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Communities of practice for contemporary leadership development and knowledge exchange through work-based learning

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of leaders who have led organisations and teams through an extended period of crisis management whilst completing a UK work-based master's programme. This paper examines contemporary approaches to work-based learning and explores the effect of organisational and workforce demands in a volatile era of global economic uncertainty. Theoretical and conceptual foundations relating to experiential learning, digital education and communities of learning are analysed and discussed. Taking an inductive qualitative approach, the study analyses semi-structured questionnaire data from senior leaders. The widespread adoption of technology exposes challenges to facilitation and the academic-employer interface, impacting upon learning communities and knowledge exchange opportunities. The findings also suggest enhanced leaders' adaptive traits, including confidence and self-reliance. This study illuminates critical issues associated with contemporary work-based learning, specifically relating to prolonged macro uncertainty and the effect upon workplaces as sites of knowledge and learning, and risks to dynamic relationships between the psychosocial work environment, genuine opportunities to learn and learner well-being. This work seeks to inform the design of future programs, specifically in terms developing inter and intra-organisational communities of learning and knowledge exchange to enhance best practice and inculcate crucial leadership skills.

Introduction

Work-based learning is a well-established format through which employers and educators collaborate to provide learners with structured opportunities to gain theoretical knowledge from an educational institution whilst practically applying new learning and simultaneously developing skills in the workplace (Francisco and Boud 2021; Helyer 2015). However, the technological revolution, geopolitical tensions and economic recovery have created an increasingly volatile operating environment in which organisations face multidimensional and continual uncertainties, exacerbated by workforce capability issues including employee transience, lethargy, and burnout, creating new challenges for leadership practice (Alexander et al. 2021; Empson 2021). Within this dynamic context, UK policy instruments such as degree apprenticeships and the lifetime skills guarantee have created additional opportunities for a range of

emergent approaches to leadership training and development, including the enrolment of over 9,000 leaders with 92 English Higher Education Institution (HEIs) on the levy funded Senior Leaders Master's Degree Apprenticeship (SLMDA) between 2018 and 2020 (Department for Education 2021).

Leadership and management development is a mature field encompassing a diverse range of programme types and delivery modes, but particularly lends itself to a work-based learning approach, described as 'all and any learning that is situated in the workplace or arises directly out of workplace concerns' (Lester and Costley 2010, 562). Work-based learning programs operate at the intersection between education and work, thus learning at and through work is equally as important, if not more so, as learning in the educational setting. Yet, whilst contemporary research examines the effect of the turbulent external environment upon traditional HEI programmes, there is little attention paid to its impact upon situated learning in an increasingly volatile period of economic recovery, affecting workforce readiness, supply chains and inflation. Similarly, despite some commonalities with the previous notion of virtual work, contemporary digital transformation exposes the breadth of hybrid and remote work, creating a multiplicity of neoteric challenges faced by leaders, demanding alternative leadership focus and practice (Chamakiotis, Panteli, and Davison 2021). This rapid evolution of working practices combined with automated decision-making tools appear to challenge the notion of transformational and authentic leadership models towards greater diffusion of responsibility, requiring more sophisticated leadership competencies including emotional intelligence, creativity and communication skills, and sustained levels of individual motivation, agility and resilience (Agrawal et al. 2020; Tourish 2019).

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 programs are robust in meeting developing policies, particularly within the broader 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 evolving individual and organisational needs (Boud and Rooney 2015; Helyer 2015). Yet, whilst a robust body of literature examines digital education, there is insufficient attention paid to the consequences of declining in-person opportunities for leaders to engage, learn and network with peers and wider learning communities (Kanwar, Balasubramanian, and Carr 2019; Mapletoft et al. 2022).

This ongoing shift, together with a paucity of research examining the effects of hybrid and remote leading and learning within contemporary workplace settings reveals gaps in our understanding of the challenges faced by leaders, and specifically the interventions and support required to underpin the development of leadership skills and behaviours, warranting further exploration (Chamakiotis, Panteli, and Davison 2021; Kanwar, Balasubramanian, and Carr 2019). Framed within the extant research on work-based learning, this study seeks to contribute towards the emerging, yet fragmented literature by examining leaders' views of the contemporary workplace juxtaposed with remote and hybrid learning, and the subsequent effect upon leadership development.

Reporting the findings of data gathered from semi-structured questionnaires with 31 senior leaders, the paper showcases the experiences of individuals who have led organisations and teams through a sustained period of global uncertainty. Our empirical findings reveal the extent to which providers have deployed technology in a more permanent shift away from traditional face-to-face delivery (Abu Talib, Bettayeb, and Omer 2021) exposing the associated benefits and challenges for both learners and HEIs in terms of socially orientated learning and knowledge exchange (Anderson 2020; Francisco and Boud 2021). We also illuminate several critical themes arising from the prolonged macro environment uncertainty and explore the dynamic relationships between the psychosocial work environment and genuine opportunities to learn (Agrawal et al. 2020; Arunprasad et al. 2022; Urbanaviciute et al. 2021).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows; the literature review examines the influence of digitalised work-based learning programme delivery, juxtaposed with the current workplace conditions and the subsequent impact upon learning communities. Following this, the methodological considerations involved in this research project are outlined before the findings are presented and analysed. The discussion and conclusions follow, including an outline of the implications of the paper's findings for practitioners and policymakers as well as the paper's limitations.

AIEd for work-based learning

Whilst much has been written about online education in recent years, new opportunities for technology enabled programme delivery, described as AIEd (Artificial Intelligence in Education) (Schiff 2021) are emerging, featuring a range of efficiencies for providers, learners and organisations including learning on demand, at any location and duration, extending benefits of time, cost, sustainability, accessibility and inclusivity, together leading to a prevalence of hybrid and remote learning for work-based programmes (Asgari et al. 2022; Lester and Crawford–Lee 2022). Many inherent tensions between work-based learning and traditional HEI provision have dissipated through digital enablement of flexible individualised support, distance collaboration and bespoke negotiation of projects which better recognise the different needs and autonomous nature of work-based learners compared with full-time undergraduate students (Naish and Minton 2015).

Yet the combination of flexible work and learning arrangements also intensifies opportunities to multi-task, potentially signalling that work continues to take priority over the secondary endeavour of learning (Boud and Rooney 2015; Reunamäki and Fey 2022) exacerbated by limited timeframes of motivation (Anderson 2020) and variable quality of facilitation (Feenberg 2008). Schiff (2021) argues that contemporary educators can close the AIEd gaps of socio-engagement through skilled moderation and synthesis of complex ideas and it certainly appears that the support provided by AIEd platforms has become the expectation, largely preferred by the majority of learners (Abu Talib, Bettayeb, and Omer 2021; Asgari et al. 2022). Yet, doubts remain over the efficacy of AIEd in socialising learners, particularly whether it is possible to inculcate rich peer to peer discussion and contextualised narrative to challenge ideas to stimulate the type of collaborative learning, reflection and action required to master complex skills (Dreyfus 2013; Gray 2007).

Boud and Rooney (2015) emphasise the central roles played by social relationships, learning mediation and practical application, specifically when intertwined across both the workplace and the provider. Social learning involving interaction, dialogue and cross-pollination of ideas can underpin collective, contextualised reflection, enabling critical enquiry into social phenomena and organisational processes and augmenting leaders' adaptive capacities (Gray 2007; Helyer 2015).

Given the rapid pace of change, it is more relevant than ever that the growing dimension of inter-organisational knowledge generation is accepted as the ultimate catalyst for transformative learning, requiring a greater consideration of the type of implicit and informal learning which takes place beyond the mass production approach of educational establishments (Boud and Rooney 2015; Kanwar, Balasubramanian, and Carr 2019). However, despite the prospect of expanded learning opportunities afforded by membership of multiple communities of practice beyond organisational boundaries (Fuller and Unwin 2003) there is less clarity concerning the contemporary role of learning providers and the emerging impact of mass digitalisation of communication amongst work-based learners. Weakened social connections within leadership development programmes seem likely to result in under-exposure to a diversity of intercultural, sector and industry interactions, reducing the breadth of opportunities from individual to inter-organisational levels of knowledge exchange (Bishop and Hordern 2017; Mapletoft et al. 2022). Similarly, the propensity to continue to adopt technology for tripartite progress reviews and consultations may also significantly alter the quality of inter-organisational knowledge exchange, creating a range of possible implications for providers and their academic currency (Lester and Crawford–Lee 2022).

Work-based learning in the contemporary workplace

Applied learning within the workplace is an extraordinarily powerful tool to equip individuals to respond and thrive across boundaries and levels. Yet, commitment to organisational and individual change coupled with wide variations in individual opportunities to learn and develop transformative leadership capabilities remain trapped in the inherent cultures and psychological climates of the organisation, significantly impacting upon the development of professional skills (Adisa et al. 2022; Malik and Garg 2017). It remains challenging for organisations to focus upon promoting personal development and growth through enriching work activities, during prolonged periods of crisis or instability with tensions emerging in many organisations between the degree of autonomy over the location of work, juxtaposed with the governance and bureaucracy over the timing and amount of work (Mazmanian 2013; Sull, Sull, and Zweig 2022).

Similarly, the potential for temporal variance between 'expansive and restrictive approaches' for optimal learning within organisations is increasingly impacted by dynamic external drivers and economic factors beyond the organisation's control (Fuller and Unwin 2003, 411). Disruptive change and large scale digital transformation across geographically bound organisations are forcing paradigm shifts in organisational hierarchies towards cross-functional, flatter structures, requiring structurally bound corporations to re-cast entrenched HRD policies to ensure that learning solutions meet changing leadership development requirements (Biron et al. 2021; Harsch and Festing 2020; Ragas and Ragas 2021). The trend towards development and decentralisation of HR activities is placing increasing pressure upon ill-equipped leaders as change agents, underpinned by organisational expectations that they can competently master, model and champion multi-faceted new technologies and working practices juxtaposed with managing growing concerns of stress and well-being amongst team members (Arunprasad et al. 2022; Link and Müller 2015).

From a sustainability and cost-efficiency perspective, the rapid implementation of innovative HRM technology during the pandemic appears to have accelerated digital training and monitoring, in addition to well-being and employee engagement measures (Duggan et al. 2020; Ravid et al. 2020). Concurrently, the pre-disposition for top-down control and availability surveillance seems to be manifesting in part by increased 'face time' via a rapid multiplication of virtual and HyFlex meetings characterised by a reduction in down time, together detracting from genuine opportunities to connect and learn (Adisa et al. 2022; Reunamäki and Fey 2022). Conversely, digital platforms, disparate work patterns and heavy workloads may collectively inhibit the potential for internal collaboration, not only altering organic connections and opportunities for critical action derived from 'micro moments' but also the way in which micro-social interactions and serendipitous occurrences incrementally influence macro-cultures and broader team dynamics and wider organisational cohesiveness and cultures (Stokes et al. 2015). Not only does this limit opportunities for different actors to intentionally establish human-centric support and learning interventions, it also further fragments the precarious link between employees' well-being and the psychosocial work environment, eroding trust, organisational identity, engagement and commitment (Moore et al. 2022; Sull, Sull, and Zweig 2022; Urbanaviciute et al. 2021).

These shifting locations of psychological empowerment and control expose new knowledge gaps in leadership and team member working practices, requiring leaders who can influence people and processes to engender a shared leadership approach (Arunprasad et al. 2022; Chamakiotis, Panteli, and Davison 2021; Empson 2021). Extant research consistently exposes the crucial alignment of situated learning pathways with social practice, underpinned by collegial interaction and integration with peers and leaders to engender empathy and trust (Hopkins and Figaro 2021; Poell et al. 2018). Specifically, the notion of team reflection as a collaborative mechanism is thought to enable participants to collectively learn and explore through organic interaction and shared problem solving to facilitate the transfer and application of experience to knowledge, developing implicit practice behaviours and creating positive change through

socially orientated learning (Francisco and Boud 2021; Gray 2007; Poell et al. 2018). Here, the enhancement of community learning opportunities is likely to be reinforced by judicious workload planning involving multi and trans-disciplinary, cross-organisational projects to inculcate weak ties (Empson 2021; Fuller and Unwin 2010); the creation of smaller sub-teams (Reunamäki and Fey 2022); nurturing of professional associations and networks (Fuller and Unwin 2016); and the modelling of behaviours which promote interaction and collaboration via cutting edge technologies (Arunprasad et al. 2022).

In examining the tensions associated with work-based learning framed within the two principal contexts of programme delivery and the workplace, a further emergent issue is the unknown extent of and pace at which organisations and educators will be forced to continue to adapt policies to align with rapid technological transformations. This raises questions about the creeping permanence and suitability of previously temporary solutions, particularly given the foreboding manifestation of a potentially toxic mix of contemporary workforce challenges including emotional detachment, isolation, lethargy and burnout (Alexander et al. 2021; Empson 2021). There also remains a lack of clarity concerning the role of learning providers in expanding learning opportunities through additional learning communities which transcend organisational boundaries to meet the learning needs of an increasingly dispersed and digitalised workforce. Therefore, how might these issues impact upon contemporary work-based learning, both within and beyond the workplace and classroom; and the associated development opportunities for leadership practice? The next stage of the paper develops a methodology which underpins a closer examination of these potential challenges and issues to reveal insights drawn from a range of practising senior leaders.

Research design

This study draws upon the experiences of practising, developing leaders to reveal how they, their organisations and their learning environment have adapted during this transformational period, identifying lessons learned and making recommendations for future delivery of work-based experiential learning. As such, the research approach is informed by an interpretive epistemology, one that emphasises context and experience in the discovery of reality (Antwi and Hamza 2015) and contends that this reality cannot be reduced to measurable observations, but rather can be interpreted to reveal underlying meanings (Wilkins, Neri, and Lean 2019). Accordingly, the study research questions focussed on participants understanding, and associated meaning made, of work-based learning in a post-pandemic context (Gephart 2004) by taking an interpretive approach to explore the experiences of leaders as learners to identify key benefits and challenges encountered with hybrid delivery of work-based learning in a post-pandemic context.

Research questions

In what ways are senior leaders from work-based learning programmes adapting to new ways of learning and leadership?
To what extent are work-based learning programmes benefiting individuals, leaders and the wider organisation?

The initial stage of this project took place between March 2022 and May 2022. Participants were all learners or recent graduates of work-based learning programmes in the Northwest of England. The sample included all learners who were currently enrolled on or had recently completed the level 7 SLMDA or SLA programme within one of the three Universities. These leaders as learners represented a range of sectors and industries including the public, private, and voluntary sector and therefore provided a broad perspective on the topic. Ethical approval complied with the authors' own institutional protocols and the Chartered Association of Business Schools (2015) ethics guide.

A qualitative survey was designed, consisting of a series of open-ended questions with unrestricted response space, and closed option demographic questions. Face validity, or pretesting (Willis 2016) was determined through an initial pilot with ten senior leaders and programme delivery facilitators to ensure applicability and to provide a 'common sense' perspective of its construct (Salkind 2010).

Data collection

Learners were invited to participate through an email sent via the researchers utilising electronic contact lists. The email included an introduction outlining the purpose and rationale for the research information about the purpose of the study and that participation was voluntary and would not affect their programme delivery or outcomes (Jankowicz 2013). Consent was considered to have been obtained by participants' voluntary completion of the questionnaire and the returns were anonymised by individual and institution.

The survey was self-administered online, the dominant mode for qualitative survey delivery (Toepoel 2017) and distributed via the Joint Information Systems Committee Online Surveys tool. Participants were asked to respond in their own words to support the production of rich data that explored participants subjective experiences (Braun and Clarke 2006). Questions were designed to access learners' experience of and perspective on the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to address their current organisational challenges and the impact that the leadership programmes had made in supporting their response to these challenges was explored. Specific questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, opportunities to access peer networking and groupwork, and potential programme improvements were incorporated to better understand how HEIs can improve delivery of senior leadership programmes.

Survey respondents were located within a range of sectors, with a predominance in the public sector, reflecting the broader demographic of levy-funded work-based learning programmes. Most participants (81%) were working in public sector organisations including education, local government or health and social care. The remaining participants (19%) were based within a range of private sector organisations, across small, medium, and large enterprises including engineering, manufacturing, hospitality, transport, and business consultancy.

Data analysis

In accordance with the interpretivist paradigm, thematic analysis was used to identify emerging themes, following Braun and Clarke's 2006 six-step framework (Table 1). To ensure that data was not merely summarised but rather analysed to fully address the research questions, a semantic, as opposed to latent, analysis was adopted whereby analysis did not attempt to examine underlying assumptions or ideologies, nor look 'for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84). In summary, the analysis sought to identify themes that would contribute to better understanding of the main research question around the students' perceptions of their learning experience.

Thirty-one questionnaires were returned, and the data collected from the questionnaires were coded manually. The researchers began with no pre-conceived ideas of what they might see within the returns, and because the semi-structured questions allowed for participants to use their own language in responding as they saw fit, informed practice judgements were made by the researchers to cluster the results into themes. Therefore, the analysis was inductive with themes emerging from the survey findings. The responses readily gravitated into two categories: those which had common factors, enabling clusters to form, and a significant number of 'outliers' i.e. single answers that were specific to the individual and their context, but which proved to be challenging to relate to responses from other

Table 1. Application of Braun and Clarke's 2006 six-step framework.

Step	Application
Step 1: Become familiar with the data	Notes were made of early impressions formed following a close reading of the data followed by a discussion between two members of the research team. Coding was undertaken by hand utilising hard copies of surveys.
Step 2: Generate initial codes	Organisation of data into initial codes utilising an inductive approach informed by the research questions. Codes were developed using open-coding which were developed and modified throughout the process. Each survey response was coded independently by the two members of the research team. Codes were then compared, discussed, and modified.
Step 3: Search for Themes	Themes were created following an examination of codes, and discussion regarding which fit into themes. For example, several codes related to the advantages of online delivery and clearly fitted together into a theme. Most codes were associated with one theme, with some fitting in to more than one.
Step 4: Review Themes	Themes were reviewed, modified, where necessary, based on comparison of notes and discussion between the two research team members responsible for analysis. The review process involved reflecting on the contextual 'fit' of the themes, and if there were any sub-themes.
Step 5: Define Themes	This final review of the themes was intended to 'identify the 'essence' of what each theme is about' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 92), and inform the final step
Step 6: Write-up	

participants. As the coding unfurled, the researchers categorised the clusters that were emerging into four broad themes: leadership factors concerning self; those in which the team take prominence; organisation-level factors; and those which are external – government policy for example.

The following section begins by drawing on the data which exposes the challenges that leaders find themselves currently facing. It then considers the advantages and disadvantages the participants perceive in on-line learning as a vehicle for leadership development. The section then records the key benefits that leaders have drawn from their programmes of study. Themes and summaries throughout are supported by exemplary statements drawn from the survey.

Findings

Challenges

Respondents were asked what they perceived to be their biggest challenge currently, and the main challenges looking ahead. There was much common ground across these two questions, with the main responses relating to the issue of budgets and funding:

> *The current economic environment.*
> *Doing more with less is a constant theme!*

Comments such as this encompassed many similar responses which also highlighted that not only are leaders seeing financial budgets being squeezed post pandemic, but they predict that this pressure is not going to ease any time in the foreseeable future. The more specific facets of efficiency and productivity were also identified:

> *How to deliver efficiency and positive outcomes with reduced budgets.*
> *Less resources with an expectation that performance needs to improve.*

It is important here to emphasise the sense of urgency that participants expressed about this issue. It can be argued that financial challenges are a frequently occurring issue across time and space, however the scale and commonality of this came across consistently, both in the number of responses and in the language used:

> *Very significant budget pressures.*

Lack of funding.
Lack of resources.

The second issue that was raised, almost as frequently as budgets, is that of recruitment/retention and succession, and these factors clustered into three distinct themes: low morale; uncertainty of direction; the impact of COVID.

To begin, the challenges of both the recruitment and the retention of staff were seen to have an adverse effect on the morale of those who remain:

An exhausted and potentially ill- equipped workforce. An ageing workforce. Previous poor succession planning.
Recruitment and retention of staff (combined with) *mass exodus of experience.*
Retention of staff in the long term as colleagues become more disillusioned and frustrated.

Again, the number of expressions of concern in this area, combined with the bluntness of the responses, demonstrated that recruitment and retention is not only a challenge in the under-staffing that remains, but which through the extra pressures falling on those that remain can exacerbate the retention issue. Participants emphasised that these concerns do not necessarily lend themselves to quick or simple fixes, and expressed their views on the longer-term impacts of these issues:

Longer term workforce challenges will need to be met, currently in a workforce crisis.
Pressures remain continuous and are not sustainable.

The next most common issue raised was that of employees having the right skills, existing employees developing new skills, and the adaptation of the workforce to a fast-changing world. In other words, even if recruitment and retention are addressed, ensuring that the workforce are suitably educated/trained, and have the capabilities required for their current roles and the flexibility to acquire new skills:

Training of current staff to increase breadth of workload.
Lack of trained professionals.

As leaders themselves, the respondents noted that not only must the operational workforce be suitable equipped with the skills they need, but the leadership and management teams also:

Skills – the right people with the right leadership skills, experience and qualifications in leadership roles.
Lack of leadership nationally.

Further to this, it was recognised that working in isolation, or a silo mentality was not conducive to developing cross-department or interdisciplinary skills.

Collaborative working skills and ability to influence those from other organisations and other disciplines.
Working well strategically with partner organisations across the region.

As a component of this area, the need for appropriate skills to keep pace with a rapidly changing environment was seen to be a challenge. The ability for the organisation, the team, and individual members' to learning and adapt to new technologies are noted as a significant theme.

Willingness to engage with and adopt new technologies.
Technological change – for example there are new airfield technologies which mean replacing and upgrading existing infrastructure.

Having identified some of the key issues that leaders find themselves dealing with post-pandemic, we turn to the learning vehicle that has been offered during the pandemic. Each HEI was forced to adopt on-line learning at short notice, in step with others across the globe. Perhaps an advantage of this occurring at one time meant that the learners were not only the recipients of on-line communication but also the deliverers through their roles as leaders and so had a degree of empathy and understanding that might not have been the case had a singular HEI implemented this strategy.

Through the questionnaires, the participants were asked to comment on what they saw as the advantages and disadvantages of on-line learning.

Advantages of on-line learning

By some margin, the main advantage identified by the participants was the flexibility it offered. The opportunity to work within one's own timescale and space was noted by several of the participants:

> Advantage is easily accessible and convenient.
> Personally, I prefer it as I can learn in my own environment which is more relaxing for me.

Naturally, the demograph of senior leadership learners is such that they not only have work roles that are busy and with a high level of responsibility, but they frequently have busy domestic lives and may be carers for children, parents, or both. As such, on-line learning was reported to have given them more flexibility to manage their time around these demands:

> Online learning more flexible and accessible for people with busy working lives.
> I like online learning. Means flexibility as we are all working full-time jobs and I have a small child, so it suits me very well.

Linked to this, and again with a significant response from participants was the factor of not needing to travel to the institution. Participants saw this as a saving, not only of time but on fuel/travel costs.

> No need to travel and allows more time to focus on what is needed.
> . . . means less travel and good for the environment.

Flexibility of time, and the absence of a necessity to travel were seen as the two biggest advantages to on-line learning.

Disadvantages of on-line learning

The main and almost unanimous factor identified as disadvantageous to on-line learning was that of a lack of interaction with other learners which linked with the challenge of building relationships and feelings of isolation/loneliness:

> More isolated and loss of interaction with lecturers, facilitators and peers.
> Don't get to gel with a cohort, miss out on shared knowledge.

This sense of isolation was seen as leading to facilitators not knowing engagement levels within the group, particularly as discussion was noted to be truncated through virtual learning platforms, both formally and informally through the conversations that take place during breaks/lunch:

> Lack of discussion time, no idea on the facilitator's behalf if people are genuinely engaged,
> lacks interaction between facilitator and audience.

Because of this, it was noted that it then becomes harder to build up the networks that enable participants to interact and learn from one another:

> Harder to build relationships with colleagues but not impossible.
> Lack of social interaction, including breakout group work – it's just not the same online although it has improved as we have all become more used to meeting online.

Leadership learning undertaken through programmes

The first factor that was identified through the questionnaires was that of increased personal confidence:

> *My own professional development – I have become more confident as a practitioner and leader.*

This widely expressed growth in confidence further exhibited itself in other ways which included a perceived increase in resilience, a capability that leaders require when undertaking change:

> *Increased confidence in dealing with challenges- increased resilience.*
> *Given me greater self-confidence and reliance, important to drive through changes.*
> *I have been more assertive in a positive way, I have identified my areas of*
> *strength and weaknesses.*

This improved confidence also helped with the feeling of imposter syndrome which is not infrequently held by those elevated to more senior roles within an organisation:

> *Has increased my self-confidence and reduced 'imposter syndrome' feelings, enabling me to take a more proactive, confident and professional approach.*

The second factor that participants commented on was that of clearer strategic thinking/seeing bigger picture/new perspectives:

> *My understanding of situations is more strategic than before.*
> *Understanding strategy has been really important. Our organisation is full of short-term thinking and no long-term planning at all. Often wrong decisions are made for the long term just to satisfy an immediate need.*

This was also expressed in terms of 'big picture', suggesting that those undertaking the leadership programmes have become more aware of wider issues than they may have been previously:

> *I've learnt to be more perceptive and see the bigger picture.*
> *I see the organisation as a whole system and see how our team fits into this rather than just being concerned about my own team.*
> *System working, greater knowledge about impact of systems.*

Also, respondents noted that they had come to appreciate some of the external factors that impact on their organisations:

> *I have a better understanding of the impact of external factors – organisational environment.*
> *I now place greater value on building relationships across health and wider organisations.*

We can see that, for many of the respondents, two of the most significant developments through the programme were the growth in their confidence, and their understanding of the strategic or big picture perspective on their team and organisation. Of course, at the heart of leadership is the task of leading other people or followers to a common purpose, and it is here also that we see respondents reflect on their learning and development:

> *Made me re-assess how I approach management of people in relation to the work environment I am now in.*
> *Improved my negotiating and influencing skills, leading to better ability to manage challenge and conflict.*

The subject of leadership styles also produced a cluster of significance:

> *Understanding leadership strategies and finding the one that best fits my style whilst also taking on board benefits of other styles.*
> *Made me realise that my natural style perhaps isn't suited to the organisation.*
> *Made me address my management style to suit the organisation rather than trying to change the organisation to suit my management style.*

We can see through these responses that, whilst leaders have been going through challenging times, the programmes they have undertaken have been of significant benefit to their ability to lead.

In summary, this study has given us an insight into three areas. First, some of the specific challenges facing leaders as we move to a post-COVID-19 landscape. Whilst the challenges they face are myriad, three key themes have emerged from the responses, and these are: budget

(doing more with less); recruitment/retention/succession planning; the constant need to adapt and update skills to match technological developments. Second, the specific learning that participants have undertaken during a programme of leadership development provided by a university, and in conjunction with their employer, demonstrating some of the advantages and disadvantages of the on-line learning brought about by the demands of the pandemic. Third, an insight into the learning that has taken place on their respective leadership development programmes, demonstrating that, whilst the interactive and peer networking element of learning appears less strong than would have been the case with in-person delivery, significant personal and professional development has taken place which has resulted in greater confidence as leaders, able to see and think more strategically than hitherto.

Discussion

This section aims to discuss contemporary approaches to work-based learning leadership programme delivery in relation to our findings and to explore the growing requirement to adapt to emerging policies, organisational and workforce demands and societal influences in a volatile era of economic and pandemic recovery.

Benefits and challenges of AIEd

The findings confirm the extent to which educational providers are seizing the opportunity to use AIEd, and align with the work of Lester and Crawford–Lee (2022) and Asgari et al. (2022) in confirming that maximum flexibility in delivery methods is required to meet the different needs and demands of work-based learners, specifically in terms of time and sustainability. The data also suggest a preference for online learning, extending the findings of Asgari et al. (2022) and Abu Talib, Bettayeb, and Omer (2021). Yet, whilst the data confirms the perceived benefits of time saving and sustainability, it also exposes tensions concerning poor facilitation, diminishing engagement and inclusion and intensifying isolation, endorsing the concerns of Asgari et al. (2022) and Dreyfus (2013). Although Schiff (2021) suggests that skilled facilitators can close gaps in socio-engagement via the stimulation of rich peer to peer discussion, the study exposes the additional complexities of engagement driven by the external environment in which work-based learners are situated, and their concurrent multiplicity of workload challenges. The high pressure, high workload environments described within the data suggest an absence of down-time, detracting from genuine opportunities to connect and learn, echoing the concerns of Poole et al. (2023) and Boud and Rooney (2015). Whilst work activities continue to be viewed as the central endeavour at the cost of learning, it is likely that many unassailable engagement and isolation issues will continue to emerge for facilitators to manage, including the propensity for simultaneous remote working and AIEd, driven by increasingly intensive workloads and technology enabled workplace distractions.

Extensive reliance upon AIEd also exposes academia's reduced physical interaction with leaders and by inference, their operating environments and sectors. Disaggregation of teaching from the coal-face of contemporary workplaces is creating a critical blind-spot concerning knowledge currency and transfer, in addition to reducing motivation and facilitation for academic leaders to improve and maintain their own expert knowledge and understanding of practice, illuminating the concerns of Anderson (2020). Greater collaboration and cohesion between academia and employer is of critical significance if universities are to provide effective work-based learning leadership programmes to support recruitment, retention and career progression.

Learning in the contemporary workplace

The data gathered about the workplace as a site of learning is particularly relevant given the continued turbulent external pressures upon organisations, and here the respondents acknowledge

their greater awareness of, and adaptation to re-engineered routine processes to maximise flexibility, productivity and preservation of resources, building upon the work of Chamakiotis, Panteli, and Davison (2021). Here, whilst the data expose a prevalence of the type of cost-efficient, remote and hybrid working practices described by Selmer et al. (2021) and Biron et al. (2021), the findings also reveal uncertainty concerning the extent to which organisations will continue to be forced to adapt policies to align with rapid technological transformations and critical long-term workforce challenges, risking normalising Fuller and Unwin's 2016 description of restrictive learning environments.

As a substantial part of work-based learning hours are allocated to learning at and through work, prolonged periods of work pressure have significant potential to impact upon individual learning capacity and programme outcomes. An associated issue is the creeping permanence of previously temporary workforce solutions, further fragmenting the precarious link between employees' well-being and the psychosocial work environment described by Moore et al. (2022) and Urbanaviciute et al. (2021). The findings here reveal a potentially toxic mix of contemporary workforce challenges including low morale, isolation, lethargy and burnout, echoing the concerns of Alexander et al. (2021) and Empson (2021). Prolonged periods of pressure, continuous change and a lack of training appear to be contributing towards an emerging, longer-term workforce crisis, particularly as the data hint at the discernible shift in employee demand and personal agency, driving post-pandemic demand for flexible, decent and meaningful employment warned of by Sull, Sull and Zweig (2022). Nevertheless, the research confirms leaders' proactive approach towards learning and increasing levels of confidence and self-reliance and resilience, described as crucial adaptive traits by Harsch and Festing (2020) and Agrawal et al. (2020). However, whilst the findings reveal the existing capacity of leaders to continually adapt, the extent to which they can continue with such challenging resource constraints or beyond the term of the programme without the type of regular 'broaden and build' opportunities endorsed by Fredrickson (2001) remains unclear.

Knowledge exchange and communities of practice

The research reveals a pattern of weakening social connections amongst the learning community, likely to result in under-exposure to a diversity of intercultural, sector and industry interactions. The finding here builds upon the work of Mapletoft et al. (2022) and illuminates the prolonged period during which opportunities from individual to inter-organisational levels of knowledge exchange are affected, extending far beyond the crisis management period of the pandemic. Francisco and Boud (2021) raise concerns that reduced physical connections can erode confidence, however the findings counter this view, revealing significant personal and professional development with greater confidence as strategic leaders. Here, it appears that the influence derived from weak ties and micro-connections through shared projects and learning remains a powerful opportunity, reflecting the views of Empson (2021) and the seminal work of Granovetter (1973).

The data also indicate leaders' increasing awareness of others, both within immediate workplace teams and across the wider organisation, reflecting aspects of Arunprasad et al'.s (2022) crucial agile leadership qualities required to motivate others and build social networks and communities of practice across multiple stakeholders. However, the findings also reveal that the radical alteration in the way that work, communication and learning are organised is leading to an uneasy coalescence of developing leaders who may rarely physically interact with their peers and managers. Similarly, the issues of resource also suggest that access to in-between spaces at work may currently be severely compromised, so the extent to which leaders have been able to influence organisational structures through interventions such as creating smaller sub-teams for more frequent communication (Reunamäki and Fey 2022) or by promoting interaction and collaboration through skilled engagement with innovative technologies remains unclear (Arunprasad et al. 2022). Here, the study exposes the fundamental role played by communities of practice, particularly in terms of their untapped potential to expand learning opportunities within and across organisations and providers in both the physical and the digital world.

Conclusions

Effective work-based learning programs bridge the gap between education and work, requiring policy-makers and educators to devote an equal amount of attention to learning conditions in the workplace. The widespread revolution of workplaces and job roles has led to emerging lifelong learning strategies intended to support individuals build a continuously evolving suite of critical skills and capacities across multiple career patterns within progressively extended working lifetimes (Dalrymple et al. 2021). Continued expansion of degree apprenticeship and technical-level programmes along with new funding initiatives including lifelong learning entitlements and the increasingly likely review of the apprenticeship levy for a more agile response to skills challenges will both require significant work-based learning programme growth and diversification, demanding a clearer understanding of the experiences of learners and opportunities to learn at and through work.

Our paper presents important findings for the future of work-based learning programme development by examining the dual effects of hybrid and remote leading and learning within contemporary workplace settings, through an exploration of the views of leaders as learners at three diverse institutions during a prolonged period of unprecedented change and uncertainty. The pandemic and ongoing turbulent aftermath have created many opportunities for educators and employers to collaboratively advance remote and hybrid programmes for leadership development, however we have exposed several latent challenges, meaning that wider potential benefits derived from community networks have not yet been fulfilled.

Extending the work of Chamakiotis, Panteli, and Davison (2021), our study indicates an improvement in leaders' adaptive traits, including confidence and self-reliance in response to the multiplicity of challenges faced. However, the prolonged period of radical workplace technological change, juxtaposed with constrained resources and a lack of training leading to lethargy and burnout, continues to reduce opportunities for community learning and development at work. The findings illuminate the critical issues associated with contemporary work-based learning, specifically related to prolonged macro uncertainty and the effect upon workplaces as sites of learning, whereby uncontrolled pressure continues to risk the dynamic relationships between the psychosocial work environment, genuine opportunities to learn and ultimately, employee and learner well-being. Unsustainable workloads and cumulative expectations of productivity combined with the increasingly facilitative role of AI for many tasks make it difficult to predict the extent to which employees will continue to seek alternative employment, and the subsequent impact upon resource constraints and organisational expectations.

Here, our findings raise important questions for policy-makers who will recognise that many employees have worked beyond capacity during this turbulent phase, and now must consider a range of equalising and flexible learning policies, sustainable workload evaluations and well-being interventions to support growing numbers of work-based learners. Reciprocity of trust and the encouragement to build learning communities can strengthen individual capabilities and attract a more diverse, committed and self-actualised workforce, therefore a range of organisational policies and procedures is essential to bring clarity, direction and support, building resilience and capability in individuals and teams. Specifically, adequate time to complete programmes of study, to reflect and learn within, across and beyond organisations through inter and intra-organisational communities of learning and knowledge exchange and, to develop the skills to competently engage with and champion evolving technology are all essential activities to ensure well-being and organisational sustainability.

Following Asgari et al. (2022), the study reveals a preference for on-line learning, underpinned by a rapid technological transformation by organisations and providers in adapting to a shifting global landscape. Yet, whilst there is enormous potential to replace our traditional notions of physical places for individual and shared learning, reflection, creativity and experiment, the skills of the facilitator, workloads and working conditions of the participants must be conducive to rich socio-

engagement. Contemporary virtual platforms are capable of hosting bold innovations including inter-organisational networks, providing a conduit into an extended regional, national and global community of leaders, learners and educators than has traditionally been the case. The multiplicity of work-based learning programmes and populations across the globe draws upon a diversity and breadth of knowledge and experience inviting further collaboration across providers and employers in building inter and intra communities of practice to combine practitioner knowledge more effectively with new academic knowledge beyond the classroom to tackle big societal issues and inform best practice. However, our research exposes the risk of missed opportunities in encouraging entrepreneurial collaboration and cross-fertilisation of ideas through interdisciplinary shared projects both within and beyond the constraints of each cohort, programme and provider, further extending the potential to kick-start inter-organisational mentoring schemes and regional, national and international communities of practice, by augmenting and influencing learning via innovative digital means. In doing so, the current risk of provider disconnect from the reality of the workplace is also likely to be reduced, creating opportunities for academic and employer currency, co-creation of content and knowledge exchange in addition to collaborative recruitment, retention and career development.

Limitations

Despite generating novel and interesting insights, we recognise the limitations of this study. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it was not intended to provide a generalised detailed analysis of the challenges and issues that act as barriers to work-based and experiential learning. Rather, it provides deep and rich insights into subjective views within a specific context. It is of note that this project is of limited size, and that whilst the key themes uncovered in the research have been discussed here, it is reasonable to assume that some of the outlying responses would develop into a wider range of clusters with a larger data set. Similarly, the data set is limited by the timing of the study, the geographical location and the type of leadership development programme which is funded by the apprenticeship levy and whose curricula is defined by the apprenticeship standard. Fruitful investigation might invoke research into different types of leadership programme or those from different geographical locations. Similarly, it may be valuable to conduct a longitudinal study to assess how perceptions might change as individuals continue to adapt, or a multi-level approach to gain the views of providers and employer organisations.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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