A study of leadership strategies in the National Apprenticeship Programme at the Mauritius Institute of Training and Development

MATASWAREE DEVI BEEPUN
Mauritius Institute of Training and Development, Phoenix, Mauritius
GOONESH KUMAR BAHADUR[1],
University of Mauritius, Reduit, Mauritius

Apprenticeship programs are increasingly recognized as effective mechanisms for addressing skills shortages and enhancing employability, yet the role of leadership in shaping apprenticeship outcomes remains underexamined, particularly in small-state and developing contexts. This study explores leadership strategies within the National Apprenticeship Programme (NAP) implemented by the Mauritius Institute of Training and Development (MITD). Using a qualitative, inductive approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 key stakeholders, including training center managers, training officers, and enterprise-based mentors. Thematic analysis revealed that supportive leadership, open communication, individualized coaching, empowerment through gradual responsibility, structured goal setting, and strong industry collaboration are central to effective program delivery. These strategies were perceived to enhance apprentices' confidence, skill development, and workplace readiness. The study contributes empirical insights into apprenticeship leadership in a small island developing state and offers policy-relevant implications for strengthening the governance and sustainability of work-based learning systems.

Keywords**:** Apprenticeship program, leadership, thematic analysis, work-based learning

The National Apprenticeship Programme in Mauritius

Apprenticeship programs combine structured off-the-job education with on-the-job training, enabling learners to acquire occupation-specific skills while earning a recognized qualification and income (Brandl et al., 2024). Internationally, apprenticeship systems, particularly those inspired by the German dual model, have gained renewed attention as policy instruments to address skills shortages, youth unemployment, and graduate employability. However, beyond program design, growing evidence suggests that leadership and governance arrangements play a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of work-based learning initiatives.

In Mauritius, a small island developing state with limited natural resources, human capital development is central to economic sustainability. Persistent concerns have been raised by employers regarding graduates' work readiness, soft skills, and alignment with labor market needs. Apprenticeship has, therefore, emerged as a strategic response to skills mismatch and employability challenges. The National Apprenticeship Programme (NAP), implemented by the Mauritius Institute of Training and Development (MITD), represents a flagship work-based learning initiative grounded in a dual-mode training model. The program adopts an "earn-while-you-learn" approach, combining structured center-based instruction with industry placement and mentorship, with the aim of producing skilled and adaptable workers for the Mauritian labor market. Apprenticeship systems are widely recognized as effective mechanisms for developing occupation-specific skills through the integration of workplace learning and formal instruction. In the Mauritian context, the NAP adopts a

[1] Corresponding author: Goonesh Kumar Bahadur, g.bahadur@uom.ac.mu
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dual-mode structure in which approximately 80% of training takes place within enterprises and 20% through theoretical instruction at the MITD training centers. This combination is intended to ensure that apprentices acquire both practical competencies and theoretical knowledge necessary for specialized professions. Financial incentives, including monthly stipends provided through the Human Resource Development Council, further support apprentice participation and retention, particularly among individuals from lower-income backgrounds, and contribute to the broader objective of promoting lifelong learning in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, n.d.).

While the effectiveness of apprenticeship programs is often evaluated in terms of curriculum design, employer participation, and learner outcomes, leadership strategies within training institutions and partner organizations remain underexamined, particularly in developing and small-state contexts. Leadership in apprenticeship systems extends beyond administrative coordination; it encompasses strategic alignment between training centers, industry partners, and policymakers, as well as the day-to-day support provided by managers, trainers, and workplace mentors. Prior studies highlight that effective leadership enhances communication, stakeholder engagement, curriculum relevance, and learner motivation, all of which are essential to successful apprenticeship outcomes (Westrick & Williams, 2020; Leow et al., 2023). Meta-analytic evidence further demonstrates that leadership has stronger effects on organizational and staff outcomes than on learners directly, suggesting its influence operates through institutional and structural mechanisms (Tan et al., 2022).

Despite the growing importance of the NAP in Mauritius, empirical research examining the influence of leadership strategies on stakeholder engagement, workplace learning experiences, skills development, and program effectiveness from a work-integrated learning (WIL) perspective remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on employability, skills development, or industry-based training in general, with little attention paid to how leadership practices influence stakeholder engagement, skill acquisition, and overall program effectiveness within apprenticeship systems (McCoshan et al., 2023). This gap is particularly salient given concerns that an apprenticeship program may struggle to keep pace with evolving industry expectations without adaptive and responsive leadership.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing the leadership strategies employed within the NAP at MITD and examining their influence on stakeholder engagement, skills development, and program effectiveness. By focusing on leadership in a dual-mode apprenticeship system in a small island developing state, the study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, it extends empirical evidence on apprenticeship leadership beyond well-studied European contexts. Second, it offers insights into how leadership practices mediate the alignment between training provision and labor market needs. Third, it generates policy-relevant findings to inform the design, governance, and sustainability of apprenticeship systems in comparable developing and small-state economies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-Integrated Learning and Workplace Affordances

WIL refers to pedagogical approaches that intentionally integrate academic learning with structured workplace experience (Patrick et al., 2008). WIL provides the theoretical framework for this study, which integrates academic learning with authentic workplace experiences, enabling learners to develop professional knowledge, practical skills, and workplace identity through participation in real work settings (Patrick et al., 2008). Central to WIL is the concept of workplace affordances, which refers to

the opportunities, guidance, and support those workplaces provide to facilitate meaningful learning (Billett, 2011).

WIL also emphasizes strong partnerships between educational institutions and employers to ensure alignment between training and labor market needs (Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). Within this framework, leadership plays a critical role in fostering supportive learning environments, mentoring apprentices, coordinating industry collaboration, and ensuring quality workplace learning experiences. Accordingly, this study adopts an established WIL perspective, drawing primarily on workplace affordances (Billett, 2011) and institutional-industry partnership principles (Patrick et al., 2008; Zegwaard & Coll, 2011) to interpret leadership practices within the NAP.

Within WIL, leadership can be understood as operating at two complementary levels. At the relational level, leadership focuses on creating supportive learning environments through mentoring, communication, coaching, and trust-building between learners and supervisors (Billett, 2011; Patrick et al., 2008). At the systemic level, leadership involves coordinating institutional processes, industry partnerships, curriculum alignment, governance, and quality assurance to ensure effective workplace learning (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2019; Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). Together, these dimensions provide a useful lens for understanding how leadership influences both the immediate learning experiences of apprentices and the broader functioning of apprenticeship systems.

Empirical studies consistently highlight the benefits of apprenticeship and work-based learning for skill acquisition and employability. Apprenticeship facilitates the application of theory to real-world contexts, enhances learners' understanding of evolving workplace practices, and improves motivation and engagement (Ilyas et al., 2023; Mackay et al., 2024). Evidence also suggests that apprenticeship can mitigate the long-standing stigma attached to vocational education by improving employment prospects and strengthening employer confidence in graduates' competencies (Dvorakova, 2021; Madhow, 2018). In higher education settings, work placement components have been shown to improve graduate employability and work readiness, including in the Mauritian context, where such placements are often embedded as capstone experiences (Aumjaud et al., 2023 Monteiro et al., 2022).

Despite these documented benefits, the effectiveness of apprenticeship systems is shaped not only by curriculum design and employer participation, but also by leadership strategies within training institutions and partner organizations. Leadership in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) settings encompasses strategic vision, stakeholder coordination, quality assurance, and responsiveness to labor market change. The UNESCO TVET leadership framework identifies a broad set of leadership dimensions, including strategic thinking, ethical leadership, partnership building, communication, innovation, and change leadership, all of which are relevant to the governance and delivery of the apprenticeship program (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2019). These leadership capabilities are particularly critical in dynamic labor markets characterized by technological change and evolving skill requirements.

Recent international policy frameworks emphasize the role of TVET leadership in advancing sustainability, inclusion, and innovation. Aligning TVET systems with the Sustainable Development Goals requires leaders to possess strategic knowledge of policy priorities, thematic expertise in areas such as digitalization and greening, and the managerial capacity to implement organizational change (UNESCO, 2022). Effective leadership is therefore central to ensuring that apprenticeship programs remain relevant, inclusive, and aligned with national development objectives.

Comparative evidence from different national contexts further illustrates the importance of effective stakeholder coordination, workplace support, employer engagement, and management in sustaining apprenticeship and work-based learning systems. In Finland, Pylväs et al. (2017) found that apprenticeship training provided opportunities for authentic work tasks and workplace learning, while effective guidance and support were important to the development of vocational expertise. In South Africa, Davies and Farquharson (2004) highlighted the importance of stakeholder involvement, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, effective management, and systematic monitoring in the implementation of learnerships. Similarly, in India, Sharma (2020) identified challenges related to employer engagement, accountability, and coordination among government, employers, and apprentices, emphasizing the need for stronger stakeholder collaboration in apprenticeship delivery. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the effectiveness of apprenticeship and work-based learning systems depends not only on program structures, but also on the quality of relationships, coordination, management, and support among the stakeholders involved.

Across these contexts, leadership strategies that prioritize collaboration with industry, capacity building, and responsiveness to labor market demand are associated with improved training quality and employability outcomes. These cases underscore that apprenticeship effectiveness is not solely a function of program structure, but also of leadership practices that coordinate stakeholders and manage system-level change.

Research Gap

While existing literature establishes the value of apprenticeship and highlights the importance of leadership in TVET systems, empirical research examining how leadership strategies influence apprenticeship outcomes remains limited, particularly in small island developing states such as Mauritius. Current studies tend to focus on employability, skills development, or system design, with insufficient attention to how leadership practices within training institutions shape stakeholder engagement, skills acquisition, and program effectiveness. Moreover, limited research explores how leadership strategies are experienced by key stakeholders, including employers and apprentices, or how leadership contributes to sustaining alignment between training provision and labor market needs. Addressing this gap is essential for informing evidence-based leadership practices and policy interventions aimed at strengthening apprenticeship systems in comparable contexts.

Research Questions

RQ1: What leadership strategies are employed within the National Apprenticeship Programme at MITD?

RQ2: How do stakeholders perceive the influence of these leadership strategies on apprentice development and programme effectiveness?

RQ3: What challenges do leaders face in implementing the National Apprenticeship Programme?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative design to explore participants' experiences of leadership within the NAP (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An inductive approach was used to generate

themes from participants' perspectives rather than test predetermined hypotheses (Thomas, 2006). This was particularly suitable given the limited prior research examining leadership within apprenticeship systems in small island developing states.

The research strategy incorporated both primary and secondary data sources. Secondary data were drawn from scholarly literature on leadership, TVET, and WIL, providing theoretical and contextual grounding. Primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders directly involved in NAP implementation.

Sampling Technique and Participants

A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed to access participants with direct experience of apprenticeship leadership and delivery. This approach facilitated timely access to relevant stakeholders within the MITD and its partner enterprises. While convenience sampling limits transferability of the findings, it is appropriate in qualitative research where the aim is depth of insight rather than representativeness.

The sample comprised 30 participants drawn from five MITD training centers:

- 5 Training Center Managers,
- 10 Training Officers, and
- 15 Enterprise-Based Mentors.

Training center managers oversee operational management, quality assurance, and coordination with industry partners. Training officers are responsible for curriculum delivery, assessment, and learner support. Enterprise-based mentors supervise apprentices during on-the-job training, facilitating the application of theoretical knowledge to workplace practice.

Administrative staff were excluded as the study focused specifically on leadership roles directly involved in apprenticeship delivery.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted over a 16-day period from 26 September to 10 October 2024. Participants were initially approached in person and via email. All invited participants agreed to participate, resulting in a 100% response rate.

The interview protocol was developed in alignment with the study's three research questions, focusing on:

- Leadership strategies employed in the NAP,
- Perceived impacts of these strategies, and
- Challenges faced in program implementation.

The instrument consisted of two sections: Section A: Demographic information, and Section B: Open-ended questions exploring leadership practices, stakeholder engagement, skill development, and systemic challenges

The semi-structured format enabled flexibility, allowing the researcher to probe responses and explore emerging issues in depth. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted between approximately 45 and 70 minutes.

The interview protocol was piloted with former training center managers and reviewed by the research supervisor. Minor revisions were made to improve clarity and sequencing.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process, and ethical clearance (MTE/37REC/UOM/338) was obtained on 26 June 2024 from the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Research, Mauritius. Participants received an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended academic use of the data. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and all data were anonymized prior to analysis and reporting.

Methodological Considerations

The use of convenience sampling facilitated access to knowledgeable participants but limits generalizability beyond the MITD context. However, the study prioritized depth and contextual richness over statistical representation. The findings therefore offer analytical insights relevant to comparable apprenticeship and WIL systems rather than universal claims.

Data Analysis Phases

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis followed six stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Coding was conducted inductively to identify recurring patterns across participants' experiences of leadership within the apprenticeship program.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with training center managers (n=5), training officers (n=10), and enterprise-based mentors (n=15) involved in the NAP at MITD. Findings are organized around three overarching areas:

Theme 1: Leadership strategies employed in the NAP,
Theme 2: Perceived impacts of these strategies, and
Theme 3: Challenges faced by NAP leaders.

Representative quotations were selected to illustrate the dominant themes identified across the dataset rather than to reflect the frequency of individual responses (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Theme 1: Leadership Strategies Employed in the National Apprenticeship Programme

Across all participant groups, supportive leadership emerged as a dominant theme, with participants emphasizing the importance of creating a safe and approachable learning environment. Training officers consistently highlighted those apprentices were more likely to engage when they felt comfortable asking questions and expressing concerns without fear of judgement.

A recurring pattern in the data suggests that open communication was not treated as a formal strategy, but as an embedded day-to-day leadership practice. Mentors and training officers described the need to build trust before expecting apprentices to take initiative, indicating that relational dynamics were central to effective learning. As one training officer explained, "I make it a priority to foster open communication, where apprentices feel comfortable asking questions and discussing any obstacles they encounter."

Similar views were expressed by several mentors, who emphasized that apprentices became more willing to seek guidance and participate actively once trust had been established between mentors and apprentices. Managers also reinforced this perspective, noting that early communication enabled timely intervention and prevented minor issues from escalating. Overall, these findings indicate that supportive leadership operates as a relational mechanism that shapes apprentices' willingness to participate, seek guidance, and remain engaged in both training center and workplace learning environments.

The themes identified through the analysis reflect leadership practices operating at both relational (e.g., communication, mentoring, empowerment) and systemic (e.g., goal setting, industry collaboration) levels within the apprenticeship program.

Individualized coaching and mentorship

Participants emphasized the importance of adapting mentoring approaches to the individual needs, abilities, and career aspirations of apprentices. Across stakeholder groups, personalized guidance was described as a key strategy for sustaining motivation and enhancing engagement in the apprenticeship process. A recurring pattern in the data indicates that leaders did not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead adjusted their support based on apprentices' learning styles, confidence levels, and developmental needs. Training officers and mentors highlighted the importance of understanding each apprentice as an individual before assigning tasks or providing guidance.

As one training officer explained, "I take the time to understand their individual goals and tailor my guidance accordingly. By aligning our training objectives with their career aspirations, I help apprentices stay motivated." Mentors similarly described adapting the complexity of assigned tasks according to each apprentice's confidence, prior experience, and readiness to assume greater responsibility.

Mentors further described closely observing apprentices' capabilities and gradually adapting tasks to match their readiness. This suggests that individualized coaching functions as a responsive and learner-centered practice, enabling alignment between training experiences and future employment pathways while supporting sustained engagement.

Gradual empowerment and development of independence

A consistent pattern across participants was the emphasis on gradual empowerment as a key leadership strategy. Most mentors and training officers described a structured progression in which apprentices were initially introduced to simple tasks before being entrusted with more complex responsibilities. This step-by-step approach was seen as essential for building both competence and confidence.

Participants indicated that assigning tasks incrementally allowed apprentices to develop familiarity with workplace expectations while reducing anxiety associated with unfamiliar or demanding

activities. Over time, this progression enabled apprentices to transition from observation to active participation and eventually to independent task performance. As one mentor explained, "We don't throw them into complex work immediately. First, they observe, then assist, then perform independently." Several training officers described this gradual progression as an important way of reducing anxiety while enabling apprentices to build confidence through increasingly challenging workplace tasks.

These findings suggest that empowerment within the NAP is not immediate but carefully scaffolded. Leadership practices therefore play a central role in structuring learning pathways that support the development of autonomy, responsibility, and workplace readiness.

Structured goal setting and accountability mechanisms

Across all participant groups, structured goal setting emerged as a formal leadership mechanism used to guide and monitor apprentice development. Training center managers and training officers consistently emphasized the importance of clear competency targets, regular assessments, and systematic tracking of progress. Participants described the use of logbooks and periodic reviews as tools for ensuring that apprentices met required learning outcomes. These mechanisms were seen as providing both direction and accountability, allowing leaders to identify skill gaps and intervene where necessary. As one manager noted, "We focus on clear, structured goals and these are carefully tracked using a logbook."

A recurring insight was that such structures helped apprentices better understand their progression and take ownership of their learning. Overall, structured goal setting functioned as both a monitoring tool and a motivational mechanism, reinforcing consistency and quality across training and workplace environments.

Collaboration with industry partners

Collaboration with industry partners was widely identified as a critical component of leadership within the NAP. Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining close relationships with employers to ensure that training remained aligned with current labor market demands.

Training center managers and training officers described ongoing engagement with industry stakeholders through feedback sessions, advisory meetings, and regular communication. These interactions were viewed as essential for updating curriculum content and ensuring that apprentices acquired relevant and up-to-date skills. As one manager explained, "We work closely with employers to ensure that the skills we teach are aligned with what the industry currently requires."

However, participants also indicated that the effectiveness of this collaboration depended on the level of commitment from industry partners. Despite this variability, the findings suggest that leadership plays a key role in facilitating coordination between training institutions and workplaces, thereby shaping the relevance and quality of apprenticeship experiences.

Theme 2: Perceived Impact of Leadership Strategies

Enhanced confidence and engagement

Across participant groups, supportive leadership was consistently associated with increased apprentice confidence and engagement. Most training officers and mentors observed that apprentices were more willing to participate actively in learning when they felt supported and encouraged.

Participants described noticeable changes in behaviors over time, particularly among apprentices who initially lacked confidence. As they received consistent guidance and reassurance, apprentices became more proactive in asking questions, contributing to tasks, and seeking feedback. As one training officer noted, "Providing consistent encouragement and recognizing their efforts boosted their confidence and motivated them to continue improving."

These findings suggest that supportive leadership not only fosters a positive learning environment but also plays a critical role in shaping apprentices' engagement and willingness to take initiative within both training and workplace settings.

Personalized growth and career alignment

Participants emphasized that individualized coaching contributed significantly to apprentices' motivation and long-term commitment to the program. Training officers and mentors indicated that aligning training activities with apprentices' personal goals helped create a stronger sense of purpose and direction. A recurring insight was that apprentices became more engaged when they could see a clear connection between their training and future career aspirations. This alignment was described as enhancing both persistence and effort in learning activities. As one training officer explained, "When apprentices see how the training connects to their future careers, they become more serious and focused."

Overall, these findings indicate that personalized mentoring supports not only skill development but also the development of career identity, reinforcing apprentices' commitment to their learning pathways.

Development of independence and responsibility

Participants widely reported that gradual empowerment strategies contributed to the development of independence and responsibility among apprentices. Mentors, in particular, described how apprentices evolved from passive learners to more confident and autonomous individuals over time.

A common pattern in the data was that apprentices who were given progressively challenging tasks developed greater confidence in handling responsibilities and making decisions. This transition was viewed as a key indicator of successful apprenticeship training. As one mentor stated, "By gradually increasing his responsibilities, he became more confident in handling clients and tasks independently."

These findings suggest that structured empowerment enables apprentices to develop essential workplace competencies, including initiative, accountability, and adaptability.

Improved alignment with industry needs

Participants consistently highlighted that collaboration with industry partners contributed to improved alignment between training and labor market requirements. Training center managers and officers indicated that regular engagement with employers helped ensure that apprentices were equipped with relevant and up-to-date skills. A recurring theme was that apprentices who were exposed to real workplace practices were better prepared for employment and more responsive to industry expectations. As one manager noted, "Because we constantly engage with industry, our apprentices are trained according to current demands."

These findings suggest that leadership plays a key role in maintaining the relevance of the apprenticeship program by facilitating continuous interaction between training institutions and industry stakeholders.

Accountability and measurable progress

Structured goal setting and assessment mechanisms were widely perceived as enhancing accountability and enabling measurable progress. Participants indicated that tools such as logbooks and periodic evaluations provided clear benchmarks for tracking apprentice development.

Participants explained that these mechanisms helped apprentices understand their progress and identify areas requiring improvement. At the same time, they enabled leaders to maintain consistent training standards across different settings. As one manager explained, "The regular assessments ensure that no apprentice falls behind without us noticing."

Overall, these findings suggest that structured monitoring systems function as both evaluative and motivational tools, supporting transparency, consistency, and continuous improvement within the apprenticeship program.

Theme 3: Challenges Faced by the National Apprenticeship Programme Leaders

Balancing training and administrative responsibilities

Across participant groups, administrative workload emerged as a significant constraint on effective leadership. Most training officers reported that managing documentation, attendance tracking, and assessment requirements reduced the time available for hands-on training and personalized mentoring.

Participants consistently described a tension between administrative responsibilities and their pedagogical role, noting that excessive paperwork often limited opportunities for direct engagement with apprentices. As one training officer explained, "Keeping track of each apprentice's progress, attendance, and assessments requires significant attention. Balancing these duties with active training is a continuous challenge."

These findings suggest that administrative demands may undermine the quality of apprenticeship delivery by constraining the time and attention leaders can devote to supporting apprentice learning.

Engagement and attendance issues

Maintaining consistent apprentice engagement and attendance was identified as a recurring challenge. Managers and mentors reported that apprentices often struggled to balance the competing demands of

work, training, and personal responsibilities. A common pattern in the data was variability in motivation levels, with some apprentices demonstrating strong commitment while others required continuous encouragement and supervision. As one manager noted, "Some apprentices struggle with balancing work and training, leading to inconsistent attendance."

Participants indicated that irregular engagement disrupted learning continuity and slowed skill development, highlighting the need for additional support mechanisms to sustain participation throughout the program.

Limited communication between stakeholders

Communication gaps between training centers and workplace mentors were frequently highlighted as a barrier to effective program delivery. Most mentors reported limited interaction with training officers, which constrained their ability to monitor apprentice progress and address emerging issues. Participants described the absence of structured communication channels as contributing to inconsistencies in supervision and support across training sites. As one mentor explained, "Communication with MITD has been quite limited, there should be more consistent communication would greatly improve our ability to support apprentices."

These findings suggest that weak coordination between institutional and workplace actors may reduce the effectiveness of apprenticeship systems, particularly in ensuring consistent learning experiences.

Curriculum adaptation and resource constraints

Participants consistently identified challenges in keeping training content aligned with rapidly evolving industry requirements. Training officers noted that delays in updating curriculum materials and limited access to modern equipment affected the relevance of training.

A recurring concern was that apprentices might not be exposed to the most current practices, particularly in industries undergoing rapid technological change. As one training officer stated, "Ensuring apprentices acquire the latest skills is challenging when industry changes are fast-paced and training materials take time to update."

These findings indicate that resource limitations and slow curriculum adaptation may contribute to gaps between training provision and labor market expectations.

Uneven workplace learning and exploitation risks

A critical issue raised by participants was the variability in the quality of workplace learning experiences. Several training officers and mentors reported that some apprentices were assigned tasks unrelated to their training, raising concerns about the misuse of apprentices as low-cost labor. Participants described instances where apprentices were required to perform menial or unrelated duties, limiting opportunities for meaningful skill development. As one training officer reported, "Apprentices have told me they are doing tasks not related to their curriculum such as cleaning vehicles, mopping offices, helping in unrelated activities."

These accounts highlight inconsistencies in employer engagement and suggest that, in some cases, workplace learning environments may not fully support the intended educational objectives of the program. This raises important concerns regarding quality assurance and governance within apprenticeship systems.

Motivating apprentices with varied commitment levels

Participants also identified challenges in motivating apprentices with differing levels of commitment and workplace readiness. Mentors and managers reported that some apprentices lacked maturity or understanding of professional expectations, which affected their engagement and performance. A recurring observation was that less motivated apprentices were more likely to display behaviors such as absenteeism, disengagement, and reduced effort. As one mentor noted, "Some apprentices are not fully prepared for professional expectations. They need continuous guidance."

These findings suggest that leadership within apprenticeship programs must extend beyond skill development to include ongoing motivational support and the cultivation of professional attitudes.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on an established WIL perspective, this study explored leadership strategies within the NAP at Mauritius Institute of Training and Development and examined how these practices shape apprentice development, program effectiveness, and stakeholder engagement. The findings position leadership as a mediating mechanism between program design and apprenticeship outcomes, influencing how learning opportunities are structured, accessed, and sustained across institutional and workplace contexts. The findings demonstrate that leadership operates simultaneously at relational and systemic levels. Relational leadership was reflected in practices such as supportive communication, mentoring, and gradual empowerment, whereas systemic leadership was evident through curriculum coordination, structured assessment, industry collaboration, and quality assurance mechanisms.

From a WIL perspective, these findings extend existing understandings of workplace learning by highlighting the role of leadership in shaping workplace affordances. While WIL theory emphasizes the importance of participation in authentic work practices, it also recognizes that access to learning is mediated by the support and opportunities available within the workplace (Billett, 2011). In this study, leadership practices such as supportive communication, mentoring, and structured task allocation were found to directly influence the quality and accessibility of these affordances. Consistent with WIL theory, leadership can therefore be understood as a key mechanism through which learning opportunities are enabled or constrained within apprenticeship systems.

Supportive leadership and open communication emerged as foundational relational practices. Leaders who cultivated accessible and trusting environments enabled apprentices to seek guidance, disclose challenges, and engage more confidently in workplace learning. These findings reinforce the importance of psychological safety in facilitating participation, suggesting that relational leadership creates the social conditions necessary for apprentices to engage productively with workplace affordances (Billett, 2011). In this sense, leadership is not merely supportive but actively shapes workplace learning environments within WIL contexts.

Individualized coaching and mentorship further contributed to apprentice motivation and alignment between training activities and career aspirations. Consistent with WIL scholarship, mentoring can be understood as a form of guided participation that supports learners in navigating workplace expectations and developing professional identity. However, the findings also reveal a structural tension: personalized mentoring requires sustained time and effort, which is often constrained by administrative demands. This highlights a broader challenge within apprenticeship systems, where

the quality of learning is dependent on the availability of human and institutional resources to support meaningful engagement.

Empowerment through gradual allocation of responsibility was identified as a key developmental strategy, enabling apprentices to transition from peripheral participation to more autonomous performance. This progression reflects core WIL principles in which learning is achieved through increasing engagement in authentic work tasks. At the same time, the findings suggest that leadership must balance guidance with independence. Excessive structuring may limit learner agency, while insufficient support may hinder confidence and skill development. Effective leadership in WIL contexts therefore requires a calibrated approach that enables both scaffolded learning and independent practice.

Collaboration with industry partners emerged as both a strength and a critical area of vulnerability. Participants highlighted the importance of ongoing engagement with employers in ensuring curriculum relevance and employability outcomes. This aligns with WIL literature emphasizing the need for structured partnerships between educational institutions and host organizations (Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). However, the variability in employer commitment and mentoring quality revealed inconsistencies in workplace learning experiences. Instances of apprentices being assigned non-relevant tasks point to governance gaps and raise concerns about the integrity of apprenticeship as a WIL model. These findings suggest that leadership within apprenticeship systems must extend beyond coordination to include active quality assurance and oversight of workplace learning environments.

Structural constraints, including administrative workload, limited professional development opportunities, and slow curriculum adaptation, further shape the effectiveness of leadership practices. These challenges reflect systemic pressures within apprenticeship systems operating in rapidly evolving labor markets (Fuller & Unwin, 2013). From a WIL perspective, such constraints may limit the capacity of institutions to design and sustain high-quality learning experiences that align with both educational and industry expectations (Patrick et al., 2008). Leadership effectiveness is therefore not only a function of individual capability but also of institutional support and system-level resources.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

The findings highlight several implications for strengthening apprenticeship systems as forms of WIL. First, structured communication mechanisms between training institutions and workplace mentors should be strengthened to ensure consistent coordination and timely intervention when apprentices encounter difficulties. Participants consistently identified open communication as a key leadership practice that fostered trust, encouraged apprentices to seek guidance, and enhanced engagement in workplace learning.

Second, capacity building for mentors and training officers should be prioritized. The findings demonstrate that personalized coaching and mentoring played a central role in supporting apprentice motivation, confidence, and career development. Providing professional development opportunities for mentors would strengthen their ability to deliver effective guidance while responding to evolving industry practices.

Third, stronger quality assurance frameworks are needed to ensure workplace learning experiences remain aligned with program objectives. Participants reported inconsistencies in employer engagement and instances where apprentices were assigned tasks unrelated to their training. Regular

monitoring, employer feedback mechanisms, and clearer expectations for workplace mentors could help safeguard the educational value of apprenticeship placements.

Fourth, reducing administrative workload would enable leaders to devote more time to mentoring and learner support. Participants highlighted that competing administrative responsibilities often constrained opportunities for meaningful interaction with apprentices, potentially limiting the effectiveness of leadership practices.

Finally, apprenticeship systems should incorporate structured career guidance and motivational support to sustain apprentice engagement throughout the program. Participants observed that apprentices who understood the relevance of their training to future employment and who experienced gradual empowerment demonstrated greater confidence, commitment, and workplace readiness.

At the policy level, these findings underscore the need for governance structures that strengthen collaboration, accountability, and shared responsibility between education providers and industry partners. Such measures would enhance the quality, consistency, and sustainability of apprenticeship programs as WIL initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This study examined leadership strategies within the National Apprenticeship Programme at MITD and explored how these practices influence apprentice development and program effectiveness. The findings demonstrate that supportive leadership, individualized mentoring, gradual empowerment, structured goal setting, and industry collaboration collectively shape the quality of apprenticeship experiences.

Leadership within the NAP operates at both relational and systemic levels. Relational leadership shapes apprentices' confidence, motivation, engagement, and workplace learning through supportive communication, mentoring, and gradual empowerment. Systemic leadership strengthens apprenticeship quality by coordinating curriculum alignment, employer partnerships, assessment processes, and governance structures. Together, these complementary dimensions reinforce the effectiveness of apprenticeship programs as WIL initiatives by supporting both meaningful learner experiences and sustainable institutional practices.

The study highlights the importance of strengthening governance structures, professional development opportunities, and communication channels to enhance the effectiveness of apprenticeship leadership. Ensuring meaningful workplace learning experiences requires not only committed leaders, but also coordinated institutional frameworks that safeguard quality across training sites.

As an exploratory qualitative study based on a single national program, the findings are context-specific and not statistically generalizable. Future research could incorporate apprentices' perspectives more explicitly, adopt mixed-method designs, and examine longitudinal career outcomes to deepen understanding of how leadership practices shape long-term workforce development.

By situating leadership within an established WIL perspective in a small island developing state context, this study demonstrates how relational and systemic leadership interact to strengthen apprenticeship systems. In doing so, it extends understanding of leadership in apprenticeship systems operating in comparable developing contexts.

DISCLOSURE OF THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI tools (ChatGPT) were used solely to assist with language editing, proofreading, and the structuring and refinement of the manuscript. Generative AI was not used to generate the study's intellectual content, research findings, data analysis, interpretations, conclusions, or original arguments. The research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, and conclusions were undertaken by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of the manuscript.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

> *An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development* (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38*).

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurships, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the WILNZ, WACE, WIL Australia, and the University of Waikato.

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion including recommendations.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights into how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, IJWIL seeks manuscripts describing an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or it was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

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