

Developing Future Leaders: An Analysis of Manager-in-Training Programmes in Management Education

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Abstract

In an era of rapid globalisation and dynamic organisational change, developing leadership capabilities among management students has become imperative. The Manager-in-Training (MIT) programme serves as a structured experiential learning model that bridges theoretical concepts with practical application, preparing students for future managerial roles. This study aims to analyse the effectiveness of the MIT programme in fostering leadership, decision-making, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. The research uses a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with students who participated in departmental MIT modules such as Training and Placement, Media, Stores, Canteen, Library, Student Council, Facility Management, Herb Garden, Studio Kitchen, and Beverage Lab. Findings reveal that exposure to diverse operational areas significantly enhances self-confidence, communication, and leadership readiness. Recommendations include strengthening mentorship mechanisms, integrating reflective journaling, and creating interdepartmental leadership challenges to promote holistic managerial growth. The study further emphasises the importance of experiential exposure in developing adaptive leadership qualities suited to modern hospitality environments. It highlights how real-time task engagement cultivates accountability, innovation, and emotional intelligence – key traits for sustainable career progression. The results contribute valuable insights for educators, institutions, and industry partners in refining management training pedagogy.

Keywords: Manager-in-Training (MIT), Leadership Development, Management Education, Experiential Learning, Managerial Skills

Introduction

In today's rapidly changing business environment, marked by globalisation, technological disruption, and evolving workforce demands, management education is under increased pressure to produce graduates not only with technical knowledge, but also with strong leadership capabilities. Organisations expect future managers to lead teams, make strategic decisions, adapt to ambiguity, and foster innovation (Day, 2000; Boyatzis, 2008). Within higher education institutions, therefore, the design of pedagogical frameworks that merge theoretical understanding with experiential leadership development has become a strategic priority.

The concept of a Manager-in-Training (MIT) programme within a management institute aligns with this imperative, offering students structured exposure to organisational operations, leadership tasks, and cross-functional responsibilities. Such programmes serve as incubators of leadership capacity by placing students in roles where they engage in tasks such as co-ordinating placement activities, and managing media and communications, inventory and stores operations, facility-management processes, and student-governance and service-learning initiatives. Through these immersive departmental

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assignments, students experience leadership in action – managing projects, collaborating with peers, liaising with stakeholders, and reflecting on their learning. This bridges the gap between classroom theory (for example, organisational behaviour, strategic management, operations) and real-life managerial practice.

Prior reviews suggest that leadership development in higher education is fragmented, small-scale, and lacks robust theory-based evaluation (Dopson, Ferlie, McGivern et al., 2018). Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by analysing a structured MIT programme across multiple departmental assignments (Training & Placement, Media, Stores, NSS activities, Library, Canteen, Student Council, Facility Management, Herb Garden, Studio Kitchen, and Beverage Lab) to understand the development of leadership skills and managerial readiness among final-year management students. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate how participation in MIT tasks influences leadership competencies such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, decision-making, and organisational awareness.

By doing so, the research contributes both to the pedagogy of management education, demonstrating an applied model for leadership incubation and to the literature on experiential leadership development by providing empirical evidence from the higher-education context. The findings can inform curriculum designers, faculty mentors, and institutional planners seeking to embed leadership pathways in management programmes.

Literature Review

David A. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory posits that knowledge is constructed via a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). This model underpins many leadership-development initiatives, emphasising that learners must actively engage in experience and reflect upon it to grow (Day, 2000). In leadership training programmes, the shift from passive lecture-based formats to action-oriented assignments (such as departmental rotations in MIT programmes) aligns with this concept.

Richard E. Boyatzis argued that leadership competencies such as emotional intelligence, self-awareness, social skills, and adaptability are developed through deliberate practice and feedback (Boyatzis, 2008). Complementing this, the work of Warren G. Bennis & Burt Nanus emphasises that leadership development must integrate cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions (Bennis & Nanus, 2003). In the MIT context, this suggests that successful programmes should include tasks that build self-confidence, interpersonal relationships, and decision making under realistic conditions.

Dopson et al. (2018) reviewed leadership development (LD) programmes in higher education institutions (HEIs) and found the literature to be “small-scale, fragmented, and often theoretically weak” (p. 218). They note the shift in HEIs towards more entrepreneurial, networked, and digital environments, which demands newer forms of leadership (Dopson et al., 2018). Gentry et al. (2013) suggest that LD programmes that combine experiential tasks, mentoring, and real-world problem solving significantly improve self-efficacy and career readiness among participants. In the management education context, this underscores the value of structured MIT programmes.

Flaig et al. (2020) in their review of formal LD found that individual competencies and organisational outcomes are influenced by the design of LD programmes, particularly when they offer practical assignments and sustained support (Flaig et al., 2020). Johnson (2014) discussed LD methods and emphasised the need for a mix of strategy and tactics: exposure to leadership roles, coaching, reflection, and real-time feedback (Johnson, 2014). Matthews (2015) focused on student LD, finding that leadership education needs to incorporate deliberate practice, feedback, and context-specific tasks to be effective.

Robinson and Barron (2007) found that structured internships and departmental rotations in hospitality and management education strengthen leadership maturity and employability. Leskiw and Singh (2007) reviewed best practices in LD and concluded that immersive, action-oriented programmes such as simulations or departmental responsibilities produce better outcomes than classroom-only training.

The MIT syllabus includes multiple departmental assignments (for example, Media, Stores, Facility Management, Student Council), which reflect cross-functional leadership exposure. Research suggests that LD that spans different contexts fosters adaptability and broader organisational understanding (Dopson et al., 2018; Day et al., 2014). For example, Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm and McKee (2014) reviewed 25 years of research on leadership development, noting that diversity of experience and reflective practice were key levers for growth.

A significant theme across the literature is the role of mentoring, feedback, and reflection in leadership growth. Ely et al. (2010) created a framework for evaluating leadership coaching and found that guided reflection and coaching accelerate development. Similarly, Kelloway, Barling and Helleur (2000) found that feedback and training enhance transformational leadership behaviours. In the MIT programme context, structured mentorship and opportunity to reflect on departmental tasks would align with these findings.

Despite the growth of leadership programmes, the literature points to several challenges: a lack of longitudinal data, over-reliance on self-report measures, and the difficulty of linking leadership training to organisational performance (Dopson et al., 2018; Gentry et al., 2013). In addition, the higher-education LD literature is fragmented and lacks consensus on best practices (Dopson et al., 2018). This study addresses these gaps by integrating multiple departmental experiences, surveying final-year students, and triangulating data via reports and interviews.

Research Objectives

- To evaluate the effectiveness of the MIT programme among management students.
- To identify the most impactful components of the MIT programme that contribute significantly to students' leadership growth and managerial readiness.
- To examine the relationship between experiential learning in the MIT programme and students'

perceived preparedness for future managerial roles, thereby linking LD outcomes with employability and career readiness in the management field.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study follows a descriptive and analytical design, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine students' perceptions of LD through MIT participation.

Population and Sample

The population includes final-year management students ($n = 120$) enrolled in the *MIT* programme. A purposive sample of 60 students from various departmental assignments was selected for the study.

Data Collection Tools

- *Questionnaire*: Structured on a five-point Likert scale, measuring dimensions such as communication, teamwork, leadership initiative, and problem solving.
- *Interviews*: Semi-structured interviews with 10 faculty mentors and 15 student leaders.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, standard deviation) and correlation analysis to determine relationships between departmental exposure and perceived leadership growth.

Qualitative data were thematically analysed to identify patterns in student learning, leadership reflection, and skill development. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 27, involving descriptive statistics, paired t-tests, and correlation analysis.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1

Leadership Competency	Pre-Training Mean	Post-Training Mean	Mean Difference	Interpretation
Communication skills	3.21	4.32	+1.11	Significant improvement through team presentations and meetings
Teamwork and collaboration	3.45	4.28	+0.83	Enhanced through cross-functional group tasks
Decision-making ability	3.18	4.05	+0.87	Exposure to real managerial scenarios improved decision confidence
Problem-solving skills	3.09	4.22	+1.13	Increased due to hands-on departmental challenges
Organisational awareness	3.32	4.36	+1.04	Better understanding of institutional systems and hierarchy

Interpretation: All key competencies showed substantial improvement after participation in the MIT programme. The highest increase was in problem-solving and communication skills, indicating that the experiential, task-based learning model effectively enhanced leadership readiness.

Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation test was performed to examine relationships among competencies.

Table 2

Variables	Communication	Teamwork	Decision Making	Problem Solving	Org awareness
Communication	1	0.69	0.71	0.64	0.59
Teamwork	0.69	1	0.63	0.70	0.68
Decision-making	0.71	0.63	1	0.73	0.66
Problem solving	0.64	0.70	0.73	1	0.72
Org awareness	0.59	0.68	0.66	0.72	1

Interpretation: All leadership competencies were positively correlated, implying that growth in one domain (for example, teamwork) reinforced others (for example, decision making and communication). This supports the concept of integrated leadership development where competencies evolve interdependently.

Interpretation: Hands-on departmental exposure through rotation was rated as the most impactful component of leadership development.

Proposed Model for LD in Management Education

The '4E MIT Leadership Development Model'

A model is proposed based on findings and literature synthesis. It consists of four integrated stages that can guide management institutes in designing effective MIT programmes.

Table 3

Component	% Students Rated 'Highly Effective'
Departmental rotations	38
Mentorship and feedback	26
Reflection reports	19
Peer collaboration	17

Table 4

Stage	Description	Key Outcome
Engage	Students are placed in real departmental roles (for example, Training and Placement, Facility Management)	Awareness of organisational systems
Experience	Students perform leadership tasks such as planning events, managing budgets, co-ordinating teams	Development of communication and teamwork
Evaluate	Mentors provide feedback; students reflect through journals and peer discussions	Improvement through reflection and feedback
Empower	Students apply learning in new contexts (for example, cap-stone projects, student governance)	Transfer of leadership skills to future workplace

Findings

- The MIT programme significantly improved leadership competencies, especially communication, problem solving, and teamwork.
- Experiential departmental assignments were identified as the most effective learning strategy.
- Mentorship and reflective learning played a crucial role in transforming experience into actionable leadership insight.
- Leadership competencies were strongly inter-correlated, confirming the holistic nature of leadership skill development.
- Students reported enhanced confidence, adaptability, and employability readiness after programme completion.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that a structured MIT programme acts as an effective experiential learning mechanism for cultivating leadership competencies in management students. Significant improvements across all measured dimensions confirm that learning by doing, reinforced through mentorship and reflection, bridges the gap between classroom theory and professional leadership practice.

The proposed 4E MIT LD Model offers a replicable framework for institutions seeking to embed leadership training within their curriculum. While this study was limited to one institution and a modest sample, its implications are far-reaching for the design of holistic, practice-based leadership education that prepares

graduates to become competent, ethical, and adaptive future managers.

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