Developing soft leadership skills online: a critical review of online MBA and masters-level leadership programmes
One of the ways in which leaders exercise leadership is through use of soft skills to influence others to achieve a common goal.
...soft skills are crucial to business and to life. They help us connect as human beings, maintain relationships, understand and influence others, and manage and control ourselves (CIPD, 2010)
Examples of soft skills

interpersonal communication
listening
influencing
motivation
conflict management
team building
giving feedback
coaching
emotional intelligence
MBA programmes under fire

Too few MBA programmes require leadership to be studied, practised or developed in any depth. At worst leadership does not exist in the MBA curriculum at all … [or] it is buried in an organisational behaviour course, typically occupying a mere half-day or evening session (Gill, 2004).
MBA programmes under fire
Hard skills preferred over soft skills on MBA programmes
Yet online MBAs are increasing...

But do they teach soft leadership skills?
Mixed methods research approach

Literature review

Analysis of online leadership programmes

Analysis of online MBA programmes

Case study analysis of two online leadership programmes

University A
England

University B
Canada
Online MBA Programmes

- < 50% of programmes were delivered wholly by distance learning
- > 40% required study on campus (making them blended in effect)
- Only 40% taught leadership as a core subject, however leadership was offered as an elective on 19% of programmes
- **Leadership teaching was indiscernible on 41% of programmes**
- Evidence of soft skills teaching could only be found on 32% of the core/elective leadership modules (ie 8 out of 25 programmes)
- There was some evidence of leadership teaching on other modules, but this was usually theoretical rather than skills-based
- **Overall, there appeared to be little or no soft skills development in approximately 80% of the MBA programmes reviewed**
Online Leadership Programmes

• All of the online leadership programmes in this sample were North American and only one was a public, not-for-profit institution

• A wide range of relevant leadership modules was provided across the sample

• In contrast to the online MBAa, soft skills were taught on a number of modules, but at some institutions this was a marginal activity only

• **On a third of the leadership programmes sampled, no evidence of soft skills teaching could be discerned**

• However, these findings should be treated with some caution, as detailed course information was “rationed” by many providers as part of a somewhat questionable marketing policy
Findings: Use of Technology

• Technology usage was fairly typical of linear course management systems such as Blackboard and eColleague

• Asynchronous discussion was the mainstay of course delivery, supported by online content and electronic assignment submission

• Some other tools were used to support learning, eg webinars and webcasts, online quizzes, chat, and online teamwork, but...

• Little evidence of wikis, weblogs, e-portfolios, social networking, eBooks, podcasting, gaming, simulations or virtual worlds being used

• Overall, there was little evidence that technology was being leveraged in an innovative or purposeful way to enhance leadership learning

• The programmes seemed more suited to knowledge transfer than soft skills development based on Morgan and Adams’ (2009) soft skills learning continuum