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## Re-thinking the role of the Advanced Practitioner: AP Connect Year 3 Evaluation Strand Final Report



The findings of this report were co-produced with:

Christina Donovan, Colin Forrest, Dorothy Braidwood, Sarah-Jane Crowson, Lou Mycroft, Sammy White Lambert, Salman Latif, Stacey Salt, Lynne Taylerson and Maria Zahariea

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# Executive Summary

**Overview:** The purpose of the evaluation element of the #APConnect programme this year was to explore the impact the programme had for those in Advanced Practitioner (AP) type roles in Further Education organisations. The evaluation engaged with APs from the programme's virtual Communities of Practice (CoP) to share and develop quality improvement strategies, as well to evaluate as the role that the Advanced Practice modules played in this process.

**Methods:** The methodology was grounded in a research circle approach (Persson, 2009) and the principles of co-production. The methodology drew upon the work of Pahl and Facer (2017:13) who argue that "evaluation is more likely to succeed and produce useful knowledge when it is driven by and deeply connected to the core values and aims of the project participants". From these and related theoretical positions, including the conditions to foster trust (Donovan, 2019), a 'co-evaluation' approach emerged. A small group of volunteer 'co-evaluators' was established, and a values-based approach to the evaluation adopted. The aspiration emerged for the CoP *to support APs in becoming affirmative change agents in their own contexts*. It was this aspiration that underpinned the methodology developed with the co-evaluation team towards evidencing the impact that the #APConnect programme had in supporting participants towards this vision.

Data were collected over the course of four virtual milestone 'Evaluation Circles', and five smaller 'sub-circle' events, including a range of artefact creation, which was captured on shared a Wakelet collection. The circles allowed for reflection upon how the artefacts were informing participants' understanding of the research problem and supported the team to identify 'actionable knowledge' (Holmstrand et al., 2017).

The methodology for Strand 2 was informed by the findings of Strand 1 and included a semi-structured questionnaire that was sent to the participants on the CPD strand of the programme, followed by three semi-structured interviews with a participant from each module.

**Findings:** The findings suggested that the way APs were positioned within institutions influenced their perceived self-efficacy in their role. Their positioning as 'experts' often conflicted with their view of themselves as collaborative and cooperative: a foundational element of #APConnect programme design. While the #APConnect project supported APs effectively supported the confidence of participants to nurture the collaborative aspects of their role, they often felt constrained by their position in the management structure of their

organisations, where structures could be rigid and inflexible. Some felt that their influence was limited within these institutional architectures. Some occupied leadership positions, and others operated as coaches/mentors alongside full-time teaching roles. APs therefore experienced varying levels of agency and influence, but at all levels experienced challenge.

Significant implications for middle and senior leaders emerged from this co-evaluation. Boundaries that define the middle spaces of organisations need to be porous and flexible to provide expansive places for APs to effect change and move beyond the functionality of the role to consider their **positionality** in facilitating wider quality improvement processes. Instead, we suggest that it might be more beneficial to understand the role of the AP as embedded in values-based practice, effecting change at all levels as a result of engagement in a wider community of critical theorists. We posit that it is the out-ward facing nature of their engagement with #APConnect that is of central importance for APs to become as change agents in their organisations.

As such, our key **recommendations** for future iterations of the #APConnect programme are as follows:

- ▶ Revisit how the AP-type role is framed in organisations, working towards a shared understanding of this role across contexts.
- ▶ Revisit the role that those who lead advanced practice (middle managers and senior leaders) might play in supporting APs who are part of the programme to innovate and implement their vision within organisational contexts, and navigate institutional hierarchies to support this.
- ▶ Ensure the findings of the co-evaluation influence the professional development of middle and senior leaders, particularly the importance of knowledge-exchange as foundational to the AP effectiveness.
- ▶ Examine the potential for co-evaluation methodologies to be developed for 'in-house' quality improvement initiatives.
- ▶ Ensure that the #APConnect programme articulates closely with other ETF sponsored programmes, considering how #APConnect communicates with the broader suite of the ETF offer.
- ▶ Consider how the CPD principles could be further contextualised to recognise co-evaluation approaches.

# Introduction

The third phase of the Advanced Practitioner programme launched in the summer of 2020 with a specific focus on *creating conditions that foster AP roles*. Significantly, this third phase offered pathways for experienced practitioners operating in Advanced Practitioner type roles as well as opportunities for participants to gain professional formation through the ETF's Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) or Advanced Teacher Skills (ATS) status. New to Phase 3 was the development of an internal formative evaluation strand, which sought to embed evaluative processes across all aspects of the offer by eliciting views from programme participants with the view to provide ongoing formative feedback to inform programme development.

Dr Christina Donovan (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Dr Colin Forrest (Leeds Trinity University) were commissioned by touchconsulting Ltd to develop a new evaluation strand for the third phase of the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) funded Outstanding Teaching Learning and Assessment (OTLA) programme for Advanced Practitioners (APs).

In previous phases of the programme, touchconsulting developed a suite of initiatives intended to create the conditions to 'embed, enhance and extend the AP role'. The programme framed its understanding of advanced practice using the work of Tyler et al. (2017) whose research attempted to ascertain not only the function of the AP role in context, but also establish the conditions in which AP work was at its most effective. Their work revealed a tension between colleges that adopted a 'deficit' model to reinforce performance management, and to target so-called 'failing' teachers, and colleges that adopted a more 'universal' approach – where Advanced Practitioner support was teacher-led and offered peer-to-peer development. They concluded that APs were at their most effective when they are working within cultures that were supportive and inclusive, allowing the AP to develop more collegial working relationships with teachers (ibid). This also led to the development of a set of functions and values pertinent to the AP type role as outlined in Table 1 below, which formed part of an Advanced Practitioner Toolkit (ETF, online). These considerations therefore served as the starting point for the evaluation of the conditions necessary for APs to support quality in teaching and learning across institutions.

**TABLE 1: FUNCTIONS AND VALUES OF AP ROLE**

| THE SIX FUNCTIONS OF THE AP ROLE   | THE SEVEN VALUES OF THE AP ROLE   |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. One-to-one support for the wider teaching workforce</li><li>2. Leading and facilitating professional development and quality improvement</li><li>3. Coaching and mentoring for colleagues experiencing challenges in their practice</li><li>4. Inductions and support of new staff</li><li>5. Supporting internally and externally set strategic objectives</li><li>6. Ensuring currency and effectiveness in the AP role and as a teaching practitioner, making good use of evidence-based approaches and peer to-peer collaboration</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Developing others in non-judgemental ways</li><li>2. The interpersonal skills necessary for effective peer support</li><li>3. Linking individual development and organisational strategy</li><li>4. Evidence-based approaches and what works best 'in practice'</li><li>5. Support for all staff (not just those 'requiring improvement')</li><li>6. Observations that are not graded or linked to performance management</li><li>7. Effective use of mobile and digital technologies to support the AP role</li></ol> |

## Evaluation Strand Aims

In line with the KPIs identified by touchconsulting Ltd, the evaluation strand itself was concerned primarily with reviewing the design and delivery of the #APConnect programme in response to feedback in order to meet participants' needs and to ensure the highest-quality learning experience for all participants.

However, the aim of fostering spaces for the development of Advanced-Practitioner type roles also underpinned the rationale behind the evaluation strand for this year, with the aim to capture 'distanced travelled' towards this aspiration for the programme.

## Project Objectives

1. To evaluate participants' experiences across the #APConnect Programme in order to provide ongoing formative feedback to programme organisers (ie, touchconsulting Ltd)
2. To evaluate the conditions needed to foster spaces for the development of APs both within and outside of organisations

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3. To evaluate the 'distance travelled' by participants towards their own professional development as an Advanced Practitioner or towards QTLS/ATS status across the three strands of the AP Connect Programme
4. To deliver a summative report of evaluation in line with the AP Connect Programme KPIs, as specified by touchconsulting Ltd and ETF

The evaluation of the programme spanned across two different strands of delivery:

**Communities of Practice (Constellations)** and a suite of standalone **'Advanced Practice' CPD modules**.

The Communities of Practice (or 'Constellations') were differentiated with Constellation B, and Constellation C amplifying the findings of the previous rounds of the AP programme and C+ designed to foster APs as agents of change, very visible within the FE workforce, leading on events and other amplification opportunities.

The Advanced Practice modules were developed to support ongoing professional development in the AP Community. These were: **Using Thinking Environments, Using Developmental Observations**, and **Leading Advanced Practitioners**.

Given the distinctiveness of the strands, two separate methodological approaches were identified to suit each of the strands of the AP Connect programme. This also reflected the amount of resource that has been allocated to each of the strands in terms of time commitment and length of intervention. However, the relationship between these two strands remained important for understanding the overall impact of the programme, and so this was incorporated into the evaluation design (see Figure 1 below).

**FIGURE 1: EVALUATION MODEL**





## Methodological Approach

### Strand 1: Communities of Practice

The Communities of Practice (CoP) strand drew upon Etienne Wenger's concept of learning as a social system. This strand of the #APConnect programme aimed to bring together practitioners from across the country to share practices within a community that collectively worked together to drive change within their organisations. Therefore, making connections and collaboration lay at the heart of this strand of the work. Participants were encouraged to develop and build upon projects that drive transformative practice, with support from the community (or constellation) on the understanding that transformational change "requires the participation of people who are fully engaged in the process of creating, refining, communicating, and using knowledge" (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger argues that people congregate around what matters to them and as such practices emerge from what the membership of that community finds important. It is when all members of a community understand the principles that have brought them together around relationships of mutual engagement and shared resources that a Community of Practice is formed (ibid). Therefore, given the ideals that underpinned this particular strand, it made sense to produce an evaluation framework which mirrored these principles. As such, the principles of co-production in research were applied to the evaluation framework for this strand of the project. The CoP Lead was also interested in how the Principal Investigator's own research on trust might support the cultivation of cultures which support thriving, unity, transformation and optimism (Donovan, 2019). Therefore, by working with the stakeholders as equal partners, this approach also sought to provide a set of tools that could be used beyond the life-cycle of the #APConnect Programme itself to support the building of trust cultures within organisations for developing quality in teaching and learning.

### Principles of Co-Production

Co-production in research is a form of Participatory Action Research which aims to imagine a better future, and make it happen (Bell and Pahl, 2018), and so knowledge production happens collectively and 'in the midst of action' (ibid). As such it is committed to dialogic inquiry as a way of understanding other forms of knowledge production outside of the academy. Pahl and Facer (2017:13) argue that "evaluation is more likely to succeed and

produce useful knowledge when it is driven by and deeply connected to the core values and aims of the project participants". By negotiating these values and aims, the knowledge produced is more likely to be of use to the community that is being evaluated, ensuring that this learning can enhance the quality of future projects (ibid). This improves the capacity of non-academic co-producers to influence their worlds in a meaningful way (Bell and Pahl, 2018). This approach speaks back to the Communities of Practice model in the sense that the opportunity to critically reflect upon the process of being part of this strand can invite opportunities for future action; leading to transformation in the project but also the participatory community which is formed by the co-producers who are involved with the evaluation strand. O'Sullivan (2017) argues that externally imposed evaluations can often lead to reduced trust in their outcomes, and so it was decided that an approach to evaluation which was negotiated and involved all stakeholders was more likely to have a meaningful impact.

Pahl and Facer (2017) outline four 'types' of collaborative research, including: 'mutual learning', 'crowd and open', 'design and innovation' and 'correcting the record'. For the purpose of this evaluation, the paradigms of 'mutual learning' and 'design and innovation' seemed to work the most effectively.

- ▶ **Mutual learning:** This approach, underpinned by the CoP model involved designing and conducting research on real world practices, underpinned by values determined by the participatory community that was formed.
- ▶ **Design and Innovation:** This approach sought to review a process or a product, in this case the #APConnect programme itself, and aimed to contribute to the development of future iterations of the programme.

Co-production disrupts the notion of 'evaluation' as a disinterested process, and instead positions it centrally as developmental, ongoing and dynamic (Pahl and Facer, 2017). Rather than producing tools for evaluation which were instrumental or performative, our approach sought to produce knowledge which was authentic, embedded and captured embodied ways of learning. Duckworth and Atkins (2019) assert that this involves 'disrupting the gaze' of the researcher, and reciprocity which involves all participants in the research. In practical terms this involves a negotiation of roles and boundaries and working for the mutual benefit of all participants in the community (Cooke et al., 2017). In accordance with this, the evaluation was underpinned by the following set of commitments:

- ▶ The values underpinning approach were determined by the participatory community
- ▶ The aims and aspirations for the evaluation of the Communities of Practice Strand were collectively produced
- ▶ By working with a community of co-evaluators, we drew upon the expertise of its members, including a negotiation of roles and time scales involved to produce methods and analysis of findings.
- ▶ The dissemination of outputs were of interest and use to those who co-produced them

### Evaluation Circle Approach

Cooke et al. (2017: 345) assert that co-production relies on “authentic collaboration, partnership and engagement as a context for action”. Collaborative research blurs the distinction between ‘research’ and the topic under investigation, which can have a legacy which imprints itself on to the project that lives on beyond its initial impact (Duckworth and Atkins, 2019), and so it was important to consider how to create the conditions which allowed authentic collaboration and mutually shared values to be embedded into the approach.

A case study by Heslop (in Atkins and Duckworth, 2019) highlighted how the use of ‘Research Circles’ (Persson, 2009) can support the development of mutual involvement in which regular opportunities for sharing day-to-day activities, roles for data collection and dissemination are negotiated and agreed. This also helps to address issues of power in the researcher-participant relationship, as the aim is to introduce all stakeholders on an equal footing in the evaluation process. Holmstrand et al (2017) highlight the potential of Research Circles to build the capacity of participants to effect organisational change.

Principles underpinning the approach to research circles are a commitment to knowledge-building as a democratic process (Holmstrand et al., 2017), and the model seeks to challenge structures that hinder development and inhibit capacities for people to drive change. The approach assumes knowledge to be situated in context, and thus it is through the fusion of situated, contextual and tacit knowledges that new, actionable knowledge is created (ibid).

### Methods

We decided to adopt the principles of the Research Circle methodology to allow the evaluation to be deeply contextualised and account for the complex range of organisations from which the participants are drawn. We hoped that this approach to collaborative research would support all participants to identify important areas for action based on the aspirations of those involved, built upon a clarity of purpose underpinned by shared values (O’Sullivan, 2017), leading to visible and tangible impacts in terms of outputs and dissemination (Cooke et al., 2017). In addition to this, by involving programme organisers within the process, they were able to respond to on-going formative feedback to make changes within the programme throughout the process.

We recruited eight Advanced Practitioners from across the programme to form a Co-evaluation Team of twelve (including the Community of Practice Strand Facilitators and the Evaluation Strand Leads). The make-up of the team meant that we could ensure the evaluation comprised the views of all stakeholders in the programme. For the purpose of this evaluation we identified the key stakeholders as the project participants, the programme facilitators and the programme organiser (touchconsulting Ltd). Members were drawn from further education colleges, college based higher education, adult learning and work-based learning settings.

We planned for a total of four milestone ‘Evaluation Circles’ to take place throughout the lifecycle of the CoP Programme covering key aspects of the research process, as outlined in the timeline in Figure 2 below, though members of the team met at regular intervals in-between to review data and discuss progress. Ethical approval was acquired via the Principal Investigator’s institution (Manchester Metropolitan University). The formative nature of the evaluation meant that reflections were contemporary with participants’ experiences of the programme. This gave considerable authenticity to the data collection.

### Co-Evaluation Framework

The evaluation was emergent in nature and framed by the conditions to foster trust (Donovan, 2019). These characteristics enhanced the ownership of the co-evaluators which became particularly significant as the co-evaluation and programme progressed. This values-based approach is therefore distinctly different from the external evaluation of previous rounds of the programme and the ETF’s programme assessment of the current programme.

The values that emerged as being important for the co-evaluators from their engagement in the CoPs included: trust, solidarity, equality and kindness.

These prompts were underpinned by the **aspiration** for the CoP to:

- ▶ *Support APs in becoming affirmative change agents in their own contexts*

Guided by the #APConnect Year 3's aim to create conditions for APs to support all, the Co-evaluation Team identified the following research question to guide the process:

- ▶ *What is the role of the Community of Practice in supporting Advanced Practitioners to navigate the challenges they encounter?*

As the practice of co-production involves the pooling of expertise, the evaluation framework was left deliberately open to be flexible enough to take on the experiences, ideas and skills of the co-producers who came on board. This approach also allowed us to capitalise on the expertise that co-producers brought with them.

### Patchwork 'collage' approach

To allow for flexibility, and dedicated space for personal reflection, the co-evaluation team decided to curate a collection of artefacts (visual, poetic, social media posts, blogs, vlogs, literature) which represent moments towards or challenges to affirmative change. These artefacts were captured on a shared unlisted Wakelet collection, which in effect became a form of digital 'collage'. Collage, as an arts-based research approach, involves using material gathered from a variety of contexts to create new 'assemblages' (Given, 2008). These assemblages allow researchers to construct new meanings and identify emergent themes that arise from a diverse selection of material. These proved to be powerful prompts that allowed the impact of the Community of Practice strand to surface.

### Evaluation Circle Recordings

In addition, the evaluation circles were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, allowing us to collectively reflect upon how the artefacts were informing our understanding of the problem under investigation. This allowed knowledge to build as the circles progressed towards actionable knowledge (Holmstrand et al., 2017).

## Strand 2: Advanced Practice CPD Modules

This strand took up the least evaluation resource. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed to capture the relationship between the two strands of the programme, contextualised within the evaluation framework identified in Strand 1.

Participants in these modules were drawn from across several organisations as the evaluation sought to explore potential impacts, or distance travelled, for participants in their own settings. Responses to the questionnaire were then followed up with 1:1 interviews with a selection of participants to explore the findings in more detail.

**TABLE 2: PROJECT TIMELINE**

#### **STRAND 1: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

This part of the evaluation will span the life-cycle of the project and centred around 4 'Evaluation Circles' (ECs):

##### **EC1 (Nov 2020): Aims & Aspirations**

The first meeting aimed to capture collective aspirations for the programme, and so identify a suitable research question to underpin the evaluation process. Prompts were derived from #APConnect Y3's vision to 'create conditions for APs to support all':

*Q1. What would the conditions for APs to support change look like in your contexts?*

*Q2. What is the role of the CoP in supporting this process?*

##### **EC2 (Nov 2020): Methods**

EC2 aimed to establish methods which would allow co-evaluators to capture moments or 'encounters' which spoke to the identified research question. The team decided to opt for a patchwork approach which allowed a diversity of artefacts to be gathered on a shared Wakelet. These artefacts then served as prompts to support discussion.

##### **Nov (2020 -Jan 2021): Data collection**

Participants uploaded artefacts throughout this period, which was supported by 'Show & Tell' Circles, where co-evaluators would select significant artefacts for discussion. These circles were recorded and transcribed to support pre-analysis of emerging themes.

##### **EC3 (Feb 2021): Co-analysis**

A co-analysis was conducted centred around 3 emerging themes from the evaluation circle process. Details in the Findings section below

##### **EC4 (March 2021): Dissemination Plan**

The Co-evaluation team met a final time to agree a dissemination plan which reflected the wishes of the team, allowing us to discuss a variety of channels for communicating key messages beyond the remit of the Evaluation Strand report.

#### **STRAND 2: CPD MODULES**

**February 2021:** Semi-structured Questionnaire which aligns to Co-evaluation framework disseminated to participants across the three Advanced Practice Modules

**March 2021:** Follow-up 1:1 interviews with 3 participants in the modules

# Findings

## Strand 1: Communities of Practice

The co-evaluation team met a total of nine times over the course of the six months of the #APConnect programme. The process of dialogic engagement with the artefacts curated throughout the course of the data collection period led to the co-creation of rich, embedded and contextualised knowledge about how APs experienced their role in practice, allowing them to identify conditions which supported and inhibited their horizons for action within their organisations. This led to the development of three analytical themes that emerged from analysis of the evaluation circle transcripts, which we unpicked together in a co-analysis circle.

### Theme 1: The lived experience of the Advanced Practitioner vs. the perceived purpose of the Advanced Practitioner role

Initial analysis revealed that there was a conflict in terms of vision for the role from the perspective of the #APConnect programme and organisations in which APs were situated. As part of the Community of Practice, APs came to see their role as essentially collaborative, supported by a programme structure which became increasingly horizontal, and porous as it developed. This was evidenced by a movement from support to solidarity, and came as a product of shared reflections upon the purpose of the constellations. The desire to co-produce content took centre stage as the Communities of Practice Lead noticed opportunities to 'cross-pollinate' between Constellations B, C and C+ in the form of #FestivalFridays. This seemed to jar with organisational structures which often privilege hierarchical relations, where knowledge can become territorialised and the AP is positioned an 'expert' teacher, in some cases as an arm of quality assurance, there to hold other teachers accountable. In this sense, the AP's perception of their role does not necessarily fit with their lived experience of their role in practice. Therefore, the evaluation potentially reveals the need to unpick the AP role so that a common and agreed understanding of what an AP is, and how they work with teaching teams can be established so that a way can be cleared for APs to implement their vision.

One of the co-evaluators reflected her sense of discomfort with her positioning as an 'expert' in her institution, and how her involvement with the Community of Practice had given her a desire to strip herself of her perceived 'mastery' and build a more inclusive, dialogic approach to coaching.



*...just creating an environment that is honest that is open where people aren't scared to kind of say what they think and you know, I know I'm an Advanced Practitioner, but it doesn't mean I know everything and I learned so much from other people as well... I think it's just so important just to be kind and I think you know just being kind especially in a process where you know, you're helping to develop staff and support staff just be kind. It's not about, you know, that there's a wall in between you and you know 'what I say goes' and 'that's what you must do' ... let them have that ownership and they will.*

### **Theme 2: Where the Advanced Practitioner sits within and across organisational boundaries**

The idea of the AP as a 'change agent' necessarily led to the AP challenging perceived wisdom and moved to change, reconceptualise, or influence the structures within which they work. While the #APConnect programme undoubtedly led to an increase in confidence and agency, the extent to which this was felt was limited to particular spaces. APs may feel constrained by their position within relatively rigid hierarchical architectures often characteristic of organisations, where they do not have the 'control' to shape their practice as easily. Early analysis suggested that where APs had been successful in changing cultures within their organisations, it was when they were working with others who respected their expertise as critical theorists (as opposed to 'masters' of teaching and learning) and evidence supporting change was listened to.

Where there was less movement, this seemed to be linked to a suspicion of evidence that was in conflict with the status quo, making this dimension of the Community of Practice inherently political. This suggests that the success of APs is in large part contingent upon an organisational structure which affords them the autonomy to take evidence-based risks, and where those leading APs have a full and clear understanding of the #APConnect programme's purpose with regards to this. One co-evaluator, who had the opportunity to redevelop the observation process in her setting, reflected upon difficulties associated with pace of change which can be reinforced by resistance to move away from the status quo, often reinforced by hierarchical structures.

*'I'll come up with an idea about something. I've seen it used somewhere else or discussed it with other APs, through Twitter or slack wherever I've explored it. I've researched it. And I will go to my manager with the idea. He likes it. And then mysteriously, it disappears in the ether. Nothing happens. Because I don't get to speak to anybody above that manager, who then reports directly to the senior management team. And I begin to think, am I just the lone voice here talking directly with tutors giving them ideas, some of which they will try out, and they'll come back to me and report back that it's worked. And I'll report back on and say, look, this is working. And I just really want to find a big drum. Let me say, there's some really good things going on here. But we need to share them, we need to make it known. But it's how to break through that hierarchy that I find very difficult'*

Another co-evaluator recounted how a twitter exchange with members of the CoP allowed dual identities to develop:

'Within my organisation I'm known for being a maths teacher that does a bit of tech and now, because of the constellation, I am recognised for sharing practice. Because of conversations within the constellations, I realise that I am not valued within my organisation. I would never have even thought that I would be asked to share my practice. Then to be asked to share my practice is inspiring'

These excerpts speak to the levels of agency experienced within the Community of Practice, and the constraints often felt by APs when trying to translate their vision into practice within their institutions. This suggests a need for the #APConnect programme to find ways to engage more meaningfully with leaders of APs to establish a shared commitment to evidence-based organisational change to support developmental approaches to improving teaching and learning.

### **Theme 3: The role of mutually shared values in supporting Advanced Practitioners to be effective in their roles**

Where APs felt autonomous (both in and outside of their organisational settings), they were working with others who share the same professional values (collaboration, trust and solidarity being key). These values underpinned the expression of these relationships in practice, allowing a mutually shared vision to be adopted. For the AP's role to be effective, the AP must be supported by others who have the competence and commitment to work towards these shared goals. It is therefore worth exploring how these shared values may be established and maintained in order to achieve changes in practice.

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A co-evaluator reflected on where tensions emerged between them and a colleague within an 'Ideas Room' linked to the AP Connect programme and the values that were in play.

*'I'd assumed equality in the room. I think then that other people didn't assume that same equality because I was reflecting on building community in the context of AP Connect. Everybody else in the room was also involved in AP connect and their guilt that they're not been involved enough meant that I went from equal contributor to being the leader there.*

*My experience goes some way to help us to, to understand the dynamics of hierarchies, and how to create an authentic collaborative space in which people can feel honest and vulnerable and build trust becomes so much more difficult within these hierarchical structures'.*

## Revisiting the role of the Advanced Practitioner

Discussions emerging from the co-analysis circle identified a need to revisit the role of the AP, and to articulate how APs navigate the boundary between the Community of Practice and their organisation, as well as negotiate the hierarchies within which they are positioned by their institution. It became clear that hierarchical positionings do not sit comfortably with the AP role as their positionality can become constrained by the rigidity of normative hierarchical architectures. Instead, APs expressed the need to move freely to offer their expertise in different spaces at different levels of the organisation. Equally important is the capacity of the AP to engage in knowledge-exchange activities externally, to bring innovation back into their institutions. This process was captured by one co-evaluator, who expressed a need to identify a definition of the AP which people can self-identify with and is open enough to be translated to hierarchical contexts. She used the metaphor of a 'bric-a-brac' goddess (see Figure 2) to express the messiness of the problem space presented by this hybrid role in context.

**FIGURE 2: ARTEFACT FROM SHARED WAKELET COLLECTION – THE 'BRIC-A-BRAC GODDESS'**



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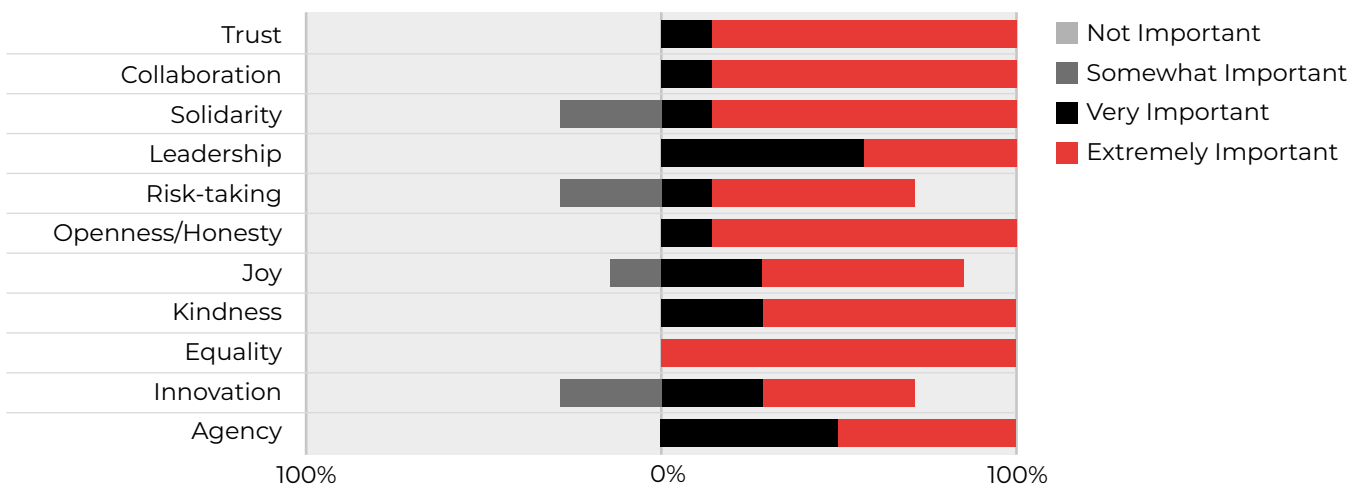
... 'She is made from lots of tiny things. She's made from lots of tiny objects and lots of tiny, mundane things. And the collage is made of lots and lots of mundane things, but together, they have become a hybrid thing. And I think maybe that's what we need to be looking at... there's a need to say, okay, what are we? And how can we find a language for ourselves that translates to multiple dimensions?'

This led the co-evaluation team to develop a model to support APs to communicate the value that they offer institutions through engagement with the #APConnect programme. This model represents the most meaningful output of the evaluation strand in providing insights into the impacts of the Community of Practice element of the programme. The model goes significantly beyond insights gained from the external, Kirkpatrick-based, evaluations undertaken on previous rounds of the programme. Furthermore, the co-created nature of the evidence that underpins the model enhances confidence in the content validity of the model. This model is presented in full in the discussion section of the report.

### Strand 2: CPD Modules

The co-evaluation approach did not extend to the evaluation of the CPD modules, though insights from the co-evaluation framework were used to design the tools used to evaluate the CPD strand of the programme. A questionnaire was issued (soliciting 9 responses), and was followed up with a 1:1 interview with a participant from each CPD module to explore the responses in more detail. All participants who filled out the survey felt that the CPD modules had met their expectations upon engagement, and were aligned with their professional values (see Figure 3 below).

**FIGURE 3: WE HAVE CONSULTED APS ABOUT THE VALUES THAT SUPPORT AND GUIDE THEIR WORK. PLEASE TELL US HOW IMPORTANT THE FOLLOWING VALUES ARE TO YOUR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE.**



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Qualitative responses from the questionnaires suggested that across all three of the CPD modules not only did the content promote and embed these values, but they were also modelled by the course leaders in their facilitation styles.

*'This module perfectly aligns all the necessary values that not only teachers need, but every human needs to interact in a respectful and harmonious way.'*

*'Course leaders and other participants have been open, honest and respectful in the ways they have delivered material, encouraged participation'*

A participant in the Developmental Observations module felt that a values-based approach proved especially important in gaining buy in from teachers. The interviewee had highlighted this in an introductory video for colleagues and noticed how ownership would be seen as an opportunity to experiment rather than restrict teaching styles. They reflected on the importance of trust in effecting change, especially in securing ownership from colleagues, and noticed that increasing number of colleagues are now proactive in seeking advice from the interviewee in their AP role.

Respondents from across all three modules also valued the opportunity to engage with up-to-date, evidence-based practice that they could use to inform development in their organisations, as well as space outside of their institutions to think things through.

*Enjoy engaging in a more academic discourse away from the daily life of FE-generally just getting things done without time/space to reflect. Very valuable for this [Thinking Environment].*

Others felt that the research-informed content also gave participants tools they could use to 'sell' new ways of working to management.

*Loved some of the models and also the information about language that can be used to 'sell' the team to management [Leading APs]*

*'the 10 characteristics of developmental observations have been really useful, as a comparison to my organisation's QA observation scheme which is argued to be developmental but is basically a form on non-graded observation (but which is actually graded as you can still 'fail" [Developmental Observations]*

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A participant from the Leading APs module reflected upon this in an interview:

*'I feel a lot more confident in what I'm doing in my approach to how I do things. One of the things that really stuck with me was we did a thing in the afternoon around like persuasive language and how you can get senior leaders on board with your ideas, and that that really stuck with me. So some of the work that we've been doing, we were one of those places that had the dreaded graded observations. And sort of off the back of that we've really pushed to get rid of that model and bring in a new model of developmental observations with the support of module facilitator. So that's been a huge, huge change for us. It was already kind of in the pipeline, but it gave me the real kick up the bum to say actually, no, this is definitely needs to happen.'*

Others found the space provided by both strands of the #APConnect programme allowed them an opportunity to feel valued, respected and listened to. This had the effect of giving them a renewed sense of energy to take back to their organisations.

*'The modules and networks developed are very important. As an FE lecturer, there has been so much pressure with colleges merging etc that I can feel downgraded as a professional. This has allowed me to feel valued'*

*'Overwhelming feeling of connectivity, community and sharing - the Programme helps break down silos and aids APs and others to work together as our goals are common ones, as are our values.'*

The modules further supported participants to create these spaces in their home institutions, finding that providing this space allowed for a more open atmosphere, and spaces which became more collaborative, supporting them to embed a more democratic and developmental approach to observations. One participant on the Thinking Environment module reflected on the use of the model in her practice observed that:

*'This is, at the moment is very much dominated by managers going in and making judgments on teachers. We want to redress the balance and move towards either peer observations or unseen observations to take away the hierarchy and create more of an equal environment for thinking based on what teachers think about their practice rather than managers' opinions. This is like the thinking environment, the model, kind of forces people's hand to step away from their role. And for that period of time, they're part of the thinking environment. So that in itself, maybe solves some of the issues around hierarchies that we make that we might have in the organisation.'*

### Professional Formation

The evaluation strand uncovered a limited desire from AP participants on the programme to use their experience towards achieving QTLS or ATS. Nevertheless, the impacts and benefits emerging for participants do show significant potential to speak to both the Professional Standards and the criteria for achieving Advanced Teacher Status.

Examples of aspects that have been developed particularly by the #APConnect programme include:

From the three themes of the ETF's Professional Standards.

▶ *Professional Values & Attributes*

- ▶ Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners.

▶ *Professional Knowledge & Understanding*

- ▶ Maintain and update knowledge of your subject and/or vocational area.

▶ *Professional Skills*

- ▶ Address the mathematics and English needs of learners and work creatively to overcome individual barriers to learning.
- ▶ Contribute to organisational development and quality improvement through collaboration with others.
- ▶ Differentiated example. demonstrate a high level of teaching and leadership skills and show initiative in improving teaching and learning within a wide range of settings

From the Advanced Teacher Status (ATS) criteria 'the badge of advanced professionalism and mastery in further education and training'.

- ▶ Continuing self-improvement and development of pedagogical practice and subject specialism.
- ▶ Commitment to the development of others through coaching and mentoring activity with colleagues.
- ▶ Ability to influence internal and external stakeholders and effect change in curriculum and improve organisational quality and development.

And

- ▶ Demonstrates effective practice in teaching and learning to the highest standard.
- ▶ Shares their high level pedagogical/subject expertise through networking, coaching or mentoring.
- ▶ Has high level technical or academic subject knowledge and professional experience.
- ▶ Can support colleagues to improve learner and learning experiences.
- ▶ Can critically evaluate their practice with colleagues or peers and assess its impact.
- ▶ Can contribute strategically to the developing curriculum and organisational development.
- ▶ Typically holds roles such as senior teacher, trainer or assessor, curriculum manager or coordinator, aspiring senior manager, senior instructor supporting apprenticeships.

This congruence suggests that the alignment of such 'badges' of professionalism with the impacts of the programme is worthy of further consideration.



## Discussion

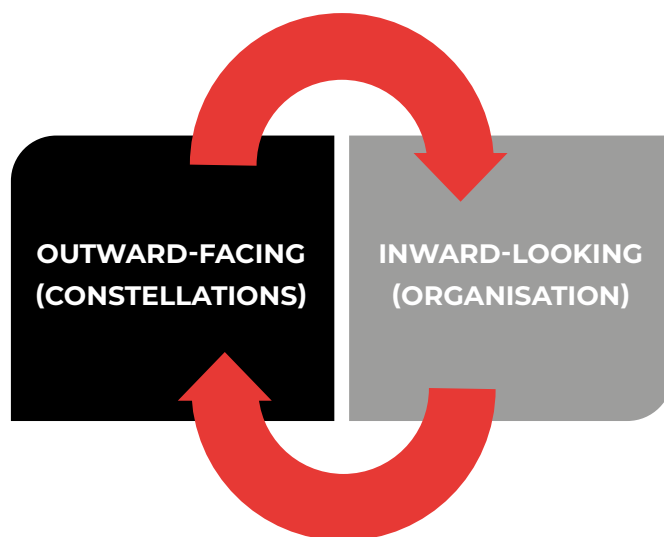
A major part of the findings outlined above revealed that APs said that values were important to them, and that trust was needed to allow them to take full ownership of their role. They felt that a positive culture change was necessary for them to be seen as valuable in their role: a paradigm shift in how their role is seen by those who they are responsible for and who they were responsible to (away from performative discourses). They also felt there was a greater need for recognition of their role as whole organisational change agents, with autonomy to make important decisions about how to undertake their work.

They felt that their engagement with the CoP should support them to develop the skills needed to effect change through engagement with cross-organisational perspectives, and develop the confidence they needed to challenge and change institutional practices via engagement with evidence-based practice. We found that when APs felt they were rooted to these values, it led to a series of practices that facilitated individual and collective growth.

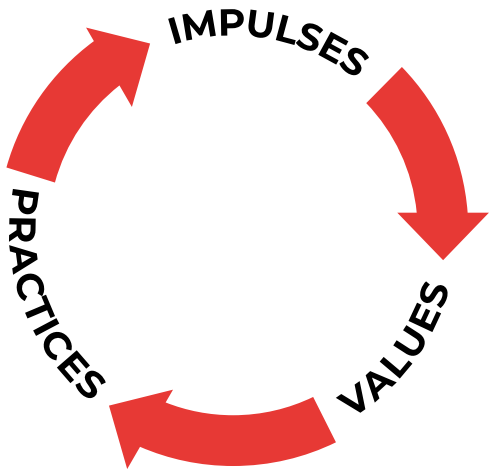
These practices were often felt implicitly within constellations, and these were spaces from which APs felt able to draw strength and confidence to implement their vision. The values also emerged as being important for participants in the CPD modules. Opportunities to step outside of organisational contexts was deemed as crucial for innovation and created a strong sense of energy which APs brought back to their roles (see Figure 4). These open, agile, flexible spaces led to increased feelings of autonomy and agency, which facilitated risk-taking and creativity.

There were indications that APs became 'critical theorists' who were able to draw upon a pool of expertise to innovate within their colleges. Where colleges embraced the value of external knowledge exchange, new cultures were more easily established which led to these values and practices being embedded in institutional contexts as well.

**FIGURE 4: OUT-WARD FACING, INWARD-LOOKING NATURE OF AP ROLE**



**FIGURE 5: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VALUES, PRACTICES & IMPULSES**



In examining the qualitative impact that the constellations had upon practice, and the progress APs made towards their aim of becoming change agents in their organisational contexts, the idea of an ‘impulse’ became important. Our fellow co-evaluator coined the concept of the ‘impulse’ which represents an instinctive response to interaction with constellations (See Figure 5). The practices became second-nature to APs, and inspired them to embed them into their organisations. In some cases this led to redevelopment of policies, or approaches to mentoring and coaching; in others, they led to cross-institutional collaborations to inform professional development. In all cases, these impulses were instinctive and authentic, representing the increased agency felt by APs in their roles.

At times, the more radical non-linear, non-hierarchical structure of the constellations was met with resistance within organisations whose cultures were embedded within rigid, inflexible architectures. This represented a challenge to some APs who felt that their influence was constrained by where they sat within these organisations. While the impact could be felt in some parts of their work, the struggle was to effect change on an organisational level. This meant that APs could put the ‘lights on’ the tree, without flexibility within the architecture, the influence of the AP remained limited (see Figure 6).

Another challenge presented was the various ways in which APs were positioned across organisational contexts; sometimes occupying leadership positions, and others as coaches or mentors alongside full-time teaching roles. This meant that APs experienced varying levels of agency and influence, but at all levels experienced challenge.

For example, while some APs in leadership positions were more able to affect organisational policy change such as observation policies and processes, the fact that they were less close to practice meant that they struggled to build trust with teaching staff. It was felt strongly in the co-evaluation team that APs should be close to practice to build those relationships, yet this often meant they struggled to influence higher up the hierarchy, meaning it took longer to get things done in some cases.

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This means that when APs occupy a fixed position, they are hindered whichever level of the institution they find themselves, as they face often impenetrable levels of the organisation both up and down the hierarchy. However, constellations allowed APs to develop skills which supported them to influence, and find the 'cracks' in the hierarchy where they could slip in and affect change.

We observed that one of the most important aspects of #APConnect was the ability to seek out advice, and develop a skill set which allowed them to 'sell' ideas up the hierarchy, and build relationships down the hierarchy. As a result, the values and practices of the constellations found their way into spaces that APs managed to get themselves into. One of our key considerations, therefore, is how APs can get into the rooms they need to get into, and be part of the conversations that will lead to effective change that is more expansive and less confined to particular spaces.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

In seeking the answer to our question *'how does the CoP support APs to navigate the challenges they encounter'*, we identified that the influence of the #APConnect programme lies in creating the space for possibility-thinking can take place. The AP, through developing an outward-facing element to the role, is supported to navigate across institutional boundaries, allowing them to bring the outside into their institutional roles.

The AP necessarily occupies a place at the boundary between inside/outside, supporting them to develop as critical thinkers and influencers. APs move in and out of boundaries that are porous where there becomes little distinction between what they do in their constellations and what they do in their organisations. Engagement in outward-facing work such as amplification or knowledge-exchange becomes more than just a bonus, or an add-on to their role, but an absolutely essential part of their practice and professional identity.

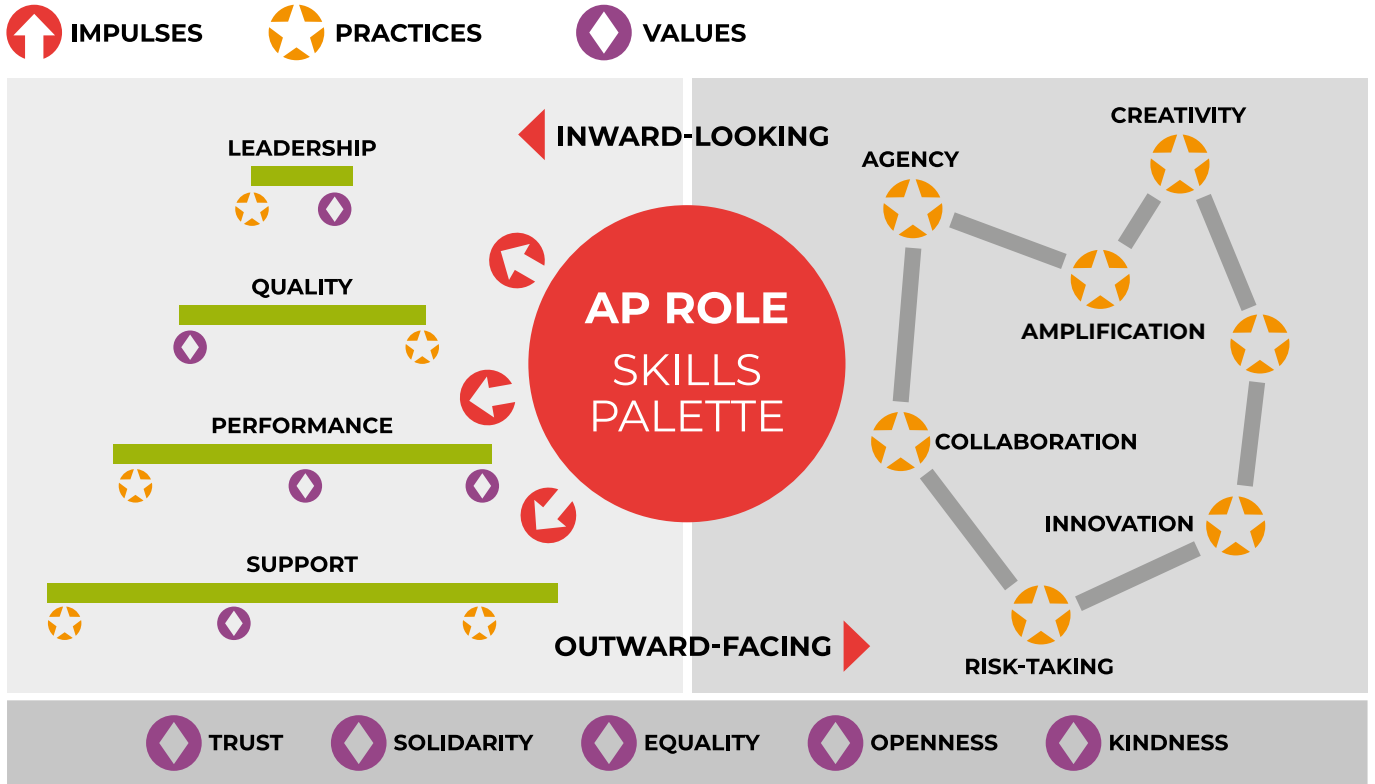
We concluded that as we come to define what an AP is or what an AP does, their unique position within and between these spaces is the very thing that supports innovation and quality improvement within organisations and it is the Community of Practice which facilitates this aspect of their role. The interactions that underpin these dynamics are represented in the Figure 6 below.

Figure 6 above illustrates the hybrid nature of the Advanced Practitioner role, as they move between communities of practice that inspire them to illuminate the work of their home organisation. This is underpinned by practices which promote collaboration, supporting the work of Tyler et al. (2017), who identified that APs were at their most effective when they were positioned as partners and collaborators within their organisations, rather than as agents of quality improvement. However, we further suggest that to build this supportive culture, APs need to be rooted to a set of values which support collaboration, innovation and risk-taking. APs' experience of participating in the #APConnect programme allowed them to find a space where these values thrive, and this led to practices which support the impulse to drive change in their own organizational contexts. However, we also observed that some APs struggle to cultivate this same space in their home institutions, which hindered their capacity to create the conditions needed to support all staff to develop this same sense of agency in their teaching.

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**FIGURE 6: ADVANCED PRACTITIONER MODEL**



This has significant implications for middle and senior leaders in further and adult education, as it challenges our understanding not only of what an AP does within an organisation, but the architectures they work within, which are often strictly governed by an outcomes-orientated set of priorities which leave little room for flexibility (as illustrated by the ‘tree-like’ formation in Figure 6, representing hierarchical rigidity). We suggest that to move beyond the functionality of the AP role as outlined by Tyler et al. (2017), it is important to consider how the AP is positioned within wider quality improvement processes. Instead of thinking of the AP role as a set of outcomes-focused job descriptors it might be better to think of APs as embodying a set of flexible working practices, as it is this agility which allows APs to effect change where needed. This would allow APs to be operational at all levels of their organisation and have a greater stake in quality improvement processes; importantly, with the competence to participate in policy creation, not just

**TABLE 3: AP FUNCTIONS**

| AP FUNCTIONS                                   |
|--|
| Values-forward thinkers                        |
| Critical theorists                             |
| Internal/external boundary spanners            |
| Influencers and amplifiers                     |
| Knowledge-exchange facilitators and organisers |

policy implementation. This is a view which is further echoed by Thedham's (2019) recent guide to leading advanced practice, where he states that APs should be given the 'freedom to act'. As such, in building on the 'functions and values' outlined by Tyler et al. (2017) (and represented in Table 1), we would add the following set of functions (as illustrated in Table 3) which build upon this conceptualisation of the role of the Advanced Practitioner:

Moving forward, in order to build capacity-building in these areas of practice, our recommendations from this evaluation are as follows:

**Ensure the findings of the co-evaluation influence the professional development of middle and senior leaders, particularly the importance of knowledge-exchange as foundational to AP effectiveness.**

This may involve revisiting how the AP-type role is framed in organisations, working towards a shared understanding of this role across contexts. It was clear that the model was received enthusiastically at the dissemination event and that considerable momentum exists for its use in AP contexts. It is important to examine how this influences the quality improvement dynamics within organisations including implications for further iterations of the approach. Active use of the model in future rounds of #APConnect may support the development of a coherent sense of the role that the programme plays in developing APs, and the added value that external knowledge-exchange brings to the organisation. Further, the co-evaluation revealed that values are central to how APs work. This needs to be made explicit and positioned as an alternative to more conventional role or job descriptors

**Revisit the role that those who lead advanced practice (middle managers and senior leaders) might play in supporting APs who are part of the #APConnect programme to innovate and implement their vision within organisational contexts, and navigate institutional hierarchies to support this**

It was clear that APs operate in the 'middle space' within and across organisations. Many though are not or do not see themselves as middle leaders. How they relate to others in this space and how AP development and influence can be fostered by values-based leadership needs further consideration. Further, those who lead APs within organisations may benefit from being more involved with the #APConnect programme, in order to support them to implement change from wherever they sit in their institutional hierarchy.

### **Examine the potential for co-evaluation methodologies to be developed for 'in-house' quality improvement initiatives.**

Members of the co-evaluation team quickly developed expertise in interpreting a wide variety of evidence to inform practice. The possibility of APs being supported in using the model to evaluate their practice and that of colleagues could impact positively on the pace and direction of internal quality improvement initiatives.

### **Ensure that the #APConnect programme articulates closely with other ETF sponsored programmes, considering how #APConnect communicates with the broader suite of the ETF offer.**

Many participants were engaging with multiple ETF programmes. Examples include Action Research, PDG, Mentoring and Practitioner Research. The respective benefits of the programmes and how they support and relate to each other could usefully be articulated more strongly.

### **Maintain a co-evaluation element within further versions of the AP Connect programme.**

The coproduction and collective sense making inherent in the co-evaluation approach proved very powerful in providing formative feedback for adjusting delivery of the major elements of the programme.

### **Consider how the ETF's CPD principles could be further contextualised to recognise co-evaluation approaches.**

The co-evaluation revealed that similar perspectives emerged from the participants in the constellations and CPD models, including a soft consensus on values central to the role of APs. These areas of mutual support could be made more explicit in further iterations of the programme.

Within the suite of the ETF's principles of effective CPD there are references to evidence-based practice, feedback and improvement cycles, embedded evaluation approaches and the ETF's evaluation framework. These aspects are all relevant to co-evaluation but the CPD principles do not currently speak to the dynamics that emerged in the construction of the model.

### Limitations

The co-evaluation approach was very successful in bringing together participants from different settings and perspectives. The equity at the core of the methodology allowed very rich data to emerge but the collection and analysis of these data proved to be time consuming. Significant commitment was needed from the participants in the co-evaluation circles in both attendance and artefact creation in addition to the participation in other elements of the programme. It is necessary to be sensitive to the burden that the approach may impose on participants. Furthermore, while the methodology allowed us to capture depth and richness, it was at the expense of breadth. Moving forward, we hope that these findings will be tested more widely to develop an understanding of how they resonate across the sector more broadly.



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