"To be relied upon and trusted": The centrality of personal relationships to collaboration in HE, in a successful cross-team institutional change project

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Abstract

The change to online delivery in March 2020 provided an opportunity as well as a requirement to change the way we work in Higher Education (HE), from a traditional stance focussed on hierarchy and roles to one that embraced individual core skills and competencies. The Transformation Academy (TA), Solent University's response led by the Solent Learning and Teaching Institute (SLTI), had as its goal the preparation of 1100 modules for online delivery in September 2020, delivered via institutional cross-team collaboration to ensure success within a narrow timescale.

Collaboration is by necessity situated and dialogic, and most effectively driven by an affective and trust-based connection between collaborative partners as well as to the project goal. In bringing together previously disparate and siloed teams, the TA project's success relied upon new collaborative partners quickly forming those connections, despite the prevailing neoliberal emphasis in UK HE on performativity and pressure from senior management to complete the work within 12 weeks.

Adopting a qualitative empirical research design and single, local, exploratory case study approach, data is derived from 11 semi-structured interviews with project members who collaborated with colleagues outside of their usual team structures, to explore the personal value they perceived obtaining from the TA project.

Preliminary findings suggest that Learning and Teaching (L&T) collaborations in a pressured environment benefit from authenticity in emotion and interpersonal affective connections, which in turn are engendered by openness and clarity in communication, a flattened hierarchy, and a sense of ownership for all participants.

Practitioner Notes

1. A conservative approach to cultural change through formal, top-down hierarchical methods and processes has been criticized as time-consuming, costly, inflexible and unimaginative.
2. Academic developers and similar roles occupy a liminal 'third space' which allows them to deploy flexibility, empathy, negotiation and conceptual criticality to encourage change in others' practice
3. Fluid, cross-team collaboration in a matrix environment allows the right person to undertake the right task at the right time
4. Matrix leadership relies upon empathy, influence, self-awareness and conflict management to drive success
5. A sense of personal reward and value enhances individuals' emotional commitment to a project

Keywords

Matrix leadership, matrix environments, institutional change, cross-team collaboration, transformation

Introduction

The change to online delivery in March 2020 provided the UK Higher Education (HE) sector with an opportunity as well as a requirement to change the way we work. As a result of the Covid-19 lockdown and the closure of most campus buildings, delivery of teaching moved online and most academic staff worked from home, away from their students. When the uncertainty around duration resolved to indicate a longer-term impact, it became necessary to devise ways to sustain this approach outside of the initial emergency response. For this paper's case study institution, one of the most pressing concerns was how to generate this kind of wholesale change most effectively to learning and teaching (hereafter L&T) practice with teams of staff that teach and support learning, ordinarily used to traditionally narrow roles and responsibilities.

In terms of delivering online, Solent University's (Solent) response was the Transformation Academy (TA). Led by the Solent Learning and Teaching Institute (SLTI), its primary goal was the preparation of 1100 modules for online delivery in September 2020. To deliver this, institutional cross-team collaboration was required to ensure success within a narrow timescale. This paper argues that the TA's capacity for success was contingent on the adoption of a matrix leadership approach. This meant that the institution's traditional stance, focussed on hierarchy and roles, moved to one that could respond to an increasingly matrix environment where individual core skills and competencies were embraced.

Matrix leadership is a fairly new construct in HE (Jones et al., 2010), initially emerging as a phenomenon in management studies, and requires an equal mix of supporting, coaching, empowering and directing. The term has since drifted into Further Education and then later still entered the HE lexicon as a step on from distributed leadership (Jones et al., 2010). This latter concept, though about empowering teams, capacity, competence, and confidence-building, denotes leadership that remains within the bounds of formal line management. For the TA project, matrix leadership provided a more useful model as it relies on empathy and influence, self-awareness and conflict management, to drive success (Malloy, 2012). At the case study site, the TA project "drove a full, fluid, and atypical collaboration between Academic Development and Learning Technologies staff often compartmentalised in L&T organisational structures" (Heard-Lauréote and Buckley, in press), outside of formal line management structures. Rather than focus on division of labour, the matrix environment relies upon the "integration of labor" [sic] (Wellman, 2007, p. 62) and a tacit trade-off between leader and followers, in that the leader can only achieve organisational goals through the activities of the followers, who in turn grant the status of leadership to the person who presents an opportunity to followers to satisfy their own personal and professional development objectives (Kezsbom, 1988).

To explore this phenomenon, the paper proceeds in four main parts. Part one contextualises Solent's move online. It explores the literature around change management and how this helps explain how Solent proceeded whilst also ensuring the quality of the student learning experience. Part two provides detail of the methodological approach used to explore matrix leadership within a matrix environment. Part three explores how matrix leadership was operationalised within the TA as a collaborative project. Part four turns to the project findings and discusses these in relation to the impact of matrix leadership on the affective dimension of staff agency.

Our findings suggest that there were four ways in which the TA project's matrix environment, and the matrix leadership that shaped this environment, improved staff agency. Our findings show that

staff were encouraged to work collaboratively, making use of their skills; the project offered opportunities for contact with others; it gave staff the sense of feeling part of something bigger and it provided opportunities for professional connectiveness. A more granular exploration of TA project members' affective states, following Ahmed's (2014) ideas around the sociality of emotion, finds that the matrix environment in which the TA operated facilitated an increased sense of self-worth, a sense of stretch, a sense of contentment, a sense of anticipation and a sense of external worth amongst project members. As a result of these findings, the paper ends by making some recommendations for the sector around the adoption of a matrix leadership approach to institution-wide cultural change.

Contextualisation: Moving online in response to Covid-19 and the impact on traditional hierarchies and change in HE

The Covid-19-induced National Lockdown on March 23rd, 2020 marked a crisis point for UK HE, leading the sector to tackle two key questions: 1) How will we enable students to continue learning through to the end of the academic year? 2) How will we deliver an attractive and effective L&T environment from the start of the next academic year?

In response to the former, Solent University, like other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Adams, 2020) underwent an emergency intensification of focus on the virtual learning environment (VLE). In response to the latter and as lockdown (or varieties thereof) endured throughout April and May, more sustainable and effective online learning programmes emerged (Feldman, 2020; McKie, 2020). To operationalise this online L&T delivery move, many UK HEIs embarked on a rapid deployment of change projects (Crawford et al., 2020). To a large degree these projects required a substantial cultural change element in that teaching staff were no longer able to be with their students face-to-face. Solent University was already in a strong position, due to a well-developed foundation of L&T undertaken via the VLE thanks to an earlier change programme. Nevertheless, like other HEIs, Solent University needed rapid institution-wide cultural change processes to enable the intensification of its online presence to deliver a rich and immersive online L&T environment at pace and volume: 250 courses; 1000 plus modules.

The UK education sector wholesale shows tendencies towards "increasingly dominant discourses of audit, performativity and standards" (Courtney and Gunter, 2015), thus following a conservative approach to enacting cultural change through formal, top-down hierarchical methods and processes. Over the years, this approach to change management has been the brunt of much criticism in relation to its time-consuming, costly, inflexible and unimaginative nature (Gill, 2003).

Solent, like others, has centralised much of its L&T support and academic development staff into a coherent service, populated by academics, learning technologists, academic developers and instructional designers. Much has been written about the ability of such roles to occupy "liminal spaces" (Land et al., 2014) within HEIs, often relying on skills of flexibility, empathy, negotiation and conceptual criticality to encourage change in others' practice.

Similarly, SLTI, in its mission of "providing an excellent learning experience for all students, by leading on the development and enhancement of innovative, inclusive and stimulating teaching" (SLTI, n.d.), tends to support such ways of working given that the service cannot operate effectively on its own, but needs the consent of the wider academic staff population. Our work depends on our ability to collaborate with others and the way we do this is imbued with a professional values-set

which includes inclusivity, partnership working, supportiveness and critical self-reflection and which is development-driven, enabling SLTI staff to draw in others.

Just as the literature has moved on from liminality to a discussion of third spaces (Whitchurch, 2008), SLTI has itself further developed its collaborative model of working both within academic and across professional service teams, accelerated by the arrival of new staff members without a traditional academic development profile, the reorganisation of senior staff members' portfolios, some fairly major cuts to staff numbers through voluntary severance and redundancies, and of course Covid-19 (Heard-Lauréote and Buckley, in press). Given its values-set, SLTI were very much able to seize the opportunity to bring others into this way of collaborative working in a matrix environment.

Collaboration is by necessity situated and dialogic (Adamson and Walker, 2011), and most effectively driven by an affective and trust-based connection between collaborative partners as well as to the project goal (Pirkkalainen et al., 2016). Ahmed argues in her model of the sociality of emotions that it is emotion, whether directed at or received from others, that creates a boundary. A group moves from a collection of 'I' to 'we' through contact with others (Ahmed, 2014). In a matrix environment, therefore (explored further below), successful leadership is based on relations, connections and emotions. By bringing together previously disparate and siloed teams through matrix leadership, the TA project's success relied upon new collaborative partners quickly forming those connections, despite the prevailing neoliberal emphasis in UK HE on performativity (Beard, Clegg, and Smith, 2005) and pressure from senior management to complete the work within 12 weeks.

Methodological approach

As TA project members operated outside their usual hierarchies within a matrix environment, complemented by a matrix-leadership approach to implementation, this research developed a qualitative empirical research design and single, local, and exploratory case study approach that would most appropriately reflect this way of working. Data was therefore derived from a series of ethically approved, semi-structured exploratory interviews, to allow for full focus on participants' subjective experiences.

Being selected for interview was contingent on working outside of usual team structures and within one of the TA sub-teams (see below) led by a person not their usual line manager. At its peak the TA project comprised 76 members; purposive sampling based on the criteria reduced this to 56 possible participants, from which the interview sample was then derived. This was a convenience sample of 11 participants, forming a 20% subset of the eligible TA members. To negate conflicts of interest, no interviews were conducted within formal line management structures, and formal ethical approval was achieved prior to the start of the research project.

The semi-structured interviews aimed to explore the personal value participants perceived both in terms of their professional work experience on the TA project and the affective dimension of their involvement. The interviews, of approximately 25 minutes duration, comprised 12 main questions homing in on the interviewees' roles and relationships during the TA project, with space for interviewees to reflect on their experiences. Given the continuing pattern of remote working at the case study university, the interviews, conducted by the authors over a two-week window, took place via Teams. They were recorded for the purposes of transcription before being deleted.

During data analysis using NVivo, we looked for cross-dataset patterns, using a staged thematic content analysis approach. We categorised all the data into four themes that emerged from the interview transcriptions, focusing on the positive and negative standpoints of working both on the TA project itself, and the interviewees' working relationships with colleagues. We then derived key words to support this categorisation, building up the keywords set inductively during this first pass as we coded the data. We then checked through the interviews for newly assigned codes thus further building up the code bank. In a final stage, we reviewed all the coded material, finally assigning and classifying these according to five key themes which in turn form the principal affective states. From these we were able to present the results and findings according to these key themes and as discussed later.

Matrix leadership in a collaborative project

The TA emerged in May 2020 to prepare academic staff for the delivery of 1100 modules fully, mainly or partially online from September 2020. Led and initially wholly resourced by SLTI, it rapidly became clear that further resources would be needed from around the University to achieve this goal.

Given the time that would have been required to change organisational structures and line management responsibilities, a matrix leadership approach was adopted in order to coordinate what was rapidly emerging as a complex matrix environment of staff and resources required to deliver this strategically important pan-University project.

Although the TA began with the SLTI teams, it quickly became necessary, due to resourcing issues, to expand this further to the other three teams structured under the portfolio of the Pro Vice Chancellor Teaching and Students, looking at the skillsets and competencies of these teams and how they might best contribute. In this way, the expanded SLTI team modelled the community building and interaction that we hoped our academic colleagues would also adopt.

Operationally led by the Head of Learning and Teaching (HoLT), through a process of negotiated allocation with the other three Heads of Service, TA project staff members were distributed by the HoLT across six teams coordinated by a project lead without any change to line management structures. These teams all contributed to different aspects of supporting academic staff to prepare their online module pages ready for the start of the autumn term, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Matrix Leadership in the TA

PVC Students & Teaching (strategic TA lead)				
PVC Portfolios	Learning & Teaching	Technology to support L&T	Student Experience	Timetabling and Specialist Facilities that support L&T
Sphere of influence of service	Academic staff and staff supporting student learning facing. Enhancement (L&T practice plus curriculum) and professional development focused.	Academic staff and student facing and technology to support learning focused.	Student facing and student focused.	Academic staff and student facing and resources and facilities to support L&T focused.
Organisational role	L&T academics (developers) and L&T professional support Solent Student Inclusive Curriculum Consultants.	Instructional Design Learning Technologists Systems Development.	Careers (Employability & Enterprise) Student Achievement Student Mental Health and Wellbeing.	Technical Instructors and Technical Assistants Timetabling.
HoLT (operational lead)				
TA sub-team and function/work in TA	TEAM 1: Intensive support for courses with low digital competence and confidence plus reviewing ADDIE questionnaires and checking final quality.	TEAM 4: Content building and checking of content of pilot modules.	TEAM 2: Audit against Course and Module templates.	TEAM 4: Content building and checking content of pilot modules.
	TEAM 3: Student Inclusive Curriculum Consultants reviewing SOL content for inclusivity and accessibility.	TEAM 5: Releasing courses and modules and ensuring enrolment.		
	TEAM 6: 2 x external consultants advised on initial project set-up, template design and content building for example course and module Solent Online Learning (SOL) pages.			

Impact of matrix leadership on staff agency

We surmised that the success of the TA lay in the shift it engendered to an open, fluid, collaborative structure under matrix leadership, outside of traditional teams and hierarchies, and which prioritized core skills and competencies over job descriptions. Following Ahmed (2014), we held that this matrix environment promoted social boundaries created and maintained through personal relations and connections.

Our findings bear this out, with the most significant impact of the TA project being its capacity to improve staff agency in at least four ways: focusing on the skills ahead of the role; providing opportunities for regular communication at an isolating time; giving a sense of collective endeavour; and allowing for personal connections across the wider institution.

Skills-centred working

First, the TA allowed staff to work collaboratively in ways that best made use of their skills. The HoLT considered the different steps of the process to take L&T online, looked at the people available to support academic colleagues to do this and divided the variously assembled TA project team between process stages based on their skills. As a result, the ability of the TA to succeed was centred on people not tasks. This automatically generated an increased sense of agency amongst project staff, and contributed to the affective dimension of 'world making' whereby individuals become emotionally invested in social structures – the TA project and Solent more widely constituting these social structures (Ahmed, 2014, p.12). This skills-centred way of working was new for Solent, which like many HEIs, traditionally functioned via siloed working whereby hierarchically structured teams led on their specific remits. Our findings demonstrate that staff involved in the TA considered this collaborative working style one of the key intrinsic values of a project that was much broader and longer than they would typically be involved in. The TA's success lay therefore in the buy-in that was achieved for this collaborative way of working rather than collaboration previously being an optional pursuit that some university staff did well and others either did not or never did.

The understanding and cooperative relationships established via the TA were generated by a strong institution-wide collaborative endeavour to pull off something that frankly looked impossible on paper – that is, have all courses and modules partially or fully online in 12 weeks between June and September 2020, a timeframe which SLTI initially considered highly unrealistic based on previous experience of engaging academic staff. To succeed, it was less a question staff working hard towards it or because the external context required it (see next section), it also needed a large dose of goodwill and affective buy-in. As one participant noted, "It's kind of amazing, really, when we've had to very dramatically change the way we work at such short notice" (Interview 8). It is perhaps because Solent has a reputation for being highly student-centred that it was ripe for the metanarrative of 'let's do this for our students,' which was a strong driver for change and helped form the 'we' of the social boundary, something to which participants could belong (Ahmed, 2014).

This can-do ethos came through strongly in interviews with participants, with one commenting that "everyone is so committed to [this project] ... that's one of the things I've really noticed" (Interview 8). The affective buy-in was clear from the beginning, with the same participant noting that "it just all felt really natural. I thought it would be really challenging to work with new people, particularly online when we're in this situation. But actually, I've not found that difficult at all" (Interview 8). Part of the reason for this might be due to the way the TA was organised, bringing teams together

from across the university and thereby enhancing the sense of shared endeavour: "I think it's all being managed really well in terms of putting something together involving multi teams and different phases ... and cascading everything" (Interview 9). This integration of labour (Wellman, 2007) was managed with empathy for existing workloads and care of the HoLT to manage conflict between resources and competing priorities (Malloy, 2012).

Regular communication

The second way that the TA project enhanced staff agency was by offering staff, during what was essentially a personally isolating period resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and recurring degrees of lockdown, opportunities for intensive contact with others. This is because each process stage was facilitated by a collaborative team and team leader where frequent and concentrated contact was necessary to advance the workflow, and which therefore tapped into the situated and dialogic requirements of effective collaboration (Adamson and Walker, 2011). Having the opportunity to remain updated on activity from around the university was found to be valuable following the loss of the casual conversations that had previously kept different teams in touch. One participant stated that, "Being aware of what all the teams are up to and what's going on, I'd say that's been quite a priority for us since the beginning of lockdown" (Interview 9).

On a more personal level, the distraction from the wider external context was considered important by one participant: "I think having something like this and this engaging to work on while we've been at home has also been really useful" (Interview 1). Similarly, others agreed that the personal contact was a welcome change from what had been a lonely and often worrying time for many: "I mean, it's been nice to actually see people" (Interview 8). A colleague agreed, saying "I think I was just waiting for something to happen, and I've not had a lot to do, so ... that's how I got involved" (Interview 7).

The matrix environment therefore provided for the integration of labour in a world that had been fractured by pandemic-driven lockdowns. For Ahmed (2014), emotions are relational, and can exist only when two or more objects are brought into relation with or in reaction to each other. In the context of the TA project, participants experienced a reorientation towards Solent more broadly through its offering a means to be in authentic contact.

Collective endeavour

The third means by which staff agency was strengthened through the TA was due to the project's wider context. TA project staff certainly felt part of something bigger during the most intensive part of the collective collaborative endeavour. There was a clear 'musketeer-like' coalescing-effect of all working towards a common goal which could only be fed by staff's personal commitment to the organisation. Engagement depends on affective commitment to the community (Pirkkalainen et al., 2016), and a particular set of internal environmental factors contributed to this. Simultaneous to the most intensive TA workflow, staff were increasingly being made aware of the financial precarity of the institution. This was then accompanied by the triggering of a substantial redundancy round. These internal factors, accompanied by the significant external factor of the pandemic, meant that staff experienced, for the large part, an enhanced sense of belonging to the organisation via their TA work.

This positive orientation towards the institution was something that the HoLT could harness in terms of influencing involvement and motivation, and tangibly fed into the TA project members, with one participant commenting that,

It's been really nice, actually, to be part of something bigger ... And everybody having this shared goal, however they might all contribute to it. I think it's been a really positive feature of the whole project really. (Interview 1)

That feeling was echoed by another participant, who could see the potential for the institution through the TA project and felt connected to that potential personally: "I was ... quite excited about this project, because ... [it was] transformative" (Interview 8). The same participant continued that,

It's the coming together of all the departments as well ... If all of those services aren't working together in a cohesive way, it would be an absolute nightmare, wouldn't it? ... People have been really great about ... being flexible with each other's teams as well. I think it's been very challenging for all the teams; I think in different ways ... they've got their own workloads to deal with, too. But they've been really on board with the project. (Interview 8)

Participants clearly identified that the project was unusual in its scope and reach, and that this was one of the overriding benefits of it: "We felt really that ... we're working on the same project ... regardless of what team we're in day to day" (Interview 6). Despite the diversity in the roles and responsibilities that TA participants brought to the project, within the matrix environment they experienced a clear vision and goal for the project, to which they all subscribed in an example of Wellman's (2007) integration of labour.

Personal connection

The final aspect of enhanced staff agency relates to the professional connectedness that the TA triggered. The collaborative working relationships discussed above meant that staff who had previously largely worked in siloed parapets, interacting directly with their immediate team, were now able to share their ideas with more and different people in an expanded sphere of professional influence with wider professional boundaries.

For example, one participant noted,

I've really enjoyed having a wider team to share ideas with and work with…It's been really, really nice and ... having more people to draw on ... That was a ... novel experience. A really good one. Very positive one. (Interview 1)

This view was shared by other participants, one of whom stated that "... actually I've learnt so much from other people ... because it is a new area for me ... I've learnt a lot" (Interview 8). Being able to work closely with colleagues who might previously have been less accessible was also seen as a positive outcome of the TA project, with one participant considering that,

It's been nice to have those conversations ... and talk to people ... Collaborative working ... has generally previously been quite fleeting ... But the whole process of getting collaborating and actually doing stuff rather than ... sit[ting] there and [doing] research. (Interview 3)

The value of collaboration in its implications for shared knowledge and greater understanding was also identified by participants through their involvement in the TA project. As one participant recognised: "Just by working more closely together, we understand what everyone's doing"

(Interview 2). The further benefits of this were noted by a second participant, who identified the initial training as being

> *the interesting bit ... that's really exposed us to having a broader range of people all listening and watching the same training and then all...asking questions and stuff. And we wouldn't normally see those people in a room, let alone on screen, you know, as part of our work. So that's been really interesting.* (Interview 9)

The same participant expanded this idea, commenting that the TA project's value had been "the fact that ... this was being involved in a broader thing, it was outside of careers" (Interview 9).

Essentially, the message from participants regarding their affective involvement in the TA project was around the personal relationships and connections that it engendered and which its structure encouraged, and this participant notes the crucial importance of that affective dimension:

> *And I suppose getting people to engage as well and being encouraging, being positive with them is really important, too ... I think being sensitive to people's feelings and needs and passions has been, you know, that's an important part of collaboration as well, supporting each other, I think on the project.* (Interview 8)

Affective themes in collaborative working within a matrix environment

Thus far we have established that through at least four pivotal ways, the most significant impact of the TA project was its capacity to bolster staff agency because of enhanced collaborative working. Drilling down deeper still, our data indicates that in working on the TA project, participants experienced five significant affective states around collaborative working, demonstrating its importance as a notion not just in terms of working with other people – but rather in this way of working's ability to carry a substantial quantity of emotional baggage.

Sense of internal worth

The first affective state induced through participation in the TA project was a reported increased sense of internal self-worth – never was this more important than during a global pandemic which drove Solent staff to remote working conditions to deliver emergency responses to online L&T. This increased sense of self-worth manifested itself through feelings of enhanced confidence, a sense of being valued by the institution, an increased sense of purpose, focus and collegiality.

The matrix environment of the TA project brought together colleagues working in isolation from home, and the sense of being "part of something bigger" (Interview 2) was greeted positively by participants. The trust required between institution and employee for this new way of working was respected by both parties, with participants recognising that the TA project conferred upon them "a bit of ownership and responsibility for the project and not like I was just being nominated as a possible spare body to do so" (Interview 6). What was paramount for that interviewee was that "it was really made clear why we're doing it and why there was value, which is what I enjoyed, because then I felt valued personally for doing it" (Interview 6), thereby reinforcing the need for 'followers' to gain as much as a leader from a project, as Kezsbom (1988) proposes. Jones et al. (2010) highlight the need for matrix leaders to empower and support, rather than direct, and this factor was responded to positively by participants.

This sense of value permeated the participants' involvement, with Interviewee 6 expanding upon what she appreciated above all: "To be relied upon and trusted to kind of undertake this work ... that's been really, really rewarding to me" (Interview 6). Reward was a common theme, with another participant elaborating that

> *I think that's been the most rewarding part of this project, knowing that ... we're supporting our students and we're giving them the best possible service that we can within these really challenging times.* (Interview 5)

The concept of reward went both ways, with another participant stating that "I was glad to be involved in it and glad to have something really positive to contribute to as well" (Interview 1).

Professionally, the TA project carried value through the demands it made upon participants in its working practices. For one participant, the gain was

> *confidence – confidence managing my team and being able to bring them along with me because it was really important that whatever else happened that they felt involved, they felt some ownership and I needed to keep them feeling a part of it as well.* (Interview 1)

Participant 4 agreed with the impact on individual teams, commenting that "I think [our work has] just become a lot more visible, through the TA. So that's obviously really very, very beneficial to me and to the team as a whole" (Interview 4).

In addition, participants experienced positive affect in the personal sphere:

> *I think it's been the best thing that could have happened during this weird period of time because it's really focussed my mind, occupied my mind. Maybe if I'd been doing things that hadn't been so challenging, I would have had more time to think or dwell on things, or I might have felt less motivated because it's been quite different working in your own home environment as well and not being in your work situation. But in some ways, because it's totally new at a time when we were being asked to work in a totally different way, mostly online ... I think I really enjoyed it.* (Interview 8)

Others agreed that the distraction from the events of the outside world was appreciated, with one recalling that "It was something to get stuck into which I was very glad for" (Interview 1).

The emotional context of the pandemic (Aslam et al, 2020) provided for a turning-towards of participants to the TA project, and that relational experience became the means by which the boundaries of the projects were shaped, giving the participants the sense of belonging and value that many of them were searching for during a tumultuous and uncertain time (Ahmed, 2014).

Sense of stretch

The second affective state induced through participation in the TA project was a reported increased sense of intellectual and professional challenge "like different muscles have been stretched" as one participant put it, adding, "I feel like I've stepped up a level" (Interview 1). The sense of contribution to the Solent community was significant in helping maintain staff wellbeing throughout an unprecedented public health crisis, although the "quite exhilarating" pace was a challenge:

> *It was insane. I did have days where I thought how on earth am I going to get all of this done? There were a few days where the laptop was taken away from in front of me and dinner was put down in front of me instead.* (Interview 1)

Despite the project's demanding nature, participants reported "enjoy[ing] being involved in something that's ... been quite a challenge" (Interview 2) and that "Nothing is more interesting than being challenged at work" (Interview 3).

This same respondent noted a sense of rekindled joy of work, in that "this process has definitely reinvigorated … the problem-solving things that I enjoy" (Interview 3). Another respondent agreed that "It's given me a fresh kind of perspective, a really good opportunity to consider things from an academic perspective" (Interview 6). In a separate conversation, a member of the TA team mentioned that they had "rediscovered an interest in teaching and approaches to teaching I suppose" (Interview 8). Another interviewee was most satisfied with the opportunity to undertake new work: "I've always been interested in … doing new things. So long as there's an interest in doing something, then, yeah, I'm looking for opportunities" (Interview 7). The matrix environment therefore provided rich circumstances in which participants could look at their work from a new perspective, take part in tasks that previously were not a part of their role, and (re)discover what it was they enjoyed about their jobs, through exposure to new teams, new colleagues and new activities. This opportunity for personal and professional development was identified as essential for the 'symbiotic' relationship needed whereby commitment to a project is derived through individual 'buy-in' in anticipation of future reward (Kezsbom, 1988), and these participants seem to have found it in the TA.

The scale of the learning curve was mentioned repeatedly by respondents with some quite detailed knowledge acquisition achieved: "I found it quite an interesting exercise because I've learnt a lot about SOL and what maybe I should be doing if I was building content" (Interview 9) and "I think we saw it as quite a good way ... to upskill ourselves" (Interview 9). The same respondent continued:

> *I do feel professionally developed through the training we were given on the task we had to do, and ... I really like looking at best practice. That's my thing ... I love seeing really good stuff because then I'm constantly thinking, right, well, that gives me ideas on what I could do with my own content.* (Interview 9)

Similar positives were derived for whole teams involved with one respondent saying that "although it's been challenging to have the extra work, I think they do say that they've got a lot out of it" (Interview 5). And another added, "it's ... made us have a massive think about our ability" (Interview 9).

For some it was as simple as "it's nice to have something to do" (Interview 7); the mere fact of being busy helped their state of mind in the turmoil of the first lockdown. As one interviewee said, what was most vital was "feeling supported ... during that time" (Interview 8). Interview respondents also talked of the value of the TA project in bolstering their professional toughness: "I think it made me realise that ... I can be really resilient. And actually, I've got lots of good transferable skills that maybe I don't think about" (Interview 8). A resilience very much born out of the fact that "we've had to just radically change everything so quickly" (Interview 8).

Interestingly, interview respondents also engaged with the longer-term implications and foresaw longer term benefits of a project like the TA:

> *One of the big elements for me is getting people to come with you and supporting them to be able to change ... it's a challenge on this project and a lot of other projects I've worked on where there's a lot of change, particularly for people who've worked in the same way for long periods of time. How do you get people to embrace change and not be frightened?* (Interview 8)

As Kezsbom (1988) notes, an attribute of a successful and effective matrix environment is one in which everyone involved stands to gain and where there is space for individuals to pursue their own personal and professional objectives within the context of the project. The experiences of the TA project participants suggest that this was achieved.

Sense of contentment

The third affective state prompted by TA project involvement was a sense of contentment and pleasure in a rewarding job done well, and the recognition of achievement gained from it. Several participants commented simply on their overall impression of it, reflecting that "I have really enjoyed it" (Interviews 1 and 8), "I have enjoyed the experience" (Interview 6), and even that "I ... anticipate that I will continue to enjoy the experience" (Interview 4).

The reasons for this seem to lie in several areas, from the boost to professional development and the stimulation and challenge of new work, to the support and structure generated by the collegiate approach.

In terms of professional development, one participant enthused that the satisfaction lay in

> *seeing examples, I love seeing best practice. I love looking at the different imaginative ideas ... I think if you go down to pure enjoyment, it wouldn't be the reviewing. It would be what I'm actually looking at ... giving you that little window into what everybody else is up to.* (Interview 9)

This idea was echoed by another participant, who found that "I really enjoyed the work, actually. I really enjoy ... reviewing and checking" (Interview 6). Enjoyment of the work itself was shared more widely, with a third participant noting that

> *I am really interested in it as a kind of subject. I think that really helped as well actually. I was quite onboard with it as a concept.* (Interview 8)

The work itself provided important routes towards self-fulfilment, with one participant finding that

> *we're doing something really quite special that a lot of other places aren't necessarily doing. And I think, personally, it's been really fulfilling. And gratifying too, to be working as part of this team and to have made a contribution and be able to see what I've done.* (Interview 1)

Similarly, another participant who was more involved in developing and producing materials commented that, "The doing stuff's the interesting bit. That's what ... I enjoy and want to keep doing" (Interview 3). Overall, participants gained

a sense of success, satisfaction on the wider objective of this project in terms of making sure courses are aligned and that these are as engaging and inclusive and accessible to as many students as possible. (Interview 5)

with the whole experience being "something we can ... build upon" (Interview 6).

As previously, the human connection was a source of contentment for participants, with one feeling that "it's nice to meet new people and get involved with things ... Being connected is kind of a nice thing for me" (Interview 7). Collegiality was "stimulating" (Interview 1), and it was "really helpful" to feel so "supported" (Interview 8). In terms of the contribution of matrix leadership to this, we argue that being able to focus more on individuals' competencies rather than narrow definitions of job roles supported this sense of fulfilment, in that these are foregrounded and developed through a supportive, coaching-based leadership style (Jones et al., 2010).

Sense of anticipation

The matrix environment also favoured participants in gleaning a clear sense of anticipation from their involvement in the TA project, with some reporting being "quite excited" (Interview 1) at the prospect of having the opportunity to participate (Interview 4) and "looking forward to being involved" in the project (Interview 6). This excitement ranged from anticipation; "having the opportunity to really get a vision for online and blended learning ... has been amazing" (Interview 1), to seeing a phenomenal acceleration of ideas for which they had been attempting to get buy-in for a long time pre-Covid: "I felt really excited because ... this is something that the Library has been pushing through for a long time" (Interview 4). The longer-term ramifications also became clear for some: "we get all excited because it's like, oh, we're there, we're visible" (Interview 9). These participants were able to tangibly see that their involvement in the TA project would, as Kezsbom (1988) posited, further their own professional goals, and this increased their commitment to it.

Sense of external worth

Accompanying this increased sense of internal worth engendered by the project, was a clear affective state amongst participants around contributing to a bigger project than themselves from which they derived a great deal of external value and recognition.

The student-centred nature of the work appealed to several participants, chiming with their values and priorities. The contribution of the TA project to the student experience was one which drove these participants, who found it "meaningful, you know … to help students have a good experience" (Interview 2), as "putting on the best possible experience for our students is obviously why we do what we do" (Interview 5). That the project itself was a priority for the university did not go unappreciated, not just as it would "make a contribution to the direction of the University" (Interview 1) and "have a big impact on students" but also that its successful completion implied that "we were being valued for student experience work and reviewing it from a student experience perspective" (Interview 6).

The scope of the project was also something from which participants derived positive affect, from the impact it had on their own roles. For example, one participant observed that "we've played a role here ... It feels that we are part of something bigger" (Interview 2), which would in turn "prompt people to engage with us" (Interview 3). The principal benefit of this lay in the recognition that "that's not necessarily something I've had before in this role" (Interview 1).

Some parts of the University certainly felt an increased sense of value to the L&T community through TA project participation – a case in point was the library. One member of staff stated that "to get that genuine involvement in the reading lists rather than just being the department that just processes the lists" was game changing. It empowered staff by giving them "license to suggest changes where appropriate and to ... genuinely contribute ... and for that to happen consistently across the board" (Interview 4).

Another service area spoke of considering it a compliment that the team were "chosen" "to contribute" or "to be included", "given the opportunity to provide insight" and "asked to be involved in this project" (Interview 5). This was particularly so given its "high priority" and "something that's ... recognised by lots of staff" (Interview 6); especially senior staff, as it was a high value and high stakes strategic activity. Other respondents talked of the TA as re-energizing because "it's really motivated the team" (Interview 5).

The matrix environment of the TA project therefore carried value beyond the teams directly involved in it. The empathetic leadership and self-awareness (Malloy, 2012) of the HoLT had succeeded in integrating disparate groups from across the university in a way that marked it out to the wider university community and gave it and its work a status that individual participants would have been unlikely to have achieved either alone or in their original teams. A matrix environment takes its individual components and creates something greater out of them, and the same was true of the TA project and its participants.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to outline the value of matrix leadership in a matrix environment to drive institution-wide cultural change through the TA project. Our findings demonstrate staff were invited to work collaboratively, giving them a sense of permission to make use of their skills; the project offered opportunities for contact with others; it gave staff the sense of feeling part of something bigger and it provided opportunities for professional connectiveness. A more granular exploration of TA project members' affective states found that the matrix environment in which the TA operated facilitated an increased sense of self-worth, a sense of stretch, a sense of contentment, a sense of anticipation and a sense of external worth. All of these are borne of the nature of contact with the TA project; its emotional boundaries that in turn emerged from the social structures put in place.

The HE sector has long been defined by traditional roles, structures, silos, and reporting lines, which perhaps served it well enough in a stable environment, but which were found wanting during a time of extreme upheaval. Our findings point to matrix leadership in matrix environments as an effective way to progress culture change in this climate because of its focus on the right people performing the right task at the right time, and in the right place. When these elements come together, the individuals involved are more likely to experience a strong, positive affective response and by extension feel greater commitment to the project. Combined with empathetic leadership and a reliance on influence, the emphasis is firmly on social connections and social structures, within which participants can share in and contribute to the social world of the project. Moreover, it is clear that these benefits, and the successful outcomes derived from the TA project, were only possible when mediated through the matrix environment. For higher education to continue to evolve, adapt and innovate, therefore, it may need to abandon its rigidity and hierarchy and embrace the ways of working within the matrix.

These findings point to future potential avenues for more research. An immediate line of enquiry would be to evaluate the success of the TA formally and explore the extent to which matrix leadership was a key variable in the success or not of the TA. Moreover, while this paper has explored the direct benefits of matrix working on the TA project participants, it would be valuable to examine the indirect benefits of this project management and leadership approach. For example, follow-up research might explore the impact of matrix leadership in a matrix environment on the institution itself to assess whether it is a stronger, more stable, more successful institution in terms of the project outcomes it is producing. Such an exploration might ask whether the TA project changed the way we 'do' or manage change overall, assessing the impact on other cross-institutional projects for example. And finally, in terms of the longitudinal impact, has the spark generated by the TA led to the longer-term enculturation of new ways of working, in the institution and indeed in the sector, or will we just snap back to how things were before the pandemic?

In terms of practical recommendations for the sector, this paper confirms the constraints of silo working and recommends fluid, cross-team collaboration, putting the people and the project ahead of line management as well as providing options and choice to staff who are prepared to be flexible both in their mindset and in their interpretation of their job profile. While this can start on a small scale, it is the process of enculturation and gradual buy-in as others see it working that will allow positive change to take place at an institutional level and transform working practices for the benefit of all.

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