



Original Research | He Rangahau Motuhake

Evaluation of the Aspiring Deans Leadership Development Program in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand

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The global demand for registered nurses outstrips supply. The sustainability of the registered nurse workforce is exacerbated by a global shortage of suitably qualified faculty to educate the next generation of nurses and midwives. The Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery (Australia & New Zealand) (CDNM) provides leadership to academics who deliver higher education to nurses and midwives. To support succession planning, the CDNM launched the inaugural Aspiring Deans Leadership Development Program (ADLDP) in 2020. The purpose of the ADLDP was to provide mentorship to academic nurses and midwives aspiring to be the next generation of academic leaders. A pragmatic qualitative study was undertaken to assess the quality, impacts and key success factors and provide insights and empirical evidence to CDNM executive on how the ADLDP could be strengthened in the future. The findings indicate the ADLDP was effective in contributing to leadership development and career advancement. Programme activities increased leadership confidence. Networking between current leaders and aspiring nursing and midwifery leaders was a highlight. Challenges for both mentees and mentors included planning dedicated time for scheduled meetings. Recommendations to consider for strengthening future programmes were provided to the CDNM including more opportunities to meet face-to-face, build continuous improvement into the ADLDP and to explore how Indigenous nurses and midwives are supported in academia and leadership. The findings provide empirical evidence in the under-researched area of nursing leadership development and contributes to a global need for a resilient and sustainable academic workforce to support and educate future nursing and midwifery graduates.

Te Reo Māori Translation

He Aromātai i te Kaupapa Whakawhanake i te Hunga e Whai nei kia Tū hei Kaihautū Mātauranga i Ahitereiria me Aotearoa

Ngā Ariā Matua

Kei runga kē noa atu te hiahia o te ao ki tēnei mea te tapuhi rēhita i te maha o ngā tapuhi e puta ake ana. Nā te korenga o te kāhui kaiako whai tohu mātauranga tōtika hei ako i tērā whakatupuranga o ngā tapuhi, me ngā kaiwhakawhānau hou o muri ake, i raru ai te toitū o te ohu kaimahi tapuhi rēhita. Ka mahi nui te Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery (Ahitereiria & Aotearoa) (CDNM) ki te hora tikanga ārahi ki ngā kaiako e hora nei i te mātauranga tiketike ki ngā tapuhi me ngā kaiwhakawhānau. Hei tautoko i te whakakīnga whāwhārua, i whakarewaina e CDNM te Kaupapa Whakawhanake i te Hunga e Whai nei kia Tū hei Kaihautū Mātauranga (ADLDP) i te tau 2020. Ko te whāinga o te kaupapa he hora kaiakopono ki ngā tapuhi me ngā kaiwhakawhānau e anga nei kia eke hei kaihautū pūmātauranga i roto i te whakatupuranga hou. I whāia tētahi rangahau ine kounga ngāwari o ngā ritenga mahi hei aromatawai i te kounga, i ngā pānga me ngā

pūtake o te whāinga hua, hei hora māramatanga, taunakitanga whai take hoki ki te kāhui whakahaere o CDNM mō te kaupapa, me pēhea hoki e whakapakaritia ai ā tōna wā. E waitohu ana ngā kitenga he whai take te kaupapa hei hora i te ārahitanga i ngā kaihautū me te ahunga whakamua o te ara mahi o te tangata. Nā ngā mahi o te kaupapa i piki ake ai te māia o ngā kaihautū. He mea ātaahua te whakawhanaunga i waenga i ngā kaihautū o nāiane me ngā kaihautū kaiwhakawhānau. Ko ētahi o ngā pīkauranga mō ngā ākonga me ngā kaiakopono ko te whakamahere wā motuhake tōtika mō ngā hui i āta whakaritea. Ko ētahi o ngā tūtōhu mō te whakapakari i ngā hōtaka mō ngā wā e tū mai nei i horaina ki CDNM kia whānui kē atu ngā whāinga wā mō te tūtaki ā-kanohi, te hanga whakapikinga ake ki roto i te hōtaka, me te tūhura me pēhea e tautokona ai ngā tapuhi iwi taketake me ngā kaiwhakawhānau ki te ao mātauranga me ngā mahi hautū tikanga. Nā ngā kitenga nei ka horaina mai he taunakitanga mō tēnei āhuatanga kāore anō kia tino rangahaua, o te hautū tikanga, ka takohatia hoki he āwhina mō te hiahia o te ao whānui ki tētahi ahumahi mātanga rangahau pakari, toitū hoki hei tautoko, hei ako hoki i ngā pia tapuhi, pia whakawhānau hoki, mō ngā rā kei mua i te aroaro.

INTRODUCTION

The global registered nurse shortage is a significant sustainability issue for health care services. Complex political, economic and demographic forces are contributing to this shortage including the increasing complexity and demand for cost effective health care, the ageing population and an ageing workforce. While these factors have had an influence over several decades, the shortage was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee et al., 2024). The associated global shortage of appropriately qualified and skilled faculty to educate the next generation of nurses and midwives is a major threat to the sustainability of the registered nurse and midwifery workforce which is reliant on education provided in tertiary institutions (East et al., 2024; World Health Organization, 2021). The *Global strategic direction for nursing and midwifery 2021-2025* (World Health Organization, 2021) identifies the establishment of leadership development programmes and mentorship opportunities as a priority to develop and empower the next generation of nurses and midwives.

With the supply of academic nurse leaders declining, a significant factor in future proofing this workforce is securing a pipeline of appropriately qualified nurses to work in nursing education (Stockmann et al., 2024). A career pathway that enables nursing academics to move into leadership roles is important for succession planning. Effective mentorship programmes are a key factor in encouraging and supporting nursing academics in leadership progression (Nowell et al., 2017); yet formal mentorship in nursing academia has been slow to develop. Little is known about formal mentorship programmes for leadership development for nursing faculty in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Council of Deans Nursing and Midwifery (Australia & New Zealand) (CDNM) is a Trans-Tasman peak organisation established to represent the Deans and Heads of Schools of Nursing and Midwifery in universities that offer undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in nursing and midwifery in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The CDNM provides leadership to academics who deliver higher education to nurses and midwives and fosters succession planning in the sector by supporting the development of aspiring academic leaders. In providing succession planning

support, the CDNM launched the inaugural Aspiring Deans Leadership Development Program (ADLDP) in 2020 to coincide with the World Health Organization's Year of the Nurse and Midwife. The purpose of the ADLDP was for members of the CDNM to provide mentorship to academic nurses and midwives aspiring to be the next generation of academic leaders.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASPIRING DEANS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The aims of the ADLDP were developed to promote academic nursing and midwifery leadership as a career and to develop the academic nursing and midwifery workforce. The inaugural 12-month ADLDP was run as a pilot project with 10 participants completing the ADLDP in February 2021. Informal evaluation of the pilot project identified several areas for improvement including regular online meetings to enable mentees to connect with each other, clearer objectives to guide participants through the programme and improved collaboration and networking opportunities incorporating at least one face-to-face meeting. These findings were incorporated into the planning of the 2023 cohort of the ADLDP.

A tailor-made 12-month ADLDP was developed and commenced in February 2023. Expressions of interest were sent out to the membership of CDNM for potential candidates to join the ADLDP in November 2022 via email. A total of 14 applicants submitted an expression of interest which included a current curriculum vitae. Ten applicants met the selection criteria and of those one withdrew, leaving nine available to commence the ADLDP. Those who were unsuccessful were notified and encouraged to apply the following year. Reasons precluding a place on the ADLDP included being too early in their academic careers and experience and qualifications not well aligned with the programme criteria. Participants were supported through monthly mentoring, leadership profiling and professional development activities including presentations, 360 degree appraisal and career planning (Table 1).

Table 1. Programme overview

	Activity	Foci	Date
1	Introduction	Group meeting mentees, mentors and programme co-ordinators. Programme overview and building connections.	February 2023
	Meet executive coach	Group meeting with the executive coach. Completion of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). ^a	
2	Learning contract	Individual meeting with mentor and development of a learning contract.	March 2023
	Executive coach	Individual MBTI feedback with executive coach.	
3	Career planning	Individual meeting with mentor and developing 1, 3 and 5-year career plan.	April 2023
4	Leadership Climate Indicator 360	Complete LCI360. ^b	May 2023
	Professional development planning	Individual meeting with mentor and identify professional development needs to meet career goal.	
5	Meet with executive coach	Individual meeting with executive coach to discuss results from LCI360.	June 2023
6	CDNM meeting	Attendance at CDNM meeting.	July 2023
	Reflection activity	Individual meeting with mentor including reflection on findings from LCI360.	
7	Reflection activity	Individual meeting with mentor and reflection on the programme to date.	August 2023
8	Online group meeting	Online meeting with the executive coach – ‘knowing yourself’.	September 2023
9	Leadership reflection	Individual meeting with mentor. Develop leadership reflection based on identified career goals, professional development needs and experiences in the programme.	October 2023
10	Leadership reflection	Individual meeting with mentor. Develop leadership reflection based on identified career goals, professional development needs and experiences in the programme.	November 2023
11	Online group presentations	Present to executive coach and mentors leadership reflections.	December 2023
12	Final reflections	Online final reflections with mentors, mentees, executive coach and programme co-ordinators.	January 2024

^aMBTI is a personality assessment tool that categorises individuals into four pairs of opposing traits. It is widely used in personal and career development.

^bLCI360 provides a comprehensive feedback system that gathers information from a variety of stakeholders to evaluate a leader’s impact on the work environment.

METHODS

The current Aspiring Deans Leadership Development Program evaluation study

The current evaluation study was commissioned by the CDNM to inform on key success factors and recommendations to improve the programme. The aims of the evaluation were:

1. Assess the quality, impacts and key success factors of the ADLDP.
2. Provide insights and empirical evidence to CDNM executive on how the ADLDP could be strengthened in the future.

Evaluation research design

A pragmatic evaluation approach using qualitative methods was used to assess programme delivery and outcomes from a range of perspectives (Mertens & Wilson,

2018). Following Davidson (2025), specific evaluation questions were developed to structure the evaluation based on Kirkpatrick’s (1998) model for evaluating training programmes. A stakeholder group comprising CDNM members was established to advise on all aspects of the research design and to confirm the following evaluation questions:

1. To what extent is the design of the ADLDP relevant for meeting the needs of mentors, mentees and Deans/Heads of Schools?
2. What has been the impact of the programme on mentees and mentors and Deans/Heads of Schools?
3. What have been highlights and success factors of the programme?
4. What challenges were experienced during the programme?
5. What would improve the experience and outcomes?

Ethical approval for the evaluation was granted by Auckland University of Technology (AUTC 23/339). The study

Table 2. Interview participants

Role	Number
Mentees	9
Mentors	9
Deans/Heads of Department	2
Executive Coach	1
Total	21

commenced in February 2023 and was conducted over 15 months.

Data collection

Qualitative data were collected from multiple sources including mentees and mentors in the programme, the executive coach, and Deans/Heads of Schools. Participants were recruited from within the programme. All candidates were invited to participate in the evaluation. Before commencing data collection, permission was sought from Deans/Heads of School to contact potential participants working in their respective institutions. Once gained, an email containing the information sheet was sent by a CDN administrator inviting potential participants to be interviewed for the evaluation. Interested parties contacted a member of the research team to organise a time and day for the interview. Verbal or written consent was gained prior to the interview. Individual online interviews using Microsoft Teams were used to collect data from ADLDP mentees, mentors, the executive coach of the programme and Deans/Heads of Schools.

Data analysis

A general inductive analysis of data was conducted. This was an appropriate method to establish clear links between the evaluation questions and data (Thomas, 2006). Transcripts were generated from the Microsoft Teams automatic transcription feature. The transcripts were checked and corrected where necessary to ensure accuracy and readability. The transcripts were read, discussed and analysed by all members of the evaluation team. As part of the analytic process the stakeholder group participated in a sense making workshop to support the development of key findings from the programme and to develop ideas and improvements for further implementation of the ADLDP. Common meanings from the data were coded and categorised and presented under each of the evaluation questions.

FINDINGS

A total of 21 people were interviewed (Table 2). Demographic data were not collected. Participants represented universities across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Most mentors had a dual role as both mentor and Dean/Head of School. One mentee moved institution during the programme and there was a change in a Dean/Head of School in another institution.

To what extent is the design of the ADLDP relevant for meeting the needs of mentors, mentees and Deans/Heads of Schools?

Most participants agreed the topics in the ADLDP were appropriate. Although most were generally satisfied with the depth and breadth of the content, some mentees would have liked more emphasis on strategic thinking related to nursing and midwifery leadership:

There was sort of a little bit of a gap for me around strategic thinking and really being aware of the political, broader landscape for Australian nurses and midwives. [Mentee 3]

Most participants thought there was a logical flow to the presentation and progression of topics. The programme's clear structure was useful to participants new to mentoring and guiding the mentorship process.

This is the first time I have been a mentor on this programme, so I was really conscious of wanting to do a really good job and make sure the mentee had the best experience possible. Overall, I followed the format provided and felt as though I didn't miss anything out. [Mentor 9]

While the ADLDP's structure was useful, some mentees and mentors took a more flexible approach based on the mentor's experience and the specific needs of the mentee as explained by one of the mentors:

Overall, the topics were relevant and the order the topics delivered were okay. However, I don't think we [mentor and mentee] necessarily followed them [topic areas] rigidly. We used the formal structure as more of a background guide. I have a lot of experience as a leadership mentor, so my usual approach is very much about going in the direction that the mentee wants to go and what they need. [Mentor 3]

This flexible and organic approach provided a flexibility to match specific needs for mentees.

My mentor and I used the topics as a guide. We took an organic approach to the whole process and used most of the topic areas as a guide for what we wanted to focus on ... the programme did provide a degree of flexibility so that as a mentee, I was also able to determine and dictate what I wanted to get out of the programme and what would be most beneficial. [Mentee 2]

Most participants were satisfied with the mode of delivery with the mix of online and face-to-face meetings identified as convenient. Despite the benefits of online meetings, including the general acceptability of this mode of delivery, some perceived face-to-face meetings provided a more authentic environment to engage with others and build a trusted relationship.

I think you do really get something else out of meeting face-to-face that you don't get elsewhere. I think people are less guarded, it is also a lot more personal. For example, somebody who I thought initially to be a little

bit snooty online, when I met the person face-to-face, I realised that actually it was shyness. [Mentee 4]

What has been the impact of the ADLDP on mentees and mentors and Deans/Heads of Schools?

The ADLDP was considered essential for succession planning and preparing the next generation of nursing and midwifery leaders. The support and opportunities offered by the programme increased mentees confidence in their existing leadership roles and for some, their capability to take on higher-level leadership positions. For most mentees, participation in the programme had a positive impact on their leadership development. Receiving honest feedback from a range of colleagues through the 360-degree process was a key contributor to this growth. Mentors reported a sense of satisfaction from observing their mentees' increasing confidence over time. Further, the mentoring relationship provided broad insight into the leadership positions mentees aspired to:

This is a group of highly influential and very successful and clever people that are opening the doors for other people like me ... they're really looking to create opportunities for others and supporting others to not just strive or aspire to, but to actually give wrap around support ... I felt humbled by that and appreciated the opportunity to be part of the programme and develop myself as a future leader. [Mentee 9]

The executive coach for the ADLDP identified how the programme provided mentees with increased self-awareness and the ability to see the world in a broader sense.

The thing that I notice more than anything was their [mentees] increased awareness of self, who they are and how they operate. They were able by the end of the course to understand that their personality traits influenced their work, how they interacted with others and how others interacted with them. I think they started to see the world broader than what they previously may have seen and were more open to ideas and suggestions. [Executive coach]

The mentorship role also heightened the mentors' awareness of their own leadership style and reinforced some of the core aspects and values of their current roles as Dean/Head of School that go beyond operational and day-to-day management. One mentor articulated how the mentorship role highlighted the complexities of nursing leadership roles in relation to teaching and research.

We did explore a lot of the different facets of the Dean/Head of School role. I don't think people fully appreciate the multifaceted nature of the job and how you are constantly juggling ... the resourcing and support needed to deliver teaching to large numbers of students, while also providing enough research time for staff to be research active and supporting career advancement. [Mentor 1]

Mentees and mentors found career planning a key aspect of leadership development. As one of the mentors ex-

plained, mapping out a career pathway was an important component of the ADLDP.

I don't think nurse academics spend enough time thinking about their careers, it tends to be a serendipitous experience, based on what opportunities are available at the time ... but sitting down and actually planning your career is a really useful thing to do. [Mentor 8]

What have been highlights and success factors of the ADLDP?

A major benefit was dedicated time for mentees to step back and reflect on their roles and career aspirations. Mentees valued the mentee-mentor relationship and exposure to the expertise mentors offered.

To have access to the thinking of an existing Dean for quite a long period of time. That was really relevant and probably the best part of my whole experience. [Mentee 5]

A highlight of the ADLDP was attending the CDN meeting and the face-to-face networking opportunities with other Deans/Heads of Schools this provided for mentees. The informal gathering following the meeting provided extra opportunity to network with fellow aspiring leaders. This was particularly useful for career development.

I attended one of the Council of Dean's meetings, that was great because I got to meet other colleagues who normally I wouldn't have had an opportunity to meet and get to know. The social gathering after that meeting was a fantastic bonus because it was a relaxed way to have conversations with people who were like me wanting to develop their careers. [Mentee 8]

A strength of the ADLDP related to the support provided by the executive coach during the programme. The sessions with the executive coach inspired mentees to shift focus from the day-to-day teaching responsibilities to the broader aspects associated with leadership roles. This reflection was facilitated by the 360-degree feedback activity. While the experience of receiving feedback was sometimes uncomfortable, many highlighted the benefits of this activity.

I have to admit it was a bit painful. However, once I got over that I realised the feedback was valid and really useful to my development as a leader. Not all of it was entirely positive, but on the whole, it was good. It pinpointed areas of strengths but also areas to work on. The feedback was delivered in a way that didn't diminish me as a person, in fact the opposite. [Mentee 1]

A key aspect of the 360-degree process was the opportunity to have a follow up session with the executive coach to make sense of the feedback.

What challenges were experienced during the ADLDP?

Challenges identified mainly related to organisational aspects of the ADLDP. A mutual challenge identified by mentees and mentors was the complexity involved in aligning schedules to fully engage in the mentoring programme.

The main challenge for me was probably the timing of our meetings. It wasn't so much of an issue for me, but it was for my mentor and that was something we struggled with ... it was quite challenging to get our schedules to align and find a good rhythm. My mentor was quite busy managing a large school, I understood that. There were times when I felt we needed more time to reflect on and discuss things that were important for my leadership development. I just didn't always think there was enough time. [Mentee 7]

Scheduling times for the mentoring sessions including consideration of different time zones required negotiation to secure appropriate times for sessions that suited both mentees and mentors. Balancing Dean/Head of School responsibilities with commitment to mentoring were common issues as described by one of the mentors.

It was being able to give the person the amount of time that they needed and the headspace. Because often I was running into a meeting with them on zoom, having run in from a meeting where we're talking finances, just being able to make that head shift and go, stop, I've just got to be in the moment, change my focus and be present. I did find this challenging. [Mentor 6]

At times, lapses in the communication strategy resulted in some mentees feeling disconnected from the ADLDP. Some mentors felt isolated in their mentoring role and would have welcomed communication with other mentors for support as well as guidance:

Being a mentor was quite a lonely experience. You want to do a good job and at times I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing ... I'm always open to trying new things. [Mentor 5]

What would improve the experience and outcomes?

Mentees suggested more emphasis on the key issues specifically impacting nursing and midwifery across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. A further suggestion was to incorporate more specialised leadership activities such as management of challenging situations often experienced by Deans/Heads of School.

It would be good if the CDNLM could consider extending the programme to incorporate more specific leadership development activities. I'm thinking of things like how to have difficult conversations, conflict resolution and other specific stuff like strategic governance, as well as media and assertiveness training. These are all things I think leaders need. [Executive coach]

Similarly, mentors suggested specific content integral to leadership roles that could be added to future ADLDPs.

I'm thinking about university governance, finance ... those sorts of things. Also, things like developing strategic and business plans. So, I think that's something that we probably could develop. A standard programme with a number of webinars with guest speakers and activities to complement the mentoring and coaching that the programme already provides. [Mentor 2]

Most participants identified the limited number of Indigenous nurses and midwives interested in pursuing academic pathways as a key sustainability issue and reflected on the importance of being responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and Māori nursing and midwifery academics to ensure their representation in academic leadership roles. For example, a more pro-active and focused approach to attracting Indigenous academics into nursing and midwifery leadership roles.

I think we need to join up with the organisations like CATSINaM [Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Nurses and Midwives] and Wharangi Ruamano [Māori nurses group] in New Zealand to really think through what a programme could look like. At this stage I don't know how it would look but it is an important discussion we need to have. [Mentor 2]

DISCUSSION

The current evaluation assessed the quality, impacts and key success factors of the ADLDP in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Mentoring among nursing academics is under-researched with few studies focused specifically on mentoring programmes for aspiring academic nurse leaders (Busby et al., 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). The current findings drew on experiences of mentorship across multiple academic settings. There was overall satisfaction with the mentorship programme from a range of perspectives. Mentees reported benefits similar to those found in previous studies on nursing faculty mentorship including a focus on career development, improving professional networks, and developing a broader understanding of leadership roles (Ard & Beasley, 2022). However, more emphasis on specialised leadership activities such as management of challenging situations and issues specifically related to the Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand context would be useful in future ADLDPs. The mentors welcomed the opportunity to share their expertise and knowledge in developing leadership skills with mentees. In addition to the sense of satisfaction mentors experienced, they perceived mentoring to be crucial to succession planning. Despite challenges with scheduling, mentors and mentees were willing to dedicate time to the mentoring relationship. Commitment of time and enthusiasm are known to be essential factors in successful mentoring (Ard & Beasley, 2022).

Recommendations to the CDNLM to improve the ADLDP have included programme refinement to support transitioning into leadership roles, promote opportunities to meet as a group and strengthen networks, an exploration

of how Indigenous nurses and midwives are supported in academia and leadership and ensuring a continuous improvement process is integrated into the programme design.

Additionally, the ADLDP delivered these results with minimal level of financial investment. The CDNMs should consider whether additional financial and other support is increased given the success of the ADLDP at the current level of funding for example, developing additional content, facilitating more face-to-face contact and supporting Indigenous engagement.

The evaluation the ADLDP was limited to the perspectives of those participating in the initiative at one point in time following the completion of the ADLDP. Leadership progression data were not collected. Longitudinal data would provide evidence of long-term success of the leadership programme and longer-term benefits to mentees from the mentorship programme. Lack of Indigenous participants mean diverse cultural perspectives on the ADLDP need further exploration. Despite these limitations the current findings provided rich qualitative evidence from a bespoke programme designed to develop the next generation of academic nurse and midwifery leaders.

CONCLUSION

This study evaluated a leadership development programme undertaken in the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand academic faculty context. Recommendations were

provided to the CDNMs (Australia and New Zealand) to strengthen the existing ADLDP. The findings provide empirical evidence in the under-researched area of nursing leadership development and contributes to a global need for a resilient and sustainable academic workforce to support and educate future nursing graduates.

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Conflict of interest

None

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