

From representation to leadership: A case study in inclusive career progression

Research
Article

10.20856/jnicec.5615

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To cite this article:

Mehta, N. (2026). From representation to leadership: A case study in inclusive career progression. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 56(1), 192-205. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5615>

Abstract

This case study explores *Accelerate*, a leadership and career development programme delivered in partnership with a research-intensive UK university to support the progression of underrepresented staff at Grades 7 and 8. Drawing on practitioners' insights, participant feedback, and light-touch career theory, the article examines how inclusive leadership development can serve as a career intervention while also contributing to cultural change. The paper reflects on programme design, facilitation, and early outcomes, and offers transferable implications for career practitioners working in complex organisational settings.

Keywords: Career progression; inclusive leadership; career development; psychological safety; higher education UK; systems theory

Introduction

Career progression within higher education has long reflected wider structural inequalities present across the labour market. While universities have made progress in diversifying entry-level and early-career roles, this has not translated into proportional representation at senior levels (Advance HE, 2020). For many underrepresented groups, including women, racially minoritised staff, disabled colleagues and those from lower socio-economic

backgrounds, progression into senior leadership remains uneven, opaque and shaped by informal norms around leadership, visibility and 'fit' (Advance HE, 2020; Lumby & Morrison, 2010). As a result, talent is often present but not fully recognised, sponsored or supported to progress.

This case study explores *Accelerate*, a leadership and career development programme designed to support the progression of underrepresented staff at Grades 7 and 8 within a UK research-intensive university. Within higher education, Grades 7 and 8 typically represent experienced mid to senior-level professional and academic roles, often positioned immediately below senior leadership grades. Progression beyond this point, particularly into Grade 9 and above, which includes senior leadership, professorial and executive roles, is widely recognised as a critical transition point where representation drops sharply. *Accelerate* was developed to intervene at this juncture, where career trajectories often stall despite high levels of capability and contribution.

The programme was launched in 2024 as part of a wider institutional commitment to addressing inequalities in career progression. While framed as a leadership development initiative, *Accelerate* was intentionally designed as a career intervention, supporting participants to build leadership capability alongside career management skills such as self-advocacy, visibility, confidence in progression conversations and navigation of informal organisational structures (Bridgstock, 2009). In doing so, the programme sought to address both individual development and the cultural conditions that shape progression opportunities.

Across the UK higher education sector, this challenge is well documented. Data from Advance HE consistently shows that representation declines sharply at senior grades, particularly for racially minoritised and disabled staff (Advance HE, 2020). While recruitment processes have become more inclusive at entry points, progression systems remain less transparent and often rely on informal sponsorship, confidence signalling and alignment with dominant leadership norms (Advance HE, 2020; Lumby & Morrison, 2010). These dynamics can disadvantage those who have historically been excluded from leadership spaces or who do not see themselves reflected in senior roles.

The institutional context for *Accelerate* reflected these sector-wide patterns. Internal workforce data demonstrated that while representation was relatively balanced at earlier grades, significant disparities emerged at senior levels. Alongside this, staff engagement data revealed that colleagues at Grades 7 and 8 reported lower levels of confidence in career progression, limited access to developmental opportunities and uncertainty about what was required to move into senior leadership. Qualitative feedback gathered through inclusion-focused consultations reinforced these findings, highlighting experiences of invisibility, inconsistent feedback and a lack of sponsorship.

This context informed the decision to design a targeted intervention. *Accelerate* was not conceived as a remedial programme aimed at 'fixing' individuals. Instead, it was grounded in the recognition that underrepresentation at senior levels is rarely a consequence of individual deficit, but rather of systemic barriers embedded within organisational cultures, leadership norms and progression practices. As such, the programme aimed to equip participants with tools to navigate the current system, while also surfacing insights that could inform wider cultural change.

The programme was delivered in partnership with Embrace Inclusion, a consultancy specialising in inclusive leadership, career development and organisational culture change. My role as lead facilitator was shaped by a professional background spanning employment and skills, economic development, career practice and inclusion-focused consultancy across public and private sectors. Earlier work included the design of career initiatives addressing labour market exit among underrepresented groups, informed by research on lost talent and economic participation. This practitioner grounding influenced the design of *Accelerate*, particularly its focus on career ownership, systems awareness and identity-affirming leadership development.

Accelerate was also explicitly aligned with the university's commitments under the Equality Act 2010, including the use of positive action to address disadvantage and underrepresentation. While positive action is often underutilised within leadership development contexts, it provided a legitimate framework for targeted investment in underrepresented talent, signalling that progression is a shared institutional responsibility rather than an individual burden.

From the outset, the programme was co-designed with the university's Social Inclusion team and informed by insights from prior development initiatives. This collaborative approach ensured that *Accelerate* was grounded in lived experience and organisational reality, rather than abstract leadership models. Design considerations included creating psychologically safe learning spaces, acknowledging the impact of systemic inequality on confidence and aspiration, and supporting participants in articulating leadership identities that did not require conformity to traditional norms.

A central design principle was the integration of leadership development and career progression. Rather than treating leadership as a purely positional outcome, *Accelerate* framed leadership as a set of behaviours, practices and ways of influencing that support both individual progression and organisational impact. This framing was intended to help participants recognise leadership in their existing roles, build confidence in their contribution, and develop the career management skills required to pursue progression opportunities more intentionally.

Career practitioners are not always positioned to work with individuals at later career stages, particularly those already operating at senior or near-senior levels. However, *Accelerate* reflects growing recognition that targeted career support at this stage is critical to addressing representation gaps in positions of power and influence. Research highlights the role of career development interventions in supporting confidence, identity negotiation, and navigating complex systems, particularly for those experiencing impostor feelings or marginalisation within senior spaces. *Accelerate* contributes to this emerging practice by offering a structured, identity-aware approach to leadership and career development for underrepresented staff approaching senior transition points.

The sections that follow examine the programme in more detail, including its structure, inclusive design principles, participant outcomes and implications for career practitioners. Through this case study, the article aims to contribute practice-based insight into how leadership development can function as a meaningful career intervention, while also highlighting the limits of individual-focused programmes in the absence of sustained organisational engagement.

Programme overview and structure

Accelerate was delivered over a nine-month period from October 2024 to July 2025 and brought together a cohort of 20 underrepresented staff at Grades 7 and 8 from across academic, professional services and commercial roles. The programme was intentionally designed as a blended leadership and career development intervention, structured around two interconnected strands: *Leading Self* and *Leading Others*. This dual focus reflected an understanding that progression into senior roles requires both internal leadership confidence and the ability to navigate organisational systems, relationships and informal power structures.

Rather than adopting a linear or competency-driven model, *Accelerate* was designed to be scaffolded to support participants at a critical career transition point. Many delegates were already operating at a senior level in practice, but lacked confidence, visibility or sponsorship to progress formally. The structure, therefore, aimed to help participants consolidate their leadership identity, develop career management skills, and build the confidence to engage proactively with opportunities for progression.

In addition, participants were matched with alumni from other senior leadership programmes within the university, typically at higher grades. This created an opportunity for informal mentoring, offering insight into progression pathways, organisational expectations, and leadership at more senior levels. While not a core structured component, this element added value by extending participants' networks and access to experience beyond the cohort.

Programme focus and core themes

The programme comprised seven core thematic areas, delivered through a series of facilitated sessions, reflective activities and peer-based learning spaces. These themes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Accelerate programme themes and focus

Programme focus	Core emphasis
Leadership identity	Values, strengths, leadership archetypes, and reframing leadership norms
Understanding barriers	Structural inequality and exploring internal
Resilience and confidence	Emotional regulation, self-belief, and navigating imposter feelings
Inclusive leadership	Power, privilege, psychological safety, and leadership impact on others
Relationships and feedback	Influence, trust, feedback, and difficult conversations
Career ownership	Visibility, self-advocacy, sponsorship, and progression pathways
Final reflections	Learning integration, sense-making, and next steps

Leading self

The first strand of the programme, *Leading Self*, focused on self-awareness, leadership identity and confidence. Early sessions explored structural barriers to progression, including bias, informal gatekeeping and the hidden curriculum of leadership. Framing these issues explicitly helped participants contextualise their experiences, reducing the tendency to internalise systemic challenges as personal shortcomings.

A key feature of this phase was the use of strengths-based leadership archetypes. This approach moved away from deficit-oriented development models and encouraged participants to recognise leadership behaviours they were already demonstrating. By validating existing capability, the archetypes supported participants to see themselves as leaders without waiting for external endorsement. This design choice was informed by both practitioner experience and evidence highlighting the role of confidence, identity and narrative in career progression, particularly for underrepresented groups (Bridgstock, 2009; Patton & McMahon, 2006).

Resilience and confidence were also addressed through reflective discussion and facilitated activities that acknowledged the emotional labour of operating in environments where participants were often underrepresented. Rather than positioning resilience as individual endurance, sessions focused on emotional regulation, boundary-setting and sustaining self-belief in the face of ongoing systemic challenge.

Leading others

The second strand, *Leading Others*, built on this foundation by shifting focus toward influence, relationships and organisational impact. Sessions explored inclusive leadership practices, including power, privilege and psychological safety, and encouraged participants to reflect on how leadership behaviours shape team culture and opportunity structures (Tulshyan, 2022).

Practical attention was given to relationships and feedback, particularly navigating difficult conversations, influencing without authority and building trust. These skills were framed not only as leadership competencies, but as career management capabilities that enable progression in complex organisations. Participants were supported to develop language and strategies for self-advocacy, articulating impact and engaging in progression conversations with greater clarity and confidence.

Career ownership formed a core theme in this strand. Rather than presenting progression as a linear or meritocratic process, discussions acknowledged the importance of visibility, sponsorship and informal networks. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their own career narratives and identify actions that would increase exposure to opportunities, while remaining aligned with personal values and leadership style.

Peer learning and action learning sets

Throughout the programme, peer learning was prioritised as a central mechanism for reflection and development. Action Learning Sets (ALS) were used to provide structured, psychologically safe spaces where participants could explore live career and leadership challenges. These sessions were conducted online and followed clear agreements around confidentiality, non-directive questioning and mutual support.

The ALS format enabled participants to test ideas, challenge assumptions and gain perspective from peers who shared similar experiences of underrepresentation. For many, this was the first time they had access to a trusted peer network at a comparable career stage. The emphasis on listening and questioning, rather than advice-giving, reinforced reflective capacity and supported deeper insight into both personal and systemic dynamics.

Line manager engagement

A distinctive feature of *Accelerate* was the intentional engagement of participants' line managers. Managers were invited to an inclusive leadership session early in the programme, designed to surface assumptions about leadership, progression and potential. While levels of sustained engagement varied, this early involvement signalled that participant development was not an individual endeavour alone, but part of a wider organisational responsibility.

Line managers were also invited to attend the final participant presentations, where delegates reflected on their learning, leadership development and next career steps. This created a moment of visibility and recognition, reinforcing participants' leadership capabilities and creating space for more meaningful conversations about progression.

Delivery approach

All core sessions were delivered in person, with careful attention paid to facilitation style, group dynamics and psychological safety. The programme avoided overloading participants with content, instead allowing space for reflection, dialogue and integration of learning between sessions. Materials and prompts were shared in advance, and objectives were co-created to ensure relevance and responsiveness to participant needs.

Overall, *Accelerate's* structure reflected a deliberate effort to integrate leadership development and career progression. By combining self-reflection, peer learning and organisational engagement, the programme sought to support participants not only to grow as leaders but to navigate progression pathways with greater agency and confidence.

In addition, participants were matched with alumni from other senior leadership programmes within the university, typically at higher grades. This created an opportunity for informal mentoring, offering insight into progression pathways, organisational expectations, and leadership at more senior levels. While not a core structured component, this element added value by extending participants' networks and access to experience beyond the cohort.

Inclusive Design and Facilitation

Inclusive design was a foundational principle of *Accelerate*, shaping not only what was delivered but how the programme was experienced. Rather than retrofitting inclusion into an existing leadership model, the programme was intentionally designed to reflect the realities faced by underrepresented staff navigating progression within a complex institutional environment. This included careful attention to facilitation style, learning environment, content sequencing, and the emotional dimensions of leadership development.

The programme was co-designed with the university's Social Inclusion team and informed by insights from previous staff development initiatives. Early design conversations

focused on identifying the points at which underrepresented staff most often experience friction in progression. These included informal gatekeeping, inconsistent feedback, lack of sponsorship and unspoken expectations around leadership presence and confidence. The resulting programme design sought to surface these dynamics explicitly, rather than leaving participants to infer them independently.

A central design consideration was fostering psychological safety. For many participants, reflecting on leadership identity took place against a backdrop of prior exclusion, misrecognition or marginalisation. Sessions were therefore structured to establish trust early, with shared agreements around confidentiality, respect and permission to speak honestly. Facilitated check-ins and grounding activities were used at the start of sessions to support presence and connection, particularly when discussions touched on sensitive experiences, such as impostor feelings or microaggressions.

The facilitation approach was intentionally relational rather than directive. Rather than positioning facilitators as subject experts delivering content, the emphasis was on creating space for dialogue, reflection and peer learning. This reflected a practitioner's belief that underrepresented staff often possess significant leadership capability but lack environments in which it is recognised or affirmed. Facilitators modelled openness and reflective practice, sharing relevant aspects of their own professional journeys where appropriate, to signal that leadership development is ongoing and non-linear.

A key innovation within the programme was the use of strengths-based leadership archetypes. This tool provided participants with a shared language to explore leadership identity without defaulting to deficit narratives. Instead of focusing on gaps or readiness criteria, participants were encouraged to recognise leadership behaviours they already demonstrated in their roles. This approach was informed by career development practice and evidence highlighting the role of self-efficacy and identity in progression decisions. By validating existing strengths, the archetypes helped participants to reframe leadership as something they were already practising, rather than something to be earned through formal promotion.

Design choices also reflected an awareness of intersectionality and the varied ways in which identity shapes experience. Activities were structured to allow multiple modes of engagement, including reflection, discussion and written prompts, recognising that confidence and voice show up differently for different people. Care was taken in group composition and facilitation to avoid reproducing dominant voices, with facilitators actively monitoring participation and creating space for quieter contributions.

Peer learning was a deliberate design feature, rather than an emergent outcome. Action Learning Sets were used to provide a structured space where participants could explore real-world career and leadership challenges in a supportive environment. Conducted online, these sessions followed clear principles focused on listening, questioning, and reflection rather than problem-solving. For many participants, this peer support mitigated feelings of isolation and enabled a deeper sense-making around shared experiences of underrepresentation.

Positive action underpinned the programme's design and positioning. *Accelerate* was explicitly targeted at underrepresented staff and resourced accordingly, with senior sponsorship signalling institutional commitment. This framing was not about lowering

standards but about levelling access to development opportunities that are often distributed informally. Eligibility criteria and aims were communicated transparently, countering opaque sponsorship practices that typically shape progression into senior roles.

Line manager involvement was also embedded as a design feature, reflecting an understanding that individual development alone is insufficient to shift progression outcomes. Managers were engaged early through an inclusive leadership session, designed to prompt reflection on bias, power and the assumptions embedded in progression decisions. While sustained engagement varied, this design choice reinforced the message that leadership development and career progression are shared responsibilities.

Accessibility considerations were addressed through collaboration with the university, which applied its existing reasonable adjustment frameworks to support participants as needed. Materials were shared in advance, objectives were co-created, and time was built in between sessions to allow reflection and application. This pacing recognised that development occurs alongside demanding roles, and that meaningful learning requires space rather than intensity.

From a practitioner's perspective, these design choices were intentional responses to the question of what underrepresented staff need to progress. Rather than prescribing behaviours or competencies, *Accelerate* prioritised belonging, recognition and agency. The programme's innovation lay not in the novelty of its content, but in the coherence among values, design, and facilitation. Inclusion was not an add-on but the foundation upon which leadership and career development were built.

Participant outcomes and early impact

As *Accelerate* concluded in July 2025, it was still too early to assess long term progression outcomes such as promotion or movement into senior roles. However, early evidence from participant feedback, facilitator observation and stakeholder reflection indicates meaningful impact at both individual and cultural levels. These outcomes are particularly relevant in the context of career development, where shifts in confidence, identity and agency often precede visible progression.

Participation and data sources

The programme cohort consisted of 20 participants from across academic, professional services and commercial roles. Participants represented a range of underrepresented backgrounds, including women, racially minoritised staff and disabled colleagues. Feedback data was gathered through a voluntary post-programme survey and written testimonials. Not all participants submitted formal feedback, a pattern consistent with internal development initiatives of this nature. In total, written feedback was received from approximately half of the cohort.

Feedback responses were reviewed thematically by the facilitator to identify recurring patterns in participant experience. This analysis was supplemented by observational insights gathered throughout the programme and reflections shared by line managers and senior stakeholders during the final presentations. While the dataset is modest, it offers credible qualitative insight into how participants experienced the programme and the types of outcomes it supported.

Confidence and leadership identity

A consistent theme across participant feedback was increased confidence in leadership identity. Many participants described entering the programme with uncertainty about whether leadership roles were accessible or appropriate for them. This uncertainty was often linked to prior experiences of being overlooked, receiving ambiguous feedback or operating in environments where few senior leaders shared similar backgrounds.

Through reflective exercises, peer discussion and strengths-based framing, participants reported a shift in how they understood their leadership capability. Several described moving away from deficit narratives towards greater recognition of their existing contribution. One participant reflected:

Accelerate has been a really transformative experience. The programme not only helped me understand my own leadership style, but also gave me the tools and confidence to lead others effectively.

This shift is significant from a career development perspective. Research suggests that leadership identity and self-belief play a central role in whether individuals pursue progression opportunities (Cashman, 2017; Bridgstock, 2009). For underrepresented staff, these internalised narratives are often shaped by systemic exclusion rather than lack of capability. *Accelerate* supported participants to reframe these narratives and recognise leadership as something they were already practising.

Career ownership and self-advocacy

Participants also reported increased confidence in career ownership. Sessions focused on visibility, self-advocacy and progression pathways helped participants develop language to articulate their impact and aspirations. Several participants described initiating conversations with line managers about development, progression or stretch opportunities during or shortly after the programme.

Importantly, not all participants equated success with immediate promotion. For some, impact was reflected in greater clarity about career direction or confidence in applying for opportunities when ready. As one participant noted:

Accelerate helped me stop waiting to be noticed and start thinking more intentionally about how I want my career to progress.

These outcomes align with career development practice emphasising the importance of career management skills such as networking, self-advocacy and proactive planning, particularly in environments where progression relies on informal processes (Bridgstock, 2009; Patton & McMahon, 2006)

Peer connection and belonging

One of the most frequently cited outcomes was the value of peer connection. Participants described the cohort as a rare space where shared experiences of underrepresentation could be discussed without explanation or defensiveness. The Action Learning Sets were

highlighted as particularly impactful, offering structured opportunities for reflection and mutual support.

Participants noted that these peer relationships reduced feelings of isolation and increased confidence in navigating organisational challenges. Several expressed intentions to maintain connections beyond the programme, including informal peer support and future collaboration. In a sector where senior roles can be experienced as isolating, this sense of collective solidarity represents a meaningful outcome in its own right.

Line manager and stakeholder perspectives

The involvement of line managers in the final presentations added an additional layer of impact. Managers reported gaining deeper insight into the experiences and aspirations of their team members. Several reflected that the presentations prompted reconsideration of how leadership potential is recognised and supported.

A senior stakeholder commented:

It was inspiring and challenging to hear the reflections shared. *Accelerate* is not just developing individuals, it is encouraging the organisation to reflect on itself.

While sustained engagement from all managers was uneven, this moment of shared reflection reinforced the programme's dual focus on individual development and cultural awareness. It also highlighted the limits of individual focused interventions where wider systems remain unchanged.

Cultural signals and early ripple effects

Beyond individual outcomes, *Accelerate* contributed to broader conversations within the institution about leadership, inclusion and career support. Participants shared learning informally within their departments, and the programme generated interest among colleagues and senior leaders.

Several participants described a raised sense of expectation about what development should look and feel like. One noted:

I now know what good leadership development can look like, and I am more confident asking for support that reflects that.

While subtle, these cultural signals are important. Career progression is shaped not only by formal structures but by shared assumptions about who leadership is for and how it develops. *Accelerate* began to challenge some of these assumptions by making underrepresented leadership visible and valued.

Limitations and critical reflection

Participant feedback also highlighted limitations. Some questioned the extent to which line manager engagement translated into sustained behavioural change, noting that those already inclusive were most responsive. This reflects a broader challenge in leadership

development where programmes risk supporting individuals without sufficiently shifting the systems around them.

These reflections reinforce the need for career development interventions to sit alongside wider organisational strategies. *Accelerate* did not claim to resolve structural inequality on its own. However, it offered a credible model for supporting underrepresented staff at a critical transition point, while generating insight into where further institutional effort is required.

Taken together, the outcomes of *Accelerate* suggest that inclusive leadership development can function as an effective career intervention. By supporting confidence, identity, peer connection and career ownership, the programme addressed factors that often inhibit progression long before formal promotion decisions are made.

Reflections and implications for career practitioners

Accelerate was never designed as a stand-alone solution to structural inequality in career progression. Instead, it functioned as a focused intervention within a much wider organisational context, offering insight into what career development support can achieve when it is intentionally designed for underrepresented talent approaching senior transition points. From a career practitioner perspective, several practice-relevant reflections emerge.

Leadership development as career development

A central learning from *Accelerate* is the importance of framing leadership development explicitly as career development. Participants did not experience leadership as an abstract concept or future aspiration, but as something already embedded in their roles, relationships and influence. By making leadership visible in this way, the programme supported participants to recognise transferable career capital, including decision-making, boundary-setting, influencing and relationship management.

For career practitioners, this reinforces the value of broadening how leadership is discussed in career conversations. Leadership behaviours often develop well before formal leadership titles are acquired. Supporting clients to recognise and articulate these behaviours can strengthen confidence, readiness and narrative coherence when navigating progression pathways, particularly in environments where informal signals carry significant weight.

Designing for systems awareness and psychological safety

Accelerate highlighted the importance of systems awareness in career development practice. Participants benefited from explicit discussion of how organisational structures, power dynamics and informal practices shape opportunity. Naming these influences reduced self-blame and supported more strategic engagement with progression decisions.

Career practitioners may not always be positioned to change systems directly. However, they can play a critical role in helping individuals interpret and navigate those systems. This includes supporting clients to distinguish between personal development needs and structural constraints, and to make informed choices about when and how to pursue progression.

Psychological safety emerged as a key condition for this work. Participants engaged most deeply when they felt able to reflect honestly on doubt, frustration and ambition without fear of judgement. For practitioners, this underscores the importance of facilitation style,

language and pacing. Career conversations that allow space for uncertainty and emotion are not a soft addition, but a necessary foundation for meaningful reflection and decision-making.

Strengths-based leadership identity and career narratives

The use of strengths-based leadership archetypes had a notable impact on how participants understood themselves as leaders. By shifting attention away from perceived gaps and towards existing capability, participants developed more confident and authentic leadership narratives.

This has direct relevance for career practice. Career narratives are often shaped by dominant norms about what success looks like, which can marginalise those whose leadership does not conform to those norms. Practitioners can support clients to construct narratives that reflect their values, strengths and lived experience, rather than encouraging assimilation into narrow models of leadership.

This approach aligns with career development research emphasising self-efficacy, identity and narrative as key drivers of progression decisions (Bridgstock, 2009). It also resonates with systems-based frameworks that recognise career development as relational and context dependent rather than purely individual (Patton & McMahon, 2006).

Supporting navigation of formal and informal pathways

Accelerate reinforced the significance of informal pathways in career progression. Participants frequently identified visibility, sponsorship and access to networks as decisive factors in advancement. While these dynamics are often difficult to address directly, career practitioners can support clients to engage with them more intentionally.

This includes developing career management skills such as self-advocacy, strategic relationship building and preparation for progression conversations. Importantly, these skills were not framed as self-promotion, but as clarity of contribution and intent. Practitioners can help clients practise language that feels authentic while still making impact visible.

At the same time, *Accelerate* highlighted the limits of individual strategy in the absence of organisational change. Some participants noted that despite increased confidence, structural barriers remained. This underscores the need for career practitioners working within organisations to complement individual support with advocacy, partnership and influence where possible, particularly when designing development provision for underrepresented groups.

Working at later career stages

Accelerate also raises questions about how career development support is distributed across the career lifespan. Career guidance is often prioritised for early career transitions, with less structured support available for individuals approaching senior leadership. Yet this is precisely the stage at which representation gaps widen most sharply.

This case study suggests that targeted career development at later stages can play a critical role in addressing inequalities at the top of organisations. Practitioners working with

experienced professionals can support reflection on identity, readiness and aspiration in ways that differ from early career guidance, but are no less necessary.

Practitioner reflexivity and role

Finally, *Accelerate* emphasised the importance of practitioner reflexivity. The facilitator's role extended beyond programme delivery to holding space, modelling inclusive practice and attending to group dynamics. This relational labour was central to outcomes, yet often remains invisible in formal evaluation.

For career practitioners, this invites reflection on how our own identities, assumptions and facilitation choices shape client experience. Inclusive career development is not only about tools and frameworks, but about how those tools are used and the conditions created for reflection.

In sum, *Accelerate* offers a practice-informed illustration of how leadership development can operate as a career intervention when designed with systems awareness, psychological safety and identity at its core (Patton & McMahon, 2006). For career practitioners, the challenge is not to replicate the programme wholesale, but to apply its underlying principles in ways that fit their own contexts, roles and constraints.

Conclusion

Accelerate was conceived as more than a leadership development programme. It was a deliberate career development intervention, designed to address a persistent and well documented gap in progression for underrepresented staff approaching senior leadership within higher education. By intervening at Grades 7 and 8, the programme sought to support individuals at a critical career transition point, while also surfacing insights about the organisational conditions that shape who progresses and who does not.

The case study demonstrates that inclusive leadership development can function as a meaningful career intervention when it attends to identity, confidence and systems alongside skills. For participants, *Accelerate* created space to recognise existing leadership capability, develop clearer career narratives and engage more intentionally with progression pathways. These outcomes did not rely on a single element of the programme, but on the coherence between design, facilitation and values. Psychological safety, strengths-based framing and peer connection were not incidental features, but foundational conditions that enabled participants to reflect honestly and act with greater agency.

At the same time, the programme revealed the limits of individual-focused interventions. While participants reported increased confidence and clarity, feedback also highlighted the uneven impact of line manager engagement and the persistence of structural barriers. This reinforces an important message for career practitioners and organisations alike: supporting underrepresented individuals to progress must go hand in hand with sustained attention to the systems and cultures that shape opportunity. Leadership development programmes alone cannot dismantle inequality, but they can make visible where further institutional effort is required.

For career practitioners, *Accelerate* offers several transferable insights. It highlights the value of working with leadership identity in career development, particularly at later

career stages when formal guidance is often limited (Cashman, 2017). It underscores the importance of systems awareness in helping clients navigate informal progression pathways without internalising structural constraint as personal failure (Patton & McMahon, 2006). It also draws attention to the relational and facilitative dimensions of career practice, where trust, pacing and psychological safety shape the depth and impact of career conversations (Brookfield, 2017; Tulshyan, 2022).

More broadly, this case study contributes to growing practice-based evidence that career development plays a critical role in addressing representation gaps in positions of power and influence. When career support is extended beyond early career transitions and designed with inclusion at its core, it can help individuals not only progress but do so in ways that are authentic, sustainable, and aligned with their values.

Accelerate does not offer a blueprint for universal replication. Instead, it provides an example of how leadership development and career development can be intentionally integrated to support underrepresented talent within complex organisations. For career practitioners working across sectors, the challenge is to translate these principles into their own contexts, while continuing to ask difficult questions about whose potential is recognised, whose progression is supported and what leadership is ultimately for.



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