



# Online and residential intensives:

## PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES FROM DIPLÔME D'ÉTUDES SUPÉRIEURES EN LEADERSHIP HUMANITAIRE (DESLH) GRADUATES



CENTRE FOR  
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Cai Wilkinson, Justine de Rouck and Phoebe Downing.  
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## Acronyms and abbreviations

ACF	Action Against Hunger
ADCAP	Age and Disability Capacity Building Program
APA	Apprentissage par l'action (Action learning)
BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
CHL	Centre for Humanitarian Leadership
DESLH	Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
INGO	International non-government organisation
NGO	Non-government organisation
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 1.1 Introduction

The standard delivery of the DESLH—which comprises four core units—is a hybrid model, designed to be delivered through a combination of online and in-person modalities.

Units 1 and 3 are delivered entirely online over 11-week periods. Unit 2 is a 10-day intensive: for Cohorts 1 to 3, this intensive took place in person, as a ‘residential’ learning experience. However, with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the course convenors rapidly transitioned Unit 2 for online delivery, to enable the course to continue during global travel restrictions and lockdowns. This online delivery for Unit 2 remained in place from Cohort 4 onwards. Like Unit 2, the Unit 4 intensive was also adapted to online delivery during the COVID-19 period. However, for the first time, Cohort 6 of the DESLH was given the option of participating in the Unit 4 intensive either online or in-person.

This mixed modality both within and between intensives units presents an opportunity for the DESLH curriculum designers and faculty to consider what impact, if any, modality has on student outcomes, perceptions, and experiences.

### Report structure

This report presents the main findings from a comparative study of the online and residential intensives of the DESLH. The aim is to understand the comparative benefits and challenges of each modality, to inform course review and ensure the optimal delivery for future cohorts, including for different groups of students whose needs and experiences may differ. The analysis focuses primarily on Cohort 6, Unit 4, given the delivery in both online and residential within this same unit affords a more directly comparable sample. However, data from earlier intensive units are also included where relevant to analysis.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review of the evidence on teaching and learning, focusing both on core findings but also emerging evidence since the pandemic. Chapter 3 compares key quality

indicators derived from the online and residential delivery of the Unit 4 intensive—such as student success rates, satisfaction, and engagement—focusing primarily on Cohort 6. Chapter 4 then investigates students’ perceptions and preferences for online and residential delivery, drawing on a wider range of DESLH graduates. Key conclusions and recommendations are presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

## 1.2 Key findings

Key quality indicators used in higher education evaluation indicate that the online and residential intensives are providing equivalent learning experiences for students of the DESLH.

Student satisfaction, for instance, is high for both the online and residential intensives. Students also achieved comparable learning outcomes and success rates through online and residential intensives, including for men and women.

Data on other key indicators of course quality—such as opportunities for peer learning, learning against the leadership behaviours, and completion rates—indicate that online and in-person offer equivalent experiences for students. For instance, a higher proportion of online students from Unit 4 (70% of respondents) scored their ability to learn from peers as 8 or above, compared to their in-person peers (54%), suggesting that online learning does not present a barrier to peer-to-peer learning and support within the DESLH.

Student engagement, however, is the one quality indicator which suggests that online learning is not providing an equivalent experience to residential intensives. Perceptual data suggest that graduates found levels of attention and concentration on online learning was compromised compared in-person learning settings.

There is a gendered element to challenges with student engagement, however. Women are more likely to report a significant burden from domestic chores—such as meal preparation or child-caring

responsibilities, including overseeing children with their homework—which interferes with their ability to concentrate exclusively on their learning, regardless of modality. This is an interesting finding, as it complicates the prior assumption that students with domestic or parenting responsibilities might prefer the presumed flexibility of online learning.

Consistent with the wider evidence base on teaching and learning, DESLH data suggest that online learning works best under optimal circumstances, for instance with experienced learners who have a high degree of intrinsic motivation and discipline, and whose learning is not impeded by competing domestic chores or caring responsibilities.

DESLH graduates and faculty generally report a marked preference for residential intensives. While several participants value the advantages for online intensives—such as flexibility and convenience—most graduates interviewed for the study reported a strong preference for residential learning. This preference for residential intensive includes groups who might otherwise be expected to prefer online, such as parents and women with high workloads.

### 1.3 Conclusion and next steps

In terms of quality learning, online and residential intensives provide equivalent learning experiences for students of the DESLH against most of the key indicators of quality. What matters is not modality, but how the curriculum is designed and delivered.

Student engagement is the one quality indicator which does indicate that online students report struggling compared to residential intensive experiences. Distractions—such as competing work demands, child-caring responsibilities, and domestic duties—can interfere with students' ability to concentrate exclusively on their online learning.

Online delivery works best under optimal conditions, with students who have the time, space, and freedom from competing demands to engage with the learning setting. While students who have prior behavioural and contextual risk factors that make maintaining engagement more challenging—such as high work-loads, additional household chores, or caring responsibilities—are at greater risk of experiencing difficulties with their learning, regardless of modality, it is possible that such factors will have greater adverse impact on students studying online.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Hybrid delivery in the DESLH

The Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire (DESLH) is a ten-month accredited graduate certificate run by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership at Deakin University. The program aims to contribute to developing a diverse, inclusive, and transformative humanitarian leadership capacity across West and Central Africa and the Francophone humanitarian world more widely.

The standard DESLH delivery is a hybrid model, comprising both online and in-person content. There are four units in the overall course design:

1. Units 1 and 3 take place entirely online over a period of 11 weeks. Students receive material on Fridays and take part in a seminar every Thursday (led by a facilitator and/or with a guest expert on the subject of the module).
2. Intensive Unit 2 is a 10-day digital unit. From Cohorts 1 to 3, Unit 2 took place in person: however, the programme was reviewed and adapted to a digital format during the COVID-19 period. The decision has since been taken to keep this unit online for future cohorts.
3. Intensive Unit 4 was also reviewed and adapted to a digital format during the COVID-19 lockdown and travel restrictions period. During Cohort 6, however, given the lifting of COVID-related travel restrictions and the increased cohort size, the decision was taken to offer Unit 4 in-person again, as well as being offered online. Students therefore had the option of participating either in-person (in Dakar) or online.

While the assumption may have been that there would be a return to 'normal' delivery modes with the relaxation of COVID and travel restrictions globally,

the transition to online delivery raised the question of whether there was a clearly 'better' modality—in terms of balancing quality learning experience with program costs and return on investment in terms of cost/student—for the purposes of the DESLH.

While popular perceptions often pit online *against* in-person learning—i.e. the question is framed as being about which modality is 'better'—scholars of teaching and learning have cautioned against simplistic comparisons of in-person and online learning (Bethel & Bernard, 2010). Each modality has comparative benefits and drawbacks, and what matters in terms of student experience and learning outcomes is not the mode per se, but rather the quality of design and delivery.

## 1.2 Purpose of this study

Noting the outlined context above, the purpose of this study is to understand the relative merits and challenges of the online and residential intensives in the context of the DESLH. The aim is to ensure the DESLH is designed and delivered for maximum quality and impact for all participants. The analysis presented below draws both on the global scholarship on teaching and learning, and on monitoring and evaluation evidence from the DESLH programme.

## 1.3 Why focus on the intensives?

This report focuses on the Unit 2 and 4 intensives, comparing where possible the quality and qualitative perspectives of the online and residential in-person intensives. It therefore offers a unit-level—rather than whole DESLH course-level—insight into the intensive units (2 and 4) of the DESLH.

As described above, the intensive units were initially offered in person. During the COVID period, however, the DESLH faculty had to review its training methods and these two intensive units were moved online after a significant revision of the learning sessions and adaptation of the virtual simulation (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Intensive unit delivery mode, Cohorts 1 to 6

Cohort	Unit 2 intensive		Unit 4 intensive	
1 (2017-2018)	In-person (Dourdan, France)	December 2017	In-person (Thies, Senegal)	April 2018
2 (2019)	In-person (Dourdan, France)	June 2019	In person (Thies, Senegal)	October 2019
3 (2019-2020)	In-person (Dourdan, France)	February 2020	Online	November/ December 2020
4 (2020-2021)	Online	February 2021	Online	June 2021
5 (2021-2022)	Online	January/February 2022	Online	June 2022
6 (2022-2023)	Online	January 2023	In-person (Thiès, Sénégal and online)	June (in-person) and August/ September (online) 2023

While the quality of delivery for online and in-person intensives are comparable—in terms of learning outcomes, satisfaction, and completion—there are similarities and differences between the two modalities as learning environments. In both cases, the intensive format of the unit is immersive and the simulation component is designed to put participants under intentional pressure to simulate a crisis context in which they can exercise newfound leadership knowledge and behaviours.

This learning environment is safely scaffolded and supervised but is nonetheless a deliberately intense experience. In the case of the in-person intensive, the residential format enables maximum immersion: participants not only learn together, but also eat together and share accommodation in multi-person rooms, and the simulation runs continuously over several days in real time, at time necessitating out-of-hours work by teams to meet goals and deliver results. The online intensives, in contrast, are less immersive, but still intense by virtue of their prolonged engagement with the online learning environment.

The overall duration of the intensive is longer compared to the in-person version due to the need to mitigate against potential detrimental effects of long hours online on health and wellbeing by limiting daily sessions to 6-7 hours. This change has most impact on the simulation, which consequently does not run in continuous real time, but rather on a pre-set schedule of start and end times. Within

this schedule, as with the in-person simulation, the online simulation is dynamic, flexible and responsive, using ‘injects’ catalyse responses and reactions from the teams. Regardless of modality, every aspect of this immersive intensive is designed to accelerate, enhance, and challenge participants’ leadership development.

Owing to the context in which the DESLH operates, there may also be unscheduled, exogenous challenges which further intensify the pressure of the residential intensive. During the intensive Unit 4 of the Cohort 6 DESLH, which was held in Thiès (Senegal) in June 2023, the DESLH team had to adapt the course delivery to the local security context. Indeed, political tensions led the team to rethink the learning sessions and the simulation format given the multiple internet blackouts on site. In addition, the DESLH team had to work closely with ACF Spain-ROWCA on site to ensure a safety plan adapted to the volatile context and reimagine the way the intensive unit was originally conceived.

The online intensive cannot—and is not intended to—achieve the same degree of immersive intensity of this residential experience. What the online intensive loses in terms of the experience of full immersion in the learning environment, it gains in terms of exposure to the challenges of working remotely and logistical flexibility. There is a trade-off, in other words, between modalities—not in terms of quality of learning outcomes, but of the qualitative experience of participants.

## Cohort 6: experiences within one cohort of an online and residential Unit 4

Cohort 6 was selected for a close analysis for this report, as it is the only cohort which included the option of an online or residential options within the same intensive (Unit 4). For this Cohort, Unit 2 was exclusively online; however, Unit 4 was split between those who attended Dakar in-person in June 2023, and those who completed the unit online over August and September 2023. This parallel option to undertake either an online and residential experience within one intensive presents a unique opportunity for a comparative analysis and evaluation of the two modalities.

The choice to offer both online and in-person for Unit 4 was justified for two reasons. First, Cohort 6 was the largest ever, with 80 students enrolled at the start of the course. This led to early consideration of upper limits for effective delivery of the intensives in either modality, with approximately 60 viewed as the maximum number of participants that could be accommodated within the existing unit—and especially simulation—design for Unit 2, and around 40 for Unit 4. Second, given the size of the cohort, it was decided to give students the choice of modality to suit their professional, professional, and personal schedules and financial means. For the DESLH team and the CHL, this mixed mode of delivery for Unit 4 was also an opportunity to examine the post-COVID training methods (e.g. intensification of online training), and to assess the comparative impact of the residential and online intensives for Unit 4.

The choice of participating in either delivery mode was completely unrestricted for the 60 students who passed their Unit 3 and thus had access to Unit 4. In June 2023, 35 of these students opted to take Unit 4 in person in Dakar, while 27 students undertook Unit 4 online in August–September.

For both delivery modes, students take part in the same learning sessions and simulation. A key difference between the modalities is the schedules and timing of the simulations. Residential intensive simulation days are longer, typically starting at 8:00am and finishing late, for instance after 8:00pm or at the discretion of the teams. For the online intensives, however, precarious internet connections and competing time zones limit the hours available, with the simulation typically running from 8am to 2pm. In addition, some learning sessions are longer during the Unit 4 online (2 hours instead of 1.5 hours) in anticipation of connection problems, group work in different channels on Teams, IT issues and other challenges related to the modality. As a result, the residential Unit 4 intensive runs over 8 days, while the online intensive lasts 10 days.

Contextual information from other cohorts and other online units or delivery are drawn on where relevant to deepen insights from the intensives analysis.



## 2. A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE: THE LITERATURE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

**A note on terminology:** In academic literature, 'online learning' is the common term; while in industry, 'e-learning' is widely used. Online learning is defined as education experienced through the internet in a synchronous or asynchronous classroom that is not dependent on a physical location for participation (Singh & Thurman, 2019, p. 302). It should also be noted that the majority of the literature on in-person and online learning does not specify whether learning was delivered in intensive or more common "spaced" format, despite the impact on design, delivery and experience.

### 2.1 Teaching and learning

#### 2.1.1 Delivery and mode

Researchers have attempted to identify strategies to enact impactful online learning. From an extensive literature review, the European Union Digital Education Framework identified the need for thoughtful and skilful design across five variables: content, delivery, support, community and structure (MacDonald et al., 2021). A recent meta-analysis found that online learning can support learner-centred education, as the modality enables students to learn at their own pace, provides fast and easy access to information, and offers opportunities to reinforce subject matter through repetition (Batdi et al., 2021, p. 19).

Over the last twenty years the amount of academic literature on experiential learning has grown significantly (Morris, 2020). Morris (2020) builds upon Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle model, emphasising 'hands-on' concrete experiences, followed by followed by contextually-specific reflection and active experimentation (Morris, 2020, p. 1071). Simulations have been increasingly recognised as important educational tools, and are often used for training employees in corporate settings, allowing collaboration and the practicing of skills acquisition in immersive scenarios (Asal &

Blake, 2006; Cespedes et al., 2022). Research suggests practical, reflective simulations are particularly effective for leadership development, encouraging active rather than passive learning (Balwant, 2021; Balwant, 2022; Earis et al., 2016). Unlike workshops or content-based classes, online simulations are immersive, forcing behaviour and reaction in near real-time, replicating real, imperfect environments (Kindley, 2002, p. 7).

Online simulations are effective ways of developing flexible expertise and behavioural skills when deliberately tied in with clear learning objectives (Wood et al., 2009). Online simulations allow students to take risks, exposing them to experiences that can accelerate learning (Wood et al., 2009, p. 492).

#### 2.1.2 Common issues with online delivery

Research by Muilenburg and Berge (2005) suggests that the most important barrier for students engaging in online learning was a lack of social interaction, followed by administrative issues, time and support for studies and learner motivation. Challenges of online delivery are more acute for new learners, whereas continuing learners may develop learning strategies adapted to online environments (Li et al., 2017). Some subjects are not well suited to online delivery and face unique challenges, such as field instruction (Barton, 2020).

Fostering community and connectedness in online learning environments is one of the key challenges and opportunities explored in the academic literature (Delahunty et al., 2014; Race et al., 2021; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018). One study found instructors could foster community by taking part in discussions, using personal introductions, providing timely and detailed feedback, and maintaining frequent email interactions (Trespacios et al., 2021). Intentionally using appropriate and varied technology was also important, including the use of a different types of media in teaching (Trespacios et al., 2021).

### 2.1.3 Time requirements, preparation, and cost

Surveys suggest online delivery can demand more time from instructors than traditional in-person delivery, although it can also offer more time flexibility for teachers (Spector, 2005, p. 17). The time required to design, develop and deliver online courses impacts the cost effectiveness of online delivery (Spector, 2005, p. 18). Online delivery often results in more emails per student, with instructors also being required to problem-solve technical issues (Bender et al., 2004, p. 110). This is important as research suggests instructor responsiveness to student inquiries is vital for student satisfaction with online learning (Swanson et al., 2021, p. 221). Steele et al (2023) argue that the limited availability of instructor time means teachers must prioritise the online instructional strategies that have the greatest impact, such as faculty interaction and feedback.

### 2.1.4 Leadership and mentoring

Mentoring can be an essential component in effective leadership development (Coers et al., 2021). Mentoring and coaching can be structured programs or more informal relationships (Leskiw & Singh, 2007, p. 455). The goal of effective mentoring and coaching programs is to provide direct guidance and feedback, an essential component of leadership development (Leskiw & Singh, 2007, p. 455). Research suggests best practice pedagogy include the effective use of class discussion, group work that is integrated into the course content, and working with others towards clear goals (Jenkins, 2020). Klaus and McRay (2022) emphasise the importance of systematic assessment of program outcomes regardless of modality. Online leadership programs are increasingly popular forms of delivery, and employ a variety of instructional strategies and assessments (Headrick & McElravy, 2022). The time flexibility of online delivery has been an important driver of its use by business (Guthrie et al., 2022, p. 28)

### 2.1.5 Reflective learning

Leadership development literature emphasises the importance of supporting students to practice specific leadership behaviours in order to sustain individual change, including developing personal learning plans and journaling (Bonesso et al., 2023). These techniques encourage reflective learning, which is an important component of leadership development simulations as it allows students to analyse their experiences and their mistakes and

successes after an exercise (Earis et al., 2016, p. 228).

Experiential simulations when paired with a self-reflective writing exercise have been shown as effective ways to teach flexible leadership skills (Balwant, 2022). Academic literature emphasises the importance of self-reflection to learning, personal growth and the development of skills in the contemporary workplace (Brownhill, 2022b). One study of undergraduates found that reflective learners were the most successful at online learning and self-directed study (Battalio, 2009). Brownhill (2022a, 2023) offers a recent model for encouraging self-reflection after training.

## 2.2 Student experience with different modalities

### 2.2.1 Perceptions

Student satisfaction is one of the main indicators used within higher education to determine the quality of education being delivered (Nikou & Maslov, 2023). One study comparing evaluations of in-person and online courses found the in-person class was perceived more positively than the online class by students (Ganesh et al., 2015). A 2019 study of a dual delivery course found no difference in student satisfaction between modalities (McKeever, 2019). An earlier meta-analysis of empirical literature comparing face-to-face with distance learning found a slight preference for in-person teaching by students (Allen et al., 2002). Other studies suggest a student preference for blended learning approaches (Rajeh et al., 2021).

Scholars have cautioned, however, against simplistic comparisons of in-person and online learning (Bethel & Bernard, 2010). Analysing the factors that shape student perceptions is important to understanding different modalities. In surveys, students often value the flexibility that online learning allows, while still desiring on-campus sessions for social interactions with students and professors (Nollenberger, 2017). Factors specific to the delivery of online learning shape students' satisfaction, including the effective creation of digital communities, the quality and accessibility of information technology, and the online course design (Nikou & Maslov, 2023).

Research finds one of the most important factor affecting students' satisfaction is the basic tools of online classes: clear navigation, online grade book

and online grading (Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2015, p. 273; Ni et al., 2021, p. 56). Students also value clear communications, clear instructions, timely feedback and opportunities for social collaboration (Ni et al., 2021, p. 56). Alqurashi (2019) finds that course material is essential to student satisfaction, with online courses having higher satisfaction rates when students felt materials helped them understand class content. Interactions with instructors were also predictive of positive satisfaction ratings, particularly asking and answering questions, receiving prompt feedback, and participating in online discussions (Alqurashi, 2019, p. 145; Holzweiss et al., 2014; Jaggars, 2014; Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2015). Context also matters. A recent survey of an East African leadership course found students preferred online delivery as it was perceived as offering global connectiveness, cultural freedom and greater flexibility (Ann & Aziz, 2022).

### 2.2.2 Learning outcomes

The research surrounding student performance do not show a significant difference in outcomes between online and in-person learning. Surveys of courses delivered in both modalities show no significant difference in student performance (Hurlbut, 2018; McKeever, 2019; Mullen, 2020; Nemetz et al., 2017; Regehr et al., 2023; Spector, 2005; Stauss et al., 2018). Research suggests online learning can be as effective as in-person learning, even though students may have different learning style preferences (Aragon et al., 2002, p. 243).

A survey of an operations management course demonstrates how pedagogical considerations can differ between modes, with regular class attendance the most important factor in the success of students in face-to-face classes, while the consistent use of interactive worksheets was the most determinative factor for online learning (Nemetz et al., 2017). An early study on the question by Neuhauser (2002) comparing modalities found no significant difference in test scores, assignments, participation grades or final scores. A recent 2021 meta-analysis found online learning has a significant positive effective on learning achievement (Batdı et al., 2021).

In the field of leadership development, online courses can increase the self-awareness, transparency and authentic leadership skills of students (Whitehall et al., 2021). Multi-factor studies have found online learning can deliver humanitarian leadership

development programs effectively in the Middle East and North Africa region (Saleh et al., 2022).

Other studies have found positive results from blended approaches to learning, which combine online and in-person teaching. A study at Pepperdine University found students in blended classes performed better on exams than those in face-to-face classes (Harjoto, 2017). Students in blended classes also showed a greater openness to flipped classroom approaches (Harjoto, 2017). Online students did tend to rate their instructor lower in teacher effectiveness than students in in-person classes, likely because they had fewer direct interactions with the instructor (Harjoto, 2017).

### 2.2.3 Engagement

Online learning offers unique opportunities and challenges when engaging students. Student engagement refers to the energy and effort students put into their learning, and has behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions (Heilporn et al., 2023). Student disengagement is a major issue faced by educators working in online modalities (Maimaiti et al., 2021). Clever use of online tools is important to countering student disengagement, such as using online breakout rooms, private online communication tools, and providing incentives for class participation (Maimaiti et al., 2021). Studies of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic find that the self-efficacy and anxiety of students shaped their engagement with online learning (Won et al., 2023; Zapata-Cuervo et al., 2023).

Research suggests instructional strategies can improve student engagement in online learning, including enhancing student-student interactions, providing dynamic synchronous and asynchronous sessions, and improving instructor feedback and accessibility (Heilporn et al., 2023, p. 14). Ensuring interactivity through presentations and online exams can motivate students to remain engaged in classes (Yousaf et al., 2022, p. 11). Research also suggests students' sense of community was important to their engagement with online learning (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). During the pandemic, encouraging university students to turn on their cameras was a challenge for instructors, with gender, personal motivation and self-image hurdles for some students (LeRoy & Kaufmann, 2022; Meishar-Tal & Forkosh-Baruch, 2022).

## 2.3 Inclusion and types of learners

### 2.3.1 Level of experience

Online delivery may suit students with strong self-directed learning skills, sometimes requiring them to assume greater responsibility for their learning, and courses that lack sufficient scaffolding may impact students without those pre-existing skills (Xu & Jaggars, 2014, p. 634). Many online learning formats require self-directed learning skills from students, and instructors must design programs and supports with this in mind (Zhu & Bonk, 2022). Studies suggest students with high levels of education tend to be more self-directed (Xu & Jaggars, 2014, p. 635). Student's level of education matters when designing online learning experiences (Holzweiss et al., 2014, p. 320). Like in-person learning, research suggests that academic self-confidence of students can impact their performance in online learning (Won et al., 2023). Adult learners at universities have high attrition rates as a group, but are often attracted to online learning due to its flexibility (Ragusa & Crampton, 2018, p. 126). For adult learners using online platforms, avoiding burn-out is a key consideration for educators (Tan et al., 2022).

Research also highlights how personal factors like self-motivation are important when considering student satisfaction with online learning (Kosiba et al., 2022). What students want from a course, and their personal expectations and familiarity with online learning formats, often shapes their satisfaction with the experience (Landrum et al., 2021, p. 87). Integrating fun and exciting activities are an important part of encouraging student engagement with online learning (Kosiba et al., 2022, p. 1001).

### 2.3.2 Access and inclusion

Research suggests performance gaps between key demographic groups already observed in face-to-face teaching can be exacerbated in online modes (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). The flexibility of online

course delivery, however, can offer education and retraining to individuals with full-time work or caring responsibilities that otherwise would not have access (Ragusa & Crampton, 2018, p. 129).

Access to fast and high-quality technology is requisite for effective online learning (Palvia et al., 2018). Nikou and Maslov (2023) found that the quality of IT infrastructure available to students directly impacted their satisfaction with online learning outcomes. A recent evaluation of an East African online leadership training program found power cuts and internet connectivity were key issues highlighted by students and instructors, although students surveyed still preferred online delivery due to its flexibility and global connectivity (Ann & Aziz, 2022). In African countries during the pandemic, uneven access to technology, the use of multiple platforms with little coordination, and faculty unpreparedness all impacted online teaching efficacy and student experience (Maphosa, 2021; Martins et al., 2023; Osabwa, 2022).

During the pandemic, social-economic status determined student's access to required technology, while students with low digital competency were liable to fall behind in exclusively online learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). There are also opportunities, such as the ability for education institutions to embed the teaching of digital competency into online learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). Moreover, one study found that minority students at universities in the United States felt they became more technologically literate because of the shift online (Hass et al., 2023).

International students can face unique difficulties when learning online. One study of online learning by international graduate students at Japanese universities during the COVID-19 analysed students help-seeking behaviour (Ashida & Ishizaka, 2022). The study found students that had been studying prior to the pandemic asked for help more often, suggesting students who had only experienced online learning faced greater difficulty asking for help and working with classmates (Ashida & Ishizaka, 2022).



# 3. DESLH QUALITY OF LEARNING: COMPARING ONLINE AND IN-PERSON INDICATORS

*'It's a great distance learning experience.'*  
[Post-KAP survey, Cohort 6]

Online and in-person intensives offer comparable learning experiences, in terms of quality. Monitoring and evaluation data show that when measured against key indicators of quality—including success rates, student engagement with key learning activities, opportunities for peer learning, learning against the leadership behaviours, and student satisfaction—online and in-person outcomes are comparable.

The relatively small samples used in this analysis, however, mean that this section does not make a claim to statistical significance: results nonetheless indicate that the quality of learning at the unit level (Unit 2 and 4 intensives) is comparable, regardless of modality.

## 3.1 Student success and modality

### Success rates at unit level

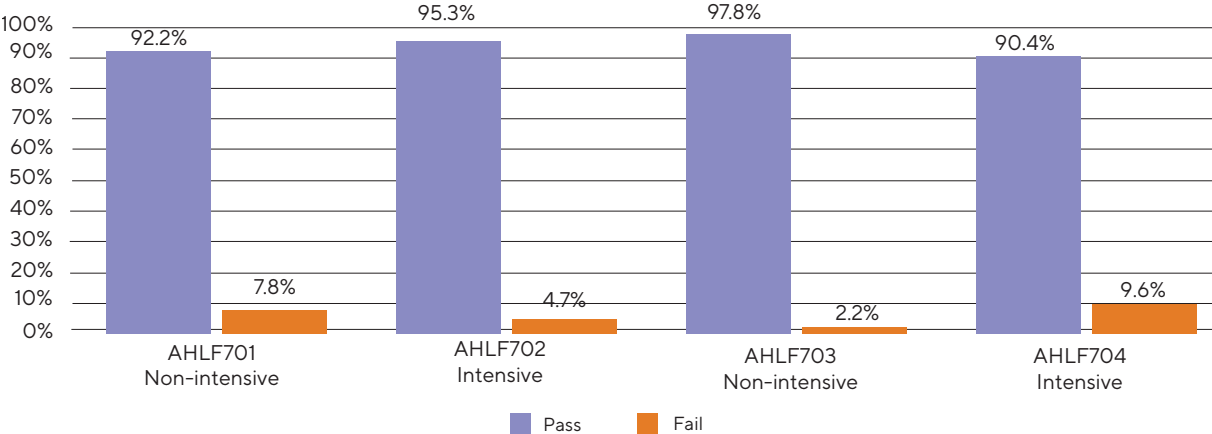
Overall, there is no significant difference between pass rates of each unit of the DESLH. As shown in Figure 1 below, success rates are not directly correlated with either aspect of modality (i.e.

whether the unit is delivered online or in-person or intensively/non-intensively).

It is notable that success rates are lower for Unit 1 (AHLF701), which is delivered in non-intensive mode, and for Unit 4 (AHLF704), which is delivered in intensive mode, potentially suggesting a correlation with student progression through the course. In the case of Unit 1, students, especially those returning to study after a long time or with less experience of formal education, may be more likely to fail since they are still adapting to formal study and understanding assessment requirements.

In the case of Unit 4, meanwhile, success requires students to demonstrate leadership at a higher level (at least 3 of 6 Leadership Behaviours at Adding Value level or higher) than in Unit 2 (at least 3 of 6 Leadership Behaviours at Awareness level or higher), reflecting the design of the course to achieve the demonstrable development of participants' leadership skills over its duration. The higher pass rates for Unit 2 and Unit 3 broadly support this interpretation. Unit 2 is viewed as the practical start of the DESLH leadership journey, with the assessment criteria reflecting this accordingly in terms of expected learning and demonstration of the Leadership Behaviours, and students are more familiar with the format and requirements of the

Figure 1. Pass and fail results by unit (all cohorts)





course and formal study in general by the time they attempt Unit 3.

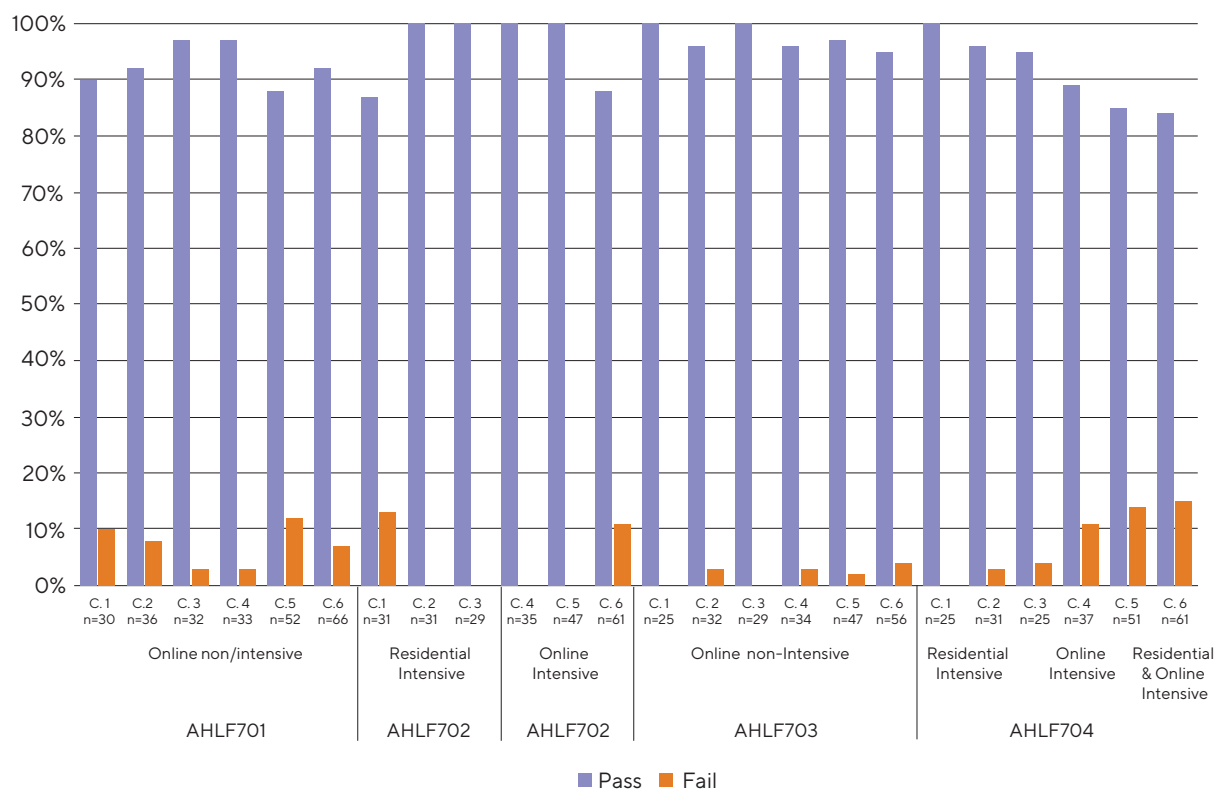
Once the cohorts are disaggregated, however, additional patterns and trends at unit level are evident, as shown on Figure 2 below. Of particular note are the following:

- A relatively higher fail rate for Unit 1 is evident across all cohorts, lending further weight to the possibility that there is a correlation between being the first unit of study and lower success rates.
- The uneven distribution of fails across the six cohorts for Unit 2, with only Cohorts 1 and 6 not having a 100% pass rate, is notable insofar as there is no clear impact of delivery mode (2 of the 3 cohorts for each modality had 100% pass rates, with the other two cohorts showing comparable fail rates at 12.9% for Cohort 1 and 11.5% for Cohort 6 respectively), but no further inferences can be made given the sample size and multiple other factors that may have affected pass/fail rates.
- Confirmation of the very low fail rates for Unit 3, which range from 0% (Cohorts 1 and

3) to 3.6% (Cohort 6), with no evident trends across the cohorts. This further supports the possibility that greater familiarity with course requirements and adaptation to the demands of formal study online means that the impact of risk factors to success is lessened, although the extent to which this would account for the low fail rates relative to other units would require further research and analysis.

- A trend of increasing fail rates for Unit 4, from 0% with Cohort 1 to 14.8% for Cohort 6 (both modalities). Given the change of delivery modality from residential to online from Cohort 3 in response to COVID-19 disruptions, and that the pass rate for Cohort 6 online was lower than the pass rate for Cohort 6 residential (80.8% for online versus 88.6% for residential – see Figure 3), it may be tempting to attribute the trend to the change from residential to online intensive. However, while it cannot be definitively established that the change of delivery modality has not affected student success rates, it is important to ensure to examine the wider underlying factors and issues and their impacts on

**Figure 2.** Pass and fail rates by unit, cohort and modality

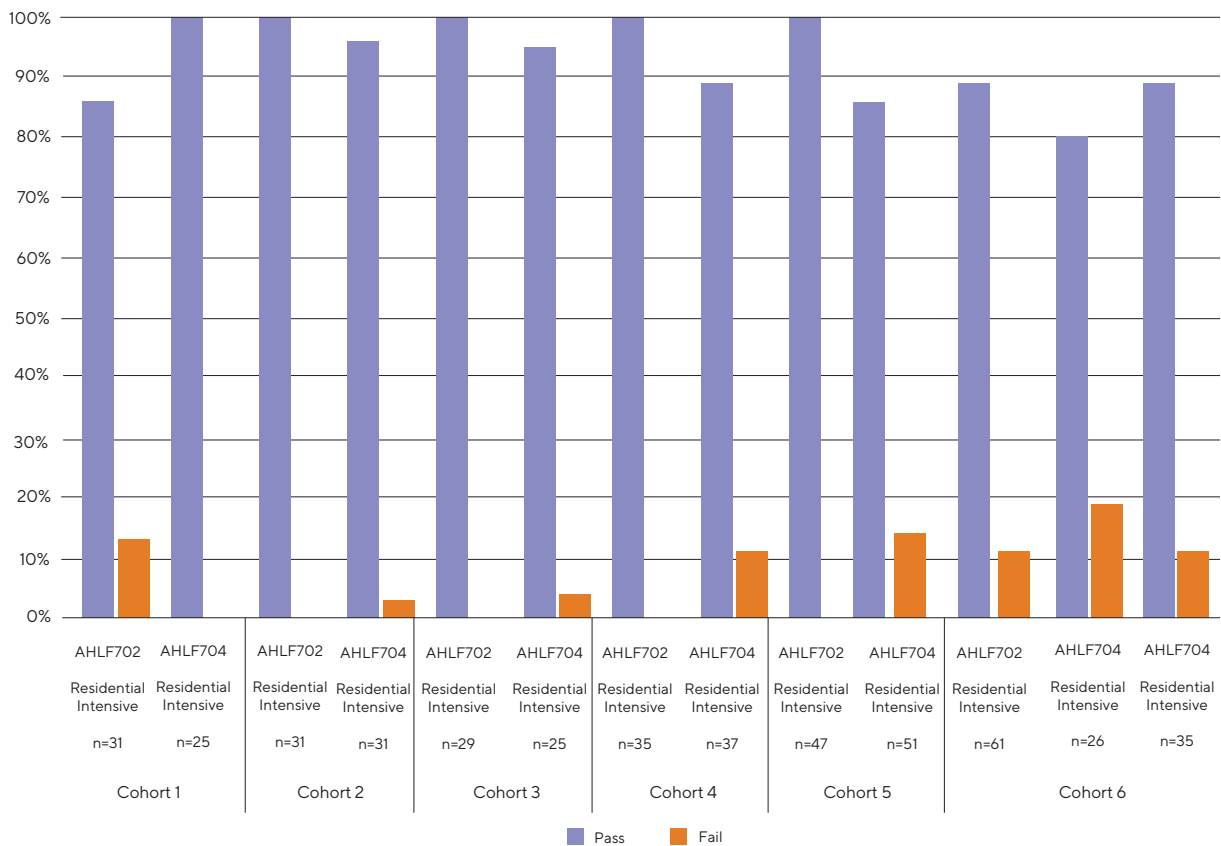


success. Of particular consideration here are the multiple and lengthy disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to every sphere of life, including education (see for example Stewart et al. 2020; Schreiber et al. 2021; Goldman & Bell 2022), as well as the complex and ongoing ways in which the pandemic and wider sectoral and geopolitical trends have affected individuals personally and professionally.

This remains the case even with Cohort 6 Unit 4, which is the only instance where direct comparison between residential and online modalities can be attempted. Two factors need to be considered when analysing the difference between success rates in online and in-person intensive results for Cohort 6 above, in addition to the ongoing impacts and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic discussed above. First, Cohort 6 was the largest cohort since the DESLH began with over 80 students enrolled at the beginning of the course (compared to an average between 20 and 45 students for the first five cohorts). Second, the sixth cohort differed from previous cohorts in terms of student composition: previous DESLH candidates who had withdrawn from the program were told that this may be their final chance to return and complete the DESLH, leading to an increased proportion of formerly withdrawn candidates compared to previous cohorts. This prior risk factor likely impacted lower success rate for Cohort 6 compared to earlier cohorts.

To complete the analysis of potential correlations between modality and student success, pass/fail rates by cohort and intensive unit modality were examined. Viewed by cohort, there would appear to be a potential trend of falling pass rates, although the very limited data means that this cannot be confirmed. It is also notable that Cohort 6 the sole cohort with fails recorded in both intensive units. Importantly, an increased fail rate should not be automatically seen as negative or positive, but rather needs to be considered within the overall context of the course, its delivery and its aims.

**Figure 3.** Student success rates for intensive units (AHLF702 and AHLF704) (Cohorts 1-6)



## 3.2 Student experiences of key learning activities in Unit 4

*‘The simulation session was a great success, because realistic scenarios were developed. The learning sessions enabled me to learn more about a number of topics. Also, the individual coaching sessions and group exchanges [during learning sessions] enabled me to learn as much about myself as about others, and to see how to approach teamwork.’ [Cohort 6, male DESLH participant, online Unit 4]*

### 3.2.1 Learning activities and unit feedback

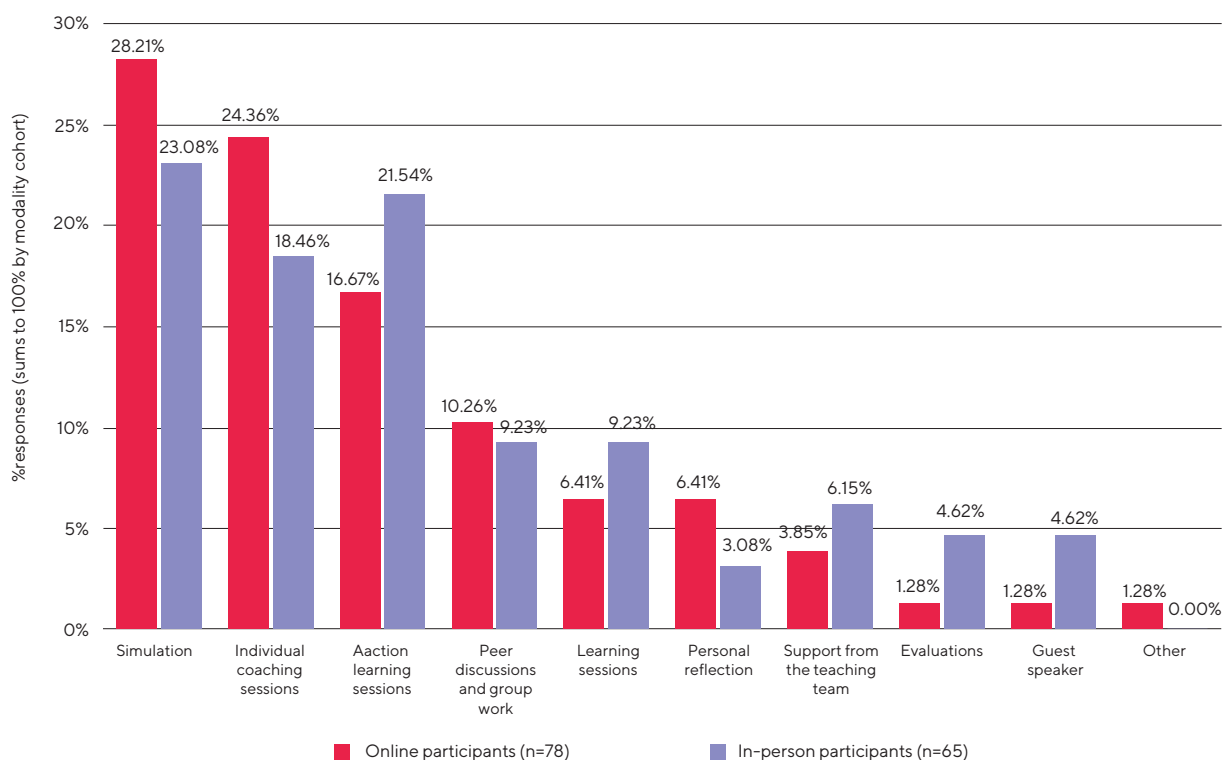
Cohort 6 survey data exploring student experiences of key learning activities during Unit 4 indicate no significant differences between online and in-person groups. When asked what overall learning elements they found most important, for instance, the online and in-person groups from Cohort 6 nominated the same three elements overall: simulations, individual coaching sessions, and the action learning sessions (Figure ). It is also noteworthy that the simulation—which might be assumed to be optimally delivered in-person, due to the experiential nature of this

activity—is in fact the most highly-rated element among online students.

There are relatively minor variations in the proportion of students who elected each activity by modality. One hypothesis for explaining the slight differences within this cohort is that the online intensive required a higher level of individual engagement and activity, leading students to value a particular activity positively; whereas for their in-person peers, this perceived value is influenced by collective engagement and activity. It is important, however, to recognise that any differences cannot be causally attributed to modality, and that the overall pattern shows a clear preference for simulations, individual coaching sessions, and action learning sessions for both modality cohorts.

Monitoring and evaluation data also indicate that these groups of Cohort 6 students also reported similar experiences in terms of how easy or difficult they found it to engage in these learning activities (Figure below). When asked, for instance, to indicate how easy or difficult it was to understand, follow and learn during the coaching, simulation, and learning sessions, there was in general no major differences between each modality.

**Figure 4.** Online and in-person participants rated the same three learning elements as most important  
Q5 - What were the most important learning points during the AHL704 intensive unit? (please choose up to 3)

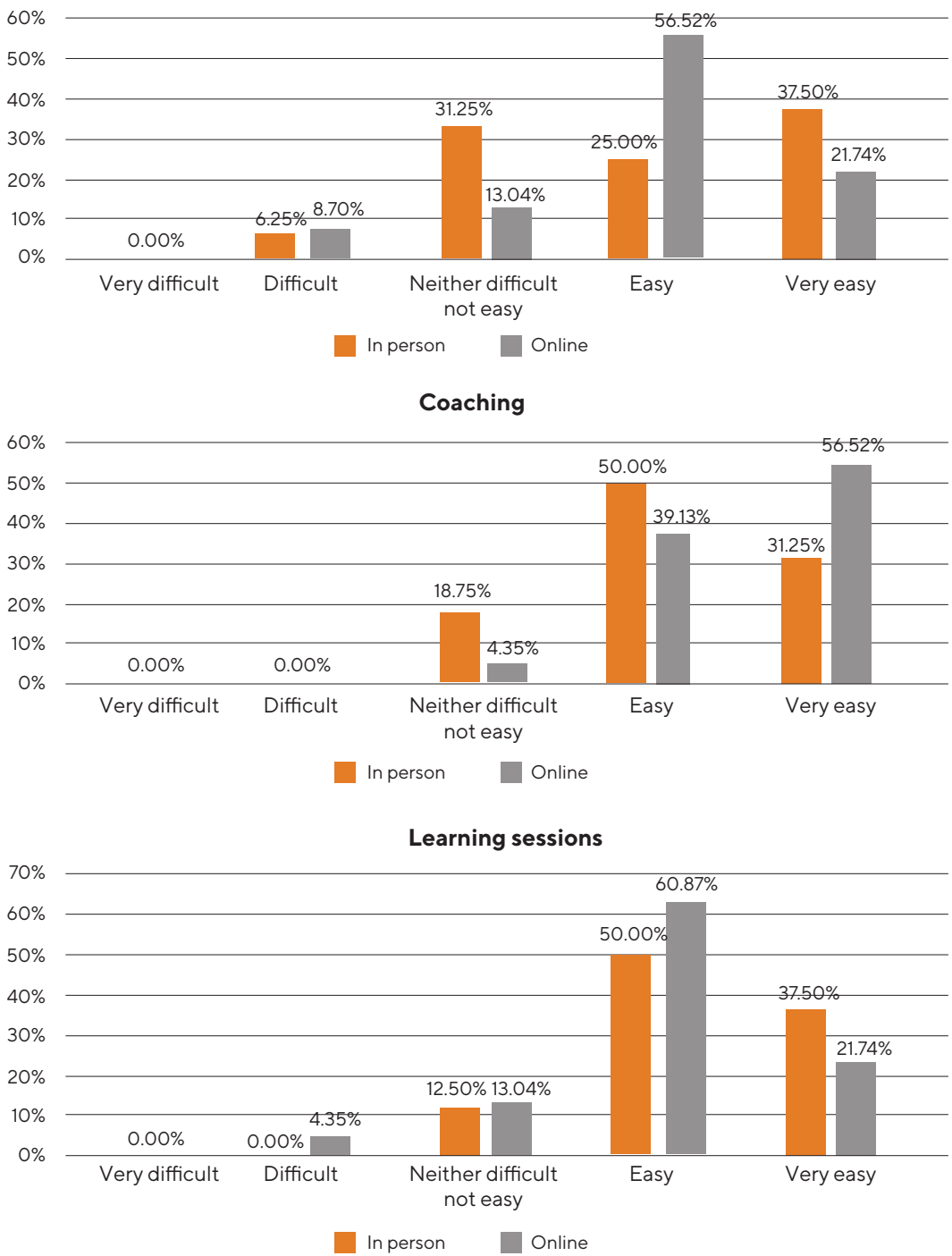


There are, however, notable exceptions. For instance, given common assumptions about the presumed challenges of engaging in a simulation online compared to in person, it is notable that online participants were more than twice as likely as their in-person peers to indicate it was 'easy' to engage in the simulation (57% compared to 25%). Similarly, 57% of online participants found it 'very easy' to learn

from the coaching, compared to 31% of in-person participants. Again, these findings are drawn from a small sample, and cannot attribute differences to modality. However, these findings do caution against casual narratives assuming it is 'harder' to engage in experiential learning activities like simulations or coaching online than it is in person.

**Figure 5.** How easy is it for students to engage in key learning activities during the Unit 4 intensive?

Q7 - Please indicate how easy or difficult it was for you to understand, follow, and learn during the AHLF704 unit. (In person, n=16; online n=23)



## Simulation

*‘The schedule was certainly very busy, but in the end I didn’t regret the sacrifice I made during that period.’ [Cohort 6, Unit 2]*

As seen above, simulations are a highly valued component of the DESLH, whether delivered in-person or online. Simulations within the intensive units provide a space for students to put into practice all that they have learnt on the course. This is done in two main ways:

1. Individual leadership - demonstration of leadership behaviours by each student
2. Collective and operational leadership - developing and implementing appropriate humanitarian strategies that take account of current and changing humanitarian contexts.

Simulations also offer students the opportunity to learn from each other. The simulations are designed around the following principles:

- Provide realistic complexity - as relevant as possible to current and future humanitarian

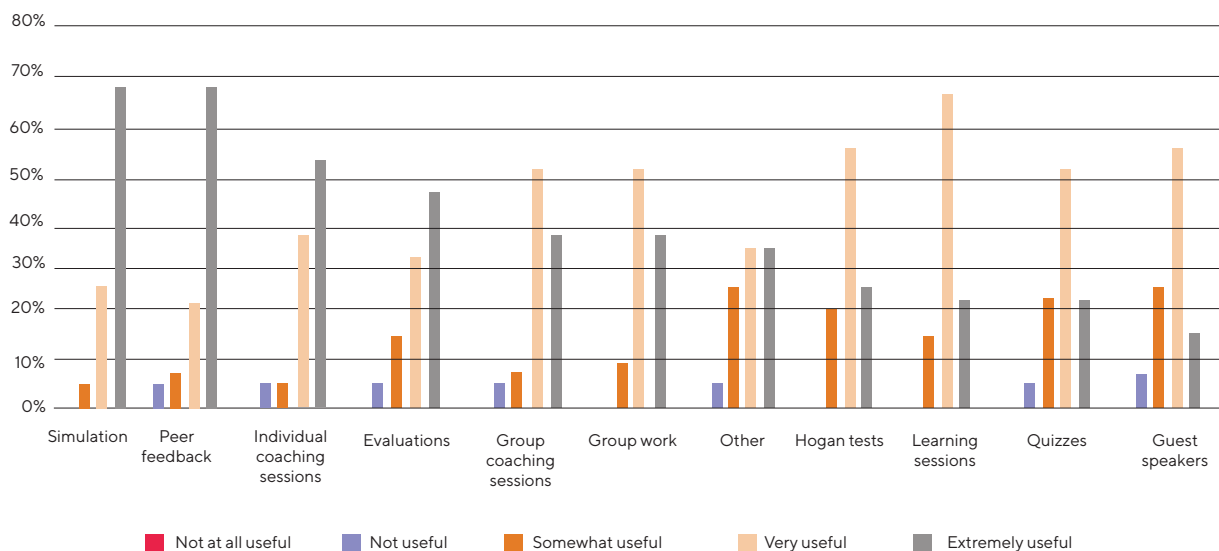
contexts involving a wide range of interactions with different stakeholders who present multiple and contrasting views and opinions;

- Raise questions and dilemmas (operational, strategic and ethical) that students will be confronted with;
- Limit the number of written submissions required from teams;
- Encourage and support good practice in the humanitarian sector.

Simulations are repeatedly rated as the among the most valued learning experiences for participants of the DESLH, in both the Unit 2 and Unit 4 intensives. Cohort 6 responses for the Unit 4 simulation have already been presented above, showing that both online and in-person groups rated the simulation as the most important learning element in their intensive experience (Figure ). This same cohort undertook Unit 2 intensive online, and similarly rated simulations, peer feedback, and individual coaching as the three most useful learning components of the intensive (Figure ).

**Figure 6.** The simulation and peer-to-peer feedback were extremely useful during Unit 2 intensive

Q16 - The DESLH uses different learning tools and methods for the AHLF702 digital intensive unit 2. How useful have you found each of these tools/methods? (n=31)





Qualitative feedback from Cohort 6 after Unit 4 sheds light on online and in-person experiences of the simulations, and why both groups rate the simulation highly (Table 2). Participants from both the online and in-person groups remarked on the intensity of the experience, with in-person participants more likely to reflect on the logistical/ residential conditions.

Overall, however, the sentiment between both online and in-person groups is that the simulation is a highly-valued and well-organised part of the intensive experience, providing an opportunity to develop leadership skills, to put theory into practice, and to engage in a realistic humanitarian scenario.

**Table 2.** Cohort 6 feedback on the Unit 4 simulation: online and in-person

In-person	Online
This exercise is very important and we saw the big challenges the pedagogical team had to overcome, with the collaboration of the cohort. However, for future sessions, it will be useful to improve: organisation of the logistics, to make sure the sanitary conditions in the lodging come together, that transport is well coordinated and there are preparatory visits beforehand to prepare the lodging, accurate communication about the climate conditions. The students need to prepare according to the conditions at the site. There would be no need to ask students to bring camping type equipment such as a flashlight/ torch, appetite suppressants if there was a decent catering service. As much as possible, give a bit of time for review between the sessions and the launch of the simulation, given the resources are put online the day before and [there is] not enough time to review them, and the computers are taken away before the exercise and the folder of documents isn't accessible for the whole period of the simulation.	The simulation was well organised. While we were immersed in the simulation, in reality, we forgot it was a simulation. We took it so seriously, viewing it as real events.
The simulation was too long and it would be good to have an agenda, even if it isn't very detailed.	The sessions are very intense
My comment on the simulation is that at the end of the session, one can take a day and half to do a comprehensive overview.	The simulation was well designed and tailored to the actual realities of the humanitarian world. Congratulations to [faculty member], the creator.
I really appreciated the spirit of adaptability to the Singa context which saw the internet interrupted across the whole area. That didn't prevent the simulation from continuing. I would add that the SimOps knew how to really play their roles.	An exercise that enables us to live the VUCA reality.
The first hours/first days were hard and laborious; to adapt to the group, get one's bearings and strive to play the real game. Along the way, we advanced in the process and it become more collaborative.	The online simulation was very intense. We even worked on the weekend.
More time in the simulation	The simulation was essential for developing our leadership capacity, to adapt and put what we were learning into practice. We role played as if it was real and its success was determined by how much we valued its importance. It is also an excellent way to work with other students and get to know each other.
I would have quite liked to take the SIM a bit further, to have more of an opportunity to practice in a real-life situation and put theoretical knowledge into practice	To have two express coaching sessions [during the simulation], I found that very beneficial

### 3.3 Peer learning

Peer learning is an integral part of the DESLH. Cohort 6 graduates report feeling that they could learn from their peers to support their own learning during Unit 4, independent of whether they completed this intensive online or in-person (Figure 6). When asked if they were ‘able to draw on the knowledge, skills, and experience of your peers to support your learning throughout Unit 4?’ all students opted for at least five out of ten (with zero signifying not at all, and ten signifying enormously), with the majority from both groups opting for seven or eight out of ten.

A higher proportion of online students from Unit 4 (70% of respondents) scored their ability to learn from peers as 8 or above, compared to their in-person peers (54%). This is an important finding, as it indicates that online learning does not present a barrier to peer-to-peer learning and support within the DESLH. The design and delivery of the DESLH online curriculum is successfully providing a space that supports peer learning.

### 3.4 DESLH leadership behaviours: student learning outcomes

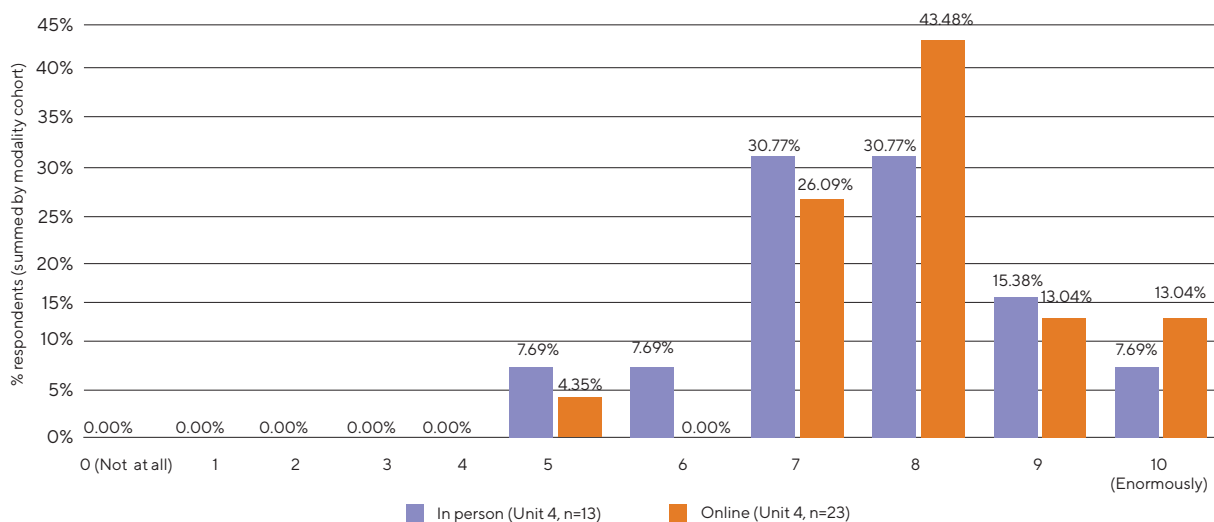
As covered in the literature review, the leadership development research evidence highlights the importance of supporting students to practice

specific leadership behaviours in order to sustain individual change, including developing personal learning plans and journaling (Bonesso et al., 2023). Reflecting this evidence base, the DESLH draws on a leadership framework to structure students’ learning and reflection throughout their leadership development journey (see annex 8.7). The course is structured around a matrix of leadership behaviours on the basis of which students evolve throughout the course and are assessed. This matrix consists of six behaviours (communicating vision and strategic purpose, strategic thinking, managerial courage, deliver results, building high-performing teams, and change and transformation) and four values (integrity, honesty, fairness, and trustworthiness), and is specific to the DESLH. For all DESLH students, the learning behaviours serve as a compass during their learning and as a reference point when it comes to personal development, especially in Units 2 and 4.

When asked to reflect on their understanding of the leadership behaviours, students from the online and in-person Unit 4 reported overall similar levels of understanding (Figure 7). ‘Delivering results’ and ‘strategic thinking’ for instance, generated similar results for online and in-person groups for this intensive. No respondents selected very weak or weak for their level of understanding of the six key leadership behaviours.

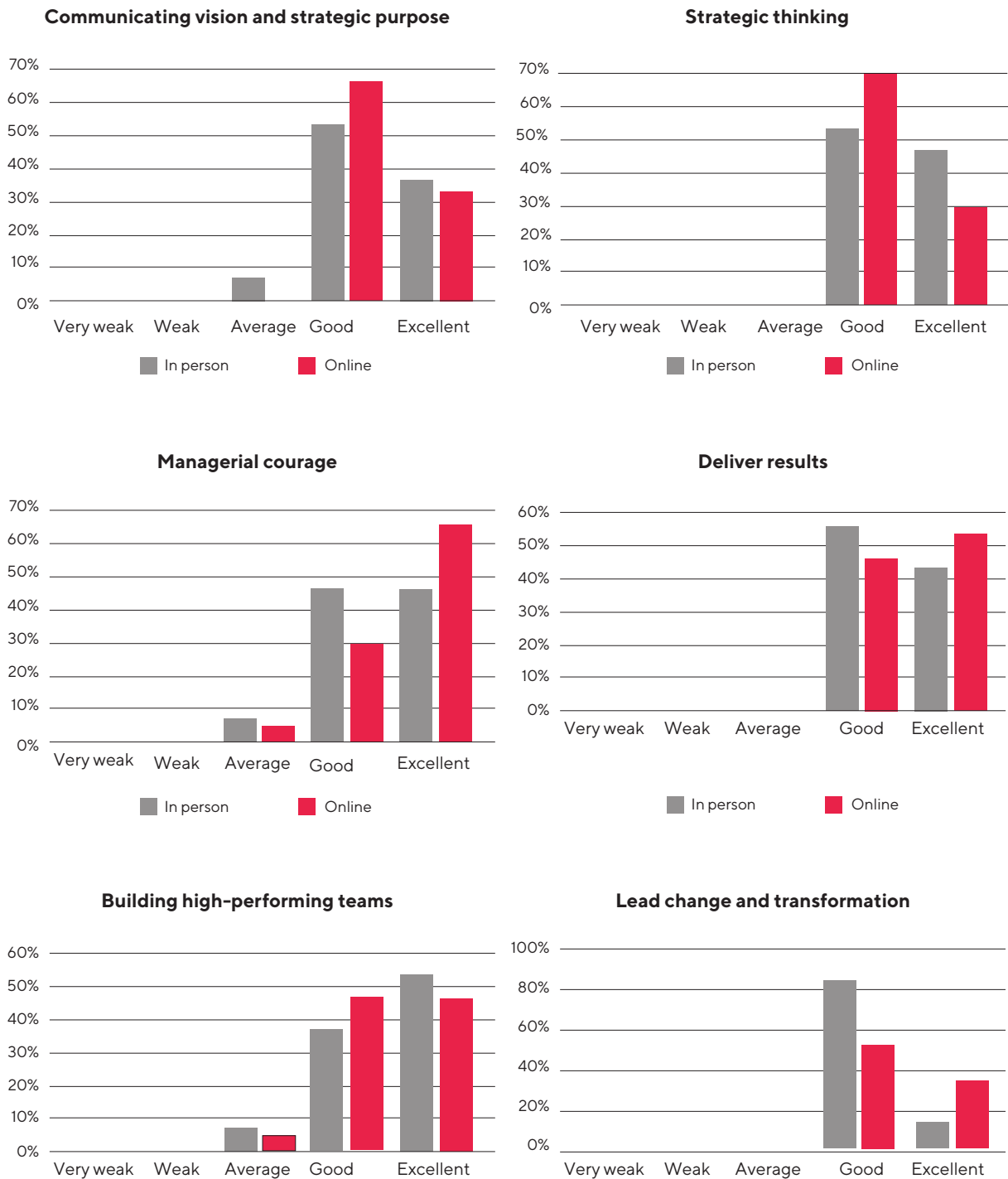
There is one behaviour which at first glance appears to suggest a difference between modalities—leading change and transformation, with 85% of in-person

**Figure 7.** Cohort 6 participants felt they could learn from their peers in Unit 4, both online and in-person  
Q18/ Q11 - Were you able to draw on the knowledge, skills and experience of your peers to support your learning throughout Unit 4?



**Figure 8.** Student comprehension of the DESLH leadership behaviours

Q21 - Following Unit 4, how would you rate your understanding of the leadership behaviours?



participants reporting a 'good' understanding, compared to 57% of their online peers. However, when averaged across the highest two options (good and excellent), both groups reported an impressive

overall level of understanding, with 100% of in-person and 91% of online participants reporting either a 'good' or 'excellent' understanding of this leadership behaviour.

### 3.5 Student satisfaction

Student satisfaction is one of the main indicators used within higher education to determine the quality of education being delivered (Nikou & Maslov, 2023). Across the whole DESLH (all cohorts), 95% of students rate the course as satisfactory or highly satisfactory, indicating a high degree of overall satisfaction across the whole programme (ITT).

When student satisfaction data for Cohort 6 are disaggregated into different learning component (intensives or courses) and modality (online and in-person), similar patterns are observed, with a high overall degree of reported satisfaction (Figure 9).

The online course (units 1 and 3) had the lowest overall satisfaction rating. However, 61% respondents reported being 'plutot satisfait'/'quite satisfied' with this element of the course, with a further 36% being 'very satisfied', summing to 97% in total, which is the highest overall figure satisfaction rating for all learning components detailed above. This is closely followed by Units 2 and 4 intensives-- 94% as quite or very satisfied--which combines online and in-person/ online hybrid units.

Interview and KAP survey data shed further light on student satisfaction specifically with online learning through the DESLH. Overall, there is a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of online delivery, owing

largely to the 'professionalism' and responsiveness of the DESLH faculty and support team:

*'Unit 4 was very rewarding for me. Although it was done remotely, it was interactive so I didn't feel remote. And that was thanks to the professionalism of the whole team.'*  
[Cohort 6, online Unit 4 feedback]

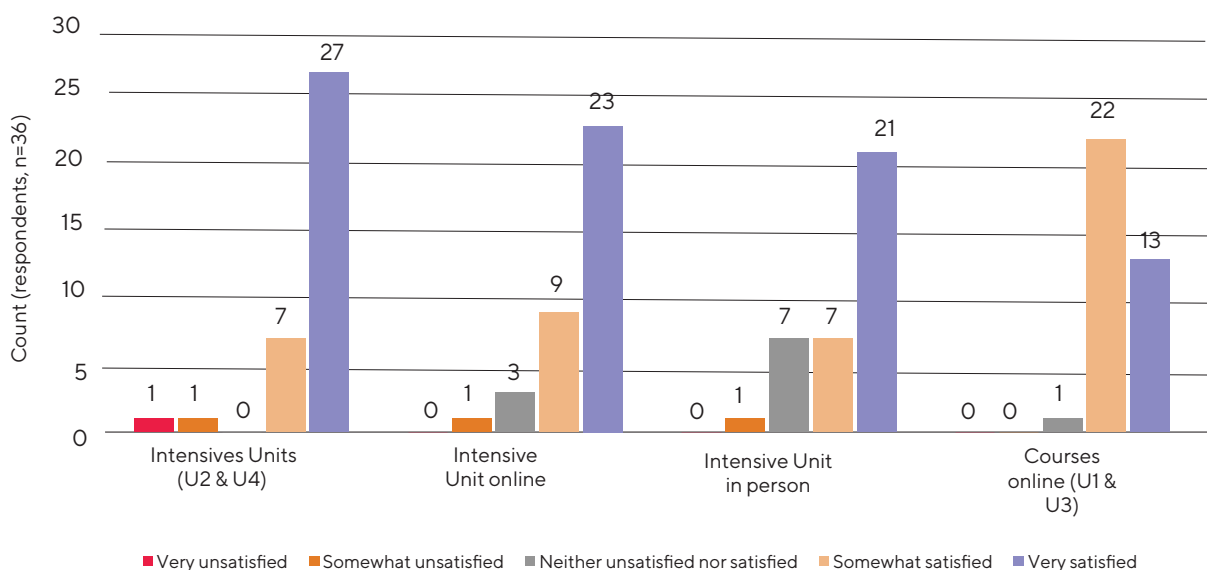
Graduates also report that the methods used for online learning components are efficient and easy to use:

*'I found [digital method used] very effective and ideal for this workshop because Teams is easy to use, you can also connect it to the smartphone which lets you get up and move around the house while staying connected to meetings.'* [Cohort 6 Unit 2 feedback]

### 3.6 Student engagement

Student engagement is the one quality indicator that qualitative data do suggest may be impaired during online intensive experiences. As flagged in the literature review above, student engagement refers to the energy and effort students put into their learning, and has behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions (Heilporn et al., 2023). Several DESLH graduates reported general perceptions that student engagement--such as concentration

**Figure 9.** Student satisfaction with online and in-person learning components is high  
Q36 - To what extent were you satisfied or dissatisfied with the following provisions? (n=36)



and commitment to the learning task at hand—may appear more relaxed or less disciplined during online delivery. One participant, for instance, highlighted this view:

*'...people don't concentrate [online] as much as they do face-to-face. Currently, I work in a face-to-face context. There's a level of discipline imposed [by virtue of being in person] that you don't always have online.'*  
[9AlumF]

Insights shared by a third female graduate deepened these first two general perspectives, introducing contextual details on what other activities might be distracting students from the online content:

*'And then the last part is concentration, because you tell yourself it's online, so you can do it while you're doing something else for example, you see, and during it you're signing documents, while you're giving instructions, or even while you're maybe at home cooking. So, sometimes that's it, you also lose the concentration of those learning.'*  
[13AlumF]

As this last quotation suggests, it is important to bear in mind that disruptions to student engagement are often a product of contextual risk factors, such as household chores ('cooking'), high workloads, workplace disruptions, and a lack of familial or employer support for participation in residential learning. Students who opt for online learning often do so because of considerations such as parenting duties like meal preparation or flexibility owing to a high workload. Online learning provides these students with a way to continue their learning while executing these additional duties. The fact that their concentration may be interrupted—through for instance having to help children with homework, or interruptions from colleagues while listening to online content at the office—is therefore not a simple question of disrespect or disengagement: it is a gendered and complex phenomenon, which needs to be considered in the context of household labour and other work-related pressures. The underlying challenge here is how online learning makes it harder to set and maintain boundaries with others around you: interruptions and distractions are more likely, and the temptation to try and multitask significantly greater, all of which is detrimental to engagement and, by extension, success.



# 4. DESLH GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS AND PREFERENCES

As outlined in the previous chapter, key monitoring and evaluation data indicate that the online and in-person intensives offer equivalent learning experiences, in terms of quality. Such quality indicators – such as student completion rates, experiences of key learning activities, engagement in peer learning, understanding of the leadership behaviours, and satisfaction—do not differ significantly by modality, based on the available data.

However, comparable quality does not mean that the experiences or perceptions of online and in-person intensives are the same. DESLH graduates and faculty alike report a much higher frequency of stated preferences for in-person intensives, compared to online. This stated preference—which is independent of evidence of impact and quality—is consistent with the wider research evidence indicating that despite no intrinsic difference in efficacy of these learning modalities when done well, students tend to express a preference for in-person learning in general.

This finding is important, as it has implications for other variables—such as student engagement and sense of belonging—which do have an impact on learning outcomes and other quality metrics.

A minority of respondents do report a preference for online learning, often doing so on grounds of better access, inclusion (particularly for women with caring responsibilities), or workload balance. This too is an important finding, as it has implications for improving access, inclusion, and diversity for the DESLH.

This chapter explores these stated preferences for and perceptions of in-person or online learning, including the reasons behind this preference, to inform the ongoing improvement and delivery of the DESLH.

## 4.1 Preferences for in-person learning

A range of monitoring and evaluation data sources indicate a preference for residential intensives both among DESLH faculty and graduates. In post-course knowledge, attitude, and practices (KAP) surveys and course feedback surveys, for instance, students are asked for general feedback (not directed towards one specific aspect of the course), eliciting comments such as:

- 'Always organise intensive face-to-face sessions'. (Cohort 6 Unit 2 feedback)
- 'For future training sessions, I think it will be very important to organise the session face-to-face. This will optimise learner learning' (Cohort 6 Unit 2 feedback)
- 'More face-to-face sessions (Cohort 6 post-KAP feedback)

A key observation in the preference for residential intensives is that graduates report this learning environment feels 'more real', and exposes how people make decisions when 'you are faced with yourself' [1F] and under immense pressure as a team. One participant, for instance, said that the residential intensive feels 'as if one is in a true humanitarian emergency' [5AlumF], compared to switching off the computer and going home each night alone:

*'It's [online simulation] not really, it's not the same thing at all. And the experience over there in Dourdan, where we were in the session, even the experience we had, it's like night and day with what we did remotely, it's not the same thing. We had to sleep in the room because we were in simulation. There was stress, simulation, as if we were really in a real humanitarian emergency.'* [5FacF]

While this may reflect their experiences of humanitarian work, it is important to note that this is not universal, especially in light of changes to work modalities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a variety of roles requiring extensive online work.

Another graduate reiterated the importance of the 'human' element for their own learning journey:

*'I come back to my human side and it's important, as we can see, but there are also scenarios that we did face-to-face last year and this year we didn't do them, for example. For example, we did sessions on the management of IDPs. So, for me, that's fundamental for humanitarian leadership training, because it allows you to see all these principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality, to put learners in situations and see how they would react to real, tangible cases like that. So, for me, the case study side or the palpable, real-life element is a bit lacking in online training.'* [13AlumF]

There is a strong sense that this human element is comparatively weaker or even absent online, leading to the sense of a lack of human contact and connection with the teaching team and fellow students. Several graduates interviewed for this study, for instance, believed that 'you lose a huge amount in virtual learning sessions' in terms of the 'human aspect':

*'The other challenge I find is that I'm more, um, human contact than virtual, so that human side is very much lost with virtual sessions.'* [13AlumF]

*'... as an African, when I meet someone in person, I know what they're like. But online, virtually, it's still a bit, you see, it's still a bit difficult.'* [3AlumM]

*'I don't know how to explain it, but I had a feeling of really being with people who are in humanitarian work in real life, having discussions with them, interacting with them.'* [15AlumF]

This lack of human connection was also felt to inhibit the ability to observe and learn leadership behaviours from others, because students can 'hide

behind a screen' and it is more difficult to read body language or identify and address problematic behaviours:

*'Face-to-face participation is more interactive. People see each other and see each other in person, mixing with each other. An interaction, but also a sharing of experiences, of leadership behaviours that we can assess. Tone is perceptible in person. So, for me it's more advantageous and I opted for the face-to-face. But the disadvantage [of online] is that you can't really assess the students properly because it's virtual. Some people are behind their screens, focused, sometimes the camera is on, but people can do other things than just concentrate [on the course]. So, I think that for me, from my perspective, face-to-face is more beneficial.'* [4AlumM]

*'There are things you can hide online. [...] I can shout, I talk, I present my data or the homework I've been asked to do. Then you deactivate. [...] You activate cameras. It's not always easy to read someone's body language behind the screens, there are people who are good at hiding their behavioural traits, but it's automatic when in person.'* [9AlumF]

Related to the behavioural dimensions of online and in-person modalities, several respondents indicated their belief that participants engagement is more authentic and sustained in-person :

*'At times there were silences, silence from many people, a lot. Maybe it was linked to being connected to work, but face-to-face, everyone made themselves much more available to be there, from start to finish.'* [15AlumF]

DESLH graduates reported that online learning affected their ability to communicate with others and get to know them, build trust, and forge relationships. For those who attended in-person intensives, they have found it very useful for networking and they built relationships that have endured after the training. Interviewees also felt that people 'made themselves a lot more available' [15AlumF] in the face-to-face unit and noted there are opportunities to chat over meals and at the end of the day. They reported how important it is to be able to 'chat, share

and interact' to feel closer to 'people who are really in the humanitarian space' [15F] Graduates reported that it was difficult to chat and exchange with others online because team members were often distracted by work or family commitments.

Some interviewees said that it is easier to prevent and resolve misunderstandings and conflict when you can 'sit around a table to clarify' any 'small tensions' that have arisen [1AlumM]. Such opportunities are far less feasible with online learning, due to the need to schedule interactions and that connection and communication is often felt to be harder and less rewarding.

According to graduates, online learning requires 'a lot of discipline' [10AlumF] and a 'lot of sacrifices' [4AlumF]. They reported finding it harder to be motivated and learn stuck 'sedentary in front of a computer' for hours. In contrast, in the face-to-face intensive, students felt that building relationships and connections helped build self and group motivation:

*'When it's face-to-face, people motivate each other. Even being able to see the teaching team ... there's a friendship that's created, there's trust that's created. And when there's trust, you say to yourself, wait a minute, she's waiting for me in the room and I'm still outside trying to occupy myself with a few distractions. But why? Out of politeness, I must go in. But if it's online, you'll always find a way to be excused.'* [12AlumM]

This view of the 'power' of in-person or residential intensives was reiterated by one external stakeholder who manages several staff members who have graduated from the DESLH:

*'Because we always ask people what they valued about the course, right? Like our, our staff that went through it. And so, for us, what we have been told was powerful was definitely the residentials, and when they can be in person. And [while] people have been so grateful for the efforts made to put things online...there's certain things you just can't replace that way. So, the value of going back to what we talked about earlier, having, 360s, doing a Hogan [assessment] and getting very specific feedback and working through that with the coach, right. And then*

*people coming up with their own plan then to go, what are they going to focus on? And then, yeah, practicing it in a simulation context and getting feedback from colleagues and obviously then wanting to continue to practice it in, in the workplace.'* [1ExtINGOF]

For a minority of graduates, the logistical or technical aspects of online learning were felt to have impeded their ability to fully engage online. The main recurrent observation was that the lack of a reliable and stable internet connection made the online simulation harder to engage with. Unreliable internet connection is 'a huge challenge' for those in African countries, according to one participant, particularly those outside of the cities in field-based roles. Lack of reliable connectivity caused interruptions to group work, prevented some members from participating fully and made assignments take longer, sometimes keeping students up later than would otherwise be necessary. Some students report working from their office where the internet connection was more reliable, but this often meant they had less privacy and were frequently interrupted by work colleagues.

*'The issue of connectivity remains a big challenge in Africa, and I'm thinking for example of countries like the Central African Republic or people in the field, it's enormously complicated. There's a lot of goodwill, but sometimes it's a very challenging for that person to be able to take part in the online sessions.'* [13AlumF]

*'I'm in a country where the internet connection is very slow. This caused me quite a few problems, but I was able to adapt.'*

*'Because of the internet connection, I started some sessions late or sometimes I left the room in the middle of a session before returning. This had a negative impact on my learning.'* [DESLH Cohort 6 participants, regarding challenges in online learning for Unit 2]

For others, time differences compounded the challenges of completing collaborative group work online within the expected time frames:

*'... the other challenge was the different group work we had to do, and the time difference. For some of the work, the time difference was*

*very, very significant. So, we all developed the same strategy of staying in the office as much as possible. It was intensive, yes, but you stay in the office for the connection. But after the week ended, there were tasks that had to be done afterwards. And that task required us to get together again. And there were times when we worked very late.'* [14AlumF]

While internet connectivity will continue to be a challenge and may be beyond the remit of the Centre, there is nonetheless scope, going forward, for the DESLH faculty to consider scheduling and team compositions based on location, to mitigate the challenges of time-zones for online learning.

## 4.2 Advantages of online learning

A minority of students reported an explicit preference for online learning, primarily citing the flexibility and accessibility for those who cannot travel, including for those with caring responsibilities, or with high workloads. Although the minority view, these findings are important, as there are often implications for access, gender, and inclusion.

Three female graduates, for instance, explained how the flexibility afforded by online learning was important for those who couldn't travel or with high workloads:

*'We have to recognise that online training has the advantage of enabling people who can't be there and travel, or who can't have time off, to still keep in touch with their studies.'* [13AlumF]

*'The opportunity to the training online enabled me to complete my training because travel, for us, it was only recently that [NGO name] lifted this travel ban due to Providence. So, it wouldn't have been easy for me to travel, so it depends on what's at stake. For me, at the time, it was better to do this because it enabled me to stay in my place of work, to continue working while doing my training.'* [14AlumF]

*'It allowed us to easily balance work and studies in case we really ... We were faced*

*with this challenge, this difficulty with availability or time.'* [11AlumF]

Another female candidate, for instance, specified that online learning helped her to manage children's homework while completing her own studies:

*'And I must admit that having done this online training course means I am better at following the progress of not only my daughter, but also other children who are in my care, in their online training. They can't make up any old story.'* [14AlumF]

Some participants also found that online learning helped them learn new methods, techniques and learning platforms that have been useful in their personal and professional lives. One graduate, for instance, said he learned useful methods to apply in his own work:

*'... [online delivery] even helped us learn how to make our way around other platforms, which are also very, very important.'* [3AlumM]

Another graduate said that online learning led her to adapt and create a WhatsApp group for her team, which helped quickly get to know and leverage people's strengths and weaknesses.

*'... the other advantage of these weeks is that... there was the whole WhatsApp network that included all the students, but also the WhatsApps for our work groups that we created so that we could keep in touch and find out about the different tasks that were required during the week. So, that allowed us to get to know each other, to discover each other's strengths and weaknesses... We were able to capitalise on each other's strengths to be able to respond to the different tasks that were asked of us in the activities during the week-long intensives.'* [14AlumF]

A final reported preference for online simulations is that they are environmentally more sustainable, given participants are not required to travel. However, one faculty member—and former participant—suggested that the environmental impact is lessened now that simulations are held in West Africa for Francophone cohorts.

### 4.3 Challenges with online learning

All DESLH Cohort 6 students completed the Unit 2 intensive online. When asked what factors or elements had a negative impact on their online learning experience, this cohort listed fatigue, time management, and internet connection as the three biggest challenges (Figure ). Only two students reported that the understanding how to use the digital space/ online platform had a negative impact on their learning during this online intensive.

When asked to elaborate on their choices for the above question, many respondents reflected on the challenging contexts in which they worked, including managing teams, balancing multiple workstreams or demands, or meeting work deadlines on top of trying to engage in the DESLH learning. One survey respondent, for instance, highlights the competing demands and challenges highlighted above:

*‘Being in a management role, I had to delegate as many tasks as possible to my colleagues. However, I had to be directly involved in certain matters, and it was difficult to balance this with the fairly intensive period of work in Unit 2. In order to have good conditions to follow Unit 2 , I had a connection installed at home, but I had disruptions for two days. Fortunately, even though I was disturbed, it didn’t hinder my understanding of the training session.’*

Others reiterated the challenge posed by working in contexts where the internet was unreliable and slow, and the additional disruptions that poor connectivity imposed on their experience.

#### Challenges for DESLH students with children and high domestic workloads

In interviews and focus group discussions, several female DESLH graduates highlighted that even when course content is offered online, participants struggled to balance the demands of parenting on top of their studies. One graduate, for instance, described her challenges participating online with a baby:

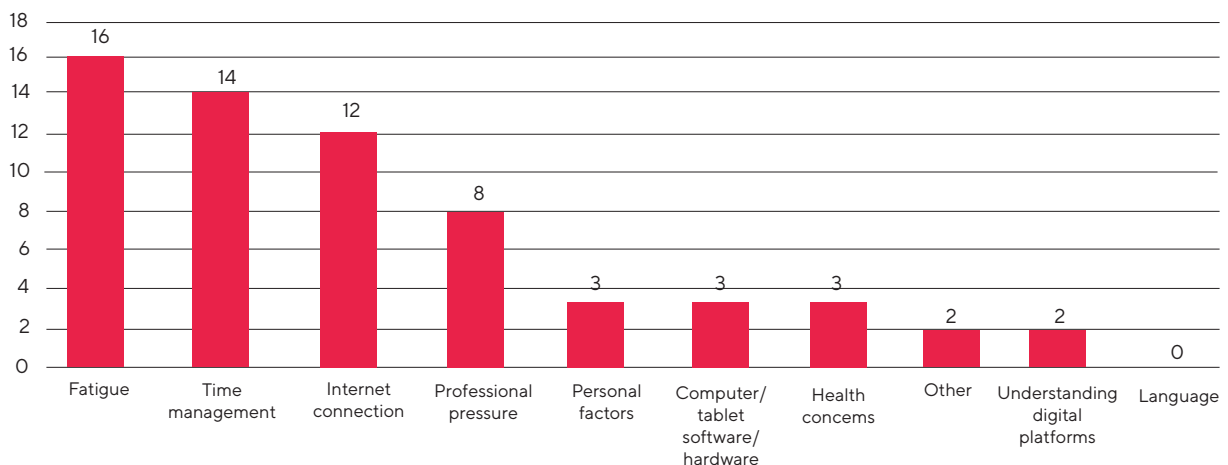
*‘As a woman with a baby, online [you still] have to stay with your baby. But to get proper training, I think it’s better to be face-to-face. That’s my opinion. Why not make it easier? We know that we’re women. Perhaps we could make it easier for women with babies, for babies who aren’t very young, to travel with their babies to the residential. That’s my suggestion. ‘ [1AlumF]*

This same participant explained that she had to leave her baby with family for a month to be able to meet her DESLH study commitments:

*‘I didn’t really have time to look after the baby. He’s still a baby and I had to go and leave him with family for a month. I left him*

**Figure 10.** Fatigue, time management, and internet connection are challenges for online intensives

Q5 - What factors had a negative impact on your learning during the AHLF702 digital intensive unit 2? Please choose up to three options.





*with family for a month, just long enough to finish the sessions, which were quite intense, before going to pick him up... It was only during the intense sessions. I didn't really have time for the baby. It really was. You had to be available as much as possible.'* [1AlumF]

This experiences of having to juggle domestic and parenting responsibilities during online studies was reiterated by another female graduate:

*'My family suffered from my absence even when I was there, because I had to work*

*with the others and I made arrangements so I could look after the house. So, when I get home from the office and always very quickly, I make the meal, I check everything and I look at the homework. And I check if she's connected because my daughter too, she'd started the online course, to see if she was going to connect to her course and has followed [it].'* [14AlumF]

This is an important finding, as it complicates assumptions that women with caring responsibilities 'prefer' online learning, demonstrating the challenges of managing familial pressures while studying.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Online and in-person intensives offer equivalent learning experiences in terms of quality, with comparable student satisfaction, learning outcomes, and opportunities for peer-learning.

While online delivery delivers equivalent learning outcomes in terms of metrics, perception and perspective data gathered from DESLH participants and faculty alike report a strong preference overall for residential intensives. While harder to quantify (if indeed possible at all), the perceptual finding that students and faculty generally prefer in-person learning merits close consideration, as it has the potential to affect the subjective learning experience.

Achieving comparable student engagement also appears to be a challenge for the online intensives, with qualitative data suggesting participants may be distracted by household chores such as child-minding and meal preparation during these remote learning sessions. This is a highly gendered finding, with women significantly more likely than their male peers to report challenges balancing domestic and family responsibilities with their ability to engage in their learning, regardless of modality.

However, consistent with the research evidence on this topic, DESLH data indicate that online learning works best under optimal circumstances, for instance with experienced learners who have a high degree of intrinsic motivation and discipline,

and whose learning is not impeded by competing demands on their time, whether professional or personal.

Given the flexibility this modality affords, however, the online intensive option is often preferred by participants who report difficult work or home set-ups and constraints. However, these prior risk factors—such as demanding professional workloads, difficult working environments, a lack of familial support, or significant home caring responsibilities—increase the risk of sub-optimal course outcomes. In other words, the more prior behavioural and contextual risk factors participants bring to the intensive (whether online or residential), the riskier it is for their own learning outcomes. This raises questions about how such risk factors might be mitigated. There is often a gendered element to these contextual risk factors. Women, for instance, are more likely to report a significant burden from domestic chores—such as meal preparation or child-caring responsibilities, including overseeing children with their homework—which interferes with their ability to concentrate on their learning regardless of modality.

Overall, monitoring and evaluating data indicate a high degree of student satisfaction and quality with both the online and in-person delivery of the intensives of the DESLH; while an overall stated preference for in-person.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Centre should:

- Investigate strategies to identify and mitigate students' prior behavioural and contextual risk factors—such as high workload, domestic and caring responsibilities, and financial precarity—which may impair their ability to engage with their learning, both online and in-person;
- Continue to monitor student engagement during online intensives to gain further insight into root causes of disengagement or distraction, and explore potential strategies to mitigate these challenges (e.g. through consultations with students and/or research);
- Explore strategies for people to 'get out from behind their screens' during online learning, to encourage movement and less sedentary learning to further enhance the learning experience, and to maximise the opportunities for peer to peer learning and support during online delivery as that comes through as equally powerful online as in person;
- Continue gathering data on key quality indicators—such as student satisfaction, learning outcomes, engagement, and changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practices—to compare modalities and inform ongoing data-driven course improvements to intensives;
- Conduct further research into effective pedagogical practices of online and residential intensives;
- Continue providing residential intensives where feasible, to provide future cohorts with the immersive experience of face-to-face, intensive learning and support; and
- Encourage students to reflect on the different experiences and learnings that can be gained from different modalities of learning and their relevance to the humanitarian sector beyond their immediate experiences and locales.

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## 8. ANNEXES

### 8.1 Research design and ethics

This study is covered by the research ethics permissions of the DESLH Impact Study. Please see main report for details.

### 8.2 Research questions

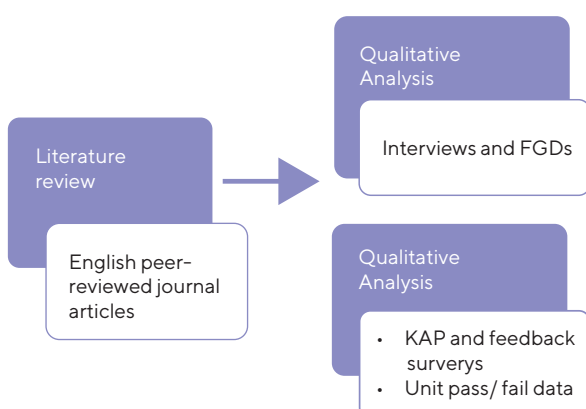
To ensure the DESLH offers the highest quality learning experience through online and in-person modalities, this research study has been organised around two research questions:

- What are the similarities and differences in quality indicators for online and in-person delivery of DESLH intensive units’
- What are the perceptions and preferences for online and in-person intensives among DESLH staff and students?
- How can the above questions be leveraged to improve the design and delivery of the DESLH in line with the strategic objectives of the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership and key stakeholders?

### 8.3 Research methods

This evaluation study uses a mixed-methods research design to answer these key research questions. Following an extensive literature review, parallel quantitative and qualitative methods were applied to secondary DESLH data, including interview transcripts, student success (pass/ fail rates) data, and student satisfaction data.

Figure 11. Mixed-methods research design



### 8.4 Methodological limitations and out of scope

This study focuses on DESLH Cohort 6 Unit 4, given this is the only unit which entailed simultaneous and comparable online and in-person modalities within the same cohort. A more extensive impact study comparing online vs. in-person modalities would need to be based on a longitudinal comparative research design, which is beyond the scope of this study.

The available data do not let us assess if the hybrid modality—the provision of the course through online and in-person/ residential learning—influences prospective applicants’ perspectives of the course, particularly for women. This is an important evaluation question, as it would enable an analysis of perception about modalities and application considerations by gender (given frequent assumptions that students with families prefer remote learning options—an assumption which is challenged in this report). Further research would be needed to answer this question.

### 8.5 Literature review parameters

#### Literature categories for review

- **Web of Science** and/or **Scopus (or just Google Scholar)**
- ‘Pearl growing’ and expert referrals
- Restrict to social sciences, including education/ teaching and learning, business
- **Key words:** simulations, leadership, and learning

**Table 3.** Literature review inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Disciplines: social sciences, education, leadership development	Exclude engineering, psychology, and health
Post-2010 publication date	Published before 2010 (with key exceptions)
English language	Languages other than English
Peer-reviewed, academic literature in scholarly journals	No predatory journals

## 8.6 Data analysis

### 8.6.1 Data catalogue

**Table 4.** Data catalogue for online vs. in-person study

Cohort	Unit	Data source	Description
<b>DESLH 6</b>	2	Post-unit student feedback	All online
<b>DESLH 6</b>	4	Post-unit student feedback surveys	Hybrid unit: online participants; in-person participants
<b>DESLH 3</b>	2	Post-unit student feedback survey	Unit 2 Intensive all in-person
<b>DESLH 3</b>	4	Post-unit student feedback survey	Unit 4 Intensive all online

## 8.7 CHL Leadership Framework: DESLH leadership behaviours

Communicating Vision and Strategic Purpose	Strategic Thinking	Managerial Courage	Deliver Results	Building High Performing Teams	Change & Transformation
<b>High Level</b>					
Communicates a compelling, inspired vision and sense of core purpose	Aligns ideas and solutions to strategic imperatives	States willingness to promote and defend opinions and ideas	Removes barriers and constraints to ensure that plans are achieved	Facilitates and manages interaction between team members so that they perform at a higher level together than they would as individuals.	Addresses the concerns of others over change, helping them to embrace it and demonstrating own belief and high expectations
Tailors communication style to various audiences, using analogies, humour, gestures etc. to promote the core message	Evaluates the opportunities and risks of each idea and solution to make informed strategic decisions	Prepared to take calculated risks and stand by decisions despite resistance	Actively manages risk and takes action to reduce risk	Creates climate of high team morale by sharing team successes	Celebrates success of change both at the end and throughout the process
Conveys complex issues with clarity, brevity and confidence	Puts in place structured opportunities for others to generate alternative ideas	Confronts difficult situations and seeks resolution	Makes changes to improve performance as a result of information received	Promotes collaborative working across boundaries	Builds the confidence of others in their own ability to embrace change
Shows optimism about the project to vision and future possibilities, which in turn inspires others		Makes tough decisions and corrective action without delay	Creates measures and metrics to track performance		Effectively influences others understanding their interests and showing how they will be met by own preferred solution
Demonstrates vision and values by acting empathetically and compassionately in service of others					

Communicating Vision and Strategic Purpose	Strategic Thinking	Managerial Courage	Deliver Results	Building High Performing Teams	Change & Transformation
<b>Adding Value</b>					
Communicates clearly with logical structure	Develops at least two alternative ideas or solutions simultaneously	Makes decisions when decisions are due	Plans appropriately and sets project steps	Encourages sense of belonging and team spirit by ensuring all members have the opportunity to contribute to team achievements	Able to tap into and use informal networks effectively to initiate, implement and/or embed change
Makes positive statements about the project	Provides analysis of situations from different perspectives at the same time	Acknowledge the problems, issues and points of conflict of other	Allocates tasks and responsibilities to get the job done	Ensures that team contribution is fully realized by bringing people into the discussion	Adapts behaviour and communication style to get buy-in from others
Is generally optimistic and makes general statements to this effect	Encourages others to develop alternative solutions to a problem rather than going with the most obvious	Speaks out clearly for what they believe	Monitors plans to ensure that results are achieved on time	Actively participates in positive team interactions	Presents features, benefits and advantages of ideas to persuade others of the change
Uses understanding of needs of others to act in their best interests					
Treats people with respect and dignity regardless of their circumstances					

Wilkinson, C., de Rouck, J. and Downing, P. (2024). *Online and residential intensives: perspectives and experiences from diplôme d'études supérieures en leadership humanitaire (DESLH) graduates.*  
The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, Deakin University

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