

Advancing Leadership Development in Early Years Education via Digitally Mediated Professional Learning: Perspectives and Experiences of 24 UK Training Providers

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Contents

- Executive Summary 4
- Aims and Objectives 5
- Methodology 5
 - Research Approach..... 5
 - Sample 6
 - Methods 6
 - Ethical Considerations..... 7
 - Data Analysis 8
- Findings of the Thematic Analysis..... 9
 - What does good DMLD look like?..... 12
 - The content and delivery are designed specifically for EY..... 12
 - It fosters authentic and critical reflection 12
 - It stimulates robust dialogue..... 13
 - It supports digital literacy..... 14
 - It is structured into bite-sized chunks of learning 15
 - What excites us about DMLD? 15
 - It forges connections across diverse contexts 15
 - It is cost-effective 16
 - It is flexible 17
 - What concerns us about DMLD? 18
 - Losing critical dialogue and reflection..... 18
 - Losing peer-to-peer connection..... 19
 - What is the future of DMLD? 20
 - DMLD must respond to the recruitment and retention crisis 20
 - We must focus on evaluation and outcomes 21
 - Intentional design is essential 21
 - Avoid binaries and embrace blended approaches..... 22
 - We can harness immersive, experiential technology 23
 - We need to move forward as a whole sector..... 24
- Conclusions 26
 - What policy-makers need to know 26

What training providers need to know.....	26
What researchers need to know	27
Glossary of Acronyms	28
References	29
Acknowledgments.....	30

Executive Summary

Investing in leadership development in early years education has been shown to make a significant difference to the quality of day-to-day practice in early years settings and children's outcomes (Douglass, 2019; Arbour et al., 2016; Melhuish & Gardiner, 2019). In the UK context, there is an awareness that we need to develop and extend the leadership development opportunities available in the EY sector. Diverse training providers, alongside the Department for Education, are exploring the opportunities to advance leadership development across the sector by making better use of digitally mediated professional learning (DMPL).

Since the COVID19 crisis, the willingness of individuals to engage in DMPL has sharply increased (Anderson, 2020; Lockee, 2021; Gomez, 2020). In the context of EY, there are considerable advantages in using DMPL for leadership development including reductions in the expense to settings and the accessibility of opportunities once the constraints of travel are removed and cover requirements are eased. DMPL can take place synchronously, that is, with participants meeting online at the same time as each other (e.g. as in a Zoom meeting or webinar). It can also happen asynchronously, as when learners engage in their own time with learning resources and dialogic platforms (e.g. watching a video and posting a comment in a forum for others to engage with in their own time).

Against this backdrop, our project aims to provide a systematic approach to understanding how providers are currently using digitally mediated leadership development (DMLD) as well as the opportunities open to the sector for developing further in this field. In the [first strand of our research, published over the summer of 2022, we presented a systematic review](#) of literature published 2011-2021 focused on both leadership development in EY and DMPL in EY. We concluded that DMPL can be used to improve access to leadership development in EY but only when careful attention is given to its design, particularly in the creation of opportunities for dialogue, connection and authentic reflection experiences, as well as ensuring a sound 'fit' between the experience of the DMPL day-to-day in the context of the pressured EY working environment. We found research to suggest that, without these elements, DMPL can even impact negatively on the motivation of EY staff.

In the second strand of our research, which we report on here, we have learned from the perspectives and experiences of 24 UK training providers offering leadership development. We present our examination of the current state of DMLD through thematic analysis based on interviews, as well as descriptive case studies showcasing approaches to DMLD across 20 providers. The report presents the current landscape but also highlights challenges to overcome as a sector and aspirations for the future of leadership development in EY, as supported by DMPL.

We conclude that DMLD has the potential to advance leadership development across the EY sector and to play a positive role in addressing the workforce crisis. If applied thoughtfully, DMLD can be used to enable the extension of high-quality professional learning across the sector, which in turn is essential for supporting recruitment and retention. Good DMLD can forge connections across diverse contexts to help boost

morale across the workforce, as well as being more cost-effective and flexible from the perspective of providers, settings and individual members of the workforce. However, ensuring that DMLD lives up to its potential depends on: a) encouraging the adoption of effective models of DMLD, b) supporting digital inclusion across the sector and c) investing in robust evaluation of DMLD, with a focus on learning environment, quality interactions and children's outcomes.

For training providers developing DMLD, it is essential to understand the characteristics of effective DMLD. This report stresses the need for DMLD to be specific to an EY audience and work with the specific needs of the sector. In line with the findings of the systematic review, the case studies highlight the need for DMLD that stimulates critical reflection and dialogue along with a sense of community.

There remain many gaps in our understanding of DMLD for an EY audience and further research is required to ensure that current investments in DMLD are evidence-based. In particular, we need research to develop a better understanding of how EY leaders can engage in critical reflection in the context of everyday pressures and how to best support rich conversations and in-depth dialogues among leaders in synchronous and asynchronous DMLD, as well as through cutting-edge immersive and experiential technologies.

Aims and Objectives

The project 'Advancing Leadership in UK Early Years through Digitally Mediated Professional Learning' aims to build our understanding of how DMPL can be used to extend and enhance leadership development across the UK EY sector.

In July 2022, we published a systematic review of global literature on leadership development in EY and DMPL in EY. Following on, this second strand of the research has investigated experiences and perceptions of DMPL for leadership development among UK training providers. We have gathered data relating to a diverse range of leadership development programmes, operating on different scales and for different audiences, in order to understand more about the current use of DMPL for leadership development and opportunities for advancement in the future.

Methodology

Research Approach

The project is situated in a pragmatist tradition. It is research designed to enable those working 'on the ground' to collaboratively problem-solve in response to the challenges that the sector faces. In all three strands, the research is co-produced with sector leaders responsible for implementing any recommendations that emerge.

Sample

Strand 2 of the research examines how diverse providers of leadership development in UK EY are using DMPL, how this has changed over time and their aspirations for the future. To learn more about these perspectives and experiences, we conducted an interview study targeting representatives from diverse training providers who self-identified as providing leadership development with some experimentation in providing DMPL. Organisations involved varied from large charitable bodies working across the UK to represent the EY sector to small private companies providing leadership development in particular regions, nationally or globally. In addition to interviewing those working for these organisations, responsible for the design and delivery of leadership development initiatives, we also interviewed participants in the leadership development.

Methods

A total of 43 interviews and 3 focus groups were conducted. Of the interviews, 27 were with training providers and 16 were with participants. 8 additional participants completed a survey in place of an interview to accommodate busy schedules. The 3 focus groups were with training providers. A table representing the data collected is included below.

Table 1. Data Collection

Data Type	Total
Organisation Interviews	27
Participant Interviews	16
Participant Surveys	8
Organisation Focus Groups	3
Total	54

The providers and participants represented 24 different leadership development programmes, ranging in size, type of provider and delivery model. To recruit interviewees, we drew on the wide networks that surround this project along with making enquiries via email targeting organisations with experience delivering leadership training via DMPL during the pandemic. Each provider is identified from hereon by a code of the type LD1, LD2, LD3 and so on. LD is an acronym for 'leadership development' and providers were assigned an individual number on the basis of the order they participated in our data collection.

In addition, we captured some of the learning around leadership development and DMPL that sits within the bigger nursery groups operating across England. We worked with LD3 to access the experience of training providers working within large and small chains. As a result of commercial sensitivities, they provided their experiences and perspectives in the context of organisation-specific focus groups where they discussed their experiences of leadership development using DMPL. We conducted three focus groups of this kind (included in the above numbers), each 90 minutes long and conducted virtually.

Interviews and focus groups were supplemented by data that training providers were able and willing to provide about the effectiveness of the programme before and after the DMPL adaptations. 75% of the leadership development programmes provided supplemental data. This included programme documents, levels of participation, levels of completion and any internal research on participant outcomes or experience. For example, LD3 provided a wealth of internal data in the form of external, rigorous evaluation reports relating to the effectiveness of their programmes. Furthermore, some organisations invited us to attend their programme to observe the elements discussed in their interview.

To ensure a balanced perspective in the study, we captured a wide range of experiences of leadership development via DMPL, both positive and negative, by cultivating the following:

- An understanding among providers involved in the project about the aims of the project, and in particular that we need to learn from both positive and negative experiences of leadership development via DMPL. We built this understanding through one-to-one meetings with those providers we recruited to the project as well as reiterating this key message via all advisory group meetings that are part of the project. We were clear that we can only learn for the future if we are prepared to engage with the 'warts and all' of experiences so far. To support this message, we ensured that there are processes and systems that enable this openness on the ground (e.g. anonymity).
- Strong and trusting relationships with providers, where we were open about what would be helpful and could take a responsive approach. This meant that if we interviewed participants who report to have had a positive experience, we returned to the provider and asked to be connected with participants who they know have had a more negative or ambivalent experience as well as those who did not complete an internal feedback form at the end of the programme.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained through the Middlesex University Research Ethics Committee. Given the nature of the data gathered, we gave careful thought to our approach to anonymity. We decided that the best approach would be to anonymise mention of providers and participants in this report through the use of codes. However, in many of the cases, we are aware that we cannot guarantee genuine anonymity. In the descriptive case studies, many of the details that we mention effectively disclose the identity of the provider on which the case study is based. For example, by

mentioning the name of a programme only delivered by that provider, anonymity is jeopardised. The limits to anonymity were explained to participants in the research through the participant information sheet. We also asked all providers to look through the draft report and ensure that they were happy with the representation of the data we gathered (including their own specific contributions). While we could not guarantee full anonymity, our decision to use codes was based on a wish to avoid drawing readers' attention to the particular identities of providers and their status or positioning within the sector. Since the intentions of this project are to generate learning across the sector, we are keen to avoid engaging in the relationships, alliances and tensions that characterise provision in any sector. By using codes, we hope that readers of the report will focus more on the findings and less on what was said by whom.

Data Analysis

Transcription was carried out professionally, but was checked by a member of the research team to ensure there were as few errors as possible in these transcripts. Participants' and providers' interviews were the basis of 20 descriptive case studies (see Appendix A) that pinpoint examples of good practice in and challenges of DMLD (a subset of the total 24 providers we collected data from).

In addition, providers' interviews were analysed via inductive thematic analysis to identify the main elements of experience of those involved with leadership development via DMPL during the pandemic. Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020) is an iterative process through which keywords and key phrases are used to build up a set of codes, which can then be grouped into themes and sub-themes. The process is inductive in that it does not rely on any existing organisational system or theoretical framework. We implemented inductive thematic analysis on the basis that it has the potential to elucidate the experience of the adaptations and innovations 'on the ground' from the perspective of both providers and participants. The analysis team implemented a robust, systematic and transparent procedure carried out collaboratively between two members of the team. The process was conducted via Microsoft Word and the team met regularly to discuss emergent codes, sub-themes and themes. Our emergent analysis was presented to the project advisory group, and the dialogues with this group further influenced the analysis and the final version of the thematic map presented in this report.

Findings of the Thematic Analysis

Following the process of thematic analysis, we developed a map to outline responses to four questions:

1. What does good Digitally Mediated Leadership Development (DMLD) look like?
2. What excites us about DMLD?
3. What concerns us about DMLD?
4. What is the future of DMLD in EY?

Our thematic map (figure 1) enables you to quickly grasp the findings across these questions, while table 2 highlights the frequency with which different sub-themes were mentioned across the 24 interviews. For example, the need for DMLD to be specific to an EY audience was mentioned in 20 of the 24 interviews.

In the following sections, we outline our sub-themes in relation to these questions, using illustrative quotes from providers and programme participants.

Figure 1. Thematic map – Advancing DMLD in the UK EY Sector

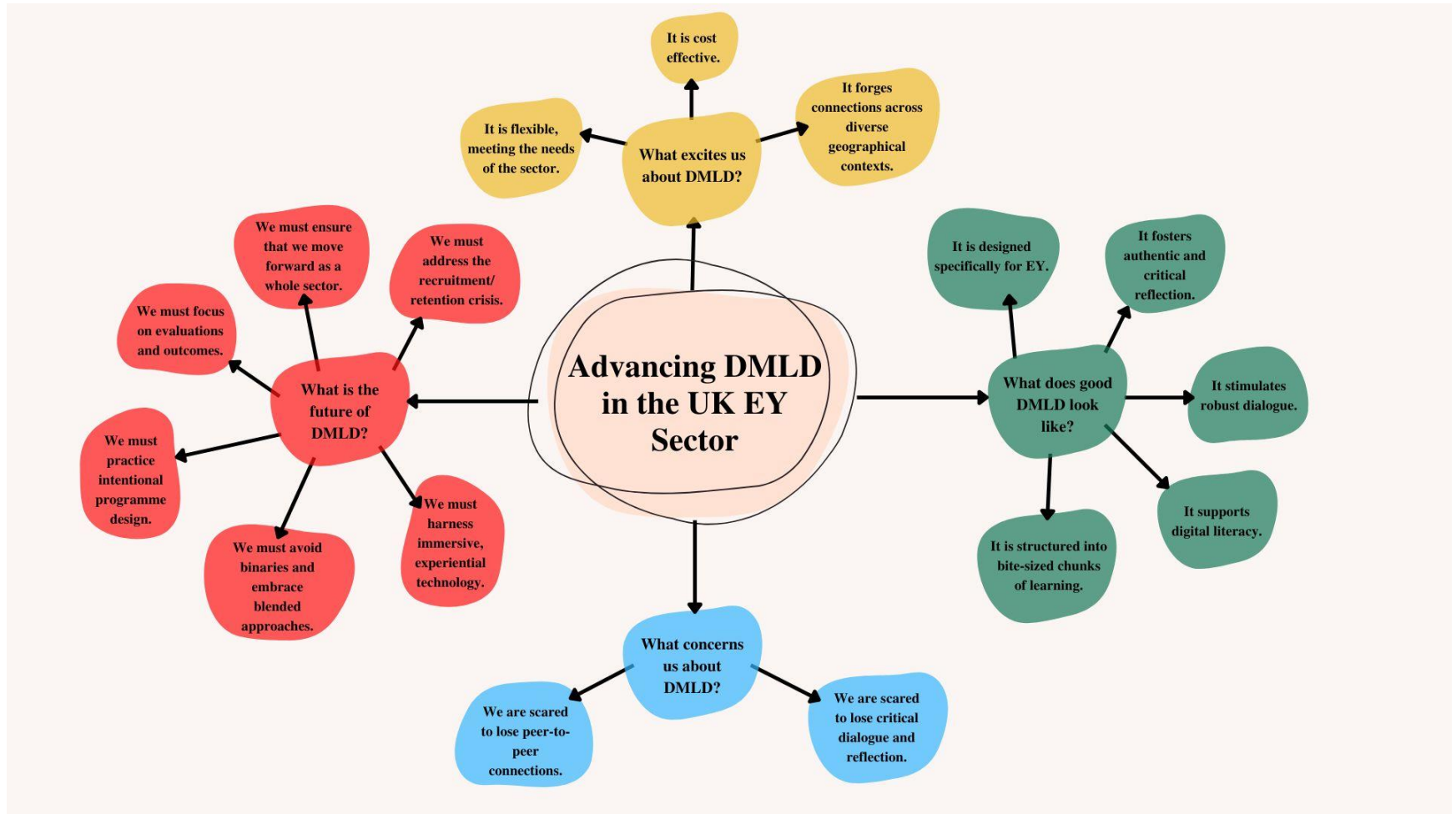


Table 2. Frequency of sub-themes across interviews

	Theme	Total
What does good DMLD look like?	Specific to EY	20
	Fosters authentic and critical reflection	21
	Stimulates robust dialogue	19
	Supports digital literacy	7
	Structured into bite-sized learning	17
What excites us about DMLD?	Forges connection across diverse contexts	13
	Cost-effective	6
	Flexible	21
What concerns us about DMLD?	Losing critical dialogue and reflection	15
	Losing peer to peer connection	17
	Responding to workforce crisis	8
What is the future of DMLD?	Focus on evaluation and outcomes	6
	Intentional design	13
	Avoid binaries, embrace blended	18
	Harness immersive, experiential technologies	3
	Move forward as a whole sector	18

What does good DMLD look like?

The content and delivery are designed specifically for EY

Interviewees agreed that in order to be effective, DMLD must be designed with an EY audience in mind. This was important for the content of the leadership development programme; those working on larger programmes with only a segment of EY leaders were aware of the need to adapt exemplification materials in order for it to be relevant to EY leaders:

These big programmes are designed with a range of teachers in mind. We think about how we can ensure programmes, which are designed for all teachers, speak specifically to EY teachers. (LD1)

We're currently in the process of writing [the NPQEYL] which we're really excited about, because it is designed for the EY sector rather than us trying to mash school designed program into something that works well for EY colleagues. (LD12)

There was recognition that the best way to ensure that content was specific and relevant to the EY audience was to allow the leadership development to emerge through a collaborative approach:

[We] provided a space where leaders could come together and that we didn't have a sort of predetermined curriculum that leaders would join in on. It would sort of grow organically, with input from them. (LD16)

This is an approach advocated by global literature on EY leadership development, particularly Nicholson and Maniates (2016) and Nicholson and Kroll (2015), where structured oral inquiry enables EY leaders to raise the issues that feel most pressing for them, critically explore them and develop an action plan that makes sense to them. Interviewees collectively showed an awareness that without specificity and immediate relevance, an EY audience – experiencing intense pressure – would quickly disengage from DMLD.

It fosters authentic and critical reflection

Prompting authentic and critical reflection was identified as an essential element of effective DMLD. There was recognition of the need to move away from a 'click and read' style of engagement with DMLD and instead to build prompts into asynchronous learning that required learners to take what they had learned, apply it to practice and reflect on the impact.

What we wanted to do with that was encourage reflective learning and practice... (LD9)

There's a [reflection component] and that really pinpoints something in the course that they can reflect on and in each course, they have a reflection document to complete. (LD10)

It also requires a lot of personal reflection and so [we are] opening these conversations that start with an analysis of self. So, we're thinking about our social

identity, we're thinking about our personal identity. Because, ultimately, we cannot remove the person from the professional. We are a person, we are people, we are human, and I really tried to delve into that human element of when we're looking at leadership and we're looking at how we think about change... there are spaces and places for reflection in between each session. (LD8)

We'll look at reflection resources, different reflection techniques, exploring a lot of them. We're trying them out as well. I think the biggest thing to take away, is it needs to be easy, but it needs to be quick because practitioners just want to get home at the end of the day, they don't want to reflect. But actually, if you do quick reflections at the end of the day, then they realize the benefit of it. (LD14)

The breakout groups are there for reflection. They're there to support forward planning and generate ideas and then they're also there to help embed learning. So, an activity might be... a scenario related to the topic that they [had] just been covering. (LD4)

The comments above demonstrate an awareness for the need to intentionally design reflection into DLMD through particular tools, prompts, times and spaces. While LD4 makes use of breakout groups in synchronous DMLD to support reflection, LD14 and LD10 focus on reflection prompts in the context of asynchronous DMLD.

It stimulates robust dialogue

Rich conversations, with an appropriate level of peer-to-peer and facilitator challenge, were seen as a crucial characteristic of effective DMLD. All providers were thinking about the intentional design of DMLD to support leaders to share experience. One of the most commonly mentioned ways to promote dialogues and connections between participants was to limit the size of groups in synchronous sessions.

What's been great is that we've been able to encourage our Level 5 learners to share information and to share experiences with each other... they can share information and encourage each other as well. I think that's one of the main things... when we offer our training, we provide opportunities to share information and to encourage each other. Because like I said in the beginning, there are so many examples of good practice going on, other people need to hear it. (LD11)

Predominantly it's around supporting conversations between leaders and managers in the early years. It's giving them the confidence to do that within and outside of their setting. [Leaders] are supported to have a lot more in-depth conversations about the type of children that they have and the way their setting runs- sharing effective practice and challenges. It makes their partnership working a lot more diverse. (LD3)

For some providers, it was impossible to stimulate these rich conversations through asynchronous engagement alone:

When you're talking about leadership development it's really important to have those conversations and that critical thinking and those questions and you don't get that from like an online platform that's completely [asynchronous]. If I use that

as a supplement... [and say,] 'Okay, let's have a conversation about the video', [then it's different]. I think alone [asynchronous] isn't enough because that takes out the conversation, and guided reflection and challenge. (LD22)

While providers recognised that digital tools, such as forums, should in theory provide an opportunity for peer-to-peer engagement on an asynchronous basis, no provider described this as a successful method of engagement. Experiences so far lead to doubts around the willingness of EY leaders to engage asynchronously in rich communication where they share practice and critically reflect on it with others. Further research is needed to understand the parameters of this engagement/disengagement and whether there are contextual and design factors that might encourage greater participation in asynchronous dialogues. For example, would leaders be more willing to engage in rich asynchronous dialogue if the platform was easier to access and allowed them to express themselves in modes other than writing (e.g. through voicenotes or short videos)? Or do the barriers to asynchronous communication remain regardless of tweaks in the digital design? Understanding this is vital for developing a more intentional approach to the design of DMLD, where community and rich conversations are recognised across the sector as a vital component.

It supports digital literacy

Interviewees were aware that not all participants on DMLD would be equally confident in engaging with the digital platforms and tools involved. Because of this, they saw the importance of building the advancement of digital literacy into the design of DMLD.

I think that people's understanding and their ability to use the technology is probably going to be a little issue for us for a while. (LD19)

A lot of our participants are not digital natives and they do struggle with the technology...So there's also the barriers to think about as to why sometimes engagement with digital online platforms isn't as great as what we want, because maybe confidence, competencies, or indeed you know, a generational change. (LD6)

Providers suggested that it was essential to be upfront about issues of confidence in using digital technologies and to purposefully and explicitly upskill those participating in the course and to see this as a positive outcome in itself.

Whenever we've worked with people that have had that exact view of 'no, I'm no good at technology and I just can't understand it, I need to meet personally, this digital way doesn't work with me', nine times out of 10 with a bit of coaching and support and guidance, you can overcome that. (LD22)

I think one of the things we've had to do is make everything very explicit. So, we've used lots of screen casts. So, kind of a screencast [that talks about]: this is how you access your grades, this is how you access the library. (LD12)

It is structured into bite-sized chunks of learning

The majority of synchronous programmes described by providers in this study emphasized the importance of short sessions to prevent burnout among participants. These ranged from hour long sessions to half day sessions with ample breaks throughout.

What we'll often do is say, 'Okay, you can leave the meeting, you've got 20 minutes and then come back on' because we found someone looking at a screen for a long time, especially when we had long sessions, was too much. So, it's good to give them a break from having to be on the call. (LD22)

It's maybe not delivering the whole part of the program, just delivering little sections of it, especially virtually because... when you do [long sessions] virtually you lose people. (LD14)

Simultaneously, providers saw the importance of offering asynchronous engagement also in a bite-sized format so that participants did not feel overwhelmed and could complete tasks in the modest gaps in their busy day to day schedule.

It appeals to everyone in that bite-sized format. When I say bite-sized, I mean 15-to-20-minute learning chunks. (LD10)

[We created] all of the training down into bite-sized chunks. And in that way, people are there to kind of process the information and assimilate the information and reflect on it before they go to the next stage. (LD2)

LD2's comment highlights that bitesize learning was seen as important not just for its practical flexibility but also for its pedagogical potential. In engaging in a bitesize way, participants could take what they had learned about and apply it straightaway, integrating it into their everyday realities and reflecting on its relevance. This approach raises a question about the nature of reflection among participants on leadership development programme and whether in-depth, authentic and critical reflection comes about in a space that is 'held', away from the busyness of everyday pressures, or whether it is inspired through the integration of reflective prompts into the context of everyday pressures. Further research is needed to understand reflection among EY leaders and how this is supported by different designs of leadership development.

What excites us about DMLD?

It forges connections across diverse contexts

Using DMLD, the EY sector has an opportunity to create active networks of learning where leaders can connect across geography to share expertise together, offer challenge to one another and improve practice collaboratively. These opportunities to connect resonate right across the sector, no longer available to only those living in densely populated areas. A nursery manager in a small family-run seaside Scottish nursery can connect with a room leader in a busy London setting who is part of a nursery group.

I think one of the biggest benefits of digital is that opportunity to connect and reach. You know there's lots of barriers to doing things in person, because of time, expense, travel, all of those kinds of added on barriers. So, I think there's a real place for us to hold onto that digital leadership. (LD16)

I think, particularly in the PVI sector, typically they will see another setting as a competition. So, building up a network beyond your geographical region or area or locality is important... you've got to meet another leader who's way over on the east and actually that forms a relationship, and you can bounce ideas off people, you can go visit and there isn't that element of competition. (LD4)

As LD4 highlights, DMLD enables providers to connect beyond their local area and this is important in the context of a sector where competition may prevent proximate private providers from sharing best practice. Through DMLD, leaders can engage with each other without feeling that they are risking the success of their setting. Connecting across contexts can support a sense of belonging across the sector, as well as enabling a more robust approach to diversity and inclusion. LD8 offers the example of how technology can help nurseries in areas that lack diversity to connect children with other children from different backgrounds. The same point can be made regarding the EY workforce, who can connect through DMPL with emerging and established leaders of different identities working in different context. This creates a wider perspective on leadership development that embraces the experiences and expertise of leaders from minoritized communities in the UK, as well as those from different countries. It supports a vision of leadership development which is much more aligned with the complex 'identity work' highlighted in the influential review of EY leadership conducted by Nicholson et al. (2020).

It is cost-effective

Money is at the forefront of providers' thinking about DMLD. As third sector or private organisations, the struggle for sustainability is tied up with the advancement of DMLD as LD5 highlights:

In the good old days, a local authority would just pay us X amount of money from a bursary to deliver 15 level three qualified practitioners... they would pay the nurseries backfill money to give a release... but those days are gone really, and so it was a natural, inevitable shift. Otherwise, we would not have been sustainable...(LD5)

Many interviewees noted the importance of DMPL from the perspective of both training providers and settings, particularly when they operate on a small scale making cost-effective approaches vital. DMLD is cost-effective for training providers because the cost of a venue is removed, and it is cost-effective for settings because travel costs are removed and cover costs are significantly reduced.

I think that the challenge will be to get people back out to face to face training, because it will require traveling, it all requires cost. (LD11)

I think one of the biggest benefits of digital is that opportunity to connect and reach, you know there's lots of barriers to doing things in person, because of time,

expense, travel, all of those kind of added on barriers, so I think there's a real place for us to hold on to that digitally mediated leadership. (LD16)

While DMLD is cost-effective for these reasons, some providers – and especially those with the most experience over the years of developing effective digital platforms – were keen to stress that digital mediation costs money to develop and it is important to bear this in mind.

It's a bit like building a house. You've got all the different people that come in from carpenters, electricians... Unless you know how those things connect together, it makes it really difficult and, equally, it makes it really, really expensive because there's everything from the look and the feel of the program and equally understanding the audience. (LD2)

It is flexible

The working days of leaders in EY are full and sometimes hectic. In the context of the recruitment and retention crisis, nursery managers often find themselves on the nursery floor for long stretches of time in order to meet the ratio requirements. Pre-pandemic surveys of the sector show that time for and investment in leadership development is not prioritised by nursery managers (Ceeda, 2019) and the time available to leaders for professional learning has only decreased since these studies. As a result, there is an urgent need for leadership development programmes to fit around the busy day-to-day realities of leaders. The flexibility of DMLD is therefore key and something that interviewees in our study were excited by:

What we found is that it's much better for learners because it's more flexible with their working days, because a lot of our learners finish at six and so they're able to log on at half six and they've not got to worry about commuting or... No, they can go home, they can sit there and eat dinner, and are still engaged with the training. And we've seen a massive upsurge in attendance. (LD13)

By the nature of early years, I should know a lot of people are missing those [synchronous] sessions. So, basically now what we do is they're recorded, there are some live sessions, where people can come together as a group, or otherwise, they can pick up that recording and then they work at their own pace. (LD15)

Asynchronous engagement is important when days and leaders find themselves staying late or dealing with issues that have come up during the day.

The e-learning is created so people can dip in and out of it. It just meant that sometimes when they've had to dip out because they have to go off and do something else. (LD2)

What concerns us about DMLD?

Losing critical dialogue and reflection

Across the board, interviewees felt that difficult conversations, critical dialogues and authentic reflection were a vital part of high-quality leadership development. The commitment to critical engagement in leadership development echoed one of our key findings of the systematic review – that leadership development depends on critical dialogue and reflection. There was some concern among interviewees that in the context of DMLD, the challenge and pushback required for critical engagement might be lost.

That challenge, that professional challenge, dialogue back and forward that we've talked about already... are we losing the ability to handle difficult conversations because we're not having conversations? (LD6)

LD6's comment highlights the way in which powerful conversations are not only good for leadership development but are a fundamental part of the leader's role in EY day to day. Leadership development in EY must model what is important about everyday leadership and, for our interviewees, this meant a focus on community, conversations and critical engagement:

We don't want to make it obvious that the seminars are being recorded and you can record them, watch them afterwards, because all you're doing, then, is watching it in isolation and you're not participating in the discussion and that's the bit that supports the leadership development. (LD12)

There is therefore a need to find a balance between enabling the flexibility highlighted in the previous section, where leaders stretched and challenged by their everyday commitments can make use of asynchronous professional learning resources, and holding a space for critical reflection and dialogue in the context of a transformative learning community.

I think when you're doing something online yourself, [you are] restricted to your own view, isn't it? You know you don't have anyone to bounce ideas off of. (LD10)

[The programme in development] will not work as a purely digital training course where there's limited interaction with a facilitator, or indeed where there's limited interaction with peers, because that whole program revolves around conversation and sharing experiences of your childhood, etc., but then allow you to go back into your setting to engage with children and families. (LD6)

Some interviewees felt that this need for critical dialogue and reflection could not be met by DMLD and required at least some face to face interaction. For other interviewees, there was a concern that it was more difficult to encourage rich conversations in an online context but that this could be possible with careful design and use of the right digital tools to mediate the experience.

If you haven't already got a relationship with the people you're speaking to, the [online] training could be less impactful. (LD21)

I feel that we're delivering leadership training. A lot of the learning comes from lessons and other people's experiences. So, when you're on Zoom or a virtual training platform, it becomes very difficult for those conversations to happen because people don't have the confidence to put their camera on or they don't know how to put it in the chat function. So, you have to find different ways to try and establish those experiences. (LD14)

Losing peer-to-peer connection

While there was excitement about the potential of DMLD to foster connections between leaders across diverse contexts, there was simultaneously a fear that the experience of DMLD prevents peer-to-peer connections. Interviewees noted that DMLD missed opportunities for informal network-building, what LD15 called the 'coffee conversations':

I think some of the good stuff happens when people are sitting around the table together... I always call them 'coffee conversations' because they're the conversations you have when you go off to make a coffee. (LD15)

We've really agonized a bit over what we've lost in terms of that informal support, that building of relationships and networks of practitioners. (LD24)

Informal, casual conversations are important for building peer connections and this was felt to be lost in the context of DMLD.

I think sometimes it's easier to build a rapport with people face to face as well... Because peer learning is something that's really important. I think, it is really important, and sometimes that can be a little bit lost as well. (LD22)

[Virtual learning] doesn't really help with building strong relationships and you know that networking is much harder on a zoom call then over lunch in a face to face seminar. (LD12)

Whilst we're trying to encourage networking, especially online virtual classrooms, we don't often network, because they want to just nip off and have a quick comfort break, nip off and get coffee or nip off and see what's happening in the nursery. So, those networking opportunities, I think, are missed. (LD3)

Interviewees were not just concerned about the loss of these peer-to-peer connections for their own sake, but also concerned that in turn this loss was producing a shift away from warm and empathic communication. As with the commitment to critical dialogue and reflection, interviewees were across the board committed to a vision of leadership that put relationships and people at its core. Prioritising communication and community therefore felt vital for successful leadership development.

In our community, if you take away that physical contact where people talk about all the richness of things that happen outside of the actual content of the program, I think there is possibly an unintended consequence there. (LD6)

In my view, leadership development is about people, it's about people and relationships. And that's quite difficult to do online. (LD23)

While the face-to-face learning environment was considered a fertile place for relationships, empathy and connection, there was confusion and skepticism about how to produce a similar environment in the context of digital mediation. Even for those training providers who specialised in DMLD and had invested heavily in developing bespoke cutting-edge platforms, the 'wins' had been in relation to the participant's individual learning journey rather than a sense of community. One of the resounding questions from this research is therefore, how do you effectively build community and enable rich and warm communication in DMLD?

What is the future of DMLD?

DMLD must respond to the recruitment and retention crisis

Unfortunately, the situation in EY currently goes much deeper than just supporting leaders to lead even more effectively. There were real concerns across providers about the sustainability of the EY workforce as a result of recruitment and retention struggles felt across the board. The struggle to recruit and retain qualified practitioners has a devastating impact on the leadership pipeline. Professional learning, including leadership development, has a vital part to play in improving conditions, status and experience across the EY workforce.

I feel like we're at such a crisis point in the early years that although I want to think about leadership for the future... it just feels like we're firefighting constantly to get your pipeline into the sector and retaining those people, and in some ways that makes the leadership element even more vital that we address it now, because we know we're losing experienced people who came through very effective leadership programs back in the early 2000s who are now reaching retirement age. So, I suppose I'd like to see investment in it, but really until we start investing more broadly in early years, it feels that we're focusing on the wrong end of the issue, almost. (LD24)

I'm concerned that we are going to have in the next maybe five years, maybe more a bit of a death in our early years leaders because we've got a big problem with recruitment and retention. And the early years sector always grows its own leaders... So, if we're struggling to get those qualified practitioners into the settings how are we going to ensure that we are really growing that leadership workforce? (LD4)

While the comments above highlight the positive contribution of leadership development in addressing the workforce crisis in the sector, other providers were aware that the sector might be reluctant about engaging in leadership development initiatives at a time when the 'basics' were felt to not be in place. Leadership development – and within this, DMLD – is at risk of rejection from a sector experiencing overwhelming pressure.

Our nursery managers are under a huge amount of sector-wide pressures at the moment. I'm sure you've heard of the staffing crisis in early years and the lack of level three practitioners, which is why we're struggling to recruit qualified

practitioners. Hence, why we do such an intensive apprenticeship programme so we can grow our own talent. I know being short staffed in nursery is making it really difficult for managers to even just do their day-to-day role, let alone doing leadership development. I think it's quite low down on their list. (LD20)

I think you know the emphasis on really trying to support the sector with the recruitment and retention crisis at the moment. It's not a great time for the sector, thinking about rolling out new leadership programmes. (LD3)

In this climate, only the highest quality DMLD will inspire sustained engagement and lead to concrete improvements across the sector. The need to get DMLD right has never been more urgent.

We must focus on evaluation and outcomes

Providers recognised that designing DMLD depends on listening carefully to participants about their experiences and perspectives, as well as gathering other types of data about their participation and its outcomes. Ultimately, providers recognised that in order for leadership development to be effective it needed to have a traceable impact not just on one leader but on a setting. DMLD offers opportunities to collect different types of evidence of the impact, but we are at the early stages of understanding how to gather, analyse and effectively use this data to improve the design of programmes.

How do we know it's making any difference to practice? We're really confident of the inputs. We know we've got really good people doing it in a really flexible and accessible way at a time that people would like. That's what all the evaluation says. What's more challenging is to identify: what are the outcomes? (LD5)

When we get people submitting their [work] we get to see the evidence they produce, which gives us some feedback on what's happening in the sector. (LD9)

We've built an evaluation process that goes right through all the training courses, rather than some, a questionnaire at the end. The brilliant thing is we seem to capture it just at the right moments when people are really thinking about it. (LD2)

The majority of programmes offered by the providers had not been subject to external evaluation as a result of budget constraints. As an exception to this, LD3 had great examples of robust, external evaluation of their programmes, allowing them to draw evidenced conclusions surrounding DMLD. These are discussed in more detail in LD3's case study, available in the appendices document. As a sector, we need more focus on learning from evaluation – both ongoing and informal forms of evaluation embedded into the design of DMLD, as well as robust external evaluation designed to measure the effectiveness of a particular programme and specific methods of delivery.

Intentional design is essential

While providers saw Covid19 as an essential stepping stone in DMLD, in that it produced an attitudinal shift towards DMPL in the sector, they also recognised that a further shift was required in DMLD – from using DMLD as an emergency quick fix in exceptional circumstances, to designing it carefully with real consideration of the audience's needs.

I think there's a real difference between in an emergency quickly doing the best you can, say make programmes designed to be face to face and making it an online programme, versus with a blank piece of paper saying, if this is an online experience, how do we capitalize on those things you can do really well online.” (LD1)

Have we given sufficient time to think about the types of tools and strategies we can use in online delivery? (LD6)

I think the digitally mediated leadership development, there's definitely a place for that. But I think it needs to be used in the right way at the right time and suitable for the right people. (LD14)

As we shift out of emergency response mode, the sector must take a step back and reflect on their programmes, engaging in intentional design that puts pedagogical values at the heart of every design decision. Providers talked with passion about their design decisions and how these aligned with their pedagogical approach.

I want to provoke thought and I can't be in every breakout room. I also am aware of things around, for instance, 'white silence'. This notion of not saying anything because you don't want to say the wrong thing and that actually putting the onus back on to me, which should not be the case as a black woman facilitating the session. I want the onus of responsibility to be on you if you are a white leader, I want you to think about this and be able to provoke that.... [So,] I just don't think that breakout rooms for me, personally, in this work that I do is always the most effective strategy. (LD8)

EY practice done well, is inherently hands on... I still think that leaders deserve to be inspired by each other's practice and the learning environment that they're building and how to help their teams to build phenomenally engaging and appropriate learning environment. I know that some of my most meaningful leadership development things were visiting other people's settings and seeing how the children engage with it. (LD12)

I'm a strong believer in experiential approaches and conversations rather than giving somebody a five-hour lecture and then sending them on their way. So, for me personally from designing online training, I need to make sure that actually that's still aligned with my pedagogical values... [and] think a little bit more critically about it. (LD22)

Aligning DMLD with pedagogical values offers a clear framework to providers and shifts the emphasis away from debating the pros and cons of particular platforms, to thinking more holistically about the approach we take and the tools that can support with this approach.

Avoid binaries and embrace blended approaches

Across the providers, there was appetite for seeing the ways that DMLD could work together with face-to-face methods. Rather than pitting these modes of delivery against

each other, providers were positive about the ways that DMLD could be integrated to enhance in-person delivery, or the other way around.

I do think a blended approach is a good way of delivering a lot of our leadership development. So doing some online sessions and then maybe some coaching or role modeling on the job can embed the learning. (LD20)

I think it shouldn't be a trade-off, online learning. It tends to be: do you like online, or do you prefer face to face. I think that's a bit of an old, almost a backward way of thinking. I don't think it is as black and white as that and I think you can't... either the perception is that one's better than the other, and I think that's where helping people to see and listening to learners that we can kind of steer it to the right balance in the digital learning. And I think once you can blend both, if you do it well, it doesn't just enhance learning, I think it contributes to a deeper learning. (LD2)

[Digital] is the way forward and that's the way we'll continue to deliver with the caveat that we do try to meet where we come as a community of practice. (LD15)

So, there is always that possibility to marry the two as well, which we also shouldn't shy away from because the two things can work very well, hand in hand. It's not to erase or delete the human experience of interaction, but it's the valuing to recognize that two things can exist at the same time. (LD8)

As well as finding the right, case-by-case balance between digitally mediated engagement and face-to-face engagement, providers also discussed the importance of blending synchronous and asynchronous participation.

I think we'd like to offer more courses which are online courses which you follow in your own time...I think the challenge for us really is that our practitioners and our staff as well like to come to face to face, even though it's online, to live sessions where they can ask questions and where that engagement happens. So, I suppose it's finding the balance. (LD11)

I think the balance between asynchronous and live is really helpful because again it's about that networking, it's about being able to ask questions... So, you know... if you're doing something online that's the best sort of mix. (LD12)

Providers' discussions around the need to balance and blend different modes of professional learning indicate the need to be sensitive, responsive and exploratory in designing new leadership development programmes. The advancement of DMLD is not about choosing DMLD over other more established ways of bringing people together in authentic and critical reflection, but rather being willing as training providers to look at all the methods, modes and approaches available and making intentional choices about the design of programmes for specific audiences.

We can harness immersive, experiential technology

There was some excitement among a few providers about the potentials of using more immersive technologies in DMPL for leaders, such as augmented or virtual reality technologies. These were appealing for the basis of aligning with the pedagogical

emphasis on experiential learning. Leaders could reflect in the moment of a particular scenario that they face in their everyday realities, but could do this in a psychologically safe environment where they feel held.

You could go through a nursery and do their health and safety check in the morning. So, it's a psychologically safe environment. You're not putting any children at risk if you miss it. (LD5)

[We could use] virtual reality as a learning resource [where] presumably we'd let you see a scenario and you make some choices about what you should do in that scenario. (LD9)

We're looking at 360 filming at the moment... like 360 filming the setting and then work with the teacher of the setting for their expertise and their rationale for all the decisions that have been made as to why things are where they are and then putting those into the clickable 360 image so that all of that is encapsulated in place. (LD12)

Immersive technologies also have the potential to respond to the concern that DMLD means a loss of rich interpersonal connections, critical dialogue and powerful conversations. Virtual communities may be able to stimulate a sense of being together in the same space so that EY leaders can engage with one another in a way much closer to the realities of in-person connection than the limitations of an online breakout room or a coffee break where everyone disappears from the screen, retreating to their own lives rather than engaging informally with others.

We need to move forward as a whole sector

Across providers, there was an appetite to see progress in DMLD as a whole sector. To providers, this meant that it was essential to be aware of and address the impact of digital exclusion of different types. Firstly, the question was raised of how to move forward with DMLD when a significant minority within the sector struggle to access a stable internet connection in their setting or at home.

Definitely, accessibility in terms of socio economics and affordability. Assuming that everybody has an Internet connection, assuming that everybody has, you know, access to technology... that's not the case, and it can be quite exclusionary in that sense, and I think it's something we have to consider... We have to think about accessibility, about who's got access to money, internet connection, technology. These things, they cost. (LD8)

It's only within the last two months that we have been able to access a new Internet connection through fibres. Not the only person in Northern Ireland, but a lot of our settings are quite rural... I still have people who are clearly on a mobile phone, you know who can't really use all of the interactivity. (LD6)

We do have this problem of digital discrimination or digital disadvantage potentially where people don't have the equipment necessary to engage in all the learning opportunities that are available digitally and we have to be conscious of that. (LD9)

Issues of digital exclusion mirror other types of social exclusion. Thus, by offering programmes only through DMLD we may be exacerbating social isolation and material disadvantage already experienced by segments of the EY workforce and sector. Settings in underserved rural communities, with limited or non-existent budgets for technological infrastructure, will be excluded from DMLD opportunities – even though, in theory, they could most benefit from these. Similarly, leaders in EY who have the fewest personal resources at their disposal – such as the hardware of a personal phone, tablet or computer, as well as the internet connectivity - will be excluded from DMLD that is designed to happen at a participant's convenience. The flexibility and accessibility which can be seen as benefits of DMLD can only be realised if robust measures are taken to ameliorate the effects of digital exclusion.

Another form of digital exclusion occurs not as a result of material factors but instead as a result of low levels of digital literacy among some members of the EY workforce community. Our characteristics of effective DMLD highlighted the need to integrate digital literacy as part of the DMLD experience, rather than assuming that everyone participating will be comfortable with the modes of delivery.

A lot of our participants are not digital natives and they do struggle with the technology. (LD6)

A final issue to consider is the ways in which individual differences and identities are respected in the context of DMLD. Can all participants in DMLD contribute and engage equally online? Do some members of the learning community find themselves silenced? LD8 discussed how experiences of DMLD can reinforce the lens of whiteness through which leadership in all sectors is understood and presented: 'for a long time what may have been seen and perceived as leadership has been done through a lens of whiteness' (LD8). Can DMLD offer a forum through which this lens is questioned and challenged?

Furthermore, do we pay enough attention in DMLD to the needs of neurodiverse learners?

If we're using keynote lectures that are recorded then people who are neuro diverse can pause, can rewind, can fast forward... (LD12)

My other concern is for anybody who has more complex special needs or challenges of any kind, and being able to support them effectively... I think it's really not acceptable that just because we've moved out of the classroom onto online that we don't ask those things. (LD18)

Such issues highlight that the future of DMLD and its intentional design requires not only an alignment with pedagogical values but also with a vision of the future of the EY sector and its workforce. If we are committed to a diverse and inclusive workforce, leadership development – including DMLD – must support with the advancement of such a vision.

Conclusions

Based on our thematic analysis, alongside the descriptive case studies presented in the appendices of the report, we put forward a series of conclusions targeting policy-makers, training providers and researchers.

What policy-makers need to know

- DMLD has the potential to advance leadership development across the EY sector and to play a positive role in addressing the workforce crisis. Good DMLD can forge connections across diverse contexts to help boost morale across the workforce, as well as being more cost-effective and flexible from the perspective of providers, settings and individual members of the workforce.
- Ensuring that DMLD lives up to its potential depends on:
 - Encouraging effective models of DMLD to be adopted across the sector, with an emphasis on community, critical dialogue and reflection, alongside practical considerations such as bite-sized learning to fit in with busy schedules.
 - Supporting digital inclusion and digital literacy across the sector so that disadvantaged individuals or settings are not left behind. Particular concerns are raised in relation to a) settings in rural areas where internet connectivity is unstable and b) settings unable to invest in their technological infrastructure.
- If we are to move forward with DMLD as a sector, investing in robust evaluation is essential. Providers can integrate informal internal evaluation as part of their programme design, but we can only understand the impact of specific DMLD programmes when they are externally evaluated with a focus not only on participants' experiences but also robust measurement of learning environments, interactions and children's outcomes. Providers are open to external evaluation but there need to be clearer pathways for accessing external evaluation partners and the resources required to implement robust evaluation.

What training providers need to know

- Great DMLD needs to be specific to an EY audience in both content and delivery. It has to work with the real pressures of the sector as they are experienced both by individual participants and the settings of which they are a part.
- Effective DMLD must foster authentic and critical reflection and stimulate robust dialogue. Blended experiences can be helpful for this as there are concerns about current digital platforms and their capacity to enable rich conversations between peers.
- In order for DMLD to foster authentic reflection and dialogue among all participants, there is a need to carefully consider how different learning platforms and interactions can support or inhibit the contribution of all participants. Too often, individuals from minoritized communities find themselves silenced in DMLD

spaces and careful learning design is required in order to ensure that this is not the case.

- Practical considerations are essential and providers need to ensure built-in support for digital literacy as part of DMLD, as well as structuring learning into bite-sized chunks.
- Evaluating DMLD is essential for its future. As a sector, we have not focused enough on the outcomes of leadership development programmes, including DMLD. Without evidence about participants' experiences, learning and impact within their settings, we cannot improve on what we are doing. Both internal and external evaluations have a role to play.

What researchers need to know

- There are many gaps in our understanding of DMLD for an EY audience. Addressing these gaps through detailed research would greatly benefit providers and policy-makers in developing the future of DMLD across the sector. These gaps include, but are not limited to:
 - An understanding of how EY leaders can effectively engage with authentic and critical reflection. In particular, it is unclear whether reflection prompts embedded in the busyness of day-to-day working lives can be effective in stimulating in-depth reflection, or whether reflection must be 'held' in a space (physical or virtual) away from everyday pressures.
 - Careful examination of the parameters surrounding social connections and rich dialogues for an EY audience in DMLD. While there is a sense among providers that it is harder to stimulate rich conversation in synchronous DMLD and that it is impossible to do this via asynchronous DMLD, we have no specific evidence relating to these claims. Research is required to test different models of learning delivery in DMLD with clear measurements of dialogue quantity and quality among participants.
 - Exploration of the potentials of immersive and experiential technologies specifically for DMLD in the EY sector. While some providers are excited by the potentials, we are not aware of any designs that specifically address the needs of leaders in EY. Further research is required to identify what might be available currently and its effectiveness, as well as research and development work to operationalise the concept and examine its impact.

Glossary of Acronyms

DMPL	Digitally Mediated Professional Learning
DMLD	Digitally Mediated Leadership Development
EY	Early Years
LD	Leadership Development
PL	Professional Learning
PD	Professional Development

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