

# The Role of Universities in Providing Executive Master's Programs for Sustainable Municipal Practices: King Saud University's Model

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## Abstract

The Executive Master's Program in Municipal Policies and Urban Development, along with the Higher Diploma in Urban Planning and Design, emphasizes effective collaboration to train municipal staff and leadership from the Ministry of Municipalities and Housing (MOMAH). These programs aim to promote sustainable municipal practices. This paper discusses how these programs were developed and assesses their effectiveness in addressing municipalities' actual needs. To achieve the research objectives, the study employs a descriptive-analytical approach and utilizes a performance evaluation form to assess program results. The findings offer several recommendations for improving educational and training programs in partnership with universities. This research emphasizes the partnership with King Saud University as a model for future initiatives that advance sustainable municipal development across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

## Keywords

Training Programs, Sustainable Municipal Practices, King Saud University

## 1. Introduction

Cities and communities across the Gulf countries are experiencing rapid socio-spatial changes that threaten sustainable urban growth. Factors such as urban expansion, demographic shifts, economic changes, and environmental issues emphasize the need for resilient governance and institutions. Urban development research indicates that a city's ability to address these challenges largely depends on its human capital and the effectiveness of municipal institutions in planning, policymaking, and service delivery (Pierre, 2011; OECD, 2019b).

Addressing these challenges requires more than just physical planning; it involves ongoing investment in skill development and organizational learning. Experts contend that sustainable urban governance depends on strong leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and adaptable institutions capable of managing uncertainty and complexity (Healey, 2007; Bulkeley et al., 2015). Universities play a vital role by providing knowledge, supporting professional growth, and fostering policy innovation to encourage sustainable municipal practices.

Higher education institutions play a vital role in developing municipal skills through specialized training that blends theory with practical urban work. International research highlights the importance of partnerships between universities and governments to improve local governance, share knowledge, and create evidence-based urban policies (Perry & May, 2010; UN-Habitat, 2020). Municipal agencies provide universities with opportunities to tackle real urban challenges, conduct applied research, and run policy labs, benefiting both academic research and society.

In Saudi Arabia, these trends support Vision 2030, especially the Human Capability Development Program. This initiative aims to improve citizens' skills, enhance institutional performance, and increase global competitiveness through sustainable education and training. It aligns with international efforts in capacity building, lifelong learning, and leadership to promote sustainable urban growth (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2021). Therefore, partnerships between universities and municipalities are vital for integrating sustainability into governance.

Universities play a crucial role in training local leaders to promote sustainability, a process that requires interdisciplinary skills in urban planning, policy, the environment, finance, and governance (Fainstein, 2010; Healey, 2012). In many countries, such as Saudi Arabia, universities are increasingly viewed as key to developing municipal leaders who can support urban sustainability and policy innovation.

Saudi Arabia has prioritized sustainable urban planning as a key part of Vision 2030, aiming to develop cities that enhance the quality of life and promote sustainable growth. However, the initial review identified a need to improve employees' skills in implementing this vision, especially in sustainable urban planning. To address this, the Kingdom has launched a series of intensive training programs to improve the capabilities of urban planning professionals and provide them with the latest knowledge and techniques in the field.

Despite efforts to develop these programs, their impact has not been systematically and objectively assessed, which limits decision-makers' ability to evaluate their effectiveness in improving employee performance and achieving the goals of the Kingdom's Vision 2030. This creates an urgent need to establish a scientific method for measuring the impact of these training programs, assessing their contribution to employee skill development, enhancing decision-making in urban planning, and determining how effectively the vision's strategic goals are being met. Taking this step will enable informed decisions to improve existing training initiatives and design new ones that meet employees' actual needs and support the

achievement of the vision's objectives.

The Executive Master's Program in Municipal Policies and Urban Development (Leadership Track) aligns with the Ministry of Municipalities and Housing (MOMAH)'s goals by enhancing municipal staff's skills. It focuses on key areas, including financial sustainability, urban policy, landscape quality, institutional excellence, and infrastructure. Similar executive programs worldwide have improved governance and supported urban policy reforms (World Bank, 2018; UNDP, 2016).

The Executive Master's Program in Municipal Policies and Urban Development, along with the Higher Diploma in Urban Planning and Design, aims to promote municipal transformation by strengthening policy-making and urban management among leaders throughout the Kingdom. These initiatives emphasize a partnership between the university and municipalities, committed to implementing sustainable municipal practices that meet international standards for local governance capacity building (UN-Habitat, 2021).

This study explores how municipal staff and MOMAH leaders benefit from training programs at King Saud University focused on implementing sustainable development policies. It evaluates whether these programs enhance municipal leaders' ability to promote integrated governance for sustainability.

## **2. The Relationship between Academic Excellence and Sustainable Municipal Practice**

### **Theoretical Background**

Recent urban studies highlight the importance of academic excellence in higher education as a key driver of sustainable urban development. Universities play a crucial role in shaping urban governance and skills, especially in quickly growing, fragmented cities facing sustainability issues. In this context, the quality of education directly affects how municipal actors can develop and enforce sustainable policies (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Sustainable municipal practice requires an interdisciplinary approach that combines urban planning, environmental management, policy, local economics, and governance. It cannot be addressed with narrow or purely theoretical models. Education strategies should focus on helping learners understand how urban systems are interconnected. As a result, there is growing interest in frameworks that merge academic excellence with practical, problem-solving municipal education (UN-Habitat, 2018).

Wiek et al. (2011) emphasize that municipal sustainability challenges are complex and uncertain, involving multiple sectors. These issues do not follow simple cause-and-effect relationships; instead, they are rooted in interconnected social, ecological, economic, and institutional systems. Education should encourage systems thinking, anticipatory skills, and normative reasoning for municipal decision-makers and urban leaders.

Recent studies support this perspective. Brundiers et al. (2021) emphasize that

sustainability education must prepare students for urban challenges in unpredictable environments. Effective programs include experiential learning, stakeholder involvement, and project-based tasks. [Leal Filho et al. \(2019\)](#) demonstrate that higher education's role in sustainable urban development is best realized when curricula are aligned with local governance and policies.

Research highlights the importance of properly framing problems and identifying root causes. [Wowk et al. \(2017\)](#) argue that sustainable municipal practices require addressing key structural drivers like governance, capacity, regulation, and socio-political factors, not just policy concerns. Academia helps professionals recognize these processes, promoting integrated, sustainable solutions for municipalities.

Universities are evolving due to societal pressures, emphasizing relevance and engagement. According to [Biberhofer and Rammel \(2017\)](#), this shift demonstrates a focus on societal needs. [Trencher et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasize their role in urban sustainability through partnerships with municipalities, civil society, and the private sector, fostering practice-based knowledge and collaboration.

Traditional higher education limits innovation. [Remington-Doucette \(2013\)](#) notes that conventional teaching emphasizes cognitive skills, disciplinary knowledge, and standardized testing. While maintaining academic rigor, these methods often fail to prepare professionals for the complex urban sustainability challenges they face. An excessive focus on theory can prevent graduates from effectively addressing social, environmental, and institutional issues.

Recent research on urban and sustainability education highlights competence-based learning, which [Dlouhá et al. \(2019\)](#) define as the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for effective real-world application. This approach goes beyond just knowledge, emphasizing action, reflection, and ethics, and offers frameworks that align academic goals with the needs of municipal governance.

[Lozano et al. \(2017\)](#) emphasize that competence-based education for sustainability centers on goal-oriented and ethically driven actions. This view recognizes that sustainable practices at the municipal level need more than just technical skills; they also require leadership, collaboration, and the ability to work across different institutions and sectors. Recent research by [UNESCO \(2020\)](#) and [Kioupi and Voulvoulis \(2022\)](#) supports this perspective, highlighting the importance of sustainability skills for adaptive and transformative governance.

From an urban governance perspective, competence-based education promotes flexible, learning-focused strategies. [Healey \(2012\)](#) highlights the importance of institutional learning and reflexivity. [Bulkeley et al. \(2015\)](#) argue that urban sustainability depends on local institutions' ability to learn and adapt policies. [Evans et al. \(2023\)](#) also emphasize that developing sustainable cities requires ongoing municipal training and collaboration between academia and practitioners.

This study explores how emphasizing sustainability skills can authentically enhance executive education. It demonstrates how graduates evolve in their thinking, practical abilities, and leadership qualities, establishing meaningful connec-

tions to real-world municipal challenges. The framework used not only measures progress but also subtly guides ongoing improvements at King Saud University's College of Architecture and Planning. By blending academic excellence with practical assessment methods, the study seeks to empower (MOMAH) leaders and foster sustainable urban growth across Saudi Arabia. This approach aligns closely with global best practices in urban development, ensuring that programs stay relevant and impactful.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study uses a descriptive-analytical research design to systematically evaluate the academic and training programs at King Saud University within their real educational environment. This method is suitable for analyzing complex educational systems because it allows for a detailed review of program inputs, instructional processes, and learning outcomes, while also ensuring their alignment with professional standards and sustainable development principles.

The analysis examines the structure, objectives, curricula, instructional materials, and teaching methods of selected academic and training programs. Institutional documents and program specifications are reviewed to assess how effectively these programs are designed to develop professional skills and support sustainability-focused capacity building.

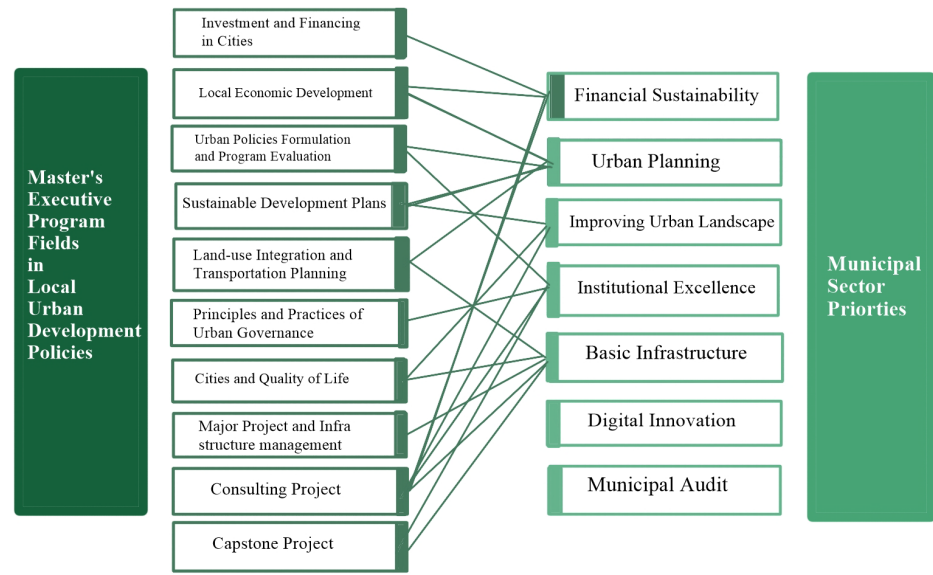
Finally, the study reviews data from program graduates to assess how well they have applied their knowledge and skills in their professional roles, particularly in creating sustainable policies and practices. This graduate-centered analysis provides insights into the real-world effects of the programs and their role in boosting professional performance and policy decision-making. Overall, the approach combines institutional program analysis with quantitative and qualitative feedback from students and graduates, offering a comprehensive, evidence-based evaluation of the program's contribution to advancing sustainable development goals.

#### 3.1. The Case Study

In 2017, the Ministry of Municipalities and Housing (MOMAH) collaborated with King Saud University to launch the Executive Master's Program in Municipal Policy and Urban Development. It aims to enhance municipal transformation by helping MOMAH leaders improve their skills in policy analysis, program evaluation, and decision-making for development projects. The program covers essential concepts of municipal governance, offers practical skills, and emphasizes financial sustainability and resource management to increase operational efficiency. It also promotes teamwork, planning, and partnership skills through interactive activities such as negotiations and public hearings.

The Executive Master's Program in Local Urban Development Policies (see **Figure 1**) aims to be practical and policy-oriented, combining academic insights with real municipal needs. It thoroughly covers topics such as urban investment, finance, local economic growth, policy design, sustainable planning, land use, transporta-

tion, governance, quality of life, and infrastructure. These topics support key strategic objectives, including financial sustainability, effective urban planning, institutional excellence, infrastructure development, digital innovation, and accountability. Through engaging interdisciplinary coursework and hands-on projects, it connects theory with practice, aiming to enhance institutional capacity and promote evidence-based policies that support Saudi Vision 2030 and high standards in urban governance.



**Figure 1.** The executive master's program in local urban development policies.

The program emphasizes advanced urban planning to enhance the quality of life. It encourages smart growth through expert participation and city tours, aiming to create a knowledge-sharing network among municipal leaders. It facilitates the exchange of experiences and expertise beyond official channels. Developed by specialists to address specific skill gaps, it aims to improve policymaking and urban development among Saudi leaders. The content aligns with the Ministry's initiatives and Vision 2030 goals to improve living standards, service quality, and economic efficiency.

The curriculum consists of 36 study units divided into four levels. The first level covers municipal institutional topics such as governance, administration, finance, and policy development. The second level emphasizes technical urban planning. Levels three and four focus on enhancing previous practices through consulting and graduation projects.

The program allows municipal leaders to work with specialized professors through a modular design, unlike traditional university programs. As shown in [Table 1](#), it has three modules: the first covers core concepts and their applications; the second explores global practices with expert insights, success factors, challenges, and solutions; the third is an open forum on local practices, global influence, and future issues in the municipal sector.

**Table 1.** Three modular curricula.

Module (1)	Module (2)	Module (3)
Key concepts in the course (4 weeks)	Advanced Global Practices (4 weeks) Core Concepts in the Course (4 weeks)	Opportunities to implement ideas and practices in the municipal sector (4 weeks)
This section discusses key ideas, their development, and their application	The course reviews leading global practices, includes expert explanations, identifies success factors, and examines obstacles and solutions.	This section is an open forum exploring local practices and future challenges to their adoption in the municipal sector.

The program features engaging activities to enhance practical skills and deepen understanding of municipal policy and urban development. Participants visited renowned international cities celebrated for their innovative municipal planning, organized through reputable global organizations. The focus is on interactive training and hands-on learning, providing participants with opportunities to apply their new knowledge in real-world scenarios. They collaborated with international experts, universities, and research groups, including UC Berkeley, the American Urban Institute, and the Netherlands' Academy of Local Government, making this experience both educational and inspiring.

The program hosts the Modern Saudi Cities Forum, an ongoing event that brings together international scholars and practitioners to discuss urban planning in Saudi Arabia. It serves as a platform for knowledge sharing, inviting municipal leaders at both local and international levels to encourage greater involvement and collaborative learning.

The program features an Annual Conference of Municipal Leaders where attendees present case studies on resource management and urban development. It serves as a platform to showcase training outcomes and involve practitioners and stakeholders, encouraging the exchange of ideas and the sharing of best practices to strengthen municipal systems and improve urban quality of life throughout the Kingdom.

### 3.2. Research Methodology Process

The methodological process was thoughtfully structured into three distinct steps. These are outlined as follows:

#### 3.2.1. Graduate Categorization

The 118 graduates shown in **Figure 2** represent the second group of trainees. The evaluation was conducted after they completed the program. They were divided into three achievement levels based on their overall weighted averages and skill development. Those scoring 90% or higher are recognized as Outstanding Practitioners, scores from 87% - 89% are called Good Practitioners, and scores from 80% - 87% are labeled Moderate Performance Practitioners. This method not only reflects their numerical results but also emphasizes their continuous progress in practical skills and leadership.



Figure 2. The 118 graduate levels.

### 3.2.2. Performance Evaluation Form

Operational and Leadership Skills					
Effectiveness in leading others and guiding them towards achieving goals	★	★	★	★	★
Planning and coordinating roles among team members	★	★	★	★	★
Analyzing issues and formulating practical solutions	★	★	★	★	★
Critical thinking and evaluation of available options	★	★	★	★	★
Strategic decision making	★	★	★	★	★
Prioritizing the implementation of the work plan	★	★	★	★	★
Self-confidence and respect for others	★	★	★	★	★
Continuous learning and self-development	★	★	★	★	★
The ability to create and innovate	★	★	★	★	★
Influencing and persuasion skills	★	★	★	★	★
Listening skills and communicating ideas clearly	★	★	★	★	★
Punctuality and taking responsibility	★	★	★	★	★

Figure 3. Performance Evaluation Form (PEF).

To evaluate student performance, the program administration has developed and implemented a structured Performance Evaluation Form (PEF) as a self-assessment tool. As shown in Figure 3, the form covers twelve key skill areas: (1) leading others toward goals, (2) planning and coordinating team roles, (3) analyzing prob-

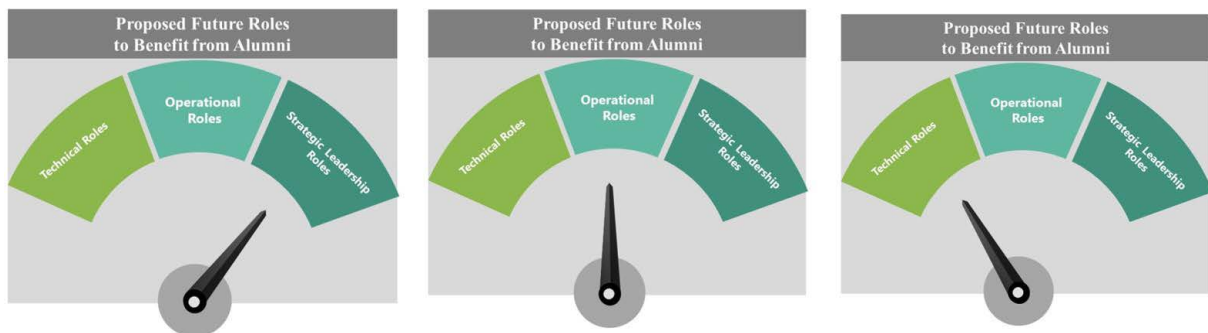
lems and developing practical solutions, (4) critical thinking and evaluating options, (5) strategic decision-making, (6) prioritizing tasks during work plan execution, (7) self-confidence and respect for others, (8) ongoing learning and self-improvement, (9) creativity and innovation, (10) influence and persuasion, (11) effective listening and clear communication, and (12) time management and accountability.

Each competency was evaluated with a five-star rating system, where five stars indicate the highest level of proficiency. This star-based approach enabled consistent comparisons across competencies and provided a clear visual cue of performance levels. Data were gathered and analyzed to highlight the community's strengths and areas for improvement.

This measurement framework was used to compare leadership and operational skill development and to guide evidence-based assessments of program outcomes related to professional readiness and applied performance.

### 3.2.3. Proposed Future Role

The Proposed Functional Roles assessment was designed and implemented by the program administration. This assessment has been developed to align graduates' skills with suitable future roles. These, as illustrated in **Figure 4**, include strategic leadership, operational, and technical positions.



**Figure 4.** Proposed functional roles.

This long-term assessment framework maintains methodological rigor by combining academic achievements, practical performance data, and professional preparedness to support evidence-based graduate classification and ensure proper role alignment in both municipal and institutional settings.

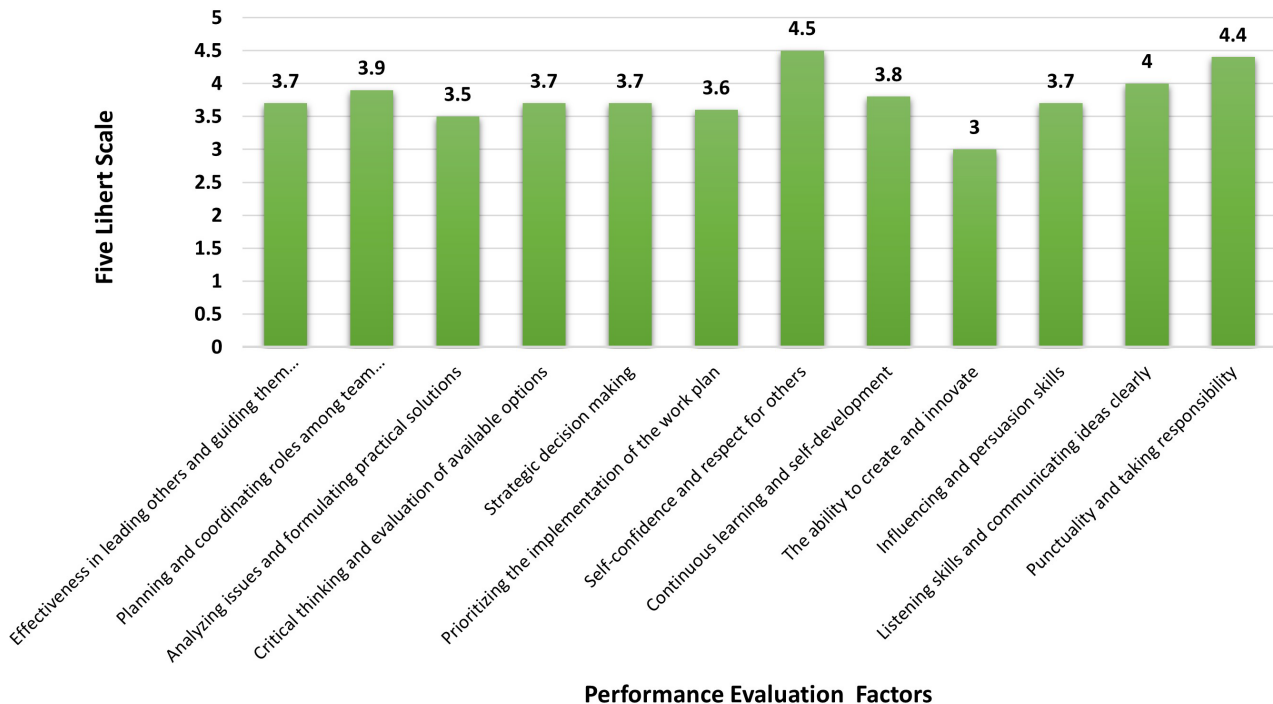
## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Distinguished Practitioners Category (24 Practitioners)

The distinguished practitioners category includes individuals with an academic average of 90% or higher, accounting for 20% of the sample ( $n = 24$ ). This group shows how academic success relates to the development of advanced professional and leadership skills. This supports research indicating that high-achieving students are more likely to develop complex behavioral and leadership abilities dur-

ing professional programs (Boyatzis, 2008; Day et al., 2014).

This group, as shown in **Figure 5**, demonstrates high levels of commitment, responsibility, planning, role coordination, and self-confidence, as well as respect for others. The scores are close to the top, indicating strong skill development. These results support research that highlights responsibility, discipline, and planning as key aspects of leadership (Mintzberg, 2009; Yukl, 2013). Highly committed and responsible individuals can effectively handle organizational roles and complex environments.



**Figure 5.** Distinguished practitioners' performance evaluation.

The focus on planning and coordination shows that these practitioners are prepared for leadership roles. Mintzberg (2009) states that effective managers spend much of their time coordinating, managing resources, and aligning roles with goals. The high scores indicate that the program successfully developed these skills through its curriculum and training.

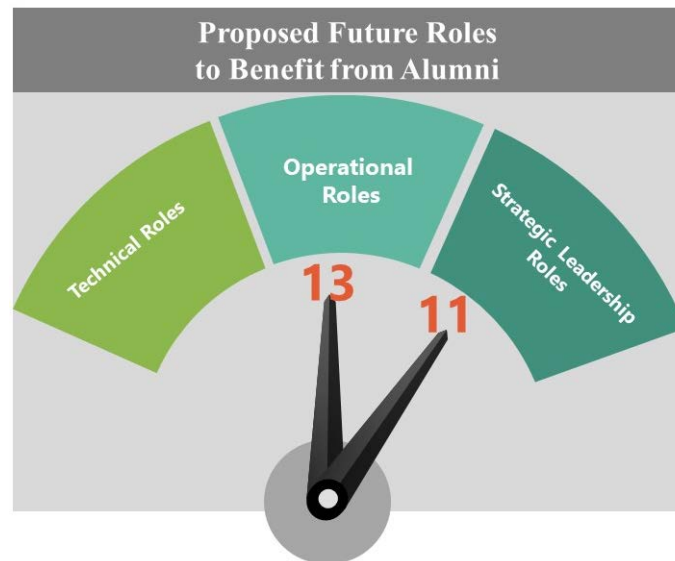
Self-confidence and respect for others, valued interpersonal qualities, closely align with emotional intelligence frameworks proposed by Goleman (2000), who states that self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management are key predictors of leadership success. High scores in these areas suggest that top practitioners are not only technically skilled but also socially and emotionally prepared for leadership roles.

Although leadership skills are generally strong, slightly lower yet still high scores were noted for leading others, communication, and strategic decision-making. Research indicates that such skills develop gradually through experience ra-

ther than training alone (Kolb, 1984; Northouse, 2021). The program provided a solid foundation, but ongoing improvement relies on post-program practice and engagement.

Critical thinking, evaluation, creativity, and innovation scored lower, although they still remain within the “high competency” range. This supports evidence that higher-order skills are difficult to develop through structured training (OECD, 2019a; Fullan, 2016). Such skills require learning environments characterized by uncertainty, open-ended problems, and experimentation—conditions often missing in formal settings.

The proposed future roles, as shown in **Figure 6**, indicate that 54% of practitioners are suited for executive operational roles and 46% for strategic leadership positions. This division suggests a dual skill set that includes strategic oversight and people-oriented leadership. Similar research also highlights the link between decision-making and transformational leadership among top performers (Yukl, 2013; Northouse, 2021).



**Figure 6.** Distinguished practitioners proposed future roles.

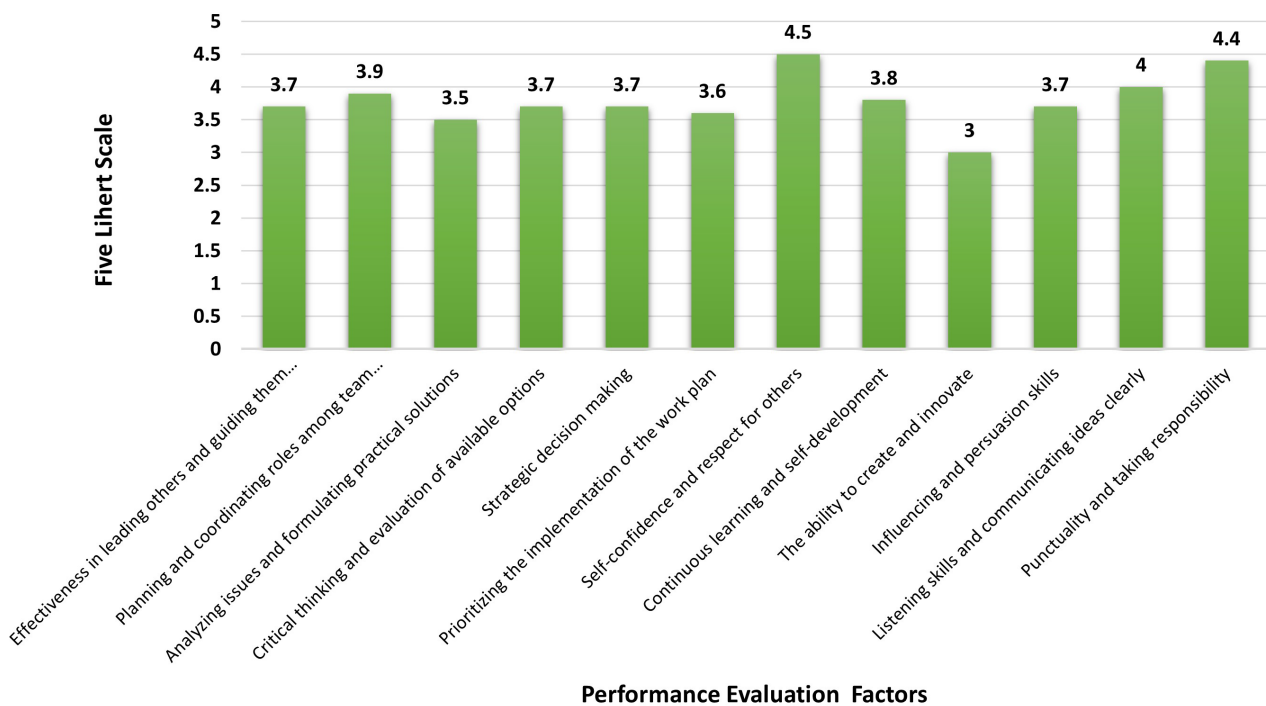
The lack of technical roles highlights the group’s focus on strategic and managerial functions, consistent with research showing that people with strong planning, responsibility, and interpersonal skills are better suited for integrative roles rather than technical ones (Boyatzis, 2008). The program appears to have shifted participants’ identities from task-oriented work to organizational leadership.

The findings confirm that the program effectively develops leadership, organizational, and executive skills among practitioners. However, they also highlight the need for improvements such as problem-based learning, innovation labs, scenario planning, and strategic simulations to enhance critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. These methods would better align the program with modern leadership development models and global best practices.

## 4.2. Good Practitioners Category (42 Practitioners)

This category includes practitioners with an overall academic average of 80% to 87%. A total of 42 out of 118 practitioners fall into this group. While they have benefited from the program overall, their skills still require further development compared to their peers in the distinguished practitioners' category.

This group, as shown in **Figure 7**, indicates that all skilled practitioners demonstrated strong self-confidence and respect for others, with an average score of 4.5 out of 5, followed by commitment and responsibility (4.4/5). In comparison, slightly lower scores were reported for listening skills and the ability to clearly communicate ideas (4.0/5), as well as for planning and coordinating roles within a team (3.9/5).



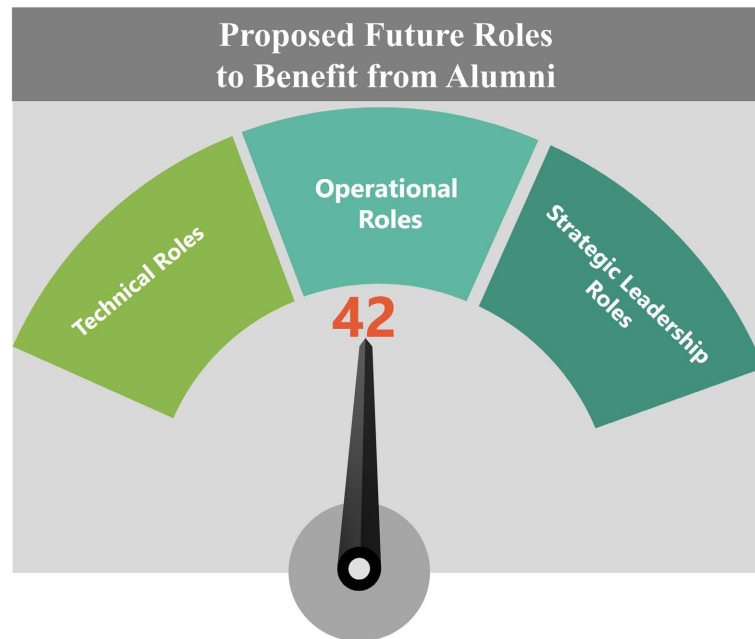
**Figure 7.** Good practitioners' performance evaluation.

The figure further indicates that good practitioners reported relatively lower levels of acquisition in analytical skills related to issue analysis and developing practical solutions (3.5/5), and they scored the lowest in creativity and innovation skills (3.0/5).

The proposed future roles, as shown in **Figure 8**, indicate that all high-performing practitioners see executive roles as the most suitable positions for their future. The figure also shows that high-performing practitioners are not considered appropriate for strategic or technical roles in their future careers.

The findings for the good practitioners' category show a competency profile marked by strong interpersonal and behavioral skills, with less development in higher-level cognitive and strategic abilities. This pattern is consistent with evi-

dence from leadership development and professional training programs conducted at universities and research centers worldwide.



**Figure 8.** Good practitioners proposed future roles.

Research shows that confidence, respect, and commitment are essential early skills, aligning with Goleman (2000) and Boyatzis (2008). At Harvard Kennedy School and UCL, mid-performers often have strong emotional and behavioral skills but may find analytical and strategic abilities more difficult (Day et al., 2014). Good communication skills, as Northouse (2021) notes, rely on practical experience and exposure.

Research from the Australian National University and the University of Toronto shows that mid-level participants usually communicate effectively but often find it somewhat challenging to blend strategies smoothly (Yukl, 2013). Lower scores in planning and role coordination suggest that these individuals rely heavily on structured guidance, which makes sense since Mintzberg (2009) suggests that such skills develop through exposure to complex organizational settings. At INSEAD and London Business School, it is often observed that intermediate performers sometimes struggle to coordinate tasks independently. The most noticeable gaps tend to be in critical analysis, problem-solving, creativity, and innovation—areas that traditional education doesn't always emphasize, as noted by the OECD (2019a). Fullan (2016) emphasizes that fostering innovation requires teaching methods that encourage risk-taking and curiosity, which are often absent from standard training.

Many people choose executive roles because they focus on practical operational tasks. Studies from ETH Zurich and Melbourne show that mid-level workers often prefer roles with clear responsibilities over those involving strategic thinking and

managing uncertainty (Boyatzis, 2008; Yukl, 2013). This limited interest in strategic or technical roles may stem from perceived skill gaps or a lack of confidence in foresight and innovation, as supported by research on leadership readiness (Northouse, 2021).

Overall, the program effectively develops interpersonal and behavioral skills, but incorporating targeted activities such as problem-based learning, design thinking, and real-world case simulations can further enhance analytical, strategic, and innovative abilities.

### 4.3. Intermediate-Level Practitioners Category (52 Practitioners)

This category includes practitioners with an overall academic average of 80% to 87%. There are 52 practitioners in this group. While they have benefited from the program overall, their skills still lag behind those of their peers in the distinguished and good practitioner categories.

This group, as shown in Figure 9, demonstrated moderate gains in commitment, responsibility, planning, role coordination, self-confidence, and respect for others, with an average score of 3.5/5. Meanwhile, they scored lower in listening and clearly communicating ideas (2.8/5), as well as in creativity and innovation.

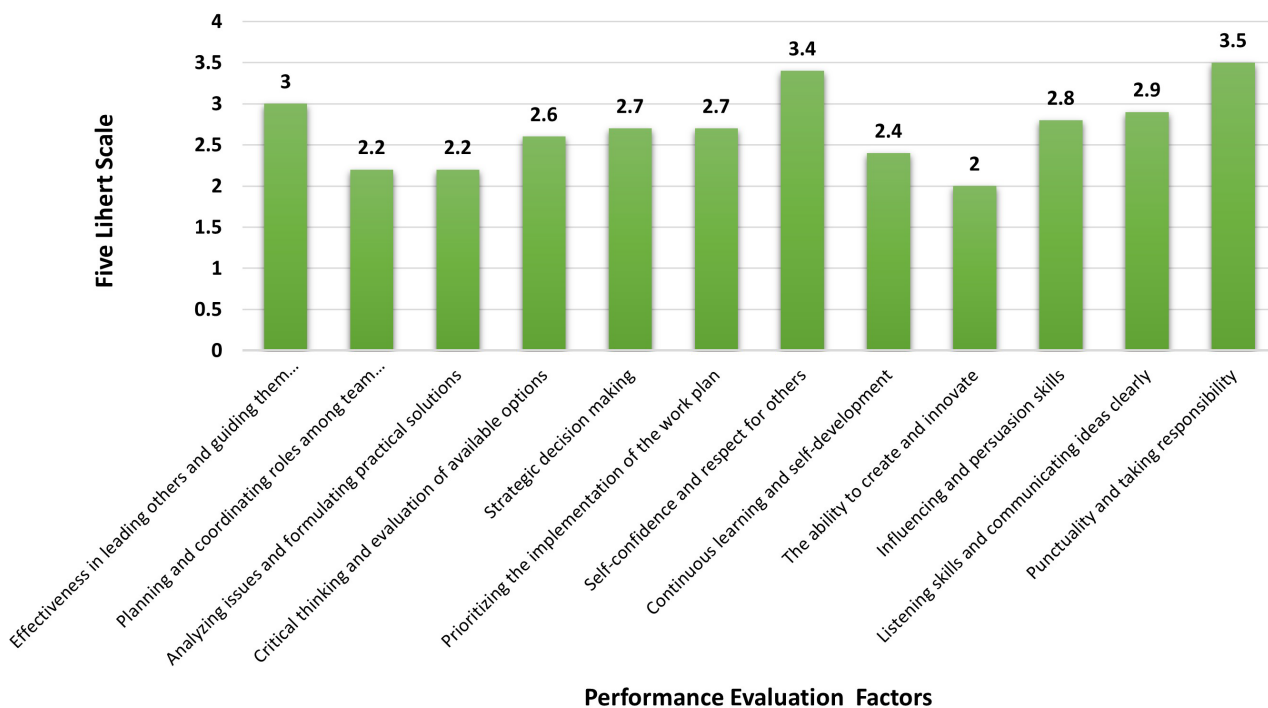
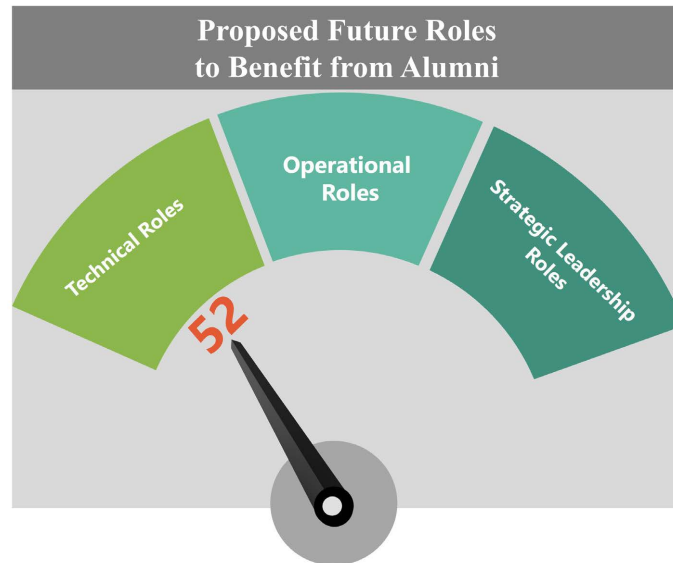


Figure 9. Intermediate-level performance evaluation.

The figure also indicates that this group reported the lowest levels of growth in understanding issues and developing practical solutions (2.2/5). They also scored lower in leading others and guiding efforts to reach goals (2.4/5), as well as in continuous learning, self-improvement, critical thinking, evaluating options, and

fostering creativity and innovation.

The proposed future roles, as shown in **Figure 10**, indicate that technical positions are best suited to intermediate-level practitioners. The figure also suggests that these practitioners are not considered appropriate for strategic leadership or executive roles in future professional assignments.



**Figure 10.** Intermediate-Level proposed future roles.

The competency profile of intermediate practitioners demonstrates early progress, with core skills like commitment and responsibility well developed. However, advanced leadership, analytical, and strategic skills remain limited. This aligns with findings in higher education and professional development.

Moderate scores on commitment and planning align with findings from Manchester and Hong Kong SAR universities, suggesting that intermediate performers tend to follow rules and grasp procedures but lack independence in complex decisions (Mintzberg, 2009; Day et al., 2014). These skills, often learned early because of their structured nature, are vital in professional programs.

Low scores in communication and listening reflect findings from studies at Stanford and Cape Town, where participants had difficulty expressing ideas and engaging in collaborative dialogue, especially in interdisciplinary settings (Goleman, 2000; Northouse, 2021). These findings emphasize that effective communication requires confidence, reflective practice, and an understanding of the context.

Research from ETH Zurich, the National University of Singapore, and McGill University shows that less emphasized areas, such as critical analysis, problem-solving, leadership, and continuous learning, are worth investing time in. These studies emphasize that developing advanced thinking and leadership skills requires patience, hands-on experience, and thoughtful reflection (Kolb, 1984; OECD, 2019a). At this stage, people often rely on what they already know and may struggle with uncertainty or generating new ideas.

The generally low scores on creativity and innovation reflect a global trend in which traditional professional training often overlooks the importance of exploration and risk-taking. Research from MIT Media Lab and the University of Melbourne indicates that innovation skills are best developed through methods such as design thinking, interdisciplinary collaboration, and project-based learning—approaches that are not always fully supported by standard programs (Fullan, 2016).

Focusing on technical roles as the group's primary future direction highlights their strengths. According to research from the University of Warwick and TU Delft, individuals with limited leadership and strategic skills often succeed in technical roles that prioritize task completion, accuracy, and adherence to guidelines (Yukl, 2013). This also reflects their own views and real experiences of skill gaps in strategic and executive positions.

Overall, these findings show that while the program has successfully built a strong foundation of professional discipline and organizational awareness among intermediate practitioners, there is still room for improvement in areas like analytical reasoning, leadership readiness, and innovation capacity. To develop these vital skills, using teaching methods such as scaffolded learning, mentoring, practical case studies, and supervised fieldwork—approaches supported by current research on professional education and leadership development—can be effective.

## 5. Comparative Analytical Discussion of Practitioner Categories

The analysis of the three practitioner groups—Distinguished, Good, and Intermediate—guides us on an inspiring journey of growth, showing how skills, confidence, and readiness develop over time. It's truly motivating to see how the program supports individuals at different stages, preparing them for impactful roles in leadership, executive, and technical areas. The positive progress in core skills such as commitment, responsibility, and self-confidence from Intermediate to Distinguished is very encouraging. It highlights how individuals evolve from simply following rules to developing a strong, confident professional identity (Boyatzis, 2008; Day et al., 2014).

Understanding how experience shapes skills helps us recognize each practitioner's unique journey. As experience grows, individuals develop a broader perspective and think more holistically. Skilled practitioners often excel in specific areas, sometimes with guidance, which is acceptable. As their challenges and responsibilities become more complex, their communication, leadership, and influence skills improve, strengthening their leadership (Mintzberg, 2009; INSEAD; LBS; Northouse, 2021; U. Toronto; ANU).

Developing advanced skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation is challenging and requires practice and experience (OECD, 2019a; Fullan, 2016; MIT; ETH Zurich; NUS). Growth slows with continuous learning, reflecting increased leadership capacity and adaptability (McGill; U. Melbourne).

Understanding how each individual fits into roles is helpful: outstanding practitioners excel in leadership, good practitioners are prepared for leadership, and intermediate practitioners focus on technical work. The program enhances core skills and encourages growth in strategic thinking, cognition, and leadership, emphasizing personalized pathways—mentoring for intermediate-level practitioners, practical leadership training for good practitioners, and simulations and projects for distinguished practitioners.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications for Urban Governance and Capacity Building**

This study demonstrates how professional development programs help practitioners gain essential skills for urban governance, municipal management, and public-sector work. Participants are classified as Distinguished, Good, or Intermediate practitioners, reflecting how their skills match various city management roles. These findings emphasize the importance of competency-based governance, where qualities such as commitment, responsibility, and ethics promote accountability and transparency—key elements of the complex field of municipal management.

The findings offer important guidance for urban governance and reform: experienced practitioners with advanced planning, leadership, and strategic skills are essential for leadership roles and for supporting fair, merit-based growth within the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing. Skilled practitioners, with their operational expertise, are crucial for policy implementation and can progress through targeted leadership development. Intermediate practitioners, mainly focused on procedures, are well-suited for technical roles and benefit from ongoing capacity-building efforts.

A major challenge remains the gap in critical thinking, strategic analysis, and innovation—skills essential for tackling urban issues such as sustainability and smart city development. Overcoming this challenge requires ongoing, problem-focused professional development and cross-sector collaboration. The study suggests a multi-layered training system, customized for different career stages, that enhances skills, resilience, policy consistency, and urban adaptability, aligned with Saudi Vision 2030. Including assessments in HR policies helps ensure training improves governance. Overall, personalized professional development is a vital tool for strengthening municipal governance, capacity, and sustainability across Saudi Arabia.

### **Research Limitations**

While this study offers valuable insights, it has limitations. First, because it was conducted at a single institution, its findings may not apply broadly to GCC municipal agencies or ministries. Second, practitioner classifications are based on self-assessments or internal evaluations, which could bias ratings and not reflect actual performance. Lastly, without a baseline or control group, isolating the pro-

gram's effect from other changes is difficult. Future research should involve multiple institutions, externally validate competencies, and include control groups to strengthen the evidence and support the application of this approach in other GCC urban governance contexts.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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