

Student Leadership Programme Impact Evaluation

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Student Leadership Programme Impact Evaluation

Executive Summary

The Student Leadership Programme (SLP), launched in 2016 by the Council of Deans of Health, was designed to support nursing, midwifery, and allied health professions (AHPs) students with leadership skills, confidence, and to develop professional networks early in their careers. This impact evaluation, conducted as the Programme's funding concludes, explores the long-term outcomes of the SLP across all cohorts from 2017 to 2025.

Using a mixed-methods approach, data was gathered through surveys, focus groups, and document reviews, engaging 79 alumni and 30 mentors/coaches. Despite limitations in alumni follow-up and the absence of a control group, the evaluation provides a robust insight into the programme's effectiveness and its influence on participants' careers and leadership journeys.

Key Findings:

- **Leadership Development:**

91% of respondents reported increased self-confidence, with many citing the SLP as a catalyst for stepping into leadership roles earlier than expected. They credited the programme with helping them develop their own leadership style, emotional intelligence, and strategic thinking. 80% of survey respondents said that the SLP had a long-term impact on their professional leadership journey. Many of the respondents said that this was done by enhancing their self-awareness, strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, and ability to develop their own leadership style.

- **Careers and Skills Development:**

The SLP has had a transformative impact on its alumni, with many pursuing diverse roles across clinical practice, leadership, research, and academia. Alumni reported increased confidence, enhanced leadership skills, and greater career clarity. The programme broadened participants' understanding of healthcare careers, inspiring many to explore non-traditional paths such as education, policy, and portfolio careers. Exposure to diverse speakers and real-world leadership experiences empowered students to advance more quickly in their roles, advocate for themselves, and align their careers with their values and aspirations. Participants developed key professional skills such as networking, communication, emotional intelligence, and strategic thinking. Several alumni reported accelerated career progression, attributing this to the leadership skills and mindset fostered by the SLP. The programme not only helped them to secure advanced roles earlier than expected but also to advocate for themselves more effectively. Overall, the SLP created a transformative space for students to build self-belief, step into leadership, and shape meaningful, future-oriented careers in healthcare.

- **Coaching and Mentorship:**

Coaching was one of the most valued aspects of the programme, with many alumni maintaining long-term relationships with their mentors/coaches. 87% of coaches believed the SLP effectively prepared students for leadership.

- **Professional Impact:**

80% of respondents reported a lasting impact on their professional journey. Many now hold clinical, academic, or research roles, with a significant number (28%) engaged in combined or portfolio careers—reflecting the programme’s broad influence on career aspirations.

- **Networking and Community:**

84% of respondents highlighted the importance of networking, with many alumni continuing to collaborate professionally and using the networks they built from the programme. The interprofessional nature of the programme was frequently cited as a unique strength.

- **Broader Understanding of Healthcare:**

Alumni gained a systems-level understanding of healthcare and confidence to influence change. Several alumni described how the SLP empowered them to challenge norms and advocate for improvement.

- **Role-Modelling and Advocacy:**

Many alumni have become mentors/coaches themselves or started leadership initiatives in their own institutions, sharing the values and skills developed during the programme.

Recommendations

While overwhelmingly positive, participants and mentors/coaches suggested enhancements such as:

- More structured support in mentoring/coaching relationships
- Greater focus on personal goal setting and reflective tools (e.g. leadership journals)
- Continued emphasis on diversity and inclusion
- A platform for alumni engagement and access to shared resources

Conclusion

The SLP has delivered significant value in preparing early-career healthcare professionals for leadership. It has helped shape a generation of confident, collaborative, and forward-thinking leaders across the UK. The Council of Deans of Health is now well-placed to build on this foundation and embed the SLP’s learning into future leadership and student engagement strategies across the sector.

Raluca Oaten

Field studied when on the Programme: Adult Nursing

University when on the Programme: Oxford Brookes University

Year on the programme: 2017

Current role and title: Policy and Research Fellow, Florence Nightingale Foundation; Trustee Council of Deans of Health



Lasting Impact on Personal and Professional Development

The most lasting impact has been seeing the art of the possible. Being exposed to leaders across health and social care—not just through networking, but as powerful role models—has been invaluable. Witnessing their authenticity, vulnerability, and strength reshaped my understanding of leadership. It has helped me overcome imposter syndrome, push beyond self-doubt, and believe I can be it—because I’ve seen it.

Influence on Career Path and Leadership Roles

The programme opened my eyes to the breadth of career paths and leadership roles available. I learned to lead myself and carve out my own path. Practically, I gained invaluable skills in pitching ideas, preparing for stakeholder meetings, building networks, and securing allyship—all thanks to the guidance and support of my incredible mentor, stakeholders involved, and the CoDH colleagues.

Leadership Skills and Insights in Professional Practice

Leading with authenticity has remained the cornerstone of my practice—I’ve learned that showing up as myself builds trust and impact. The programme taught me the value of surrounding myself with those who challenge and champion me. It also instilled a mindset that nothing is impossible. These insights continue to guide how I lead, collaborate, and pursue opportunities with confidence and purpose.

Initiatives and Changes Resulting from the Programme

The programme supported my initiative to create a one-stop website for individuals facing amputation due to disease, improving understanding of the journey before, during, and after surgery. Drawing on SLP learning, I secured funding and launched it in Oxford with the Mayor and lead consultant present. Since then, I’ve led multiple initiatives—from starting an ICU Journal Club to securing an NIHR Internship and pursuing a full-time career in policy and influence.

Impact on Confidence and Identity as a Leader

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Introduction

The Council of Deans of Health's Student Leadership Programme (SLP) was established to develop practical leadership skills among healthcare students. Launched in 2016, the SLP's overarching aim was to develop and promote students' leadership capacity in support of delivery of the best possible care to patients and service users. With both the Health and Care Professions Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Council emphasising the importance of leadership within their respective standards of proficiency, the SLP was designed to support aspiring leaders from nursing, midwifery, and allied health professions (AHPs), helping them to develop the confidence, skills, and networks necessary to shape the future of health and care. Through a blend of residential workshops, mentoring/coaching, and peer learning, the programme targeted students early in their healthcare careers, offering opportunities to engage with senior leaders and explore their leadership identity. Over the years, the SLP attracted a diverse cohort of students, with a strong emphasis on inclusion and interprofessional collaboration.

Rationale for evaluation

With the SLP funding having now ended, the Council of Deans of Health (Council) is conducting this impact evaluation to assess how effectively the programme met its aims for the SLP and to understand both the short and long-term impact on its participants. This evaluation seeks to provide evidence of outcomes in areas such as leadership development and confidence. It is also intended to inform and influence future discussions around student leadership and engagement.

Evaluation objectives

The main aim of the evaluation is to understand the long-term participant outcomes of the Student Leadership Programme, particularly in terms of its impact on their career and skills development, as well as leadership growth. These outcomes together help to evidence the overall success and effectiveness of the programme. The secondary aims of the evaluation are to communicate the impact of the programme to the Council's membership and to the SLP funders, as well as to start to identify key lessons to strengthen future work around student leadership and engagement.

Audience

The primary intended audience for this evaluation is the programme's funders without whom the SLP would not have been possible. The secondary audience is Council's members, senior academic leaders within healthcare education, as well as relevant bodies and policy makers who may benefit from understanding the long-term impact of the programme and its recommendations.

Scope and Limitations

The evaluation includes all cohorts of the SLP, from the first cohort in 2017 to the final cohort which concluded in 2025. The evaluation uses mixed methods including surveys, focus group interviews, and features case studies with programme alumni. The availability and completeness of data varied across cohorts; time constraints and difficulties with communication also limited the extent of follow-up with all alumni. In addition, the absence of a formal control group limits the ability to attribute outcomes solely to the SLP. Despite these constraints, the evaluation provides a robust insight to the programme's impact on its participants.

Methodology

This impact evaluation uses a mixed-methods approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on the outcomes and experiences of participants on the SLP. The evaluation was designed to capture the breadth and depth of the programme's impact across multiple cohorts, focusing on individual professional and personal development.

Data Collection Methods

- **Online Surveys** - Structured surveys were distributed to alumni across all cohorts, as well as to mentors/coaches from the SLP. The surveys captured quantitative data on key indicators such as perceived leadership development and professional opportunities post-programme. Likert-scale items, multiple choice boxes, and open-ended questions were used to gather both measurable outcomes and more nuanced feedback.
- **Focus Group Interviews** – Focus group interviews were conducted with a sample of SLP alumni to explore individual journeys in greater detail. Participants were asked to reflect on the impact and influence the SLP had and continues to have on their leadership journeys. The focus groups provided qualitative insights into the personal and professional impact of the programme, including barriers and enablers to leadership development.
- **Document and Data Review** - Previous evaluation reports, participant feedback from events, and students' end of programme reflections were reviewed to contextualise findings and support triangulation.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the alumni and coach surveys was analysed to identify common trends and outcomes. Qualitative data from focus group interviews and open-ended survey responses were analysed thematically. Data was then triangulated across sources to ensure the reliability and validity of findings.

Rob Molloy

Field studied when on the Programme: MSc Occupational Therapy (pre-registration)

University when on the Programme: Brunel, University of London

Year on the programme: 2018

Current role and title: Highly Specialist Occupational Therapist and Honorary Research Fellow, Queen Mary University London



Lasting Impact on Personal and Professional Development

The Student Leadership Programme inspired me to consider a wide range of opportunities for career development. Hearing from leaders who followed a variety of career paths, often with portfolio careers, gave me the motivation to take up opportunities as they arise. I am currently mixing clinical work and leading on multiple areas at work with developing a career in research through an NIHR development grant.

Influence on Career Path and Leadership Roles

The programme gave me the confidence to take up leadership opportunities as they arose. For example, I took a part-time Band 7 secondment two years into practice, which involved leading a team and pathway at work. The programme also motivated me to seek out opportunities in areas I wanted to develop in, such as research. I have now started an NIHR grant to develop research skills.

Leadership Skills and Insights in Professional Practice

The programme taught me the importance of having strong networks and relationships to thrive in the complex healthcare field. I learned the value of supporting and championing others, and in turn allowing others to support me. Building a strong network has helped me explore new areas of practice I am interested in and receive mentorship and support to enter new spaces, such as research.

Initiatives and Changes Resulting from the Programme

My career thus far has focused on clinical work. I have led the development of pathways for children with physical disabilities, including launching a new clinic following national guidelines for cerebral palsy surveillance. I have presented this work at conferences and am part of the leadership team for the national programme. Being on the SLP showed me that I can be a leader regardless of how many years I have worked.

Impact on Confidence and Identity as a Leader

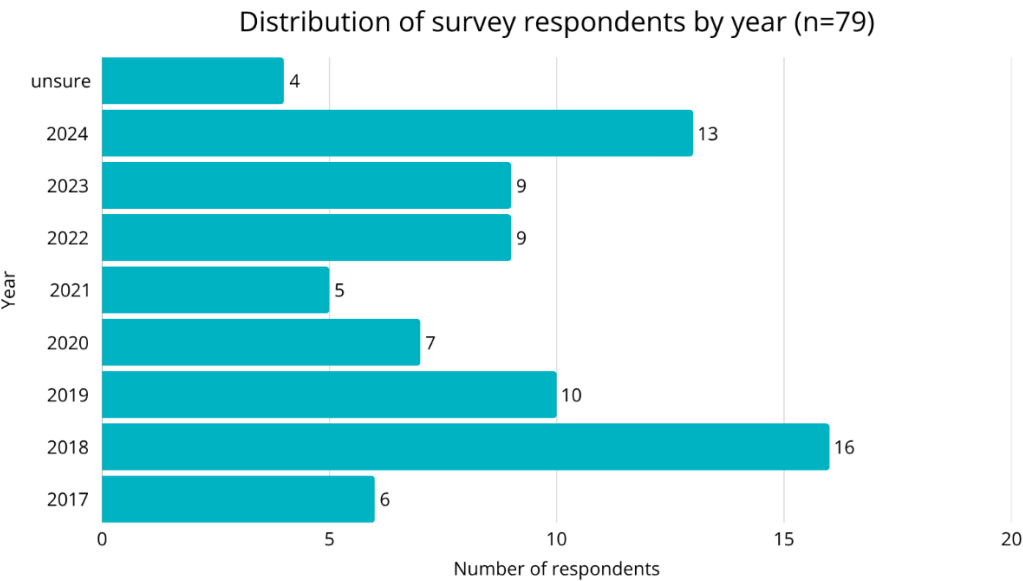
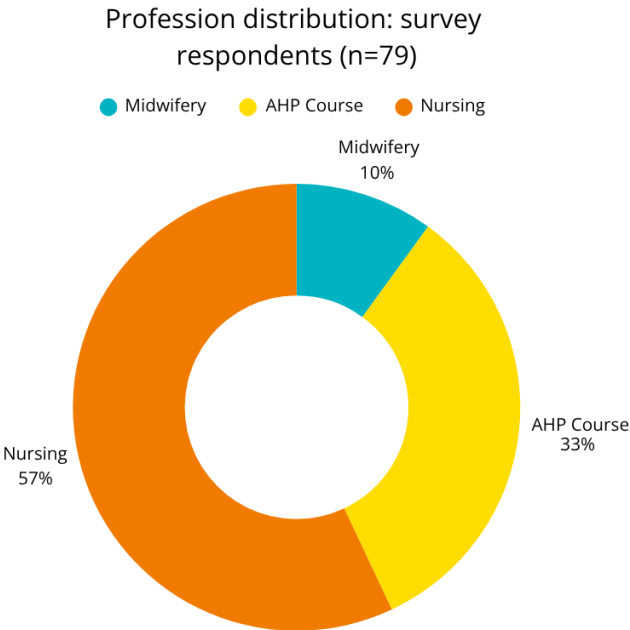
The programme gave me the confidence and resilience to be an authentic leader who follows my values and principles. Meeting a variety of leaders with different personalities and styles showed me that I can bring my authentic self to leadership without feeling the need to conform to a mould. This gave me the confidence to step away from jobs and roles when they no longer felt like the right fit.

Demographics

Alumni survey demographics

Over the past eight years, the SLP has engaged over 470 students from across the UK, including nursing (56%), allied health professions (34%), and midwifery (10%). All participants were invited to complete a long-term impact survey, and 79 students completed it (17%). The response group reflected similar proportions to the overall participant pool.

Although it was more challenging to reach earlier cohorts, due to changes in contact details and personal circumstances, there was a consistent distribution of respondents across all cohorts, with an average of nearly nine students per cohort (the 2018 cohort was a larger cohort of 90 participants).



78% of respondents were based in England, with 7.6% in Scotland and 6.3% in Wales. This distribution reflects the broader SLP population, which has logically consisted mostly of England-based participants due to the higher number of students there. Notably, no survey respondents identified as being based in Northern Ireland. These figures closely align with the overall participant demographics of the programme since 2017, which includes over 470 individuals—78% from England, 12% from Scotland, 7% from Wales, and 3% from Northern Ireland.

Focus group demographics

Focus group interviews were conducted on two occasions, bringing together twelve former participants (who completed the Alumni Survey), mostly alumni from the first three years of the programme: two from 2017, five from 2018 (two cohorts), three from 2019, one from 2020, and one from 2022.

Among them, 66% (eight alumni) were based in England, 16% (two alumni) in Scotland, and 8% each (two alumni) in Northern Ireland and Wales, representing a broad spread across the different nations involved in the programme.

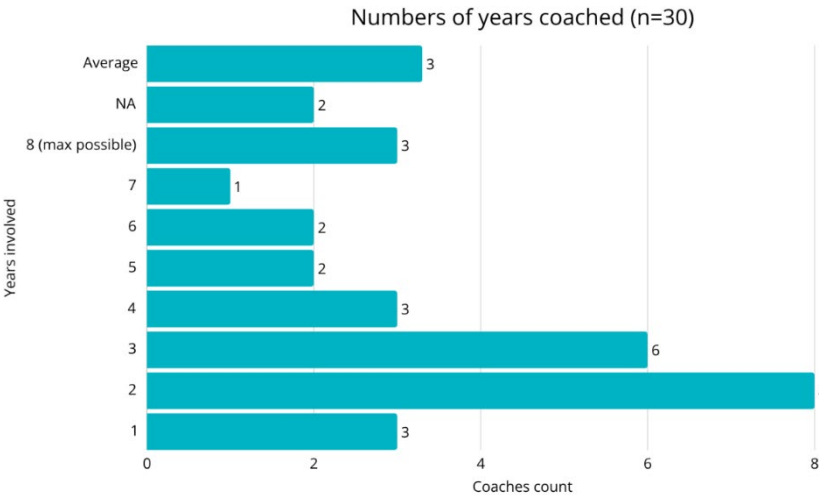
There was also considerable diversity in terms of professions and fields, with eight different professions represented within the nursing (four alumni), midwifery (three), and allied health (five) fields. This group included five participants currently working in education and research: a Research Nurse, a Senior Lecturer in Mental Health Nursing, a Lecturer in Midwifery, an Occupational Therapist Research Fellow, and a Paramedic Team Leader & Lecturer.

Most of the remaining seven participants were working in clinical practice and either held or were progressing toward advanced and specialised roles, such as Maternity Ward Manager, Cancer Prehabilitation Lead & Digital AHP, Trainee Advanced Clinical Practitioner, and Senior Digital Physiotherapist.

Mentor/Coach survey demographics

Thanks to the Council’s strong networks, a wide range of professionals were engaged, including academics, clinical practitioners, and sector leaders, to support students through the coaching scheme.

As part of this evaluation, 30 survey responses from mentors/coaches were collected, many of whom have supported the programme since its inception or over several years. Their long-term involvement adds relevance and depth to their perspectives on the programme’s development and its impact on students.



Coaches who completed the survey had coached for an average of 3.3 years, with 56% (17 individuals) having coached for at least three years, reflecting strong retention and commitment, which is important for maintaining programme quality and consistency. Three of the respondents had been involved every year since the programme’s inception in 2017.

Joy O’Gorman

Field studied when on the Programme: Adult nursing
BSc (Hons)

University when on the Programme: University of
Plymouth

Year on the programme: 2020

Current role and title: PhD Student; Clinical ICU Nurse;
Senior Clinical Research Nurse (three roles hybrid
working)



Lasting Impact on Personal and Professional Development

The programme empowered me to stay true and remain connected to my authentic self within my professional role and career, while also developing new skills outside my comfort zone. It helped me focus on maintaining diversity in all my planning and thinking and remain proud of—and fully embrace—my personal strengths as a collaborator, networker, and cultivator. One of the most powerful impacts that remains with me is the tangible feeling of empowerment I experienced sitting in a room full of passionate peers striving to make a difference.

Influence on Career Path and Leadership Roles

Four months into my new role post-graduation, I was invited to apply for a PhD scholarship to further explore research themes I had developed as a nursing student. Whilst this invitation was based on my merit, I initially felt unsure whether I can consider such an opportunity as it is not always seen as an obvious step for nurses or allied health professionals. Had I not been on the 150 Leaders programme, I may have struggled more with the barriers and myths around glass ceilings for early-career nursing. Meaningful conversations with my senior clinical leads enabled me to advocate for myself and develop an early-career research nursing pathway.

Leadership Skills and Insights in Professional Practice

Key programme messages on reflexivity, networking, interprofessional collaboration, and authenticity echo loudly in all aspects of my professional practice. The ability to refine my strengths, strengthen resilience, filter unconstructive internal or external barriers, and focus on cultivating and planting energy rather than chasing outcomes are also pertinent skills I developed during the programme.

Initiatives and Changes Resulting from the Programme

I developed a quality improvement project (QI) which involves new starters to ICU wearing a specific lanyard as they transition into their position. The QI was embraced by clinical leads and the full MDT, and it is now embedded in practice to help the Nurse in Charge and the MDT more easily identify and support those new to the team while on shift. I also advocated for and launched a new clinical research category sponsored by the NIHR for the Student Nursing Times Awards. The category is now embedded as part of the annual awards, helping to showcase and advocate for early-career research.

Impact on Confidence and Identity as a Leader

The programme’s core message on authenticity has enabled me to remain focused on my passion for nursing. Burnout and current NHS pressures are challenging, yet my professional resilience and confidence remain strongly influenced by the inspirational organisers, coaches, and peers on the programme who are passionate about building positive working cultures and leading positive change through collaboration.

Findings and Analysis

Overall impact of the SLP on students

Overall, participants highly valued the programme and its impact on their professional career and leadership journey. Survey respondents scored the programme’s impact an average score of 4.55 out of 5. Similarly in the coaching survey, mentors/coaches also agreed that they found the programme beneficial for the students they worked with giving it an average rating of 4.5 out of 5. Exposure to healthcare leaders and networking were considered the key benefits of the programme, valued by over 75% of respondents.

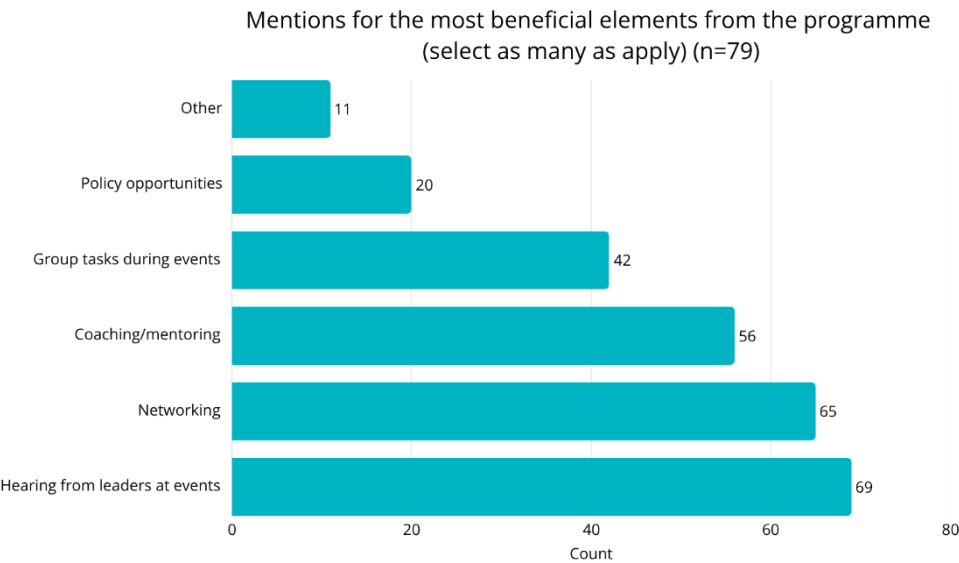
Survey respondents found coaching and mentoring (71.8%) as well as interactive group work (53.8%) particularly valuable, highlighting the importance of relationship-building and experiential learning. They greatly appreciated the personalised support and role modelling offered through coaching, in some cases forming lasting connections that continue to influence their professional lives.

The lasting connection with mentors and coaches was also acknowledged by multiple alumni in the focus groups.

“I have also kept in touch with my coach as well and have had quite a lot of opportunities from that. My mentor was about including me in things, and I just felt really lucky to have that experience. I really felt that my mentor went absolutely above and beyond what I was expecting, which was fantastic.”

Midwifery alumnus, 2018 Cohort (Focus group)

Fewer respondents mentioned policy opportunities (25.3%), which may reflect their more limited availability or relevance at certain stages of a student’s career. These opportunities were also less common in the early years of the programme but became more frequent over time, thanks to stronger collaboration with partners and stakeholders, as well as the programme’s growing reputation.



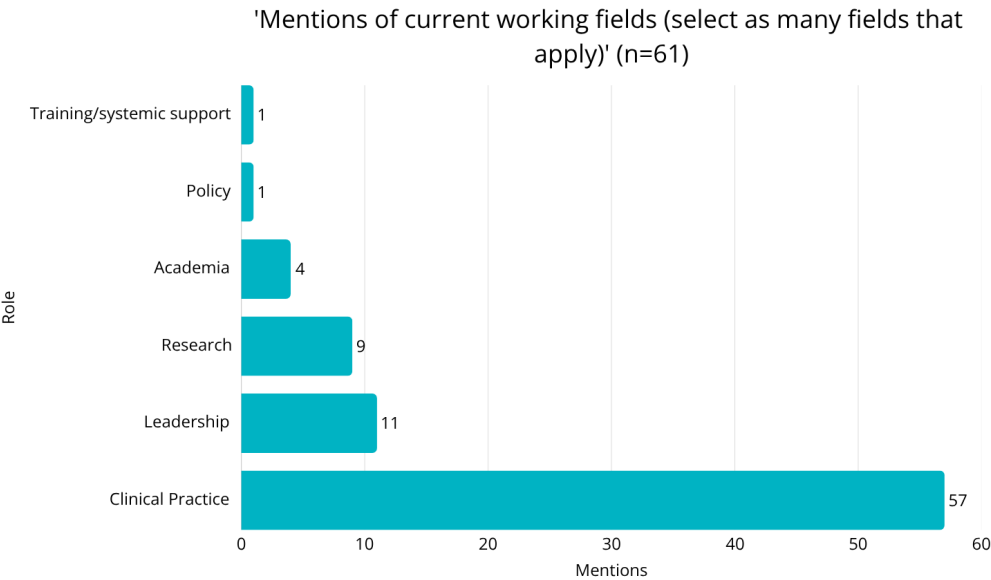
87% of mentors/coaches agreed that the coaching had helped prepare students to take on greater leadership roles within their institutions or professional lives. They noted that the programme particularly helped students by:

- encouraging them to take initiative and demonstrate leadership at their own level (e.g., leading a project or taking on a new role).
- supporting them in setting personal goals.
- equipping them with tools and practices they can apply in the future.

Career and Skills Development

To understand the long-term impact of the programme, alumni were asked to provide details about their current employment, including whether they are working in the healthcare. Among the seventy-nine respondents, 61 alumni (77.5%) are currently working in either healthcare or healthcare education. Only one respondent (1.3%) is working outside of the sector to work in a different field. The remaining 17 respondents (21.5%) are still students either completing their degree, most of whom belong to the most recent cohorts, or undertaking further studies within healthcare.

The 61 alumni who currently work in healthcare or healthcare education were asked to specify the area in which they are currently employed. They were able to select as many fields as possible that applied to them. Of the 61 respondents, 92% reported involvement in clinical practice. However, 17% mentioned involvement in leadership, followed by research at 16%, and academia at 6.5% of respondents.



18% of respondents reported having academia and research as part of their roles. This suggests that the programme may have contributed to encouraging graduates to pursue careers in education and research—two fundamental areas within the Council’s remit.

28% of respondents reported having joint or combined roles across multiple fields. Examples include holding a leadership position within a clinical setting or combining research with clinical

practice. These figures are particularly significant given that SLP alumni are still early in their careers. They highlight the community's strong diversity and high level of qualifications. The programme may contribute to shaping broader professional ambitions aligned with the Council's goals.

"I was unsure that I wanted to go into clinical practice. The SLP has made me see there are many options available, and I have become increasingly interested in research and education."

Nurse alumnus, 2024 cohort (Alumni survey)

15% of respondents highlighted the SLP's role in broadening their career horizons beyond clinical practice. The programme raised participants' awareness of diverse career possibilities beyond clinical practice, including education and in policy. They particularly emphasised the value of portfolio careers and the development of adaptability skills to pursue innovative career paths. The diversity of speaker and stakeholders' profiles involved in the programme was widely cited as a key source of inspiration.

"The SLP inspired me to consider a range of different career options by hearing from leaders in various fields. It inspired me to consider having a portfolio career which I am now developing for myself. I was inspired to learn from the journeys of many leaders in healthcare."

AHP Alumnus, 2018 cohort (Alumni survey)

"The programme role modelled it for me so that I want to then do that for other people and that's what's kind of inspired me to go into education"

Nurse Alumnus, 2017 cohort (Focus group)

By exposing students to a wide range of speaker profiles and leadership journeys, the SLP broadened participants' understanding of what a healthcare career can look like. Whilst an unintentional result of the SLP, those who participated in the focus group also reported leaving with a newly awakened interest in academic careers and non-clinical roles, recognising that their paths are not confined to traditional clinical practice.

"This experience directly inspired me to pursue a career in clinical research, and I am thrilled to have been awarded one of only 30 fully funded places on the NIHR MSc in Clinical Research. I have no doubt that the skills, experiences, and reflections I gained through the SLP played a crucial role in strengthening my application. The programme not only supported my personal and professional growth but also affirmed my passion for contributing to research that improves patient care."

Nurse Alumnus, 2023 Cohort (Alumni survey)

"It was inspiring to have so many speakers come from so many different backgrounds come and share their stories about how they followed opportunities that arose."

AHP alumnus, 2018 cohort (Focus group)

This expanded perspective empowered students to pursue new opportunities, to say yes to challenges that align with their goals, and to say no when something doesn't serve their values or vision.

"I think one of the big things I took away was seeing the variety of things I could do in my career... it (SLP) allowed me to advocate for myself a bit better and having the confidence to say no when something isn't OK."

AHP alumnus, 2018 cohort (Focus group)

"It's helped me to understand the other options which are more aligned to my goals and aspirations. It's helped me to lead with purpose and compassion, which is something I wouldn't have started without the SLP."

Midwifery alumnus, 2024 cohort (Alumni survey)

91% of survey respondents identified that confidence was a key area that they have developed from being part of the SLP.

"The SLP fortified my confidence in my own self and my own voice, which I have used in my current workplace... I'm proud to say the SLP helped me step into myself as a professional."

Midwifery alumnus, 2018 Cohort (Alumni survey)

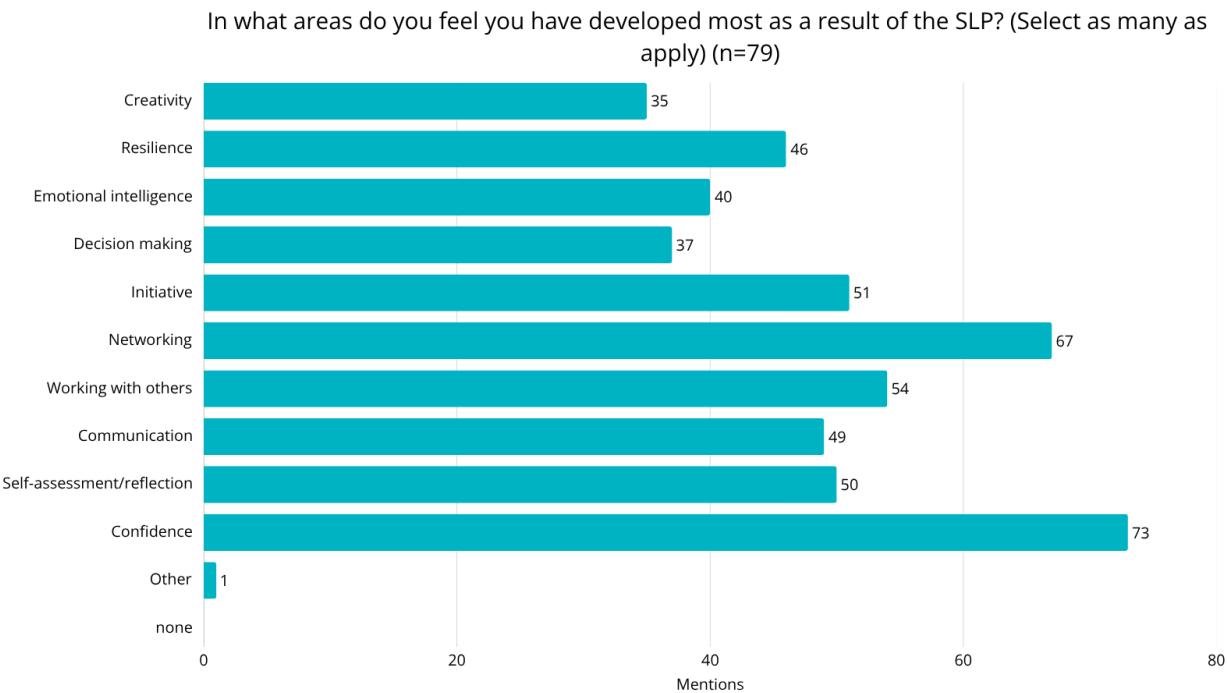
"The SLP is the reason I am in my current role - a role that should have taken me 15-20 years to work towards. SLP gave me the confidence to use my voice, make big swings and believe in myself. It muted my imposter voice and told me to go for the things I believed in."

AHP alumnus, 2019 Cohort (Alumni survey)

Networking (84.8%) and working with others (68.4%) were also frequently mentioned, highlighting the programme's strong emphasis on collaboration and relationship-building. Respondents recognised personal and interpersonal skills, such as self-assessment and reflection (63.3%), initiative (64.6%), and communication (62.0%), as key areas in which they had improved.

While fewer respondents selected emotional intelligence (50.6%), resilience (58.2%), decision-making (46.8%), and creativity (44.3%) as areas in which they'd improved, these areas still

represent meaningful personal growth for a substantial portion of the cohort. No respondents indicated a lack of development, reinforcing the programme’s positive impact.



80% of survey respondents said that the SLP had a long-term impact on their professional leadership journey. Many of the respondents said that this was done by enhancing their self-awareness, strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, and ability to develop their own leadership style. They also highlighted the value of networking and relationship-building, particularly in multidisciplinary environments and noted that the programme opened up new opportunities, broadened their horizons, and helped them feel recognised for their leadership knowledge.

“The SLP enabled me to develop leadership skills and confidence which I believe led to me progressing within my career more quickly than my peers. I started in my current band 7 post in January 2022 and I gained my first band 6 post around 14 months after qualifying.”

Nurse Alumnus, 2017 Cohort (Alumni survey)

“Not only I was able to complete my competencies in 3 months and was signed off as a Preceptor plus - which usually takes around 12 months, I had the trust in my skills to apply for a new position.”

Nurse alumnus, 2023 Cohort (Alumni survey)

Similarly, those involved in the focus groups noted that this helped to foster a strong sense of self-belief and equipped them to step into leadership roles early in their careers.

"It obviously helps job interviews and things like that. So yeah, I didn't think I would be a band 6 so soon after qualifying"

Nurse alumnus, 2020 Cohort (Focus group)

"Paramedics and the ambulance service has a sort of a burden of leadership. In that role, from a newly qualified, you're expected to work on your own and lead a team, lead a scene. (...) I've definitely noticed that this programme and that mindset, has me looking for opportunities and pushing for things and that has set me to where I am, at a rate ahead of my colleagues."

AHP alumnus, 2019 Cohort (Focus group)

The Student Leadership Programme has played a pivotal role in helping its participants build essential leadership skills, develop emotional intelligence, and gain confidence in their own abilities. Through structured learning and tailored activities, students were encouraged to explore and define their own leadership styles, flourishing within an environment that celebrates diversity and multi-level leadership. The SLP offered more than a theoretical understanding of leadership—it empowered students by allowing them to practise and refine these skills in real-world contexts and they're continuing to benefit and use the skills in their continued leadership and professional journeys.

Leadership Growth and Advocacy

Respondents noted how the Student Leadership Programme influenced their decision to work in their current roles. 56% reflected that the SLP provided participants with confidence and motivation to pursue their chosen paths, such as starting their own project or practice, entering research, or seeking leadership opportunities.

"It has given me the knowledge and skills to embrace the leadership aspect of my role. It was an incredible opportunity, and it helped me to feel confident in my ability that I can be a leader."

Nurse Alumna 2018 (Alumni survey)

The SLP played a key role in building participants' confidence, enabling them to take initiative, lead projects, and pursue new professional opportunities. When respondents were asked to provide examples of how they had applied learning from the SLP in their professional lives, 38% of the most frequent examples related to the programme fostering confidence and a sense of validation and readiness. In other words, it gave participants the confidence to contribute, lead projects, and seek out new opportunities.

70% of survey respondents felt that the SLP supported them in taking on leadership responsibilities or a leadership role. When asked to give examples of how the programme supported them in this, the majority of respondents reflected on how it empowered them to seize new opportunities.

Others noted that the SLP enabled them to demonstrate leadership and influence at their own levels.

"I learned leadership skills and qualities, (...) all healthcare professionals, from student to the most senior roles can practice, adopt and develop. It has helped me to realise early on that leadership qualities are worked on daily, and this helped me to have to confidence to apply for promotions, leading me to where I am now."

AHP alumna, 2018 (Alumni survey)

Linked to building self-confidence, a standout long-term impact of the SLP has been the way it inspired participants to become role-models and advocates for positive change.

"(SLP) made me more confident to speak about wider midwifery conversations and get involved in change. I was able to attend the RCM conference to represent my hospital and have made many wonderful connections across healthcare disciplines. As a result of the program, I am a more confident speaker in my role as well as advocating for students to get involved in wider research and extracurricular programmes."

Midwifery Alumnus, 2023 Cohort (Alumni survey)

Alumni reported feeling more confident in upholding their values, particularly around discriminatory practices, and transmitting these values to others.

"Building an understanding of leadership from the SLP helps solidify the conviction and the courage needed to actually abide by my values... I try my best to inspire a new generation of leadership in my students"

Midwifery Alumnus, 2018 Cohort (Focus group)

A recurring theme from the survey was that alumni were supporting others by transferring their leadership skills: some had taken on mentoring/coaching roles (including some more experienced alumni coming back to coach on the SLP) or even started their own leadership development schemes for future leaders.

"It made me want to do more for students as well, and I'm still trying to think about how to do that with my students. We want to kind of incorporate our own leadership training and our own leadership development."

Nurse Alumnus, 2017 Cohort (Focus group)

The SLP encouraged students to not only embody leadership but to share their learning and experiences with peers, future students, and colleagues.

Networks and Systems Navigation

Perhaps one of the most lasting impacts of the SLP is the network it fosters. Participants developed meaningful connections with peers from across the UK and from a range of disciplines, gaining exposure to a diversity of professions and perspectives that enrich their understanding of healthcare. Over the years, students came from all fields of nursing, midwifery and each of the allied health professions [as defined by NHS England](#), as well as mentors/coaches from across these professions. 84% of survey respondents identified that networking was a key area that they have developed from being part of the SLP.

"I know that for me as a paramedic, we sort of work fairly isolated from of the rest of the NHS in parts, but I feel that if I want to talk to a midwife, I've got a bunch of midwives from my cohort I can ring"

AHP alumnus, 2019 cohort (Focus group)

"I still work/do collaborations with students on the programme. I still speak to them every month at least, and I've been writing a book with a fellow participant"

Nurse alumnus, 2020 cohort (Focus group)

With two thirds of mentors/coaches stating that they are still in touch with their mentee(s) or coachee(s) in either a personal or professional basis, it's clear that these networks often extended beyond the duration of the SLP. Many alumni in the focus group were very grateful for the relationships that they continue to have with their mentors and coaches.

"I'm still in contact with my mentor today, all these years on. Any time I go for a new role or just wanted to someone to speak to, I can always e-mail her. She's been a big part of my professional career and personal life."

AHP alumnus, 2017 cohort (Focus group)

Through coaching, mentorship, and speaker engagement, participants also gained direct access to senior leaders in the sector, offering invaluable insight and inspiration as they shape their own leadership journeys.

Another lasting impact of the SLP has been the deepened understanding students gained of the healthcare system as a whole. Alumni reported an increased ability to see the bigger picture of healthcare delivery and policy, along with the confidence to challenge the status quo and speak up, including to senior managers and decision-makers.

"It (SLP) gave me an insight that I don't think other people have who I worked with have. You see a far bigger picture. You see what's happening in in other areas and in other services."

Nurse alumnus, 2017 cohort (Focus group)

Some participants noted this particularly in comparison to their peers who they felt were less likely to stand up against the status quo.

"You didn't just go along with the status quo with some people did. So maybe at first other people were just like, well, this is just the way it is. (...) So, I think maybe it gave me a confidence to speak up more."

AHP alumnus, 2018 cohort (Focus group)

Simon James

Field studied when on the Programme: Adult nursing

University when on the Programme: Swansea University

Year on the programme: 2020

Current role and title: National Lymphoedema Specialist Practitioner; Lymphoedema Wales Clinical Network



Lasting Impact on Personal and Professional Development

Networking and growing my leadership skills have been vital for the projects I have led or participated in, as well as for my current job role within the NHS. I work for a national team and therefore have to liaise with and coordinate different teams to deliver care and create care plans.

Influence on Career Path and Leadership Roles

I feel that the SLP has improved my confidence levels and enabled me to push myself to the next level. I have met many wonderful and inspiring people through the course and regularly utilise their expertise and knowledge.

Leadership Skills and Insights in Professional Practice

I work with many students in my job role and continue to support the Swansea University Student Leadership Academy. I coach for them and also help to support student-led projects aimed at improving student wellbeing and education. I am able to pass on my knowledge, skills, and insights to those who are starting their own leadership journeys.

Initiatives and Changes Resulting from the Programme

Since my time with the SLP, I have led and supported a number of student-led projects within the university and have also led my own projects within my workplace. I have increased my confidence in public speaking by regularly doing it for the Swansea Student Leadership Academy, which proved vital for a project of my own—a skin care/basics of movement session. I liaised with Swansea University to deliver this to first-year nursing students, designed to encourage them to be more involved and proactive in patient care.

Impact on Confidence and Identity as a Leader

I feel I have my own identity and leadership style as a result of attending the SLP. I have worked on my emotional intelligence and prefer to work collaboratively with my team and students, enabling them to be the best they can be and to keep pushing projects forward.

Recommendations

Changes to the programme structure and content

Whilst not the main focus for this impact evaluation, the feedback from alumni and coaches raised some suggestions for changes to the programme's structure and content. Some of the suggestions for improvement also come from alumni of early cohorts of the Student Leadership Programme and where changes to the programme structure/content had subsequently been adapted and improved.

Some alumni found the pace of learning to be overwhelming at times, particularly the intensity of the programme/events. The suggestion was that a more staggered delivery could have supported absorption and reflection. Further in-person gatherings would also have enhanced connections among participants, but this option was limited by financial constraints.

While the SLP has been overwhelmingly positive in its impact, early participants noted content areas that could be strengthened. At its inception, the SLP lacked structured discussions around diversity and inclusion, which were later integrated into the programme and recognised as essential to effective leadership in healthcare. Some participants also felt that practicing more professional, transferable skills such as navigating conflicts and difficult conversations, could have been impactful in preparing them for future leadership roles.

Finally, there was a call for more personal support and development in students' personal leadership journeys. Part of that is better preparation for mentoring and coaching, including setting expectations for coaching and more support around goal setting. Again, some of this had been integrated into the final years of the programme but was a more recent development. There is also a wider recommendation for further check-ins, personal reviews and a leadership workbook so participants can track their own leadership journey.

The future of student leadership and engagement

Part of the next steps for the Council of Deans of Health and its members is considering how to embed learning from the Student Leadership Programme into member institutions and to consider how the Council of Deans of Health works on its future engagement with students.

With a successful local initiative at the Student Leadership Academy in Swansea and the Student Leadership Academy trialled at the University of West of England, Bristol, there is a promising model for sustained leadership development at a local/regional level.

The [Student Leadership Programme Toolkit](#) is accessible to those interested in developing student leadership initiatives and has been designed with a wide audience in mind including universities, public bodies, and policy organisations. The toolkit offers best practice around developing a student leadership programme for healthcare students and provides recommendations at every stage of development.

The [10 Year Health Plan for England](#) highlights that “great leadership [is] at the heart of... plans to transform the NHS”, emphasising its importance “at all levels, across all health settings”. In

response to the need for strong leadership to meet future workforce demands, the Student Leadership Programme serves as a model for developing the essential skills required to shape the next generation of NHS leaders.

There was strong appetite from alumni to continue engagement with the Council and other alumni. The focus group participants suggested a dedicated platform to connect students with alumni, professionals, and mentors, alongside a digital library of leadership resources and learnings from previous cohorts, for example webinar recordings and speaker presentations.

Conclusion

The Student Leadership Programme has made a demonstrable and lasting contribution to the leadership development of participants on its programme. This evaluation has shown that the programme consistently supported students in building confidence, developing leadership skills, and expanding their understanding of the healthcare system. Participants not only gained practical tools and professional networks, but many also experienced transformative shifts in their career trajectories and leadership identities.

Alumni have gone on to take up diverse and often accelerated in roles within clinical practice, research, academia, and policy, with many crediting the SLP as a key influence on their professional journeys. The programme's emphasis on mentorship, peer learning, and interdisciplinary collaboration fostered a strong, enduring network that continues to support alumni long after completion.

Despite some early limitations in content delivery and resource constraints, the evolution of the SLP over time has strengthened its inclusivity and impact. Participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire for continued engagement and wider access to leadership development opportunities, indicating the potential for ongoing benefit through regional or institutional models.

As funding for the national SLP concludes, this evaluation provides compelling evidence of its success and value. It also presents clear insights into how its principles can be embedded and sustained across the sector. The Council of Deans of Health is now well-positioned to take forward the learning from this programme to inform future student engagement, promote inclusive leadership development, and continue to shape the future of health and care professions.

For more information:

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