

STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF THE ADVANCED LEADERSHIP PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE EDUCATION PATHWAY

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ABSTRACT

Many higher education courses designed to develop leadership skills, knowledge and attributes in health and human services are centred on individual skill development and competencies. Organisational needs are not always taken in consideration. Competencies for effective teamwork, collaboration and driving change, are missing from leadership development curricula and educational strategies. The Professional Practice Pathway: Advanced Leadership for Guiding Transformation (PPP) was developed to address these shortcomings by incorporating work-integrated learning projects, learning circles and mindfulness.

This study evaluates the PPP by investigating effectiveness, focussing on transformed thinking and its translation into transformed behaviours. Qualitative enquiry was used to explore students learning experiences. Five students (63%) from the 2021 PPP cohort participated in this study by taking part in in-depth interviews. Three participants (60%) were female, and all participants were employed in full time roles in health and human services.

Four themes were developed through a thematic analysis approach: enablers for learning, being connected, overcoming barriers, changed leader, and overcoming barriers in leadership transformation. It has become clear that the PPP provided opportunities for a small group of health and human service professionals to learn and change together. Students developed a better understanding of self, reflected on previous, current, and future practice in leadership and were able to build on knowledge and skills by applying their learnings. The creation a positive learning environment contributed significantly to participants leadership development, contributing to effective and efficient workplace practices ultimately leading to better patient and organisational outcomes.

KEYWORDS

leadership education, transformational leadership, higher education, healthcare education, professional practice.

INTRODUCTION

Health and Human Service (H&HS) leadership is a practice and skillset that must be, and can be, intentionally taught [1]. Formal training in the multifaceted components of leadership is now highly desirable for health leaders [2]. Health and human services require a level of leadership that encompasses the ability to identify and respond to a wide range of

complex challenges. Communication is at the core of effective leadership [3] and includes strategic direction, expectation and feedback [4]. Attributes such as empathy, integrity, adaptability, agility, and self-awareness contribute to a transformational thought process and this leadership style has emerged as one of the most prominent for complex organisations such as those in the H&HS sector [5]. The definition of a transformational leader is someone who raises people to higher levels of motivation, making changes and shaping the future. Transformational leaders are more likely to help organisations advance though maintaining a good balance of task behaviours and relationship behaviours [6] as opposed to other types of leaders such as transactional leaders. Leadership models have been shown to be extremely helpful for students to grasp new concepts, make sense of lessons learned through their own experiences and afford structure that facilitates lasting comprehension through reflection, and provide a basis for student assessment and evaluation [7].

Higher education courses designed to develop leadership capability in health and human services traditionally focussed on individual skill development and competencies and there is a recognised need for programs to address the gaps at an organisational and policy level [8]. The requirements necessary to lead health and human service system change, such as competencies for effective teamwork and collaboration, are not reflected in current curricula and pedagogic models used to teach leadership [9]. The COVID pandemic reinforced the need for leaders to have exemplary interpersonal and communication skills [10] and there is increasing importance attached to emotional and social intelligence and creating the right mindset for leadership success [11]. Additionally, a study undertaken by Balwant [12] identified that transformational leadership demonstrated by instructors was positively related to student motivation, perceived instructor credibility, satisfaction with leader, and student learning. Transformative learning involves teaching students how to think critically in contrast to primarily content-based learning.

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE PATHWAY

The Professional Practice Pathway: Advanced Leadership for Guiding Transformation (PPP) is a year-long program undertaken after successful completion of year one and year two of the Master of Leadership: Health & Human Services (MLHH) or the Master of Healthcare Redesign (MHR). The PPP provides an intensive development program including advanced study, work-integrated learning projects and reflective learning allowing students to demonstrate commitment to, and mastery of, evidence-based leadership practice in their chosen professional field(s) and workplace(s). Pearson [13] suggests that three conditions need to be working in tandem for transformation across teams, organisations, and systems. These are leaders who are exposed to transformed thinking, leaders who have begun to experience inner transformation and those same leaders who have been equipped to begin the process of enabling others that they are working with to also undergo inner transformation. These conditions represent the PPP learning outcomes.

A key aspect of the PPP program is an opportunity for students to practice and integrate their emerging capabilities in transformation through development and implementation of a transformational project in their workplaces. Students in the PPP are expected to develop professional competencies in Advanced Leadership and Guiding Transformation through a program of work integrated learning in professional practice. Work-integrated learning such as this, provides engagement and opportunity in authentic workplaces and provides students the chance to connect theory and practice in real time [14]. A systematic meta-analysis highlighted some of the benefits of work-integrated learning in healthcare includes an increase in productivity suggesting that students were increasing service provision [15]. Conversely, time to complete study in the workplace was identified as the main barrier in a further study [16].

AIM

Evaluation of H&HS leadership higher education courses is important for two main reasons. Firstly, to understand the appropriateness of capability development in students and secondly to ensure the relevance to organisational investment and expectation [17]. Evaluating the PPP will ensure that the program content aligns with students' expectations as well as the expectations and needs of health and human service organisations locally and nationally and that the teaching team are meeting the needs of students at an individual level. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the Professional Practice Pathway (Advanced Leadership for Guiding Transformation), particularly transformed thinking and its translation into transformed behaviours.

METHOD

The methodological approach for this study was a qualitative enquiry. This study was approved by the Tasmanian Human Research Ethics Committee Human Research Ethics Committee, Reference H0024296.

PARTICIPANTS

All students who enrolled in the PPP in 2021, the first year of the program (n = 8) were eligible to participate.

RECRUITMENT

Students enrolled in the Professional Practice Pathway were invited to participate via email from the program director. All students were required to provide written consent for participation in this study.

DATA COLLECTION

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the completion of the course. These took place online or in person depending on current circumstances, location, and the preferences of the student. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview topics centred around the three learning outcomes for the program, specifically exploring the student's motivations for enrolling in the program, experience within the program and their own professional development. All interviews were conducted by staff who were not involved in teaching roles within this pathway.

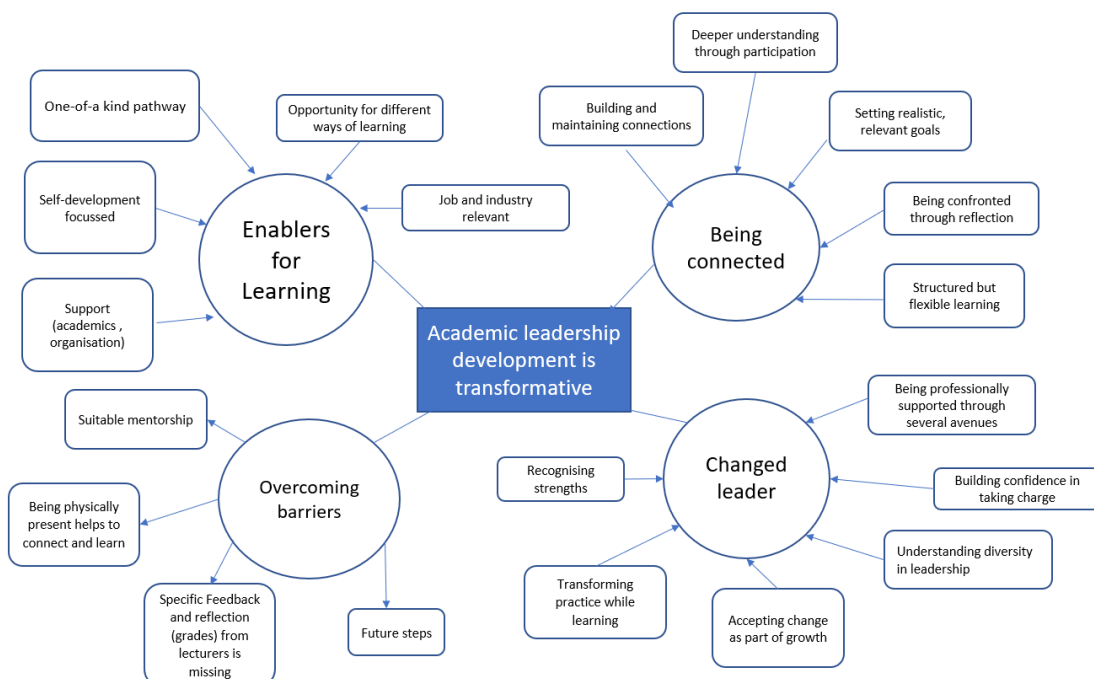
DATA ANALYSIS

Interview data (audio recordings) was transcribed by an external provider (Way with Words) and analysed by the authors using deductive content analysis. We developed a coding framework based on the learning outcomes and interview questions. We used the thematic networks approach [18] to develop basic themes, organising themes and a global theme.

RESULTS

Five students (63%) from the 2021 PPP cohort participated in this study. Three participants (60%) were female, and all participants were employed in full time roles in health and human services. Thematic analysis revealed four organising themes, described below, and one overarching global theme: Academic leadership development is transformative (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: THEMATIC NETWORK



THEME 1: ENABLERS FOR LEARNING

This theme encompassed the participants thoughts on the type of program they undertook, the impact that has had on them both as individuals and leaders, and the different ways of learning that were provided for students.

Initial attraction to undertaking this pathway was because it was different from anything else being offered in the tertiary sector. Interviewees identified that the traditional research pathway is not for everyone.

I was very excited to be a part of it and get as much as I could out of it, but also the idea of being part of something new was exciting. (P2)

Interested in an alternative pathway versus a traditional research pathway. For me it was more practical. To me this was a more meaningful way to achieve something I would use, beyond the research option (P4)

Participants highlighted the focus within the program on increasing self-awareness and development and how important this was for themselves both as an individual and as a leader.

it was an opportunity for me to really look at who I am and who, I am as a leader and who am I am as a person, so everything just seems to line up and that that's why I signed up to it. (P5)

I think those things that happened during the year through the learning, and then sharing it in the learning circle and seeing other people having the same experience, I think really helped me to just grow as a person (P2).

Small class size was seen as a positive by interviewees as it enabled participants to be vulnerable and share personal experiences in a safe environment.

I think from the class being small and getting to know people so intimately and how they work, which I think is a very unique situation. (P1)

Interviewees stressed the importance of providing opportunities for different ways of learning and the impact this has had on their leadership practice.

just that deep listening and just doing the learning circles and the... Just listening to people better and more intensely and trying to... Taking away what I think they've said and being able to reflect back essentially what they've said, has definitely had big changes on how I lead (P1).

the zoom meetings with learning circles that we had once a month were really good (P3).

the Enneagram and those kind of things, really helped me to understand myself a little bit better and look at where I was at and plan some goals for the year. (P2).

Support from academics, peers and workplace organisations was considered key to enabling student success in the program.

I think the pathway and the learning circles and the relationships I developed through that really helped me from a support perspective (P2).

we've all been very supportive and encouraging and trying to push each other (P4).

I have a workplace that's very open to give support (P1)

Participants agreed that the ability to put learning into practice immediately made the program relevant to their job and hugely beneficial to their development as a leader. The ability to bring information and practical knowledge back into the workplace was seen as encouraging others in the workplace to consider the program. The potential impact on their career both now and into the future was also highlighted by participants.

I really liked that idea that it was very practical, and I'd be able to implement things straight away, not just theoretical (P1)

*The project made me put those learnings into reality and a practical application (P2).
because I've implemented a lot of it, will continue to do it a lot more than a typical uni course. So, I think it has more
lasting, ongoing impacts than other ways I've done uni. (P1).*

I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't have done that (PPP) (P3).

THEME 2: BEING CONNECTED

This theme focuses on the quality of being connected as a characteristic of pathway content and delivery and which is experienced in a variety of ways by participants. This concept encompassed PPP connection with student context in pathway design and delivery, and the role of facilitating connection with self and with others in supporting leadership transformation. Participants highlighted this aspect of the program and emphasised the function of the relationships formed with each other.

*I think one of the special things about the course was that it was so focused on the being together and working with
yourself and what you're doing. (P1)*

Group activity was viewed as supportive and a forum for learning from each other.

*Being on the pathway, being involved with the group, having learning circles and that connection around my
leadership journey really kept me on a path in a year that it was really challenging and helped me from a support
perspective (P2)*

*we have just formed such a great bond between all of us and we champion each other, and we call each other
we want the best for each other..... we're telling each other and giving advice (P3)*

Significantly, the bonds formed were reported to have continued beyond the conclusion of the program, as learning and social networks, and included ongoing connection with the program itself.

one of the big things for me that I felt at the end of the pathway was that I actually didn't want it to end (P2)

we're all still in contact and all sharing our experiences, and you know learning with each other (P5)

*i'm still involved now, as most of us are in the learning circles and being mentors for the cohorts because it will
only, not only will it benefit others, it will continue to benefit me (P3)*

Participants identified their participation in pathway activities, which included sharing reflections, as a way of developing their deeper understanding of leadership, of themselves as leaders and their relationships with others.

*doing the learning circles and specifically having a question that you have to think and reflect and discuss with a group,
..... I've then kept thinking about it for weeks after and then that's when I've seen change at work. (P1)*

*.... the various 360s and the archetype and the Enneagram, I think they all helped us dive a little deeper even for
people like me who had a basic understanding. (P4)*

*the assessments at the start of the pathway around the type of leader you were really helped me to understand
myself a little bit better and look at where I was at (P2)*

Participants linked the program and insights gained through program activities with realistic and relevant goal setting, appropriate for their context and stage of development.

I thought, you know what, that is right up my street in terms of, you know, reflecting on my management experience, up until now. It was an opportunity for me to really look at who I am and who I am as a leader and who I am as a person
(P5)

Understanding where I sit on that [the MLQ] has allowed me to consciously allocate effort to things that I probably could do a little bit better, but in the knowledge that it will take away from something else that I'm doing (P2)

While valued, reflection was described as challenging and often confronting, underscoring the importance of the safety provided by program structure.

I saw things about myself that I had never realised and I felt a bit icky about myself and as I would do things I'd go, oh my God, that's what you're doing.....those kinds of learnings about yourself, although they do feel quite confronting at times, can be really significant (P2)

I think if you're sharing this stuff with 20 people, I don't think you would get the same experience or outpouring from people..... we had a really good group [8 participants], and I think we all accepted that vulnerability together and we all know none of us judge, so we all share. (P5)

Participant comments suggested they experienced the program as a structured but flexible learning environment, and one in which they could integrate different ideas, and ideas with experience.

I think it was well structured it wasn't overbearing. You know, I think it was nice little pieces leading up to, to the major projects (P4)

as a package that we were almost surrounded with, there was all these tools that I could pull out when I needed them during the year for some of these experiences I was having (P2)

THEME 3: BECOMING A CHANGED LEADER

This theme relates to how participants incorporated their learning, contributing to changed behaviours. An important part of this learning relates to not falling back to previous held behaviours and this occurred through reflection and feedback from others and by increased understanding of self.

I guess if you don't understand yourself and how you work and how to better yourself, then your ability to lead others or an organisation is going to be quite limited (P1)

I definitely had comments from other people in the team that they noticed changes with me doing the course and how I responded to situations or how I led. (P1)

Transforming practice while learning occurred through applying strategies and techniques exposed to in the learning circles. Deep listening was one of these strategies implemented into the workplace, leading to enhanced reflective skills. Moreover, these strategies were also taken up by staff members working closely with the participants and these strategies were used to support each other in the workplace. Taking a step back and reflect on how situations were handled led to insights on how to change behaviours. Furthermore, participants came to the realisation that other people have personality traits that are challenging, but the interpersonal techniques learned in the course, meant that participant could handle these traits.

In terms of that relationship building and team building I am probably doing that very differently now. (P5)

It gave me more insight into why people were the way they were and how to try and combat that. (P3)

Participants also articulated that reflective practice had become a routinely carried out activity.

I stop and reflect more than I have ever done in my career. (P2)

Building confidence in taking charge resonated with most participants and recognising own strengths in relation to other leaders was an important contributing factor to become a confident leader. Participants also allocate efforts to improve leadership actions in their roles.

I have become a more confident leader and more aware of... I think I knew what my strengths... Well, I did know what my strengths were before but being confident that I don't have to have the same strengths as other people. (P1)

If I had gone into this position before I started the course, I think I would have really struggled.

Confidently and effectively engaging with senior leaders and executive leaders occurred through articulating arguments more clearly, which was learned and practised in the course. Handling challenges and disappointments by learning to put them in perspective, contributed to more confidence.

...I applied for a job and didn't get it...I used that as a learning rather than a negative outcome. (P2)

Being engaged in the activities of the course for a period of 12 months and actively sharing learning, receiving feedback and observing other people with a similar experience contributed to growing as a person. As a result of sharing learning a strong bond between the participants was formed, continuing after the course ended.

To this day we all still talk. We have a whatsapp group.... There wouldn't be many days in the week when someone isn't communicating. (P4)

THEME 4: OVERCOMING BARRIERS IN LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATION.

This theme focuses on the barriers that participants identified as part of their journey through the professional practice pathway and its relation to leadership transformation. Most of these barriers were related to structure and delivery rather than content and provide a range of opportunities for improvement. As part of the pathway, each student is allocated a mentor, someone to guide them through the process of transformation and work with them to develop their leadership skills. Some participants questioned whether the mentor that they were allocated was suitable, they felt that their needs were not being met.

"My mentor wasn't suitable for me... There wasn't a great match, I really wanted someone to push me to that next level" (P4)

One of the main barriers to transforming, and taking their new skills to the next level, was a lack of future direction. Participants suggested that they needed a better understanding of how this type of transformational leadership knowledge and skill set can be utilised in the real world and where opportunities might arise for them.

"When we got to the end, we could be so much more, but we had no understanding of where to go" (P3)
"I wanted someone to give advice on how to jump to the next level roles that we were all chasing" (P4)

It was noted that this pathway is most beneficial for people who are already in leadership roles, wanting to build their career further into the director or executive space but the pathway is not promoted in this way. There is a need to ensure that people entering this pathway are aware of the potential outcomes and outputs for them personally and professionally.

"I think that at that level, service director level, it's a really beneficial thing to do (the pathway), but its not sold that way"
(P2)

"I would not recommend doing the pathway to someone who is 2 or 3 years out. I think you need to be slightly up the chain" (P5)

Some more technical, course related barriers were also identified as part of the structure and delivery modalities. This pathway is offered both face to face and virtually and participants who solely joined on a virtual platform felt that they would have achieved more by being in the room. The size of the group was also highlighted as an enabler in this cohort but noting that a larger group may have made it difficult for the learning to occur as specifically as it did.

"The opportunity to be in the room would have made it easier" (P2)

"We had a really good group...one thing I would say is don't get any bigger. I think if you get bigger than that you will lose the intimacy" (P5)

Similarly, a gap was identified in the way in which assessment tasks were graded and feedback provided. Participants were undertaking a master's level course and felt that it was important to receive a numeric grade on each assessment task rather than a Pass/Fail, which was the design utilised within the pathway.

I hate pass fail.... I really think it needs to be graded. I want to know just passed, you know that I pass really well and if I'm not passing well, I want to be able to improve on how I can get better.

I felt like it was a cop out at a master's level to just be a pass fail (P5)

DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to evaluate the University of XXX Professional Practice Pathway: Advanced Leadership for Guiding Transformation (PPP) through understanding student expectations and experience. Our findings demonstrate that the PPP has successfully transformed the leadership practice in a variety of ways. Although there were some barriers identified, overall, the PPP was an exciting new opportunity that involved a small group of health and human service professionals learning and changing together.

The reported enablers for learning are consistent with previous studies that suggest support, relevance and usefulness are the key factors that influence experience in higher education [19,20]. Further, Khiat [21] demonstrates that planning and reflection are two key components of successful self-regulated learning. The participants in our study were motivated to enrol in the PPP to learn in new ways, challenging traditional leadership education approaches. The PPP provided students with many opportunities to develop a better understanding of self, to reflect on previous, current, and future practice in leadership and build on knowledge and skills by applying their learnings in real time. This finding is consistent with Van Dam & Ford's [22] work who developed a leadership learning theory responding to the opportunities, including a four-stage learning process. Central to this process is reflection on self and feedback and transfer of learning, contributing to leadership development.

Within the PPP leadership transformation was facilitated by the creation of a positive learning environment where vulnerability and openness were encouraged and supported. A recent leadership study by Kilg et al [23] emphasised that creating a positive and engaging learning environment improves students' motivation and achievement. This highlights the notion that creating a positive learning environment is central to leadership development. Participation in meaningful group activities allowed students a connectedness not commonly associated with a higher education course. This educational strategy ensured a positive student experience that, contributed to participants developing leadership

skills. Therefore, it is important that these strategies should be incorporated in university leadership courses, as it encourages reflection and learning, resulting in better organisational outcomes [24]. Moreover, Gravett and Winstone [25] highlighted that meaningful, personal interactions in higher education positively impact student experiences. Further, Yale [26] demonstrates the importance of the teacher/student relationship in higher education and its influence on student outcomes. She suggests that when students feel supported and encouraged, they develop higher academic self-concept and are more motivated to continue on their learning journey. This is consistent with our findings and the sense of belonging and connection that students felt both from their peers and from their teachers and mentors. Collective learning is an important part of the PPP and contributed to the positive learning experience and the individual change that participants reported. In practice, where leadership roles are more commonly being shared, this collective thinking and learning are important education components for successful transformation [27].

The empirical effectiveness of transformational leadership stems from the use of empowerment rather than control, a behaviour not easily taught via traditional educational approaches. A strength of the PPP is the continuous opportunities for reflection and peer feedback to understand self [22]. It has demonstrated the importance of this type of reflection in the development of transformational leadership behaviour and the personal and professional change that is needed to drive this change. Students in the PPP engage in activities designed to maximise their strengths and recognise and understand their limitations as part of a behaviour change strategy. Our findings suggest that behaviour change was linked to shared learning, connection and applying the range of techniques included in the curriculum, such as deep listening [28].

Although, overall, our findings highlighted positive experiences and outcomes within the PPP, the reported barriers suggest there are opportunities to improve the student experience. Higher education aims to prepare students for a role aligned to their interests and new expertise. Students undertaking the PPP are potentially looking for career advancement and making a positive change to the organisation they are employed with. To address these expectations leadership educators will need to have a good understanding of the students' organisational context and this understanding can be created by forging strong partnerships with health and human services organisations [29].

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