

Case study

The importance of the *degree* in Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeships (SLDA)



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

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Background

The University of Birmingham (UoB) commenced delivery of its Senior Leader Master's Degree Apprenticeship Programme (SLMDA) in September 2018 with the launch of four programmes with three, discrete, specialist programmes tailored for delivery in local government, healthcare and education contexts. The ability to translate the SLMDA standard into specific, contextualised content has been proven by the University to have considerable appeal with public sector employers where opportunities and access to funding for such workplace training has not previously existed.

Working in partnership with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, the Local Government Association (LGA) and a number of local and regional councils, the University's Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) developed a bespoke Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeship for emerging leaders working in local government. Its effects are clear; the SLMDA is a key component in the workforce and career progression strategies of an increasing number of councils, linked to active engagement with apprenticeships at all levels.

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In addition, the UoB's Health Services Management Centre (HSMC) is partnered with University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS Trust to develop and deliver a SLMDA for NHS emerging leaders looking for career progression. The programme is delivered by leading international researchers in the field of health and social care and covers a range of areas that include the development of integrated care; assessing need and demand for services; improving quality and safety; innovation and change, and leading and developing people. And a SLMDA for the education sector has proved to be a welcome approach, one that is designed to integrate far better with the highly complex and demanding duties that stretch beyond the bounds of the typical school day and mitigate the risk of drop-out owing to work pressures.

The Challenge

The idea that the SLMDA is supported and delivered as a perk for highly paid top teams is not the UoB's experience. Rather, the apprentices are almost all senior practitioners (typically directors of public health, assistant head teachers or heads of service) where leadership and strategic management conceptual knowledge is critical for the effective delivery of crucial public services. Almost all of the employer partners use a master's degree qualification as a hard sift criteria to attract the best candidates into senior leadership roles within their organisation. The SLMDA is allowing for a profound experience by apprentices from across the public sector with the programme providing an otherwise scarce opportunity to learn skills at a strategic level including professional reflection and development which enables them to tackle leadership challenges.

In education for example, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that increased school autonomy and a greater focus on schooling and school results have made it essential to reconsider the role of school leaders with room for improvement in professionalising school leadership, support current school leaders and make school leadership an attractive career. The UoB's SLMDA that delivers an MEd in Educational Leadership satisfies this aspiration in the specialist knowledge and skills that are developed through its focused academic study. It teaches a range of theory that equips leaders with the necessary tools to develop an understanding of strategy and the communication of a vision and mission and prepares apprentices for the particular challenges of the sector. Schools, nurseries and colleges are different working environments to manufacturing or business and finance corporations and have their own set of values and outcomes to consider. As a result, apprentices from these organisations require an in-depth understanding of their particular needs and circumstances to support their successful leadership, which in turn demands the expert teaching and guided learning experiences that can only be provided by experienced academics and 'pracademics' during the practical learning period.

The Value of the Experience

For every cohort, the SLMDA experience has helped develop a professional network, with the support of academic expertise and resources at the University of Birmingham, that has ensured modules are relevant to the broad range of apprentices attending. Indeed, the wide range of commercial experience across many industries combined with views from public sector organisations has inspired new thinking about policy and working across complex organisations. Bringing academic models to problems that have proved difficult to resolve using traditional organisational approaches have also opened up possibilities for apprentices. For example, governance theory taught as a module has been applied to homelessness challenges and similarly economic theory to the planning and delivery of winter services in the context of local authority statutory responsibilities.

Lessons Learned

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Often, the arrival of the Senior Leaders Master's Degree Apprenticeship has been both important and timely in supporting the development of leadership across all professions. Employers have benefited from apprentices' growth as leaders, implementing change to and developing the future workforce in terms of skill mix changes, service redirection and variation. Notable gaps in the skills and knowledge at the senior management level have been addressed. Although perceived as a non-specialist programme, the SLMDA is demonstrating its value in upgrading the business knowledge (practical and conceptual) of future leaders with demonstrable impact not only on policies, strategies and outcomes, but on employees' lives too. The opportunity for a funded master's degree programme where 80% of the required learning is derived from work, and the emphasis is not on just academic subject expertise but on practice-based professional and/or sector expertise, cannot be overstated. Indeed, the SLMDA is successfully meeting the needs of individuals seeking access to professional roles, professional recognition and career progression.

Quotes

"The MEd is the key component for me; I am not sure what value the apprenticeship would have without the MEd. The MEd so far has been incredibly valuable to me in broadening my perspective into areas of leadership I haven't been involved in before as well as a greater depth of understanding in areas I have led for a number of years. More than that though, I think the transferable skills it develops such as evaluating evidence and then organising and presenting arguments will strengthen my ability and confidence as a leader in many ways." – **MEd Educational Leadership Senior Leader Degree Apprentice, Assistant Head Teacher, Windsor Academy Trust**

"If this [apprenticeship] hadn't been designed and funded in this way, there is no way I would have been able to do the MEd and it's had a big impact on the way I work as a senior leader. I take a much longer-term view now than I used to and it helped me considerably when successfully applying for my secondment to an assistant head teacher position." – **MEd Educational Leadership Senior Leader Degree Apprentice, UCAS Coordinator & Assistant Head Teacher, King Edward VI Academy Trust**

"My MSc Degree Apprenticeship in Public Management and Leadership has assisted my understanding and appreciation of leadership models and management within a public organisation. The breadth and scale of the information covered has supported the development of wider corporate and partner understanding and has, individually, supported my promotion and appointment to an Executive Position within my organisation. A key personal motivation for signing up to this programme was the award of an MSc...and the MSc is now actively being utilised as part of our organisational succession planning with those identified as future senior leaders...The award of an MSc from a recognised international institution is a key motivator in this

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decision and ongoing support for this programme.” – **MSc Public Management and Leadership Senior Leader Degree Apprentice, Assistant Executive Director (Governance and Assets) (Knowsley Council)**

“As a newly merged organisation with over 13,000 staff, the second cohort of participants have really embraced the opportunity to use the knowledge, skills and behaviours learnt to evaluate and collectively develop a united organisation... Having two cohorts progressing at the same time really compliments each other, through mentorship and real time leadership development. Apprenticeship development at all levels, supports the progression, retention and wellbeing at this Trust... The level 7 senior leader apprenticeship is developing the innovative and significant expertise required for the here and now.” – **MSc Health and Care System Leadership Senior Leader Degree Apprentice, Apprenticeship and Vocational Development Manager (Learning and Education), University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS Foundation Trust**

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