

# The thinking behind the action (learning)

## Reflections on the design and delivery of an executive management program

The thinking  
behind the  
action  
(learning)

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to report on an action learning (AL) approach to curriculum design and delivery of a two-year part-time executive masters program, facilitated in part through a longitudinal work-based action research project. Program participants were a mix of mid- to senior managers operating in both the public and private sector and business owners, and all were in full-time employment.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper presents findings relating to participant and tutor perspectives of the program design, structure, and content. It also chronicles an AL tutor initiative run in conjunction with the inaugural program delivery, established to provide a collegial approach to learner facilitation, and to enable a research informed model of practice.

**Findings** – Findings suggest that the program allowed for greater action-reflection among and across all contributors (students, tutors, and program managers), and facilitated cross-pollination of AL perspectives, thus strengthening the interaction between practitioner and academic, and among academics themselves. Furthermore, the early involvement of tutors informed the work-based research project and larger AL program, and facilitated a matching of research interests between practitioner and tutor.

**Originality/value** – These findings suggest that an action-based model of knowledge transfer and development offers significant learning benefits to those partaking in an executive development program, resulting in the following insights: executive needs better served using a learner-centric approach; problem-oriented work-based assessment affords theory–practice balance; there is evidence of action-reflection “contagion” among all contributors; and the presented AL cycle has potential value in the conceptualization of reflective action.

**Keywords** Action learning, Reflective practice, Executive education programme design

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

This study reports on an action learning (AL) approach to curriculum design and delivery of a two-year part-time executive masters program. AL has been distinguished from other learning “in that its primary objective is to learn how to ask appropriate questions in conditions of risk, rather than to find the answers to questions that have already been precisely defined by others” (Revans, 1982), thereby offering “context surrounding the link between knowledge and action” (Huff and Huff, 2001, p. 52). The documented program ethos

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is based on actionable skill development (Freire, 1973; Starkey and Tempest, 2005), focused on developing participants' professional competences in their role as business manager. However, for the maximum benefit to be gained from the AL approach, its application needs to be more carefully considered, particularly in relation to the provision of some wider external frameworks for the manager to use as "tools for thinking" (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993). This purpose was pursued within the program design through embedding a combination of: reflective practices that develop awareness, systems thinking, integration, and understanding of how to work effectively in today's globalized world and application of these attributes to understanding and implementing the broad responsibilities, purposes, and ethical values associated with businesses and other organizations (Waddock and Lozano, 2013).

Having contemplated these insights, the program development board agreed that the AL principles would permeate each aspect of the program design and delivery. The board acknowledged that this approach would result in a move toward a more andragogical frame in management education (Cunningham, 1999; Fornaciari and Lund Dean, 2014; Knowles, 1980), where the academic acts as learning facilitator and knowledge generation is more participative (Bilimoria, 1998; Francis and Cowan, 2008; Olsson *et al.*, 2008). Thus, it was considered prudent to initiate a tutor partnership program to run alongside the inaugural program delivery. This paper documents the program progression through a number of learning iterations as its first cohort of students and tutors developed in tandem, and offers insight into all perspectives (tutors, participants, course managers and faculty) in the latter stages of the paper.

### AL in executive management programs

AL is well established as a tool of management education (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993; O'Hara *et al.*, 1996) and has become a widely accepted methodology for the development of managers and managerial competence. It seeks to facilitate skill development based on the integration of knowledge gained from experience and that gained from scholarship (Augier and March, 2007; Starkey and Tempest, 2005). While experience provides an important basis for education (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001; Tranfield *et al.*, 2004), it is the critical reflection among executives engaged in AL that builds competence (Helyer, 2015). In response to these perspectives, educators have attempted to combine theory and practice in executive development programs by linking participants' practical experience more closely to a program's learning objectives (Cunliffe, 2004; Mergerison, 1978; Stewart *et al.*, 2008).

The question remains as to how to incorporate an AL philosophy in executive education. Zuber-Skerritt (1995), Monks and Walsh (2001) and Howell (1994) each offer guidance in this regard, by contrasting themes underpinning AL principles and the more standard teaching and learning approach to executive programs (Table I).

Action-based design	Traditional design
Flexible on/off-campus delivery	On-campus delivery
Local, national, international	Local (fixed timetable)
Intensive residential	Formal classes (weekly)
Off-campus reading programs	Tutorials
AL "Sets" and project work	
Learner-centered, participant-oriented	Teacher-centered
Emphasis on the process of learning	Content-centered
Work-based assessment	Subject-based assessment
Interdisciplinary, problem-oriented	Disciplinary
More expensive	More economical

**Sources:** Adapted from: Zuber-Skerritt (1995), Monks and Walsh (2001) and Howell (1994)

**Table I.**  
Comparing action-based and traditional executive program design

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These studies suggest that executive development needs are better served using a learner-centered approach to management education, wherein problem-oriented work-based assessment affords the theory/practice balance recommended in the literature (Augier and March, 2007; Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Starkey and Tempest, 2005). Noting the cautionary view that the application of generalized problem solving techniques to any situation fails to consider that many of the problems tackled by practitioners are ill-defined, unique, emotive, and complex (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2016), the board believed the students needed to experience action and learning in their own environment. Thus, it was agreed in principle that a work-based research project would form a key aspect of program delivery. In evaluating three professional education courses based on the AL ethos, Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008) identified six determinants that related to the quality of these courses, namely, the capabilities of the presenter/facilitator, a flexible and emergent approach to design, ongoing evaluation, critical learning incidents, operationalization of the learning (“application”) and self-improvement (“self-efficacy”). These principles underpin the program design documented in this paper.

### **Designing a work-based AL initiative**

In the first meetings regarding the program design, the board considered the likely profile of prospective participants; individuals with significant prior management experience, seeking to develop their management competence through higher education. The board sought to adopt the critical aspects of effective executive education: that it be intimately tied to anticipating and causing industry change, that it focuses on the centrality of active distributive leadership and that it engages participants in activities that translate into action plans linked to actual organizational outcomes desired by their institution (Myrsiades, 2001). The syllabi needed to act as a teaching and learning support in this regard (Fornaciari and Lund Dean, 2014), returning the development team to the drawing board in relation to module design. Program development meetings highlighted the evolution of learning through applied inter-related modules, and subsequent application of learning in a live environment. In many ways, the development of this program marked a significant shift from traditional class-centered models of executive education to one that drew on developments in AL (Table I).

At this stage in their career, the development of reflective practice was a central learning outcome for these students. Prior research found that the key elements for the development of reflective practice in executive masters programs are: adult learning principles, the role of the instructor, instructional strategies, collective learning and curriculum design (De Dea Roglio and Light, 2009). Thus, the board agreed that practice-oriented research would better serve the participants learning and development needs. At masters level, a work-based project can often make an impact on the work context and also have a developmental effect on the program participant who becomes a practitioner-researcher to undertake the project (Costley and Abukari, 2015). It was therefore agreed that the program should incorporate an action-oriented change project, wherein students would initiate and address issues connected with change, complexity, and innovation in their own work environment. This would allow them to engage in solving highly contextualized problems, leading to the development of reflective practice at work, supported by high-level university learning and teaching (Costley and Abukari, 2015).

Adopting Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt’s (2008) six determinants of quality programs detailed in the literature review (facilitator capabilities, flexible design, ongoing evaluation, learning incidents, applied learning approach, and self-improvement outcomes), the goal was to provide these executives with the knowledge and confidence to influence change, and facilitate professional development through the application of the program curriculum in practice. Therefore, the board turned its attention to the program configuration. It was agreed that the first year of the program would focus on three inter-connected “cornerstone”

modules, encompassing strategic change management and renewal, organizational development and behavior, and economic and social change. When amalgamated, these modules offered students insight into the principles of a dynamic organizational landscape (Waddock and Lozano, 2013), and were prompted to promote cross-disciplinary perspectives when addressing issues related to change, complexity and innovation in their work. When combined with the proposed workplace project, this afforded the program team scope to facilitate mutual competence development, as exhibited in Figure 1.

The program's integrated approach to reflective practice (Cunliffe, 2004; Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2016) sought to embed theory in practice, such that class-based learning could be translated into actions, which have organizational consequences (Myrsiades, 2001). An AL research module developed in conjunction with the program tutor team preceded the workplace research project, within which students would prepare and present an organizational problem-based research proposal. The proposal would include a theoretical perspective on the subject matter of focus and a theory-informed intervention plan to be implemented in their own organization. Throughout the implementation of this plan, the participant would work alongside their appointed tutor existing in a collegial practice-theory partnership that would facilitate cyclical competence development in both parties, as exhibited in Figure 1.

### Tutor engagement with the work-based AL initiative

In recognition of the move away from the traditional tutor/student model of engagement in this executive masters program, a number of student and tutor support structures were added. Many of these additions emerged through tutor shared learning and reflections as the program progressed in pursuit of successful skills transfer (Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt, 2008).

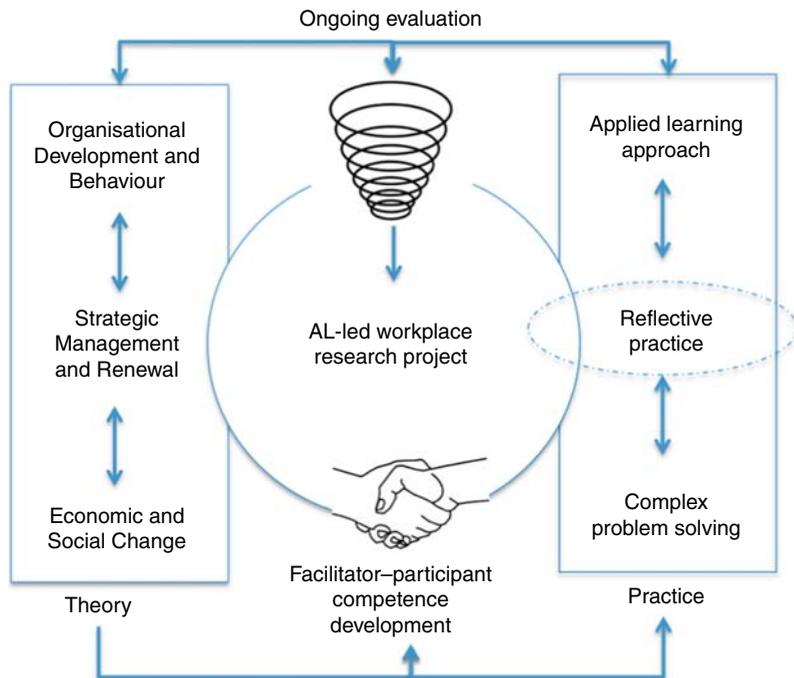


Figure 1.  
Action learning  
program configuration

An AL Tutor Program evolved from this collegial approach to program delivery, whereby a series of tutor workshops were run alongside the program (Table II).

Faculty were invited to take part in the AL tutor program on a voluntary basis, and a series of workshops evolved from this request, held over the two-year duration of the inaugural program. The first workshop sought to establish common interest in this education and workplace learning approach, and to identify key criteria relating to AL tutorship. From here, the self-selected tutor team reconvened for a workshop, which sought to inform the AL assessment criteria and approach. Agreement was reached in relation to the anticipated role of both student and tutor, and also key points of delivery in the AL cycle were identified. Notably, the board was in general agreement that students may find the research:

[...] isolating [...] particularly considering they are executives and used to being in teams [...] we need to find a way to give them encouragement as a group as well as individually. (Tutor 2, Workshop 2 notes)

This feedback influenced the ultimate delivery mode in relation to this aspect of the program. The research cycle was revisited in light of this feedback, and alternatives for peer interaction throughout the AL cycle were drawn up. Workshop 3 had a dual purpose: communicate what was being delivered to the students in the AL module[1] (discussed below), and discuss the peer-interaction proposals. Workshop 4 amounted to a “Part B” of the program planning cycle, wherein the remaining AL lecture notes were distributed and finer points of the student/tutor engagement and peer interventions were discussed. Pre- and post-tutor sessions (Table I) followed specified interventions (the Data Collection Residential 4 months into the research cycle, and the Initial Findings Network Evening 8 months into the 12-month workplace research project cycle).

Workshop	Criteria	Output
Initial workshop (1) (prior to program commencement)	Voluntary membership Establish common interest Identify tutor training needs: AL training Student/tutor relationship	Tutor Manual – work-based AL project management, student: tutor relationship management
AL project management workshop (2) (Semester 1)	Develop AL assessment criteria Agree quality approach Identify tutor/student terms of reference Agree key deliverables	Update tutor manual: Student/tutor terms of references  Key deliverables (with dates)
AR method workshop (3/4) (Semester 2)	Links to AL module feedback Peer-interaction planning Agree panel review criteria (proposal presentations)	AL project Student Manual Schedule of student/tutor events for AL project cycle
AL initiation workshop (5) (end of Semester 2)	Discuss proposals/interventions (residential) Inform AL process	Review panel intervention Preparatory pack (Residential) Updated tutor manual
AL data collection workshop (6) (Semester 3)	Preparatory session with self-allocated tasks Discuss assessment procedures	Schedule of events Assessment templates Virtual community established
AL initial findings workshop (7) (Semester 4)	Review data collection protocol (DCP) event – collegial value Self-allocated tasks Discuss assessment procedures	Schedule of events Assessment templates
Program review workshop (8)	Tutor focus group Student focus groups	Program poster development Programmatic review/enhancement

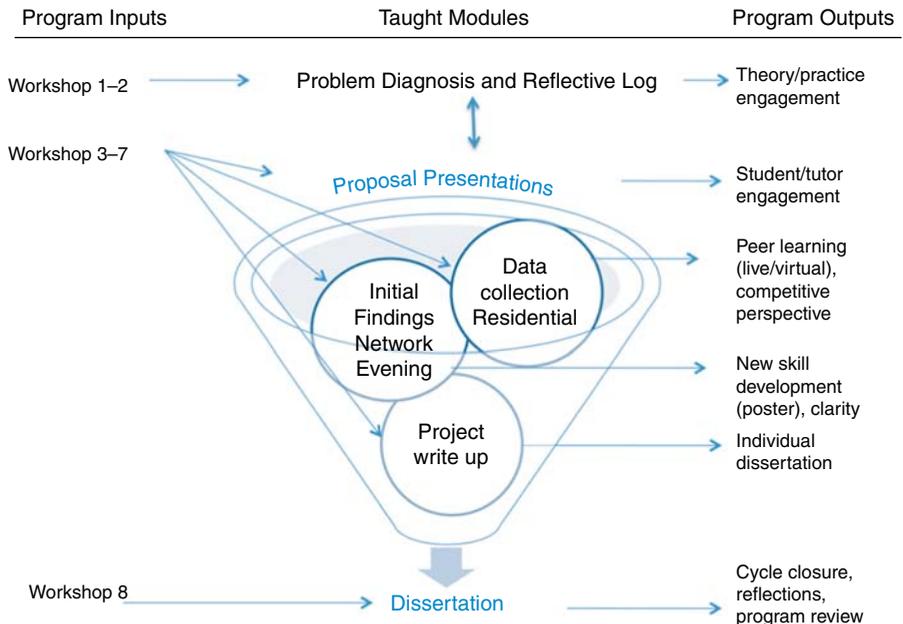
**Table II.**  
Action learning  
tutor program

**AL-led workplace research project**

Building on AL principles, it was proposed that each student would apply the AR methodology to pursue a longitudinal work-based change initiative with a heavy emphasis on the action/reflection cycle. Specifically, as reflection is pivotal in this approach, the early and sustained executive logging of critical reflections by each participant would be encouraged. This would involve looking both backwards and forwards (and sometimes sideways) to make connections with current undertakings (Helyer, 2015). While reflective practice can be a solitary pastime, there is a benefit in articulating the journey to an outside source. It was therefore agreed that the participant’s tutor would examine this journal at regular intervals throughout the research process to help develop the process of knowing how to learn (Helyer, 2015). This approach seeks to entwine theory and practice in the mind of the student from the outset, ultimately resulting in learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2005), through a “journey of self-discovery” (Olsson *et al.*, 2008, p. 433). Thus, the epistemological assumptions underlying the program approach to learning means that the reflective journal is qualitative in nature, and would not pre-specify activities, events, attitudes or feelings, but allow the writer to record subjective perceptions of the incident observed (adapted from Symon, 1998).

Applying these principles in practice, students then embarked on a yearlong workplace research project, chronicling the pre-intervention environment, the intervention itself and the post-intervention impact on the organization, a reflecting on each stage of the AL process. The program leaders, in liaison with the tutor team, developed the student support plan, mapped closely to the AL tutor program detailed in Table II.

The tutor team agreed a series of tutor team interventions over year 2 of the program, which would facilitate the collegial needs of the program participants, as well as those of the tutor (see Figure 2). This approach echoes Knowles’ (1980) and Cunningham’s (1999) advice in relation to participative knowledge generation. On completion of the taught aspect of program (Figure 1), it was agreed that each student would present his or her research



**Figure 2.**  
Student support plan  
for program delivery

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proposal to a panel of tutors, followed by a panel discussion on the proposal. All students were in attendance for each of these presentations, allowing for cross-project insights throughout the AL process. This process had dual benefits: the student received multiple perspectives as to the quality of the proposal compared to those of their class colleagues, as well as advice relating to the pending implementation in the work environment. Furthermore, the tutors had the opportunity to assess the compatibility of interests in light of the research topic and express a preference for a particular project(s) before the tutors were assigned. Subsequently, students received written feedback from the panel, and were assigned a tutor for the duration of the project.

The work-based research project is broken into distinct stages: pre-intervention planning – the outcome of which is a data collection protocol (DCP); intervention – the outcome of which is initial findings; and post-intervention analysis – the outcome of which is discussion and recommendations, with the dissertation as a final deliverable. While these could each be delivered using a traditional tutor/student approach, the collegial value of intermittent reconvening of the participants (and tutors) is acknowledged in this aspect of the program design (Augier and March, 2007).

#### *Data collection residential*

Howell (1994) observed the use of a residential weekend in her case study of an MBA program “convened to discuss strategic policy and ongoing preparation and progress of the dissertations” (p. 16). A similar delivery approach was adapted in this program, in the form of an off-campus “data collection residential.” This residential was held at the start of year 2 of the program, wherein students presented their DCP to class colleagues and faculty in two parallel sessions, and gained feedback from the tutor panel in each room. Students were also encouraged to ask questions and make comments on each other’s DCP. The entire group then reconvened to identify the key challenges in the forthcoming “project intervention” phase. This flipchart and note-based feedback was collated by a repertoire not directly involved in the projects and reviewed for input into the following day’s roundtable discussions. This was followed with an evening meal to offer an opportunity for informal dissemination of the session events. On day 2, a keynote speaker provided insights into the AL cycle enabled by the AR methodology based on their self-experience and expertise in the field, and this was followed by an AL event, wherein the group was divided into roundtable teams, an approach which drew on Mintzberg’s (2004) advice. We enhanced this approach by having participants move through a sequence of issue-themed and tutor-facilitated roundtable discussions, each of which was informed by the previous day’s feedback. Findings from each group were then fed back to the reconvened group in a final “wrap up” of the residential event.

The allocation of tutors across the DCP review panels, the “key-issues” meetings and the Day 2 roundtable discussions were structured in such a way as to facilitate: tutor transfer of supervisory learning across different projects; tutor interaction with the participants on projects that they were supervising and not supervising; inter-disciplinarity in addressing project management issues; and wider potential supervisory and class colleague feedback for participants through exposure to a number of tutors and participant projects. Feedback suggests that both students and tutors got value from the event (Table II):

The feedback from fellow students is very powerful with a real appreciation for the support and contributions of all lecturers who also attended. Student 5 (via e-mail)

It was excellent and would give us great focus for the next hurdle. [Guest speaker] was very inspiring – amazing clarity – I hope some will rub off. Student 8 (via e-mail)

It was great to see what the other students are doing and what stage they are at – we don’t often get to move outside the supervisor/student realm to group insight in research environments. Tutor 3 (feedback session)

As formal classes had ended in the preceding May and this event occurred in October, students were in an independent research cycle in the interim period, and feedback identified a number of collegial and competitive benefits affiliate to reconvening the class in this way that were not initially anticipated by the program team:

It puts it up to me to get my act in gear, as I can see what stage everyone else is at. Student 4, Residential Event

I learned so much from the weekend, especially when we got together after the sessions with our tutors, and thrashed out the details of 'what comes next'. Student 2, Residential Event

I got great ideas from the others, and [name] has offered to send me on some stuff that fits in with my own project. Student 11, Residential Event

More comprehensive feedback on this event from the tutor and student perspective is presented in Table AI.

#### *Interim peer-to-peer engagement*

When students suggested they would like to have more interaction with each other throughout the research process, a tutor with expertise in the area offered to establish a virtual community using the higher education institute (HEI)'s online learning network software (Moodle), wherein the students could dialogue, upload relevant data and offer each other support and advice throughout the AL cycle. A physical classroom was also reserved within the HEI to facilitate monthly meetings on campus for those participants who wished to avail of it. Following the residential, the student/tutor relationship resumed until the next intervention held four months later at the start of the final semester in the program. Peer engagement was evident in the interim period based on online activity and the presence of the majority of the students at the monthly on-campus meetings. These monthly meetings proved to be a valuable program support tool as the program managers met with these students to ensure they were satisfied with their progress and to address any queries that arose. This peer-to-peer engagement amounted to an AL set (Revans, 2011), allowing students to explore issues arising from practice with their peers and to utilize this debate and discussion in a safe and supportive environment in order to move beyond blockages to constructive and active reflection (Helyer, 2015).

#### *Initial findings network evening*

Students presented initial findings in a poster format at a network evening held on campus, where tutors and faculty members were invited to review and assess the poster contents with students, again offering a feedback cycle that proved valuable when entering the final write-up stage of the project. As one student remarked:

I think the key moment of that was the poster event and it was something that for me anyway [...] that became the basis for the rest of it after that because I thought it went through everything together up to that point whereas the presentations during the residential was important I thought the poster event was the key because if you couldn't get to the poster event you couldn't finish. Student 12 (Focus Group)

Tutors perceived that the poster event challenged students to effectively present a synthesis of their work to date with a view to moving to the next stage of the AL project (the write-up):

The poster forced the student to abstract from all the materials that they had and I thought that was a good skill. It also required them to be able to communicate orally. Tutor 1 (Focus Group)

It brought them back to life and it gave them a structure for the final document [...] I'm pretty sure that the thesis wouldn't have landed [without] this navigation structure. Tutor 5 (Focus Group)

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Thus, this event was perceived as instrumental in creating a highly visible project display for each student that prompted dialogue in the reunited tutor–student body. More comprehensive feedback on this event from the tutor and student perspective is presented in Table AI.

#### *Embedding reflexive practice in the AL cycle*

Each student retained a reflective journal in addition to his or her AL project notes, which sought to chronicle the student’s evolutionary thought process in relation to the implemented change. This active-reflection ethos sought to entwine theory and practice in the mind of the student, ultimately resulting in learning (Cunliffe, 2004; Freire, 1973; Kolb and Kolb, 2005). As articulated by one student:

I took a different view of myself and the business and from that my confidence changed [...] I continued the reflection process, adapting real changes [...] brought about by coming up with a focused project. (Student 7)

The student’s tutor examined the journal at regular intervals throughout the research process. Its contents often prompted discussion between the tutor and student on the nuances of both action research and organizational change, resulting in further analysis of the learning that was occurring in practice. In other cases, it provided a simple record of events that proved useful in the identification of certain activities and the frequency of occurrence, providing for the possibility of improving work practices and identification of unforeseen effects relating to the applied workplace project intervention. It also offered insight when analyzing the research data and writing up the AR report. It therefore amounts to a personal journal of the research process, and each student records emergent ideas and results, reflections on personal and participant learning and an ongoing examination of personal attitude. Student feedback and evidenced graduate learning (Table AI: reflective practice insights) suggests that reflective practice can help the pursuit of individual learning both in and of practice. This journal was submitted with the final AR project thesis, and was marked on a pass/fail basis.

#### *AR project write-up and submission*

This final stage of the AL cycle (post-intervention analysis) was demanding on students. Consistent with Shaw and le Roux’s (2017) observations, the program participants struggled with the changes in reading and writing practices in the transition from professional work practice and masters coursework to the research dissertation. This was a primarily self-led exploration of the workplace project outcomes requiring interaction with less familiar domains: that of theoretical insight and literature review. Thus, the program design incorporated components that included system elements, relationships, purpose, and feedback that facilitated interaction between the conventions of the research practice, what the student brings to the practice, and the agency of the student (Shaw and le Roux, 2017). The combination of the tutor engagement and the electronic and face-to-face peer network facilities offered support during this stage of the project. In addition, the program leaders hosted a thesis write-up workshop in response to student queries relating to this phase. This stage is along more traditional lines of research presentation and analysis (Table I) – the outcome of which is discussion and recommendations, with the dissertation as a final deliverable. Insights from the project write-up and submission (Table AI) point to the value of “guidelines” during this process. The collegial aspect of the program design and delivery was maintained throughout the program although this did not completely alleviate the challenge of writing up: “the whole process of pulling a dissertation together was daunting” (Student 5).

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### Reflections on an AL executive development program

Separate student and tutor review sessions were carried out following program completion, as documented in Table AI and referred to throughout the paper. These focus groups allowed the program leaders to discuss the AL project cycle, individual research experiences (from either a student or tutor perspective), and to elicit reflections and insights that could contribute to the program enhancement in subsequent cycles of the program. Students perceived that the culmination of the program with the dissertation facilitated understanding of the “action,” the “learning” and the “research”:

When I (sic) doing the dissertation [...] a lot of things only clicked in place for me then. Student 7 (Focus Group)

I think I deal a lot better with people around me and bring solutions to problems. I look around much quicker in a much more constructive manner rather than basically reacting. Student 11 (Focus Group)

The value of reflective practice was highlighted in both student and tutor feedback, as it was felt that the program “was a very thoughtful program, very strong reflection [...] [students] gained enormously from that [...]” (Tutor 2) while students also felt that the reflective process “[...] was very, very, useful” (Student 10).

The program ethos sought to ensure that students and tutors “learn” from both the program and the AL process (Stewart *et al.*, 2008), as exhibited in the cyclical nature of Figure 1. Thus, when the student interacts with the business as an action-researcher, it is important that they not only record their findings, but follow up on the experience by researching the underlying ideas and management philosophies, and the change impact through class/peer discussion, tutor interaction, and literary immersion, thereby enacting critical reflection. Taking these perspectives into account, the studied executive program was built on the principles of theory–practice balance (Freire, 1973; Starkey and Tempest, 2005), and on AL program quality (Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt, 2008), a challenge revisited at the end of the first program cycle.

In hindsight, the time and effort in delivering the program has been far greater than a traditional approach, not only because tutor and academic board interventions are non-standard, but also because the program model requires greater support in terms of student/tutor relationship development (Figure 1). As articulated in the tutor feedback:

[...] voluntary contribution is all our own time effectively I suppose. (Tutor 2)

[...] I mean we’re interested and all of us at the table have done that [...] have given a lot of ourselves [but] there has to be some consideration [of time impact on individual lecturer contribution]. (Tutor 3).

Furthermore, there was a sense that not everyone was suited to tutoring these types of students and projects. As articulated by Tutor 1:

There are some types of people I like supervising and there are some types I don’t like supervising them and there are some types of projects I don’t like supervising. They don’t fit my view of the world as it were.

Notably, the additional time and effort involved in moving toward an AL frame was anticipated by Jennings (2002, p. 663), who observes that, “action-learning projects can be time consuming to establish and monitor. They may require a more prolonged duration than anticipated to allow the development of understanding, proposed solutions, and reflective learning.”

While the feedback provided evidence of student – and staff – learning and positive affirmation of the first cycle of the program, there was feedback that suggested future modifications that could enhance the program. Tutors suggested “more interventions

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along the way” (Tutor 5), and that the tutor “[...] be in the picture a lot earlier than we were” (Tutor 3), although these views created a lively debate as to optimization of these criteria (see Table AI: reflections on faculty experience), particularly in light of finite resource, including faculty’s time. Separately, students suggested bringing certain program features forward in the program timescale such as the reflective journal, the plenary speaker at the DCP, explanations about how interim milestones translate into final dissertation chapters, and one even requested “more deadlines” (Student 7).

### Closing thoughts

Based on the stakeholder feedback documented in this paper, the collegial theory-led practical approach adopted in the program allows for flexible, learner-centered activities, which are key aspects of the action-based ethos outlined in Table I and the literature review. This approach allows for an interactive perspective, reinforcing the “meta-action” perspective offered by Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008). Communication between the authors and program stakeholders suggest that the residential provided a “kick start” (Student 9, e-mail correspondence) to progress to the next stage of the AL cycle. Furthermore, the initial findings network event offered insight into conceptualization of the data at a pivot point in the AR cycle. These findings suggest that an action-based model of knowledge transfer and development offers significant learning benefits to those partaking in an executive development program, resulting in the following insights:

- executive needs better served using a learner-centric approach;
- problem-oriented work-based assessment affords theory–practice balance;
- there is evidence of action-reflection “contagion” among all contributors; and
- the presented AL cycle has potential value in the conceptualization of reflective action.

Research is ongoing, and the authors intend to document further iterations of the participative model of program delivery in subsequent cycles of the program.

### Note

1. This workshop was held mid-way through the AL module delivery, and therefore incorporated the first half of the module notes.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)

Program component Focus group evaluations (code: T = tutor, S = student)

Problem diagnosis	<p>“[...] they needed the panel because [...] it seemed to me that they were kind of all over the place, they weren’t as well focused as they should have been” [T3]</p> <p>“[...] the panel worked very well because you had people there with different backgrounds, with different skill sets [...] I thought it worked really well [...] you were able to match students to supervisors” [T2]</p> <p>“[...] coming in earlier gives the opportunity to craft the project more and make more ownership but what I enjoyed about it was that I met the student with a fully formed idea and I could be much more purposeful and tactical with my interventions [...] a lot of my dissatisfaction with supervision comes from the faffing around at the start in terms of ‘what I’m doing’ it’s quite unproductively done. You know – It’s great when they really try an idea and bring them to the proposal” [T5].</p>
Data collection residential	<p>“[...] up to that point my dealings with those students were in a very academic focus [...] I found that session particularly useful for giving us a kind of a collegial mentality which makes us very useful thereafter” [T3]</p> <p>“The students wouldn’t be having that class interaction I think it was hugely important in that sense to give them a sense of a cohort, of being part of something beyond themselves, and to know that there was support there for them as well” [T4]</p> <p>“It [the Residential] was an excellent idea [...] it worked very well in terms of building their confidence as well” [T2]</p> <p>“I think that worked very well because we had been missing each other because we were not in a classroom anymore we were on our own and I thought that was very good because it was very hard during the summer to keep focused, trying to get something drafted and I just found that that perked me up” [S8]</p> <p>“We were getting validation for what we had already done and telling you, you were on the right road now and I thought that was very good, giving you the kick up for the next stage” [S4]</p> <p>“The lady who gave us a talk [keynote speaker] [...] I thought that was brilliant and to me it made it very clear because up to that point I wasn’t really sure what was action research and what is a thesis” [S9]</p>
Initial findings network evening	<p>“The poster forced the student to abstract from all the materials that they had and I thought that was a good skill. It also required them to be able to communicate orally” [T1]</p> <p>“I think it was a great event and thought it was brilliant from a learning perspective for all of them, and a confidence booster [...] he thought his findings were rubbish until I saw them when he presented them verbally and [...] on the poster and I said ‘well, they’re not rubbish’” [T3]</p> <p>“The posters really did help him [...] there was a logic there on that poster and that really got him onto a track from there on” [T2]</p> <p>“[...] it brought them back to life and it gave them a structure for the final document [...] I’m pretty sure that the thesis wouldn’t have landed [...] to have [...] this navigation structure [...]” [T5]</p> <p>“It was great to get them there to see actual findings I think that was great. I have findings” [S8]</p> <p>“By presenting it to other people you do get more confidence in what you have done” [S5]</p> <p>“[...] they ask you questions that make you think around it a bit more and it gets you into another level” [S2]</p> <p>“I think the key moment of that was the poster event and it was something that for me anyway [...] that became the basis for the rest of it after that because I thought it went through everything together up to that point whereas the presentations during the residential was important I thought the poster event was the key because if you couldn’t get to the poster event you couldn’t finish” [S12]</p>

**Table A1.**  
Program component  
focus group  
evaluation

(continued)

Program component	Focus group evaluations (code: T = tutor, S = student)
Reflective practice	<p>"[...] his reflective piece was very impressive. He gained enormously from that and I think the Action Research approach is very effective, because to an extent it is more meaningful to them" [T2]</p> <p>"The time that I took on the course got me in the process of reflection critically important to me and critically important to how we changed the business the process of reading of experiences of other companies" [T1]</p> <p>"Anything in the log that was an event or an incident it made you try and instead of reacting to the incident at the time it made you actually understand [...] you question things more than just reacting I think that was the benefit from that point of view for me anyway" [S12]</p> <p>"It did make you think about what you are doing what you are looking at, can relate it to work. It is hard not to but I think if you do take time out to reflect not to sort of, you look at everything in the context of what you are dealing with that day or that week so. I thought it was very, very useful and I could have made more use of it" [S10]</p> <p>"[...] emotional response on behalf of my team to a change that they were not part of and that ended up being my core focus when it came to the thesis and that was right through the log" [S1]</p>
Project write-up and submission	<p>"The guidelines were a huge help and also the notes being so well organised when you are doing it and although you can have access to your tutor and you can bounce things off your tutor there is a lot of time to be spent, a lot of time spent on your own, scratching your head" [S12]</p> <p>"When I (sic) doing the dissertation or the thesis in the end a lot of things only clicked in place for me then I didn't realise the DCP and aspects of it and taken parts of it fell so nicely into the dissertation" [S7]</p>
Reflections on faculty experience	<p>"I'm not sure to what extent additional intervention would have assisted their struggle because the nature of their struggle to a large extent were issues outside of the institution and the programme [T1] [...] was my experience as well" [T3]</p> <p>"[...] very thoughtful programme, very strong reflection. We got a lot of development in it as well as the students" [T2]</p> <p>"I think out of the last year or two it was probably the most interesting programme I was involved in and I think that came from the innovative use of methods, work standard, the collegial engagement that happened, and the kind of collective sense making at each stage and process" [T5]</p> <p>"[...] one of the most worthwhile experiences I partook in over the two and a half years I have been here. I could see the benefit, like Tutor 2 said, for myself – certainly I learned a lot from it and that was mainly garnered through the collegial aspect to it" [T4]</p> <p>"I think the programme has been incredibly effective with engaging with executives" [T2]</p> <p>"In terms of changing it, I would give more interventions along the way" [T5]</p> <p>"I would be a little bit more prescriptive in terms of what the students are required to present, because in one case the student wasn't as on top of the whole project early enough" [T1]</p>

**Note:** While findings are presented together above, the student and tutor focus groups were carried out separately

**Table AI.**

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