

Senior Leaders Masters Degree Apprenticeship

Claire Pritchard, Deputy CEO/COO, Academy Transformation Trust

Claire chose to study the Senior Leaders Masters Degree Apprenticeship (SLMDA) with National College of Education (NCE). She completed both her Level 7 Senior Leader Apprenticeship and Masters of Education in Educational Leadership in 2020 gaining a Distinction for all elements.

Claire has worked as a Business & Finance Director, and Chief Operating Officer (COO) and recently was successfully appointed as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Plantsbrook Learning Trust.



What made you choose to do the SLDA?

Whilst there are a plethora of qualifications around covering the varied responsibilities within the School Business Professional (SBP) remit, this one particularly appealed to me for two reasons:

1. it wasn't role-specific. Many of us choose to consider recognised professional qualifications in HR or finance for instance. These are useful for specialist roles but don't necessarily lend themselves as well as the SLDA to the wider leadership roles that are opening up in the sector for our profession within MATs in particular.
2. the SLDA was industry-specific. I am committed to the education sector and, as such, felt this was an appropriate route to gain a leadership qualification alongside my education peers.

How did you go about getting approval from your line manager to do it?

This wasn't really an issue. In terms of funding, we pay into the apprenticeship levy and, like many education organisations, we weren't realising the full value that this fund could provide. The course I followed was fully funded from the levy so 'cost' my MAT nothing extra and gave them the opportunity to utilise their levy pot rather than lose it. In terms of time (20% off the job training) I looked at how this could be achieved in irregular blocks of time rather than taking one day a week (which is what many people perceive this means). The four residentials accounted for a large chunk of this time but I also included any opportunity I had at work to attend other CPD

events, networks and forums, and any task I completed that didn't regularly feature in my working week (for instance shadowing other leaders in their work and leading the Covid-19 response for my MAT).

How did you manage to balance a full-time job and studying?

It definitely takes some work, especially when you add being a single parent of three and a Trustee of another MAT into the mix! The key for me was to ensure that the off the job training was relevant, and of value to my work commitments – this way it didn't feel like you were switching between work/study mode and also made me realise how much we grow and learn every day. I stopped reading fiction, even on holidays, and swapped it for research papers and leadership/education books. Whenever I had a submission deadline for an essay, I would book a week off work (this could be agreed with your employer as off the job time if you can't/don't want to use annual leave). You have to be candid with yourself and your line manager about what you can achieve and seek support when you need it – we work in an industry that is invested in continuous development and you may be surprised how much support you receive from a wide range of colleagues – I talked about my study often and both my education and business colleagues offered suggestions for essay themes and practical studies and also shared resources that they had collated themselves.

What was the most challenging part of the SLDA?

I was part of cohort 1 with the National College of Education and the only SBP amongst educationalists. I definitely suffered with imposter syndrome and wondered if I'd made the right choice, especially when one whole residential module focused on teaching and learning, considering lesson observation techniques etc. I probably had to work harder than others sometimes to consider how my role was relevant and how I would justify my impact. Once you master this and adapt how you share that narrative about your role, rather than feel you have to 'do' something different, it becomes much easier.

What has been the most rewarding aspect of the SLDA?

Apart from the achievement itself I would say realising that I have so much to offer to others. The residential was a really interesting experience for me, being with a group of senior leaders from a teaching background who weren't afraid to admit their own weaknesses and lack of understanding in the areas SBPs focus on. The way the course was structured, I was able to really support them in some of the practical tasks around finance, HR and estates.

What would you say to anyone who is considering the SLDA?

Absolutely go for it – what do you have to lose? Whilst I was excited at the opportunity to study for this qualification, I had a huge amount of trepidation about my ability to manage the workload and meet the academic requirements of the course. My degree was in Financial Services so even 20+ years ago I hadn't had to write academically! I'm going to be honest and

say I hoped I would just pass BUT I came out with a distinction for my work – if I can do it you absolutely can too!

How has the SLDA developed you as a professional?

The opportunity to read so much about leadership styles gave me a much deeper understanding of how to apply myself in different scenarios. I have also found I am much more adept at planning projects based on sound frameworks and using research in my reports and business cases – being able to evidence that recommendations have a sound foundation gives Trustees and colleagues the confidence to adopt change more freely. As SBPs (if you are anything like me) we can often suffer from a perceived lack of credibility – this qualification has given me the confidence to know I can walk into a room and feel equal to my education peers. As a result, I'm finding myself getting involved in conversations I would have sat quietly in before, thinking I had nothing valuable to add.

Make the most of your apprenticeship levy...

Out of almost 2,000 employees in my MAT I was one of the first existing employees to utilise the apprenticeship levy. It has been excellent to go through this experience myself to be able to talk with passion about the necessity to realise the value the fund can give our industry back if we use it well. We have now firmly embedded an apprenticeship strategy into our people development offer and report its use as a KPI to our Trustees. Our career route maps highlight how the attainment of apprenticeships can assist progression and we will be using the levy widely to support the development of operations staff at all levels.