

## **BAM Conference 2022**

### **Developmental Paper – Leadership and Leadership Development Track**

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#### ***Evolving work-based learning for leadership development in a fast-changing world***

*This developmental paper provides an overview of a collaborative research project to explore the lived experiences of senior leaders as they undergo a work-based learning programme with one of three universities in the North West of England. Qualitative data will be drawn from semi-structured surveys and interviews with leaders and thematically analysed to identify the experiences, key issues and challenges encountered. It is one of the first large scale studies of its kind, examining delivery of work-based leadership programmes across a range of industries and sectors in a post-pandemic context within the UK. The research is intended to provide a rich and descriptive picture of how both leaders and HEIs have adapted their practice during this period, identifying lessons learned, and making suggestions for future delivery of work-based leadership learning in an increasingly uncertain and challenging environment.*

#### **Introduction**

This developmental paper outlines a research project undertaken between three universities, based within the North West of England. Through close engagement with partner organisations, each institution runs postgraduate work-based learning (WBL) programmes at Master's degree level during which senior leaders undertake a programme designed to enhance personal and professional development as part of their lifelong learning journey (Schedlitzki, 2019). Over 9,000 leaders enrolled on the levy funded Senior Leaders Master's Degree Apprenticeship (SLMDA) programme between 2018 and 2020 (Department for Education (DfE), 2021a). Yet the impact of such leadership development programmes remains under-explored despite the significant opportunities for research into their efficacy (Bowman, 2022). The three universities cover Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Merseyside, collectively facilitating leadership development programmes to over 600 work-based learners, each of whom is a current, practising leader. These individuals have led organisations and teams through a sustained period of unprecedented crisis management wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting a unique opportunity to gather previously unexplored data to examine how leaders have continued to adapt and develop during this period of instability. It follows that interpretation of this rich seam of data has the potential to inform the evolution of leadership programmes.

#### **Background**

Leadership and management development is a long-established and mature field that encompasses a diverse range of programme types and delivery modes, but particularly lends itself to work-based learning approach Van Velsor et al (2004). However, the aftershocks of the pandemic combined with the global "megatrends" of technological hyperconnectivity, urbanisation, geopolitical tensions, economic recovery and global climate policy continue to

influence the demand for critical automation-proof skills including creativity, judgement, communication and empathy required by leaders to create sustainable and inclusive teams and organisations (Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC), 2021). Within this context, policy instruments such as degree apprenticeships, Help to Grow and the forthcoming lifetime skills guarantee have created additional opportunities for a range of emergent approaches to leadership training and development (DfE, 2021b). The apprenticeship levy applies to all UK organisations with a payroll exceeding £3 million with employers accessing their contribution for training through apprenticeships from levels 3 to 7. Level 7 was linked to Master's degree provision from 2018 to 2021, with 92 HEIs across England offering SLMDA programmes developing senior leaders in both public and private sectors (DfE, 2021a). The launch of the new Senior Leader Apprenticeship (SLA) Standard in January, 2021 saw the decoupling of the Master's, however most HEIs continue to offer a 'top up'.

Over the past two years, the covid pandemic has affected many aspects of life, and leadership is no exception as individuals moved to home working, and team meetings migrated to virtual and hybrid platforms. Emerging findings from both current work-based learners and alumni across the three institutions demonstrate that workforce issues, including recruitment and retention of staff, resource, and budget constraints (particularly within the public sector) alongside the impact of and recovery from pandemic are the recognised challenges of the future for leaders and their organisations. Leaders identified a need for flexibility and agility, coupled with strong leadership as a response to these challenges; this has potential influence on the value of HEI leadership development programmes, both in content and delivery. This project proposes to glean empirical data as to the ways in which leading is evolving across a broad range of contexts, aiming to inform leadership development programmes.

Whilst much HEI research has examined the effect of the pandemic upon traditional HE student programmes, much less is known of the impact upon work-based learners in an increasingly volatile period of post pandemic economic recovery affecting workforce readiness, supply chains and inflation which continues to present a number of challenges for leaders and by inference, those responsible for leadership development (PWC, 2021; 2022). The emergence of new professions and hybrid or remote working practice combined with automated leadership decision making and artificial intelligence appear to challenge the notion of transformational and authentic leadership models toward greater diffusion of responsibility, requiring independent critical thinking and high levels of individual motivation (Tourish, 2019). In particular, Parry et al. (2021) expose the contemporary challenges faced by leaders, citing deficits linked to emotional intelligence, empathy and interpersonal skills required to gain follower trust and manage a range of potential issues.

Concurrently, a renewed diversity of contemporary work-applied management approaches is emerging across different levels of organisational learning and development as employers and providers adapt, requiring interrogative research to ensure that programmes are robust in meeting emerging policies which continue to manifest themselves in an increasing complex range of ways, particularly within the broader contexts of sustainability and the trend towards hybrid workplaces and workspaces. The central tenets of work-based learning provision comprise flexible, experiential and reflective learning opportunities, facilitated by adaptive and innovative curricula designed to underpin a multiplexity of workplace learning requirements in response to emergent individual and organisational

needs (Johns, 2017; Helyer, 2020). Emerging narratives describe the dominance of blended and online delivery in current leadership work-based learning programmes, yet the significance of this departure from the traditional physical model characterised by face to face social and personal interactivity toward the role of AI in supporting work-based learning remains unclear (Asha Kanwar *et al.*, 2019; Mapletoft and Price, 2020).

This ongoing shift, together with a paucity of contemporary research examining the facilitation and efficacy of virtual and hybrid work-based programmes intended to build communities of learning, reveals gaps in our understanding of the challenges and benefits for leaders and their leadership development, warranting further exploration (Brue and Brue, 2016; Asha Kanwar *et al.*, 2019). The study therefore seeks to determine how work-based learning, action learning and organisational development methods are delivering leadership development programmes, cognisant of relevant theoretical frameworks including social learning theory (Bandura, 1989), social capital theory (Lin *et al.*, 2001) and critical action learning (Brook and Pedler, 2020).

### **Project outline and timeframes**

The initial stage of this project took place between March and June, 2022, comprising an invitation for work-based learners enrolled upon the SLMDA and SLA to complete an electronic semi-structured questionnaire. Preliminary NVivo coding will take place during July, 2022. Subsequently, the qualitative data will be coded manually during July and August, 2022, to uncover themes and patterns. Through a combination of initial questionnaires and follow-up semi-structured interviews during September, 2022 with practising leaders, this project will investigate the place of WBL during the pandemic, exploring how Senior Leader programme teams can learn from the lived experiences of work-based learners as leaders in the workplace, making recommendations for programme development.

### **Methodology**

Senior leaders are defined within this study as those who are currently registered for, or recently completed, a Level 7 SLMDA or SLA programme within one of the three Higher Education Institutions in the North West of England. For these senior leaders, the theoretical knowledge adopted during their studies is viewed as learning at the point of application i.e. when knowledge has been developed into practice (Argyris, 2004). There is an assumption that at times these leaders may not be able to explicitly state this 'theory in action' or how it was learnt, however, through our chosen methodology we aim to explore emerging phenomena in order to access any collective understanding there might be around the current experiences and practices of our leaders. A description of epistemology that encapsulates this way of knowing is that of radical empiricism; acknowledging that the world we live in is largely created by language and perspectives, and in reality is unknowable whilst also acknowledging that there is knowing in the preverbal (Marshall and Reason, 2007).

Adopting a qualitative approach, an electronic semi-structured questionnaire has been developed and distributed in line with the research questions (below), to elicit data pertinent to these questions (de Vaus, 2001). The questionnaire incorporates filter questions enabling the research team to sift according to categories such as gender, level of responsibility. Survey

face validity was tested during an initial pilot testing phase with 10 senior leaders and programme delivery experts, to ensure applicability and provide a 'common-sense' perspective of its construct (Salkind, 2010). Following this, the survey was distributed to all current or recent graduates of Level 7 SLMDA and SLA programmes across the private, public, and voluntary sectors.

Knowledge, skills and behaviours required to address current organisational challenges and the impact that senior leadership apprentice programmes are making in supporting senior leaders to respond to these challenges are explored within the survey. Specific questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, opportunities to access peer networking and groupwork, and potential programme improvements are also incorporated to better understand how HEIs could improve delivery of senior leader development programmes.

From the interpretation of these findings through thematic analysis the researchers will continue to explore the emergent phenomena by developing a semi-structured interview guide for a sample of 30 self-selecting participants in order to identify the experiences, key issues, and challenges encountered by leaders as work-based learners (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). These interviews will focus on the following key areas, to gain a deeper understanding of senior leaders' experiences and views:

#### **Research Questions:**

1. What are the current and future leadership challenges and the ways in which leaders are adapting their practice.
2. To what extent has WBL leadership development benefitted individuals, their leadership practice and their organisations.
3. What are leaders' experiences of remote learning and development.
4. How might programme design and content be improved.

The relationships between each of the three institutions and their partner organisations is strong and, as the research team anticipate organisations being keen to be involved, this study has the potential to strengthen these relationships further. Whilst the funding of the apprenticeship programme is met indirectly from the levy applied on the organisation, the 20% off the job time allocation awarded to the students is a significant and direct investment by the employer. Whilst this project is not specifically looking at return on this investment, it is anticipated that some signposts or indirect indicators will emerge.

It is expected that, for each institution, the findings will support the ongoing evolution of their leadership development programmes in terms of improved delivery mechanisms, content and scope, along with supplying empirical data that will enable the attraction of new partner organisations within the North West and beyond. Programme growth of this nature is also likely to improve organisational retention of high calibre leaders within the region.

Two follow-on projects are proposed using this research project as a foundation. Firstly, a longitudinal study would look to re-interview selected participants after a further 12 and 24 months to establish benefits that have accrued as programme learning has become

embedded in practice. A second study would gather empirical data to explore the extent to which links may be found between participation in work-based leadership development programmes and on, or post-programme career promotion.

## Discussion

This discussion paper invites contributions from conference delegates in three areas:

1. What are your perceptions/experiences of how leadership is evolving through the pandemic?
2. What changes have you made to delivery of your leadership development programmes thus far?
3. Do you foresee changing your programmes of leadership development going forward, and if so in what ways?

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