into. You think it's a club and everything runs by itself. You learn — it's a real way of growing up." (RVV Katwijk, Netherlands)

"Communication, resilience, helpfulness, independence and respect. I will be really happy if they go out with respect — whether it is for teammates, coaches or just anyone else." (THF, Iceland)

"It will encourage you to be leaders wherever you are — because being a leader is someone that can stand in front of an audience and just say: here I am. It doesn't matter whether it's in sport, volleyball or life." (HK, Iceland)

The VVH Harderwijk interviewee was particularly articulate on this dimension, drawing on her own experience of growing up in a volleyball family and tracing the professional and personal competencies she attributed to her club involvement. She described how young participants move from abstract enthusiasm into the practical realities of organising: managing budgets, coordinating logistics, solving problems in real time. The Zaanstad interviewee reflected on how involvement broadens young people's perspectives beyond their own team to an awareness of the wider regional sport ecosystem and the interdependencies between clubs.

These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that sport can be a productive context for life skill development, particularly when participation involves genuine responsibility and adult facilitation of reflection (Gould & Carson, 2008; Pierce et al., 2020; Cronin et al., 2023). However, a significant interpretive limit applies to this entire theme. Every account in this section is an adult's perception of what young people are gaining, not a young person's self-report. Club leaders are both observing their own programmes and have an interest in presenting those programmes favourably. The consistency of the life skills narrative across all 12 interviews does suggest it reflects

something real, but the absence of any direct youth voice means it remains an adult construction rather than an empirically verified outcome.

5.7 Programme Experience and Design Implications

Across all four countries, interviewees offered direct reflections on the WLVT programme. The overall orientation was positive, but the critical feedback was substantive and, in several areas, convergent enough to constitute a clear evidence base for redesign.

In Denmark, all three clubs described the programme materials as too heavy, too long, and poorly adapted to the practical conditions of small volunteer-run organisations. These assessments were consistent, unprompted, and came from clubs that were broadly supportive of the programme's underlying goals:

"We came back from the kick-off day and were sent home with a thick book of exercises that was completely hopeless. It needs to be shortened significantly — maybe 10 good exercises. It bears the hallmark of something foreign that was translated rather than created for a Danish context." (Rødovre Volley, Denmark)

"The manual probably needs to be compressed. Give people concrete things they can use." (Bedsted Volleyball Club, Denmark)

"It's 260 kilometres to Odense. There have been real logistical challenges." (Bedsted Volleyball Club, Denmark)

Geography compounded the material weight problem in Norway, where distances between clubs, combined with the demands of online coordination, limited the quality and frequency of cross-club interaction that several interviewees identified as the programme's most valuable component.

In the Netherlands, the programme was experienced more positively in terms of engagement, though the picture was not without complications. RVV Katwijk noted that out of the seven or eight young people who participated, approximately half had left the club by the end of the programme period, primarily to pursue higher education. The remaining participants had moved into coaching or committee roles, which the interviewee described as a meaningful outcome, but the attrition itself reflects the structural problem of educational mobility that the programme can document but cannot solve. The Zaanstad interviewee described the programme as having directly contributed to a young woman joining the board, which he presented as real organisational renewal. VVH Harderwijk offered the most reflective account: the programme's value emerged most clearly in moments of deliberate non-intervention, when young participants were allowed to encounter difficulty without being rescued.

In Iceland, the responses were more varied and more divided than in any other national context. HK described the programme as a catalyst for formalising practices that were already beginning

to develop, crediting it with giving institutional legitimacy to a youth council that might otherwise have remained an informal arrangement. KA offered a starkly different assessment. The interviewee acknowledged that their club had not yet built the structural conditions for programme outcomes to be sustained, and that without those foundations the programme had produced recognition of the problem more than actual change.

Across all four countries, the elements consistently identified as working best were direct peer relationships between participants, informal and flexible session formats, and close personal support from club facilitators. The most problematic elements were complex or over-lengthy materials, logistical demands on volunteer time, and the difficulty of fitting programme activities into already crowded club calendars. Taken together, these reflections point to a persistent gap between the programme's ambition at the transnational design level and the absorptive capacity of the grassroots clubs it is designed to serve, a challenge identified in the sport programme design literature and one the WLVT project has not yet fully resolved (Frawley et al., 2018).

5.8 Cross-National Observations

Placing the four national sub-samples alongside one another reveals a shared structural logic and important contextual variation.

The most consistent cross-national finding is that the mechanisms of youth leadership development are broadly similar regardless of national context: informal observation, personal invitation, graduated responsibility, and mentoring. This consistency across countries with quite different sport club cultures, national federation structures, and demographic contexts suggests that these features reflect the structural conditions of volunteer-based grassroots sport instead of culturally specific practices. It also implies that programme activities built around these mechanisms are likely to have cross-national relevance.

Within this shared architecture, however, meaningful differences emerge. The Danish and Norwegian clubs present the most developed and explicitly articulated mentoring practices, including formal youth board positions at Namsos, a structured cross-club peer support relationship between Rødovre and Amager, and proactive coaching education pathways at several Norwegian clubs. These represent the most mature examples of institutionalised youth leadership development in the dataset and offer a practical reference for less developed clubs.

The Icelandic sub-sample is the most heterogeneous in the study. HK represents one of the most advanced cases of deliberate youth leadership culture in the entire dataset, with an established youth council, strong organisational confidence, and a clear articulation of how youth leadership connects to the club's long-term sustainability. KA represents the earliest developmental stage, with an explicit acknowledgement that current practices are insufficient and that the structural foundations for change are not yet in place. THF sits between these positions and introduces the parental engagement dimension that does not appear prominently elsewhere. This heterogeneity is a finding in itself: national context shapes the field of possibilities but does not determine what

clubs do within that field. Organisational culture, leadership priorities, and club history appear to be stronger determinants of youth leadership development than national context.

The Dutch sub-sample introduces the most institutionally structured framing in the dataset. The volunteer coordinator concept, the explicit distinction between having and taking space, VVH's deliberate diversity policy in committee composition, and the systematic use of annual member surveys to map skills and interests all reflect a more formalised approach to club management than is visible in the Scandinavian material. Whether this reflects a broader Dutch sport organisational culture or the specific institutional profiles of these three clubs is a question the present data cannot resolve.

6 Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to three intersecting debates in the sport management and sport policy literature: the conditions under which youth leadership development programmes produce measurable outcomes; the structural barriers that limit those outcomes in volunteer-based grassroots clubs; and the governance implications for sport federations designing transnational developmental programmes.

6.1 The Limits of Individual-Level Intervention

The quantitative findings reveal a consistent pattern that carries analytical weight beyond this study. Pre-programme self-assessments showed that this cohort already possessed well-developed relational and inclusive leadership competencies, most likely as a result of their sport socialisation, while registering genuine deficits on structural agency items: whether they felt heard, trusted, and given real influence within their clubs. Post-programme, the most meaningful gains occurred precisely on those structural items, particularly adult responsiveness to young people's opinions and perceived opportunities to take on leadership roles, while the practical competency domain (goal-setting, delegation, problem-solving, handling pressure) remained essentially unchanged.

This pattern is not easily explained by the programme content alone. It suggests that what shifted was not participants' individual skills but their sense of being positioned differently within their club's social and governance structure. The qualitative material offers a plausible mechanism: clubs that engaged seriously with the programme, and particularly those that assigned meaningful responsibility to young participants, created the conditions for young people to experience adult responsiveness in practice. Where this club-level engagement was weaker, as in the case of KA in Iceland, programme participation produced recognition of the problem without the structural conditions to translate that recognition into change.

This finding resonates with Pierce et al.'s (2020) argument that leadership development in sport requires more than skill instruction: it requires the design of psychologically safe environments where young people can experience real agency and receive genuine adult support. It also aligns with

Frawley et al.'s (2018) observation that the transfer of leadership programme learning to everyday practice depends on the receptiveness of the organisational environment into which participants return. The WLVT data suggest that the programme was more effective in environments that were already broadly supportive, and less effective in environments where structural disempowerment of young people was the norm.

6.2 Structural Empowerment Versus Individual Competence

The pre-programme baseline data make a more pointed argument. When only 28 per cent of participants agreed that experience and seniority were not a barrier to leading, and only 36 per cent reported having genuine influence on club decisions, the primary obstacle to youth leadership is not located in the individual. It is located in the club's governance culture. This distinction matters for programme design. Activities that develop individual competence in young people without addressing the structural conditions that constrain the exercise of that competence are likely to produce participants who are better prepared for leadership opportunities that their clubs are still not offering.

The qualitative findings confirm this structural reading. The practices most consistently associated with positive outcomes in the interviews were not programme activities as such, but ongoing organisational commitments: informal observation of motivated young people, personal invitation into graduated responsibilities, and sustained adult mentoring. These practices depend on adults who are already predisposed to recognise and invest in young leadership, which means they tend to reproduce existing advantage. The equity implication noted in the qualitative findings section, that young people who are already visible, connected, and confident are most likely to be identified and invited in, is not a minor caveat. It is a structural feature of how youth leadership currently operates in these clubs, and a programme that works through the same informal relational mechanisms will inevitably reproduce that feature.

The Dutch volunteer coordinator concept is instructive here. It represents an attempt to institutionalise what would otherwise remain entirely contingent on individual relationships and managerial attention. By creating a role whose specific function is relational maintenance with young volunteers, making contact, clarifying expectations, recognising contributions, and serving as continuity across seasonal disruption, these clubs were attempting to build the conditions for youth leadership development into the organisational structure. The fact that VVH Harderwijk could articulate the cost of losing this role with precision, while clubs without it could not identify its absence as a specific gap, suggests a counterfactual worth taking seriously in programme design.

6.3 Gender, Role Congruity, and the Leadership Identity Gap

The WLVT programme is explicitly directed at young women's leadership development, and the data carry gender-relevant signals that deserve attention even though the study did not conduct a disaggregated gender analysis.

The role congruity problem identified by Eagly and Karau (2002) provides one useful frame. The cultural expectation that leaders are agentic, decisive, and authoritative can feel misaligned with how young women understand themselves and their position in club hierarchies, and this misalignment can produce a gap between available opportunities and the likelihood of taking them up. The Dutch interviewee's precise formulation, that young people can be given space to lead (7 out of 10) without taking that space (5 out of 10), may be partly explained by this dynamic. Structural empowerment creates opportunity; it does not automatically translate into leadership identity or willingness to occupy the space created.

Several interviewees noted that reframing leadership as helping or contributing, instead of holding a position, reduced this gap for some young people. This is consistent with developmental research suggesting that leadership identity among young women is more likely to develop through service and contribution frames than through authority and position frames (Gould & Carson, 2008; Cronin et al., 2023). However, it also raises a question the current data cannot resolve: whether reframing leadership as helping is a productive transitional strategy or a permanent accommodation to structural conditions that should themselves be changed. If young women are consistently directed toward helping roles and away from governing roles, the reframe may reinforce the structural barriers the programme is designed to challenge.

6.4 Programme Design and Transnational Transferability

The interview material from all four countries raises a consistent challenge for the WLVT programme at the level of design and implementation. The programme was experienced as too heavy, too complex, and poorly adapted to the absorptive capacity of small volunteer-run clubs. This feedback, which was consistent, convergent, and unprompted in the Danish material and echoed in other national contexts, is not a problem of participant engagement. It is a design problem with governance implications for the European programme partnership.

Transnational sport development programmes face a structurally difficult translation challenge. They must be substantial enough to offer real content and credibility at the partnership level while remaining simple enough to be implemented by a club administrator volunteering a few hours a week during a competitive volleyball season. The WLVT materials, as currently designed, appear to sit closer to the former end of that continuum than the latter. This is consistent with what Frawley et al. (2018) describe as a persistent misalignment between the ambition of transnational sport development frameworks and the implementation reality of grassroots delivery partners.

The cross-national variation in programme experience also points to contextual factors that a single programme design will not easily accommodate. The geographical constraints faced by Norwegian clubs, the parental engagement dynamics in the Netherlands and Iceland, and the differences in club organisational capacity between HK and KA in Iceland all represent implementation realities that a standardised manual cannot resolve. There is a plausible argument that the programme's most sustainable contribution would not be a content-heavy manual but a set of enabling conditions: clear role definitions, accessible coordination support, structured opportunities for cross-club peer learning, and adult facilitators equipped to exercise the deliberate non-intervention described most clearly by the VVH Harderwijk interviewee.

6.5 Methodological Reflections

Two methodological features shape how the findings should be read.

The quantitative data reflect the experience of those who completed both survey waves. Participants who did not return for the post-programme survey may have disengaged for reasons that are themselves analytically relevant, including dissatisfaction or departure from the club. The post-programme findings therefore describe the programme's more committed participants rather than its full intake, and observed gains are best understood as indicative rather than representative. The near-zero change in the Practice and Skills domain suggests that even among retained participants, the programme's contribution in that area was modest.

The qualitative findings are constructed entirely from adult perspectives. Every account of what young people gained, how they responded, and what they experienced is filtered through the interpretive frame of club leaders, who are simultaneously observing their own programmes and have an interest in presenting them positively. The consistency of the life skills narrative, the graduated responsibility accounts, and the structural agency findings across 12 interviews supports the view that these are real patterns rather than artefacts of the interview framing. But the absence of direct youth voice is a substantive scope limitation, and future evaluations of WLVT and comparable programmes would benefit significantly from integrating young people's accounts alongside those of club leadership.

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

This study set out to evaluate the WLVT programme's contribution to youth leadership development in grassroots volleyball clubs across Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and the Netherlands. Drawing on quantitative survey data from 132 pre-programme and 88 post-programme participants, combined with 12 in-depth interviews with club board members and senior leaders, the analysis produces four principal conclusions.

First, the programme's most consistent measured contribution was to strengthen participants' sense of structural agency within their clubs. The largest observed gains were not on individual competency items but on items capturing whether young people felt heard, supported, and trusted by the adults around them. This finding suggests that the programme was most effective as a catalyst for relational and cultural change at the club level, not as a vehicle for individual skill instruction.

Second, the primary barrier to youth leadership in these clubs is structural rather than individual. The pre-programme baseline data showed a cohort already well-equipped with relational and inclusive leadership competencies, while registering genuine deficits on structural empowerment. This configuration implies that programmes focused on developing individual leadership skills, without simultaneously addressing the club governance conditions that constrain the exercise of those skills, are unlikely to produce sustained change.

Third, the mechanisms that most consistently supported youth leadership development in the qualitative data, informal identification of motivated young people, personal invitation into graduated responsibilities, sustained adult mentoring, and deliberate non-intervention at key learning moments, are not programme activities. They are organisational practices that depend on adults already predisposed to invest in young people. Programmes that operate exclusively through these informal relational channels will tend to extend leadership opportunities to those already positioned to receive them, with limited reach toward less visible or less connected young people.

Fourth, the programme faces a persistent tension between its ambition at the transnational design level and the absorptive capacity of the grassroots clubs it serves. The feedback on materials being too heavy and too complex was consistent enough across national contexts to constitute a clear structural finding. The most productive redesign direction is not to simplify the content of the programme but to shift from content delivery toward enabling conditions: clearer role definitions, lighter coordination tools, structured cross-club peer learning, and support for adult facilitators.

7.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed to the WLVT programme partnership and, where relevant, to national volleyball federations and affiliated clubs.

Programme design and materials: The current materials should be substantially compressed, with priority given to a small number of high-quality, practically usable activities. A useful benchmark would be ten well-designed exercises that club administrators can implement within realistic volunteer time constraints, rather than a complete programme manual. Materials should be adapted at the national level, ensuring responsiveness to differences in club size, organisational capacity, and geographic constraints.

Structural empowerment as a programme goal: The programme should explicitly frame structural empowerment alongside individual development. This means building in activities directed at club

leadership, not only at young participants: conversations about governance culture, explicit commitments to creating meaningful leadership roles for young people, and mechanisms to monitor whether those commitments translate into practice. The programme's evaluation framework should include structural empowerment measures at the club level, not only self-assessed competency gains at the individual level.

Volunteer coordinator roles: Dutch evidence offers a practical, replicable model. National federations and larger clubs should be encouraged to consider whether a dedicated coordination function, even part-time or shared, would improve both the quality and equity of youth leadership development. The key function is relational maintenance rather than administration: regular contact with young volunteers, recognition of contributions, and continuity across seasonal disruption.

Equity and access: The informal, observation-based pathways through which young people are currently identified and invited into leadership roles reproduce existing advantage. Clubs should be supported to develop more systematic approaches to identifying potential young leaders, including mechanisms that reach less visible participants. The VVH Harderwijk example of using annual member surveys to map skills, interests, and backgrounds offers one transferable model. The programme should address this equity dimension explicitly rather than treating informal identification as a neutral or universal good practice.

Evaluation and youth voice: Future evaluations of the WLVT programme should integrate direct youth voice as a primary data source rather than relying on adult accounts of young people's experience. This could be achieved through focus groups with young participants, participant diaries, or reflective interviews conducted by trained peer researchers. Without a direct youth voice, evaluations of this kind will continue to describe adult perceptions of youth development instead of youth development itself. Future data collection rounds would benefit from improved participant tracking and follow-up procedures, particularly in countries where geographical distance complicates in-person engagement.

Cross-national learning: The study identified meaningful variation in the maturity and sophistication of youth leadership practice across the four national sub-samples, with the Danish and Norwegian clubs offering some of the most developed examples and the Icelandic sub-sample presenting the widest range of developmental stages. The programme partnership should invest in structured cross-national and cross-club learning, creating opportunities for clubs at earlier stages to learn directly from those that have developed more systematic practices. This peer learning function may be more valuable than additional programme content, and it builds on an element that interviewees across all four countries identified as among the programme's most effective features.

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8 Annexes

8.1 Annex A: Survey Instrument

The complete survey instruments are provided in the companion document WLVT Surveys – All Language Versions.pdf. The companion document contains the following eight questionnaires, organised by language pair: Dutch pre-programme and post-programme versions; Danish pre-programme and post-programme versions; Icelandic pre-programme and post-programme versions; and Norwegian pre-programme and post-programme versions. Each survey is presented in its administered form, as used during data collection in the respective partner country.

Survey Instrument (English Version)

This questionnaire aims to assess various aspects of your personal, educational, and sports-related backgrounds, along with your attitudes towards the "We Lead Volleyball Together (WLVT)" project. It includes several sections that explore your perspectives on leadership, self-assessment of leadership skills, and perceptions of your talents and abilities. It is designed to identify areas where you can grow and overcome obstacles to effective leadership.

Your responses will help us better understand leadership development needs and opportunities in youth sports. Please read each question carefully and answer honestly. There are no right or wrong answers—your personal views and experiences are what matter most.

- **Be Honest**: Your answers should reflect your true feelings and experiences.
- **Take Your Time**: There is no time limit, so feel free to think carefully about each answer.
- **Complete Each Section**: Try to answer every question to the best of your ability, as each response is important.

Thank you for taking part in this survey.

Personal/Educational/Sports Related Information

1. Age (numbers):
2. Gender (options – Male – Female – I don't prefer to say - Other)
3. Country of residence
4. Involvement in Leadership/Management/Volunteering Roles

Participants' attitudes toward the program:

(*taken from a scale used to calculate participants' attitudes in a survey used to connect Planned Behavioural Control over parents' behaviour.)

I think participating in the WLVT program will be:

1. Beneficial - Useless

1 = Useless

2 = Somewhat Useless

3 = Neutral

4 = Somewhat Beneficial

5 = Beneficial

2. Fun - Boring

1 = Boring

2 = Somewhat Boring

3 = Neutral

4 = Somewhat Fun

5 = Fun

3. Easy - Difficult

1 = Difficult

2 = Somewhat Difficult

3 = Neutral

4 = Somewhat Easy

5 = Easy

4. Relaxing - Stressful

1 = Stressful

2 = Somewhat Stressful

3 = Neutral

4 = Somewhat Relaxing

5 = Relaxing

Leadership Skills Self-Assessment

Please rate each of the following statements based on how much you agree with it. Use the following scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neither disagree nor disagree
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly Agree

Understand barriers & opportunities in leadership

1. I listen to others' perspectives before making decisions.
2. I am confident in sharing my own ideas, even if others might disagree.
3. I can change how I act as a leader based on what the situation needs.
4. I believe I should be given more chances to take on leadership roles.
5. I see opportunities for young players like me to step up and lead.
6. The experience and seniority can be barriers for me when I want to lead.
7. Building strong relationships can create new leadership opportunities.
8. I feel that I have an influence on the decisions made within my volleyball club.
9. Adults in the volleyball club take my opinion seriously and support me in taking initiatives.

Exploring talents

1. I can effectively communicate my ideas and thoughts to others.

2. I apply leadership skills in other areas of my life outside sports.
3. I manage time effectively, balancing my responsibilities.
4. I am confident in making decisions in personal and professional settings.
5. I can communicate effectively with people in different aspects of my life (family, work, friends).
6. I adapt my leadership style depending on the team's needs during the game.
7. I am open to feedback and use it to improve my skills and performance.

Practice and build skills

1. I seek opportunities to improve my leadership skills.
2. I am organized and can delegate tasks efficiently.
3. I am clear about goals and expectations for myself and others.
4. I develop effective strategies to achieve objectives.
5. I take initiative in solving problems when they arise.
6. I handle the pressures of competition with calm and focus, setting an example for others.
7. I handle stress and challenges by staying calm and focused.

Build leadership skills in teamwork

1. I set a positive example for others to follow.
2. I support and encourage others to perform at their best.
3. I am respectful in disagreements with others.
4. I build strong relationships based on trust with teammates and colleagues.
5. I help resolve conflicts within a team or group.
6. I inspire others to work hard and reach their potential.
7. I inspire my team to go beyond their current limits and achieve their full potential.

Inclusive Leadership

1. I make sure everyone on the team has a chance to share their ideas.
2. I ask for input from teammates who may be quieter.
3. I help create a team environment where everyone feels respected and included.
4. I appreciate and celebrate the different backgrounds and perspectives on the team.
5. I make sure everyone has the same chances to take on responsibilities and opportunities.
6. I handle any conflicts about inclusion and respect in a fair way.
7. I encourage teamwork by making sure everyone feels valued and supported.

8.2 Annex B: Survey Administration Protocol

The survey was administered to participants at two time points within each programme cycle, following a consistent protocol across all four partner countries. The pre-programme questionnaire was distributed to participants at the start of fieldwork, prior to the first educational workshop. The post-programme questionnaire was administered at the close of the final educational workshop, once all programme activities had been completed. This pre–post measurement cycle was repeated twice during the project, yielding two full rounds of data collection across the four national contexts. Federation partners were responsible for distributing and collecting the questionnaires within their respective countries, having received training from the research team at The Hague University of Applied Sciences on administration procedures and data return (see section 3.4).

8.3 Annex C: Interview Question Guide

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS for CLUB BOARD MEMBERS

Add brief explanation:

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with us. This interview is part of our Erasmus+ project, which aims to explore how volleyball clubs can strengthen pathways for young leaders. By young leaders we mean motivated and engaged young people who take initiative, assume responsibility, and contribute to their clubs and communities through leadership roles.

The purpose of this conversation is to understand how clubs currently approach youth leadership, what opportunities and challenges exist, and how clubs envision the role of young leaders in the future. Your perspective as a board member is essential, since you are directly involved in shaping the club's culture, structures, and priorities.

The interview will cover a number of themes, including the current situation and vision for youth leadership, empowerment and inclusion, sustainability of leadership pathways, organizational culture, life skills, and future priorities. There are no right or wrong answers and we are interested in your honest views and experiences.

The discussion will take around 30 to 45 minutes. All information will be treated confidentially and will be used only for research and development within the project.

A. Current Situation and Vision

1. How would you describe the current role of young leaders in your club's leadership structure?
2. Why do you think it is important (or not) to develop leadership pathways for young people in volleyball?

B. Empowerment and Delegation

3. How do you think the club currently empowers (or does not empower) young leaders to take initiative and responsibility?
4. What would need to change in the club to truly empower young leaders beyond token participation?

C. Inclusion and Diversity

5. How does your club currently identify and recruit diverse young leaders?

D. Sustainability of Leadership Development

6. How confident are you that the young leaders currently involved in your club will be leaders in 5 years? Why or why not?
7. What structures or policies would you recommend the club adopt to ensure that leadership development is ongoing and not dependent on one-time projects?

F. Organizational Culture and Capacity

8. Over the past five years, how has your club's ability to support and integrate young leaders evolved?
9. Do you feel that your club has a culture that values leadership development as a strategic priority? Why or why not?

G. Life Skills and Broader Impact

10. What types of life skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, resilience) do young leaders develop through their involvement in volleyball administration?
11. Do you believe that volleyball leadership prepares young people for broader societal leadership roles (outside of sport)? Why or why not?

H. Future Priorities and Success Criteria

12. How would you define success for this leadership initiative, for the club, for the young leaders, and for you personally?