

# **Transformational change: The lived experience of executive education participants**

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## **1. Background**

'I am much more confident' is a common response from our executive education graduates when asked about their course. But what does this actually mean for them professionally and for the organisations that have invested in their employee's development? This study is an attempt to explore this further through the lens of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (2008) and to try to measure change using several confidence related constructs applicable to the workplace.

## **2. Research aims and objectives**

My research question is 'What are the factors that contribute to the transformational change of executive education participants?' This is broken down into four objectives:

- 1) To confirm the hypothesis that participation in executive education increases psychological capital, leadership efficacy and reduces imposter phenomenon.
- 2) To explore the effect of executive education on reported positive organisational behaviour
- 3) To ascertain if there is a relationship between personality and level of positivity of reported experiences.
- 4) To identify the activities and experiences which bring about reported transformational change.

## **3. Literature review**

At the heart of this study is an exploration of personal transformation and Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is key here. The idea that by exploring and changing implicit frames of reference, taken for granted assumptions and attitudes, learners can experience a real transformation in their thinking and behaviour (Mezirow 1997, 2008) is central to understanding the 'I am much more confident' statement. Mezirow revised his theory over many years and it is the later revisions which incorporated habits of mind, points of view, schema and constructivist theory (Kitchenham, 2008) which are of most interest and will be used to inform the semi structured interviews.

Other constructs which can provide a valuable lens through which to view and measure workplace confidence include Psychological Capital, Leadership Efficacy and Imposter Phenomenon. It has long been common practice for researchers investigating leadership and performance to substitute the concept of self-efficacy for that of self-confidence (McCormick, 2001). Psychological Capital (PsyCap) is a state like capacity comprised of four factors – efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthens et al, 2007). This concept has been linked to organisational success through positive organisational behaviour (Luthens et al 2008). Leadership Efficacy is founded on self and means efficacy theory which incorporates the confidence individuals have in their capability to lead and their beliefs about the supportive nature of their environment (Hannah et al, 2008). Imposter phenomenon is synonymous with feelings of fraudulence and associated with a multitude of negative outcomes (Tewfik, 2022).

A recent systematic review of the academic literature on Imposter Phenomenon suggested that individuals who struggle with this will be more subject to burnout and limited in their ability to fulfill their professional potential (Bravata et al, 2020).

Positive organisational behaviour is rooted in the positive psychology movement and how this can be applied within organisations. Central to this is the idea of work as somewhere that employees can be their best selves and experience positive emotions, satisfaction and flow (Luthans, 2002). My study is attempting to explore the link between personal transformative experiences that arise from executive education and how this translates into and enhances reported positive workplace behaviours.

#### **4. Research methodology and methods**

I am adopting a mixed method approach as I want to attempt a quantitative measurement of change across several psychological constructs and a qualitative phase to explore the lived experience of participants through 1-1 interviews. Participants will be registered students on an executive education course with LJMU who will be invited to take part in the research. I am aiming to recruit 50 participants over an 18-month period from three intakes of the programme.

The research will be in three phases:

*Phase One:* Early on in the course participants will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and four psychometric test questionnaires to measure the constructs of imposter phenomenon, leadership efficacy, psychological capital and the big five personality traits.

*Phase Two:* After participants have finished the course, they will be asked to complete the four psychometric test questionnaires again and changes from phase one completion to phase two will be identified.

*Phase Three:* After completion of the phase two data collection participants will be invited to a semi structured 1-1 interview to investigate their lived experience of transformational change from the executive education programme.

Measurement of any changes between phase one and phase two will be analysed across the psychometric measures to meet objective one of my research and this will be considered in connection with the qualitative data and themes arising from interviews which will attempt to address objectives two - four.

#### **5. Potential impact of research study**

Transfer of training is the measure of successful executive education for organisations (Grossman and Salas, 2011). A HBR article from 2019 referred to 'the skills transfer gap' whereby executives are unable to take what they learn in the classroom and apply it within their jobs (Moldoveanu and Narayandas, 2019, p8). A Forbes article in the same year was titled 'Leadership development is a \$366 Billion dollar industry: here's why most programs don't work' (Westfall, 2019). These are damaging messages for the executive education sector. At a local level there is a potential crisis looming in my own institution as anecdotal reports from our key partners suggest that organisations are directing their apprenticeship funding away from senior leaders to other levels of employees. This is reflected in our course numbers with multiple cohort intakes in 2020 to vastly reduced numbers in 2022. In response specific targets have been set to recruit more self-funding students which will be difficult given the current cost of living crisis and the Bank of England suggesting that the UK will fall into the longest ever recession (BBC, 2022). To survive long-term we need to have a very explicit offering of the advantages of engaging in executive education and I am hopefully that my study will be able to articulate a clear vision of the personal, professional and organisational benefits.

Additionally, this study might contribute to a research gap, as in a meta-analysis of transfer training research Baldwin, Ford and Blume suggested that adopting a more consumer centric inquiry approach to transfer research and exploring the lived experience of participants to uncover what really matters to people is important and that this has been lacking in transfer research so far (2017).

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