

Leadership Journeys: Tracking the impact and challenge of the Top Management Programme

Year four report executive summary

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1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

The Leadership Journeys Study conducted by Dr Martin McCracken, Mr Mark McCrory, Professor Heather Farley and Professor Marie McHugh from Ulster University, gathered and considered the views and career trajectories of participants of Advance HE’s Top Management Programme (TMP). Using longitudinal mixed methods research, five key objectives were established:

- + map the career trajectories of selected TMP alumni to date
- + determine the experiences of participants on the TMP (alumni, current and new as at October 2016)
- + explore whether/how the TMP has contributed to the leadership journey of alumni
- + track the current and new TMP cohorts from October 2016 to October 2019, to include career pathways, aspirations, skills, characteristics and work-life balance.
- + identify the types of influence/impact TMP alumni have made in their HE institutions.

The majority of those who participated in the study were alumni of the TMP, but as part of the data collection other university leaders who had sponsored (sponsor interviews) or observed the leadership of participants (Story Based Evaluation (SBE) colleagues), were included. Additionally, we also asked about their career trajectories and leadership skills development of those who could have joined TMP but had not at the time of data collection applied (comparator survey). In the main, the study included university leaders (in both academic and professional roles) working the UK and Ireland, although a small number were also based in Australia and New Zealand.

1.2 Context

The data collection and analysis for this longitudinal study is now complete. Over the three-year period a vast range of quantitative and qualitative results emerged focusing on the theme of senior leadership development in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Further detailed insights and reports from each of the year end reports can be found [here](#).

Year 1 activity primarily centred around the retrospective data collection element in the study. The findings from the retrospective study were published in the Year 1 Report and summarised in the Year 1 Leadership Insights report. The themes emerging from the Year 1 report suggested that TMP alumni held a great degree of affection for the programme, seeing it as a valuable and fulfilling experience which provided insights which were extremely useful for their further career development. Similarly, for participant sponsors there was a general consensus that the TMP was the most important and prestigious programme for aspiring senior leaders in HE, with the power to enhance skills and competencies (eg communication, self-awareness and political skills) for senior positions in higher education (HE).

In Years 2 and 3 the focus centred on the various data collection elements of the longitudinal survey and the reports and associated Leadership Insights from these years illustrate the detailed results from the three-wave survey with five TMP cohorts over the period from October 2016-April 2019. These reports also summarise the pilot of the Story Based Evaluation (SBE) approach, as well providing oversight of the in-depth interview findings from recent alumni who participated in the longitudinal study. The key themes emerging in the years 2 and 3 reports illustrate the impact and perceived beneficial aspects of TMP had for those who had completed the programme more recently, especially in terms of encouraging self-confidence and self-awareness as leaders as well promoting professional networks and enhancing social capital.

1.3 About the TMP

The TMP is a leader development programme open to senior leaders with both academic and professional roles in HE. There are normally two cohorts per academic year (Autumn and Spring) with the programme starting with an Orientation Day designed to introduce participants to the philosophy, design and learning methods of TMP followed by three four-day sessions. In the first substantive gathering, participants meet for a four-day residential designed to address issues associated with leadership, strategy and top-team development. Week 2 comprises an International collaborative group assignment sponsored by a local host organisation (normally a university in the host destination). During this week participants investigate international HE issues and visit other local higher education providers, learning about their strategic challenges and opportunities. Finally, in the third four-day session participants address issues around strategic positioning, culture, leading through collaborative relationships, power and influence as well as governance and risk.

Across this structure, the TMP employs a number of learning interventions including:

- + a structured 360-degree review process
- + impact Groups – participants meet regularly to discuss issues, particularly difficulties that they are facing and then test in action the ideas arising from discussions
- + one to one coaching and engaging with guest senior leaders and speakers
- + a simulation activity where participants are tasked with leading an institution collaboratively and respond to a specific crisis or other scenario.

1.4 Approach

The study used a mixed methods longitudinal research design using online surveys, focus groups, in-depth semi structured interviews and reflective story-based interviews with TMP participants and colleagues, as well as other HE senior leaders who had sponsored TMP participants.

In terms of the retrospective element of the study, firstly, after consulting with the programme delivery team through a focus group to determine TMP content and issues, a survey was administered to the entire population of TMP alumni (utilising the Advance HE database) from its initiation in 19?? to the start of our study in 2016 when our study commenced (n=95, response rate 19%). Secondly, in depth interviews were held with a sample of over 50 alumni, spanning both participants from the earliest cohorts to April 2016. Thirdly, we interviewed a sample of HE leaders (12) who had sponsored TMP participants (mostly Vice-Chancellors), to explore their views of development programmes like TMP.

For the longitudinal study five TMP cohorts who commenced the programme in October 2016 and completed in April 2017, to those who started studying in October 2018 and finished in April 2019 were surveyed at three time points. The numbers of participants in the surveys for the longitudinal element across the three different time points are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey administration and responses

Cohort	Start	Finish	N	Programme outset (n)	3 months post (n)	12 Months post (n)
TMP39	October 2016	April 2017	21	Oct 2016 (16)	June 2017 (12)	April 2018 (7)
TMP40	April 2017	October 2017	19	April 2017 (17)	March 2018 (12)*	Oct 2018 (7)
TMP41	October 2017	April 2018	22	Oct 2017 (19)	August 2018 (17)	April 2019 (9)
TMP42	April 2018	September 2018	21	May 2018 (13)	Nov 2018 (9)	Sept 2019 (6)
TMP43	October 2018	April 2019	21	Oct 2018 (14)	June 2019 (8)	April 2020 (6)
Total			104	79 (53% Male; 47% Female)	58 50% Male; 50% female)	35 37% Male; 63% female)
Comparator				Oct 2018 (158)	n/a	April 2020 (53)

As well as the data collected in these three wave surveys, in depth qualitative interviews were held with TMP alumni approximately 12 months from when they completed the programme. In total 11 TMP alumni, (four from TMP 39, one from TMP40 and two each from TMP 41-43) agreed to be interviewed.

In addition, a questionnaire was administered to one large comparator group (two waves - October 2018 and April 2020) using a population of HE leaders drawn from the Advance HE database of those who were eligible for the TMP but had not enrolled. Finally, the SBE approach was employed to gain views on the leadership behaviour and practice of a recent TMP alumni from their colleagues. In the SBE, TMP alumni were asked to select a small sample of colleagues who could share leadership stories about them, since the completion of the programme. These stories were analysed and related back to the TMP alumni in question in a reflective interview illustrating their colleagues' views on application of the TMP learning. By the end of data collection five recent TMP alumni had participated in this data collection exercise.

2 Key findings

Across all the data collected in this study three core issues were focused upon in a bid to understand and effectively evaluate the TMP and the implications of participating for senior HE leaders. The key findings in each of these areas are shown below:

2.1 TMP Experience

Across all cohorts, regardless of the data collection methodology TMP participants appeared to be very satisfied with the programme. The data showed that they understood the rationale, purpose and ethos of the programme and were overall pleased to have participated. When asked more specifically about the main pedagogical features of the programme including the 360-degree feedback, simulations, coaching, Vice-Chancellor (VC) meetings, international trips and impact groups, again across the study population there was widespread satisfaction. In the in-depth interviews in particular, alumni emphasised that what they valued most from the TMP experience were the opportunities they received to critically reflect, with support from coaches and peers, and how an environment conducive to supporting clear introspective learning was created:

“I alluded to the fact that I worked in industry before academia, it’s a long, long time ago but I couldn’t ever imagine going to a cross industry training session where people were so honest about their own organisations – warts and all. And it took me a little bit of time to actually get over that, so I could get to the point where I shared things myself but it was a very, very open and honest environment where people were willing to share in order to learn, ...it was a very good environment in that respect”. (TMP 39 participant)

Finally, although not always considered as a negative aspect in terms of experience, it was shown that across all cohorts studied, direct line manager and sponsor involvement was perceived to be low. Indeed, the majority of alumni noted that most of their line manager and sponsor colleagues had little real input, or in some cases interest, in their TMP experience.

2.2 TMP Outcomes

Four key outcomes were identified as being most vital to the TMP experience, namely participant self-awareness and leadership identity, confidence and competence. **The findings clearly illustrated that for all four of these measured outcomes, study participants felt that TMP made a positive contribution. Of particular interest was the data linked to leadership identity, confidence and competence which showed that TMP participants, in contrast to the Comparator Group, appeared to grow on all counts.**

Further data analysis on leader identity and confidence measures revealed how TMP participants clearly identified themselves as leaders at programme outset and were confident in their leadership abilities immediately after the programme was completed. **Interestingly, leader identity was largely unchanged between the surveys distributed at Time 1 (programme outset) and Time 2 (three-months post-programme) but by Time 3 (12 months post-programme), leader identity had increased by 13% overall, which was a statistically significant difference.** The comparator group of HE leaders who would have been eligible for the TMP but had not yet enrolled increased by 5% over this 18-month period which was not statistically significant.

Leadership confidence increased by 9% between Time 1 and Time 3 for TMP participants, a statistically significant increase. In contrast, leadership confidence within the Comparator Group remained unchanged. The biggest increases in both identity and confidence were found a year after TMP completion which would suggest that it takes some time for the full effects of the TMP experience to occur.

In terms of leadership competence, participants were asked to rate their competence in seven areas developed for this study based on characteristics that are consistently mentioned within the literature of HE leadership at senior levels (ie Dean, PVC, etc) and which also map to the TMP intended outcomes. **Participants across each of the TMP cohorts reported a 5% increase overall which was statistically significant** whereas competence for the Comparator Group increased by just 1% which was not statistically significant.

Of these outcomes, leadership identity was the only measure where statistically significant differences according to gender arose, with results indicating that male participants appeared to re-evaluate their leadership identities during TMP more than their female colleagues. In explaining such a finding, we felt that this could be linked to increased levels of self-awareness amongst participants which while present, did not reach statistical significance. When this issue was explored in more depth in the qualitative interviews it would appear that TMP did provoke such reflections:

“The main learning is in changing one’s paradigm and that the changes to one’s paradigm come in lots of different forms ... The sort of shifts in one’s mental map of the world or outlook arise through many shifts that happen as a function of the programme.” (TMP 41 participant)

Ultimately, we felt that when considered as a whole, participation in TMP had clear positive developmental outcomes for participants, particularly in the longer-term post-programme. Again, returning to the qualitative interview data, a quote from one of those who participated in the retrospective study summed up the overall impact of TMP:

“A really stimulating leadership experience, I enjoyed the variety of experiences, the thinking that it stimulated, the discussions and indeed the lines of thinking that have persisted since then.” (TMP 19 participant)

“I have to say probably TMP changed me from somebody, from an academic doing his senior management job, to somebody with a senior management mentality.” (TMP 32 participant)

2.3 TMP Impact

The findings indicated that there was an expectation for many alumni that signing up for a development programme such as the TMP, would produce impact in terms of both skills development as well as longer-term career progression. **When we explored impact with the TMP participants, many spoke about how the experience on the programme had directly influenced initiatives, such as strategy and policy development or organisational restructuring, which they were involved with at their institutions.** These examples arose in both the individual interviews as well in the SBE exercise with colleagues when we invited alumni and their colleagues to speak about the personal skills, leadership competence, networks and sector knowledge, they gained through the TMP experience.

For many alumni it appeared that the most evident impact from the programme, was linked to the tendency they now had to step back and think more deeply about their roles, skills and competencies. Therefore, **the TMP experience clearly promoted critical self-reflection and introspection and for many participants this was its most powerful impact.** One area where this could be observed was linked to future career development planning where examples were put forward during the interviews, and in the survey learning journal entries, illustrating how the TMP experience had ultimately stimulated reflection on career development and progression. For example, one interviewee summed up how the experience had caused a shift in thinking on her career:

“... I’ve decided I’m looking up and I don’t actually want to go any further because of the work/life balance issues... .. So, for me, TMP was great. It really helped kind of debunk some of the assumptions I had.” (TMP 39 participant)

2.4 Limitations

The Leadership Journeys: Tracking the Impact and Challenge of the Top Management Programme was an ambitious mixed methods longitudinal study using multiple data sources and therefore some limitations were unavoidable. The biggest issue faced by the researchers were low response rates, especially for the comparator survey. Although a comprehensive Advance HE database was used to identify a suitable population there was uncertainty surrounding those who invited to complete the survey, and if they were the best ‘comparable others’ to those who actually undertook the TMP. In many respects those who actively seek to participate in a leadership programme such as TMP may have a very different perception about their leadership qualities and potential in comparison to those who have decided not to undertake such a programme.

In terms of the other data collection methods the attrition in completion rates over the three wave survey points as well as the lower than desired uptake in post 12-month interviews and participation in the SBE element of data collection was disappointing. However, the research team feel that when combined, a large and robust data set has been collected and the lower-than-desired response rates do not substantially compromise the evaluation of the TMP.

3 Conclusion and recommendations

Over the three years duration of this ambitious research study a large and diverse mixed methods longitudinal data set was amassed. After analysing this data, we were able to establish what impact TMP has made for those who participate in the programme. The annual reports which provide detail on all the major issues linked to the experiences of those who either participated in TMP or were linked to the programme as sponsors, colleagues or programme facilitators can be viewed here.

The TMP undoubtedly has made a significant impact for those who have experienced it since its inception and clearly its influence can be felt in the higher education sector, particularly in the UK and Ireland, but increasingly, given the increasing number of international participants, further afield. Overall, across all cohorts and amongst sponsors and colleagues we identified a real attachment to the programme and appreciation for its role in developing leadership practice and career development opportunities. Testament to the power of the programme is shown in the findings from the main data collection intervention – the three wave surveys for TMP participants since April 2016 – which illustrated that participants leader identity, confidence and competence had shown a statistically significant increase. This finding was further reinforced through analysis of the qualitative responses, along with the insightful results from the SBE exercise, which again illustrate the overwhelming positive effect that TMP involvement has had for increasing confidence and self-awareness amongst participants.

Although the key findings and conclusions from our leadership journeys study illustrate value of the programme, throughout the data collection a series of suggestions and recommendations have arisen which are detailed below:

- + Although TMP Alumni and sponsors held the programme in high regard and it was viewed a highly useful learning experience for senior leaders in the HE Sector, comments indicated that there was a need continued refreshment to ensure material and interventions were relevant and up-to-date for the sector going forward. For example, the issue of innovations in HE was noted during data collection and there appeared to be a desire for the TMP to allow for more discussion centring on more creative strategies to support institutional effectiveness. Related to this overall objective participant also felt that more emphasis could be placed on managing university finance, culture and organizational development initiatives.
- + TMP participants universally cited the power of the interactions they had with fellow Impact Group members. However, it was interesting to note that there appeared to be fewer post programme meetings and contacts amongst some of the later cohorts (39-43) studies in comparison to earlier groups. This issue of formal impact group follow-up may be something that TMP facilitators could investigate further, ie how might they be able to help promote and encourage post-TMP meetings to really encourage sustained impact and build social capital from the TMP programme. Advance HE might investigate, if reconvening impact groups is not feasible, the merits of offering post-programme developmental support and/or mentoring for TMP participants.
- + The issue of support from line managers and sponsors was mentioned by many participants. The study showed that a relatively “hands off” approach was apparent in relation to applying the learning that TMP alumni brought back from the programme. However, in the sponsor interviews it was noted that some were interested in better exploiting the networks which had been formed through TMP. Going forward, actions regarding the level of support needed from TMP facilitators and sponsors of TMP participants post-programme, to allow the benefits of participation to be fully realized should be considered. A VC we interviewed summed p the scenario well noting “There is no framework, well there is very little framework in which the sponsor is an active participant, unless I’m missing something... I think it would be well worth doing that.” (VC - Sponsor)
- + Another aspect that was clearly valued amongst study participants was the diversity of cohort composition in terms of HE institution type and participant roles (i.e., both academics and professional positions represented). For study participants this blend offered real learning potential, and many indicated that efforts need to be made to ensure that the mix of people that enrol on the programme, is cross-sector, and TMP members are at an appropriately senior leadership level.

- + The issue of programme challenge was shown to be particularly complex, but a key finding amongst alumni was that TMP was more ‘emotionally challenging’ as opposed to ‘intellectually challenging’. Participants in the main found the reflective aspects of the programme and the opportunities for introspection they offered as the most challenging but insightful aspects of the programme. With that in mind, linked to a previous recommendation, ongoing support to build upon ties that are formed through TMP should be cultivated to ensure that isolation amongst HE leaders does not impact their effectiveness.



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