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Guest editorial

Degree apprenticeships: delivering quality and social mobility?

Employers in England are increasingly shifting their skills and talent pipeline strategies towards higher levels, including degree apprenticeships. There is no doubt that the introduction of degree apprenticeships in 2015 represented an exciting policy move, supported by employers who have focussed on the creation of apprenticeships for job roles to meet sector skills and productivity objectives. Expansive developments can be seen across key public and private sector occupations including nursing, policing, social work, teaching, engineering, construction, digital technology and in leadership and management. Equally, there is little doubt over the positive influence made by UK Higher Education (HE) providers of all sizes and types to drive the upward migration in the skill level and professional occupational focus of apprenticeships, including post-graduate delivery. However, as this phenomenon grows, so have a number of debates about the focus of apprenticeships, with views increasingly polarised and language bordering on territorial. Should the apprenticeship system retain its primary focus on level 2 skills and support for young people entering the workforce or redefine its purpose to raise productivity, deliver high-quality public services and enhance the social mobility through outstanding teaching, learning and assessment?

As a result of this building critique, Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) (guest editor’s institution) and the University Vocational Awards Council (this journal’s primary sponsor and guest editor’s organisation) convened a national conference in June 2018 for thought leaders and innovators to explore, understand and address issues of quality, widening participation and social inclusion in higher level and degree apprenticeship delivery. The conference was to be a celebration of achievements and opportunities in HE aimed at bringing out the best in emerging practice. It also launched an exciting number of academic papers that now form the scope of this special issue with content that looks to further our understanding of the impact on and the response from the work-based learning community, learners, employers and wider stakeholders we serve.

This special issue comes at a critical moment for learning and skills development. Some might say the transformative impact of higher level and degree apprenticeships and the advent of the apprenticeship levy (alongside government co-funding for non-levy paying employers) has been a positive disruptor in the relationship between HE and business that raises a number of important issues about how reduced inequalities and improved quality of delivery (including outcomes) are achieved. Writing in the New Statesman in November 2018, the Chair of The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, Professor Sir Chris Husbands (vice-chancellor, SHU) asked:

[…] how do we re-purpose our education and training institutions to meet the challenges of diversification and flexibility? […]

As a starting point he outlines how:

Sheffield Hallam University believes in creating opportunities by working with others, especially employers, to design education and training programmes so more people can do more things. We reject the idea of universities as outside society, set back and distant from the world around us. We reject the lazy distinction drawn between academic and vocational training.

The reality of social learning in a digital age and the perspectives of some post-millennial learners might ask us to consider if the concepts of academic and vocational learning will
remain relevant to the design and delivery of skills development going forward. After all where does knowledge now reside? It has never been the preserve of one institution over another. Universities are agents of knowledge exchange and development, oftentimes thought leaders, but dependent on the cutting edge of business to maintain an influential and impactful role in society. The relationships forged through higher level and degree apprenticeships can be harnessed to enable innovation, enterprise and deeper relationships for multiple types of knowledge exchange, providing the system focuses on the right things. As the House of Commons Education Committee observed:

The Fourth Industrial Revolution promises great opportunities for those with the skills employers want, but ever fewer for those without them. (Parliament, 2018)

So, it is a pleasure to introduce you to the contents of this special issue published at a time when degree apprenticeships are developing a solid reputation as the flagship apprenticeship programme in England (Anderson, 2018). Since their introduction, degree apprenticeships have introduced a new highly aspirational choice: a degree and an apprenticeship (job) in one package. Not a vocational or an academic choice, but a high-quality vocational and academic programme; a programme that in all likelihood will become the most prominent form of higher level work-based provision nationally (Bravenboer, 2018) and is already highly valued by employers, individuals and HE institutions alike.

Over the last few years, degree apprenticeships have undoubtedly offered an attractive proposition. For employers, degree apprenticeships have helped attract new talent, tackled gender stereotyping, encouraged inclusion and widening participation and demonstrated an apprenticeship can be equal in esteem to more traditional academic routes for both new and existing employees. For individuals, a degree apprenticeship represents a debt free route through HE and a stepping stone in a career or future learning opportunity. For universities and HE providers, degree apprenticeships offer a significantly new way to engage with employers to meet their skill needs in the context of a new, if not challenging, economic reality (Crawford-Lee and Wall, 2018) and ambiguous quality assurance landscape.

Not surprisingly degree apprenticeships appear to be attracting in growing numbers, in certain sectors, individuals from cohorts who are currently under-represented in HE provision. Degree apprenticeships are also helping transform the image and perception of apprenticeships from the good choice of “other people’s children”. Indeed the degree “professionalises” a job role, helps attract a different talent supply and raises performance standards for the occupation. Ask an apprentice of any age: Why they decided to pursue a degree apprenticeship and the ability to gain a degree will be one of the key reasons? The introduction of degree apprenticeships and the power of the degree brand in England have also helped sell the benefits of the wider family of apprenticeships – including apprenticeship roles at a lower level of skill – and the opportunities for progression in education and a career now seen as integral to each other. An apprenticeship is no longer just the choice for individuals who could not go to university. Through the inclusion of a degree, they can be a highly aspirational choice and a change agent for social mobility. The internationally accepted reputation and value of a UK degree when combined with an apprenticeship makes for a very bold statement. Out-going is the academic-vocational divide and in its place, quality and pedagogical innovations are now seen as paramount.

What is certain is that together with the start of the apprenticeship levy in 2017, for employers with a payroll above £3m, degree apprenticeships have changed the outlook for higher level skills in the UK. It is now the case that through the UK Government’s apprenticeship reforms, a clear policy intent and the hard work of HE providers, the skills system in England has those ranked among the foremost universities in the world, now engaged in its delivery (Crawford-Lee, 2018).
The original call to this special issue identified a range of topics and suggestions including:

- collaborative partnerships and innovative employer-driven programmes in key public sector services and private sector growth areas;
- how the quality and perception of the England apprenticeship system has improved and the provision better available in meeting the needs and ambition of employers;
- innovative best practice in higher level apprenticeship work-based learning which impacts positively on social mobility and the delivery of key public sector services;
- sophisticated approaches to delivering high-quality apprenticeships, in a highly regulated sector, to ensure occupational competence meets national and international requirements and complies with relevant legislation;
- the challenges and opportunities around widening participation in workplace HE and whether degree apprenticeships are the catalyst to a step change in social mobility; and
- the status and position of degree apprenticeship vis-à-vis quality, governance and policy.

We hope you find that the papers in this special issue live up to this ambitious focus and that they have done so in ways that demonstrate the transformative effects of degree apprenticeships. Each of the papers is now outlined. The first of the nine papers is Felce’s (2019) “Managing the quality of HE in apprenticeships”. It is an important place to start as it provides a critical viewpoint from the independent body entrusted with monitoring and advising on standards and quality in UK HE. Felce gives an overview relating to the quality assurance of higher and degree apprenticeships in England during a time when the Quality Assurance Agency reflects on the process for setting out a new and comprehensive characteristics statement for apprenticeships as part of the UK Quality Code. It is inevitable that this position paper will need an update, even in the short-term, as the HE sector grapples with an increasingly complex quality assurance approach to excellence in apprenticeship. It nevertheless provides a valuable perspective on the quality regime as it stands, confirms what we know and clarifies what is still to be determined.

The second paper, McKnight et al.’s (2019) “Establishing a social mobility pipeline to degree apprenticeships” discusses innovative practice within geographically specific activity which, “delivered by a new collaboration of private and public sector partners aimed to build a pipeline between those currently failing to progress to, or engage with, degree apprenticeships and employers seeking higher skills and a broader pool of talent”.

Here the authors reflect on the impact of leveraged funds on regional activity provided by the Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund; perhaps the last major fiscal intervention of the HE Funding Council for England before it was replaced as the main regulator of HE by the Office for Students in 2018. The paper explores the contextual parameters that determine degree apprenticeship as an attractive proposition. Having framed the context, it provides insight into what remains critical activity for many universities whilst keeping a keen and impactful watch on their wider societal obligations. Of significance for McKnight et al. is the incorporation of an entrepreneurial strand combined with a “step-up” access model. This links an initiative for small business growth support with an approach to skills recruitment in apprenticeships so offers a truly regionally driven and SME focussed proposition. Such practice might inform other HESWBL practitioners in their own public–private sector engagement activity including but not limited to the possibility of adopting hybrid social innovation business models linked to sustainable skills development.

In the next paper, Bradley et al.’s (2019) “Driving social mobility? Collaborative competition in degree apprenticeship development” takes it lead from the dual policy objectives of apprenticeship reforms in England: to generate a new cohort of skilled
individuals to support economic growth as well as improve levels of social mobility. The paper explores and comment on “various manifestations of collaboration” and in this respect the authors are particularly interested in the concept of competitive collaboration, “[…] collaboration as embedded; collaboration as negotiation and as a driver for social mobility or social equality”. One of the interesting insights from this case study approach is the thoughtful interrogation of the broad concept of collaborative partnership, our possible assumptions about social mobility and social equality and their applied meaning in the context of developments in degree apprenticeships. It is of particular interest as it tackles specific challenges of retaining institutional distinctiveness within a collaborative arrangement comprising, in this instance, not less than 12 HE providers. Its final call is to researchers and practitioners to keep the channels of communication open to ensure learning gains and insights are widely shared and reflected on.

Having started out with a focus on social mobility, next we have two papers that take us on a journey through an eventful three years in the health sector in England and of adaptation to the realities of investment in workforce development since the apprenticeship levy. Both offer very different perspectives but together offer a great insight into the challenges facing our nursing and healthcare infrastructures in the context of professionally oriented curricula.

In “Responding to the NHS and social care workforce crisis: the enhancement of opportunities through collaborative partnerships”, Hanney and Karagic (2019) provide a comprehensive review of the multiple political and economic drivers surrounding the skills crisis in health and social care and describe how an extensive collaboration has forged a community of practice in response. The paper observes how collaborative synergy can be a force for quality enhancement and in this way supports issues raised in this special issue’s third paper (Bradley et al., 2019). The authors set out a scenario where further and HE providers are comfortable operating delivery in the same space; where foundation degrees and higher apprenticeships sit hand in glove and where quality enhancement is aligned to meet employer need. A follow up paper to pull through the longitudinal impact and outcomes of this joint working will have significant implications for others in the field HE, skills and work-based learning.

“Post levy apprenticeships in the NHS – early findings” provides a valuable follow on from Hanney and Karagic’s (2019) case study exploration. Here, Baker (2019) seeks to establish early insight into outcomes from the employer perspective. Qualitative methods are used to identify four key themes that might be extrapolated, or tested, for the health sector as a whole: “first, organisational readiness; second, the apprenticeship offer; third, opportunities for further development; fourth, potential problems for implementation”. Findings are discussed by taking a holistic look across the sector’s experience including the challenges to implement off-the-job learning and the role of National Vocational Qualifications to ensure rigour in assessing workplace skills. This is particularly relevant given that in engineering degree apprenticeships the current trend is a move away from vocational on-programme assessment that does not sit easily with the idea of synoptic end point assessment and a move towards a re-focussing on professional behaviours instead. The challenge for apprenticeship delivery is reflected in a simple truth that “[…] every week there’s something different coming out which is slightly changing the way that we […] think about things”.

Moving on from a health sector focus, we turn to the workplace more generally to examine critical success factors in higher and degree apprenticeship delivery, with a keen focus on employer engagement in delivery. Minton and Lowe (2019) ask the broader question “How are universities supporting employers to facilitate effective ‘on-the-job’ learning for apprentices?” The authors are keen to acknowledge that further education and independent training providers might have a few offerings HE can benefit from and that on-the-job learning is not a new principle or practice. The role of facilitation is purposefully outlined and organisational challenges including the tension between short-term productivity and sustainable development is a key topic. This paper draws on a number of issues quite familiar to the
experienced work-based learning practitioner but acts as a timely reminder of the challenges that still remain of academics reluctant to credit the workplace as a genuine site for learning and employers hesitant to embrace their role in securing these advantages for the apprentice in a structured, consistent and sustained way. It highlights how early engagement is critical to success with a key requirement for practitioners that:

[...] higher and degree apprenticeships are developed holistically, meeting the academic requirements of the university and workplace needs of the employer. This in turn will enhance success rates and reduce attrition rates from apprenticeships [...].

Next, Roberts et al.’s (2019) “Workplace mentoring for degree apprentices: developing principles for practice” continues on the theme of working with and supporting employers and identifies where we can see apprenticeship principles in practice establish clear blue water between traditional degree programme provision and degree apprenticeship delivery. This paper focuses on “developing a deep understanding of the nature and impact of the workplace mentor role in degree apprenticeships” and investigates a theoretical model of workplace mentoring activity leading to a set of principles for supporting the development of effective mentoring practice. Introductory discussion explores the conflation of the terms coaching and mentoring and the challenge of bridging the theory-practice gap where “mentoring thus becomes a key factor in supporting the individual apprentices in establishing the connectivity between previous learning and current activity”. At a deeper level a challenge to achieving impact is identified where “organisational identities” might prevent the mentor from uncovering the accurate learning needs of the apprentice. This is a pivotal paper in bringing to prominence the critical role of the employer as the key collaborative agent in harnessing the work context as the place and source of apprentices’ learning.

The final two papers move the focus to leadership and management and some vital cross sector challenges are present in each. Hughes and Saieva (2019) explore curriculum design, internal infrastructures and support systems and innovations in “Degree apprenticeships – an opportunity for all?”. This paper embeds tri-partite thinking and through a case study approach explores the phenomenon of the “accidental (and aspiring) manager” in the delivery of the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship. Key themes in this paper include employer engagement, innovations in on-boarding infrastructure, demystifying “off-the-job learning” (so as to move away from the notion of “out-of-office”) and defining support mechanisms as a catalyst for achieving a high-quality apprenticeship experience. The authors structure their discussion around the subject of diversification covering sub-themes of income, the student body, employer recruitment and talent strategy impact. Though less explicit, the variegation of delivery approach is also present in the discourse as they triangulate qualitative statements from apprentices and their employers with secondary data from the Chartered Management Institute to evidence apprentice productivity, economic contribution and retention impacts for the employer. The paper closes with a call for further micro and macro research to unpick and fully inform the debate about added value in higher and degree apprenticeships and for broader sector collaboration.

The final paper is “Developing apprentice leaders through critical reflection”. Here Schedlitzki (2019) in her conceptual paper reflects on aspects of degree apprenticeships in leadership and management and offers us a number of fresh thoughts. She explores first the notion of “being an apprentice” and how degree apprenticeships have the potential to establish creative and reflective leadership development practices that impact on businesses for the long-term. Second, the role of and opportunities for the “educator” in degree apprenticeships and, third, the role of the learning portfolio as a critical reflection model. It seems that addressing sustainability in this professional curriculum area has an important role in moving “towards embracing deep, situated learning practices that in themselves
have a transformative effect in the form of lasting reflexive practices”. From an editorial perspective, this paper is helpful in summarising an ethos that runs through this special issue as it is Schellitski’s proposition that these apprenticeships:

 […] ask individual learners to straddle across two identities: the accomplished manager in a hierarchical position and the apprentice learner. A key aim then of engaging in critical reflection is to shift this initial conflict of identities by challenging the very notion of the self as an accomplished leader or manager.

And in respect of the role of e-portfolio she suggests that by “[…] using it as a reflexive pedagogical tool rather than a container of information, we open up possibilities for enabling learners to reframe their own development as leaders as a lifelong apprenticeship”.

In addition to analysing what is included in the special issue it should also be recognised that higher and degree apprenticeship delivery England wide is taking place within a very challenging context, where it is hard to separate opportunity from risk including the risk of not delivering on the policy objectives. Writing post-conference, Husbands (2018) warned:

 […] the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) is proposing reductions to a number of funding bands for apprenticeships which put delivery at risk before programmes are established. At a minimum, there should be stable funding which recognises degree apprenticeships involve significant costs for universities and employers.

Also, The Higher Education Commission’s (2019) report suggests that those already benefitting from high rates of educational participation and employment hot spots are also those in the greatest proximity to degree apprenticeship opportunities while those in areas of least opportunity are not. There is no doubt that the achievements described in this exciting special issue are testament to the pragmatic determination of our work-based learning community, HE’s depth of passion for authentic learner growth and a sheer willingness to deal with and make change work for the better. This special issue is dedicated to the many universities, HE providers, practitioners and stakeholders who have responded positively to the UK Government’s apprenticeship reforms and are intent on ensuring that the impact on employers and individuals of improvements in the quality of apprenticeships at all levels are highlighted and the widening of opportunity is celebrated. It is our hope that these papers collectively raise a number of important issues which will help frame the research and practice development which constitutes this journal.

We give the final word to Hase and Kenyon (2001). In their exploration of heutagogy as an alternative (complementary?) approach to andragogy, they offer a general perspective on learning that adds momentum to this field of practice:

The world is no place for the inflexible, the unprepared and the ostrich with its head in the sand, and this applies to organisations as well as individuals. Capable people are more likely to be able to deal effectively with the turbulent environment in which they live by possessing an all-round capacity centred on self-efficacy; knowing how to learn; creativity; the ability to use competencies in novel as well as familiar situations; and working with others.

We might reflect that although intended as a direct message to learners on work-integrated programmes, the above statement may equally apply to the challenges facing our academic community and institutions in further and HE seeking to cut through the ambiguity and be part of the productivity solution.

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References


Further reading

Abstract

Purpose – Traditionally, apprenticeships have been the domain of further education and skills training providers, predominately at pre-higher education levels where management, organisation, inspection and funding have little in common with those familiar to higher education. Higher level and degree apprenticeships have brought together different cultures and methods of designing, delivering and assessing knowledge, skills and behaviours, funding learners and learning providers, data reporting, quality management and its review or inspection. The purpose of this paper is to establish the primary concerns about managing quality in degree apprenticeships, the challenges the variances bring, how the challenges are being resolved and future work that may be required.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of a range of guidance and organisations involved in managing the quality of higher education in apprenticeships was undertaken. The primary focus is on the advice and guidance provided through the Quality Code and associated documentation, which are key to managing and assuring standards and quality in UK higher education. In addition, requirements and guidance provided through other bodies is considered along with the cross-sector groups charged with developing quality assurance processes for apprenticeships at all levels.

Findings – The paper shows a range of detailed guidance available to those entering the higher and degree apprenticeships arena and how the organisations involved in quality assurance of apprenticeships are working together to remove or mitigate concerns to ensure that quality is embedded and successfully managed.

Originality/value – Designing and delivering higher level and degree apprenticeships is a relatively new addition to UK higher education providers. There are long established practices to assure the quality and standards of UK higher education wherever and, however, it is delivered, in the UK, overseas and through online models. Apprenticeships across the UK have changed significantly over recent years, and new models, organisations and methods of working and funding have been introduced. This paper brings together key activity by the Quality Assurance Agency and other stakeholders to show how standards and quality can be managed and assured.

Keywords Assuring standards, Managing quality, Higher education, Apprenticeships

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Universities in the UK are independent and autonomous organisations, recognised internationally for excellence in academic and research practice. Many have significant experience of delivering and assessing work-based learning and professional competencies and for working collaboratively with other academic organisations, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The recent introduction of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships in England, Higher Level Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland and Degree Apprenticeships in Wales and Graduate Apprenticeships in Scotland has brought different cultures, management and funding systems, models for design, delivery and assessment, reporting and quality management into universities and other higher education providers. Previously apprenticeships were primarily located within further education and independent training providers who are mainly familiar with many of the external bodies and their respective requirements. However, the changes have brought with them new organisations and approaches that have also impacted on existing providers’ knowledge and understanding of many matters related to apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships are seen by many as a means through which access to higher education can be broadened to support social mobility by offering an alternative to a full-time academic route to higher level qualifications, such as Bachelors and Master’s degrees.
Whilst academic routes to higher education are clearly defined and well understood, vocational routes are not always as transparent and thought, by some, to be less rigorous. This paper will show how well-established processes for quality assurance of higher education must be applied to higher level apprenticeships and, thus, will ensure the importance of the learner experience and the alignment of academic and vocational routes.

Education is one of the devolved powers in the UK; different approaches to all aspects of apprenticeships (e.g. apprenticeship frameworks, apprenticeship standards, quality assurance, funding, oversight, priority areas) are emerging that further complicate the “market”, particularly where organisations have cross-border or UK-wide roles and responsibilities. Understanding all the nuances of the different approaches and meeting the needs of the different stakeholders is complex and is currently subject to continuous change.

Any organisations that deliver higher education are responsible for the academic standards and the quality of the learning opportunities; the degree awarding body has overarching responsibility for the standards and quality of the qualifications and awards. The new landscapes in which these organisations find themselves can appear daunting and, understandably, create concerns about how to manage the quality of higher education in apprenticeships and meet their responsibilities as degree awarding bodies.

This paper sets out the context for managing quality assurance of higher education in apprenticeships across the UK, bodies that are involved in quality assurance of apprenticeships and guidance that is available to support and inform those who are entering, or further developing, their apprenticeship offer in higher education.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is an independent body whose vision is for “world leading and independently assured higher education” (QAA, 2018a). Since 1997, the QAA has worked across the UK, with all four nations, to “monitor and advise on standards and quality in UK higher education” (QAA, 2018a). A key aspect of their work is to involve students in all aspects of it and to check that all students “working towards a UK qualification get the higher education they are entitled to expect” (QAA, 2018a).

As part of its role, the QAA sets and monitors the standards of UK higher education. It also provides advice, support, guidance and training about quality and standards to those involved with UK higher education. All work carried out by the QAA is in partnership with the relevant bodies and organisations who set policy and or who are practitioners in a particular area. In its work related to higher education in apprenticeships the QAA works with a cross-sector advisory group that includes representation from universities, colleges, private providers, government, funding bodies and representative organisations across the four UK nations. The breadth and diversity of this group ensures that the work of the QAA is informed by current practice and can respond to the evolving nature of apprenticeships across the UK.

The QAA represents UK higher education on groups and committees tasked with developing, monitoring and reviewing quality assurance in apprenticeships. Through its activities across higher education, it is well placed to represent the sector on these groups and to ensure that policies and practices developed are informed by the recognised good practice in the quality of UK higher education and that they are shared with, and, where appropriate, debated with the sector. Key groups and committees are referred to later in this paper; the next section will explain the role of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and how it applies to higher education in apprenticeships.

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) was developed in consultation with the higher education sector and is used to “assure the standards and quality
of UK higher education” (QAA, 2015a). It is written in three parts: Part A – setting and maintaining academic standards; Part B – assuring and enhancing academic quality; and Part C – information about higher education provision (QAA, 2015b).

The Quality Code is the national reference point for the whole of the UK for quality and standards. It sets out the baseline requirements or expectations for quality and standards for all providers and includes advice and guidance to support providers in meeting their responsibilities. It covers all UK Higher Education wherever and however it is delivered; consequently, it covers apprenticeships that involve higher education. The QAA (2017) undertook a review of the Quality Code in relation to apprenticeships and confirmed that it was “fit for purpose” for these emerging models for UK higher education.

The Quality Code sets out “19 Expectations that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet” (QAA, 2015b); the expectations work at the level of principle, rather than refer to specific, individual qualifications. Underpinning the Quality Code, and integral to Part A, are the national qualifications frameworks (QAA, 2008, 2014), subject benchmark statements (QAA, 2018c) and characteristics statements (QAA, 2015c) which aim to ensure comparability and consistency within and across institutions and internationally. Part C requires that “Higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the learning opportunities they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy” (QAA, 2011b).

Part B contains 11 chapters which consider the key elements of a student journey into and through higher education, setting expectations for each stage that providers are required to meet. The whole of the Quality Code will apply to apprenticeships but of particular note is the expectation in Part B10: “The fundamental principle underpinning all arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with others is that the degree awarding body has ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, regardless of where these opportunities are delivered and who provides them” (QAA, 2011a, p. 8). This statement is key to apprenticeships where learning opportunities are delivered both on-the-job and off-the-job, i.e. within an employer’s premises and elsewhere, such as on a university campus, as well as being delivered by different people, e.g. established academics, workplace mentors, others in the workplace.

In November 2018, the revised Quality Code will apply, although it should be noted that the existing Quality Code, as referred to in this section, will continue to be used for the purposes of institutional quality reviews for a transitional period.

The Revised UK Quality Code
In March 2018 the Revised UK Quality Code (Revised Code) was published (UKSCQA and QAA, 2018); this followed extensive consultation with higher education and sector bodies in 2016 and 2017. The Revised Code is clearer on what aspects are mandatory and which form advice and guidance. It contains a set of four expectations: two for standards and two for quality. These are underpinned by Core and Common Practices. The revised code still applies to all UK Higher Education wherever and however it is delivered, with the exception of the Common Practices which are not mandatory for England. Thus, the Revised Code will apply to apprenticeships across the UK.

The Core Practices which are particularly relevant to apprenticeships are:

For standards: “Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered of who delivers them”.

For quality: “Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered of who delivers them”. (UKSCQA and QAA, 2018, p. 3).
Advice and guidance, setting out key principles and practical actions, have been written for 12 themes, reflecting the student learning journey. The themes have been written by groups that provide cross-sector representation to ensure that the content reflects known requirements and practice. They were published in November 2018 and are available from the QAA website (www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code). Of particular interest to providers of apprenticeships are the themes: work-based learning (QAA, 2018e) and partnerships (QAA, 2018d); however, all themes apply equally and should be referred to for the different elements of the student cycle.

Characteristics statements
The Quality Code and the Revised Code are written to apply to all UK higher education and do not specify individual qualifications or types of learning. The qualifications framework (QAA, 2014) and the credit framework (QAA, 2008) set out the different levels of higher education qualifications and guidance on how to use credit when designing courses, respectively. Subject benchmark statements “describe the nature of study and the academic standards expected of graduates in specific subject areas. They show what graduates might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their studies” (QAA, 2018c).

Whilst all of these will apply to apprenticeships they do not establish key characteristics about those qualifications. The purpose of characteristics statements is to “describe the distinctive features of qualifications at particular levels within the Qualifications Frameworks. They describe the qualifications in terms of their purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes, but do not include subject level detail” (QAA, 2015).

A characteristics statement for higher education in apprenticeships will be co-developed with the sector during 2018/2019, now that they are more established and all four nations are able to inform their development. In the absence of such a statement, the QAA, through the apprenticeships advisory group, published advice and guidance to meet the known and expected needs of higher education as they started, or grew, their offer in higher education in apprenticeships.

Quality assuring higher education in apprenticeships: current approaches
The purpose of this publication is to describe how expectations (in the Quality Code) “accommodate and apply to existing and emerging UK models of apprenticeships involving higher education qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate level” (QAA, 2018b). It focusses on those expectations that are particularly relevant to apprenticeships including responsibilities of higher education providers and others, learning, teaching and assessment, the apprentice experience, managing provision with others, dealing with complaints and appeals and monitoring and review.

Approaches to higher education in apprenticeships, as noted above, vary in each of the UK nations; where commonalities and differences exist, these are clearly noted making the guidance relevant across the UK.

This, along with many QAA publications, will be subject to revision to align with the Revised Code; however, the advice and guidance is unlikely to change fundamentally, and it will continue to be a useful resource for the sector.

Meeting multiple stakeholders’ requirements
Whilst the QAA has a UK-wide role in quality assurance, it is not the only stakeholder who sets requirements for standards and quality in higher education. There is a range of PSRBs that will have an impact on one or more models of apprenticeship and one or more apprenticeship frameworks or apprenticeship standards.
Consequently, UK Higher Education is familiar with designing, delivering and assessing learning to meet the requirements of a range of different stakeholders. The suite of standards and frameworks referred to in the previous section are, by necessity, generic requirements that are rarely the only benchmarks for a course or subject. In many courses, there are PSRB requirements that must also be met for the graduate to be able to work within a specific profession or to achieve a professional status. Many will be familiar with designing courses for the health sector that need to meet Nursing and Midwifery Council requirements, meeting the UK Spec in Engineering Courses, meeting requirements of Chartered Management Institute or Institute of Leadership and Management in Business Management and Business Administration courses. Higher education in apprenticeships will not only need to comply with the Quality Code and meet the needs of such stakeholders but also additional and potentially conflicting requirements. This section identifies key stakeholders within English apprenticeships, where practice is more established and significantly different to non-apprenticeship provision. Key stakeholders, in addition to PRSBs, elsewhere in the UK include: Skills Development Scotland, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland).

**Apprenticeships in England**  
**Institute for Apprenticeships.** The Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) is a non-departmental public body which was formally established in April 2017 following Richard’s (2012) and Sainsbury’s (2016) reviews. The IfA (2018a) states that its main functions are:

- developing and maintaining quality criteria for the approval of apprenticeship standards and assessment plans;
- supporting the development of (apprenticeship) standards and assessment plans by employer groups;
- publishing approved (apprenticeship) standards and (apprenticeship) assessment plans;
- advising on the maximum amount of government funding that can be drawn down by employers for individual apprenticeship standards;
- quality assuring the delivery of apprenticeship end-point assessments; and
- ensuring that all end-point assessments are quality assured.

Higher education providers in England need to design their courses to meet the requirements set out within the relevant apprenticeship standard and its associated assessment plan. For integrated degree apprenticeships this will include the end-point assessment. The IfA (2018b) encourages trailblazer groups that are developing apprenticeship standards to “engage and consult with potential training providers and end-point assessment organisations”. Where higher education providers are involved with trailblazer groups, they should be able to inform the development of the apprenticeship standard and, more particularly, the assessment plan to ensure that it aligns with the frameworks and standards used within UK higher education. Whether or not they are involved at this stage, if an UK higher education provider plans to offer an apprenticeship they must design the course to meet requirements of both the UK Quality Code/Revised Code and the apprenticeship assessment plan. Where relevant, PSRBs will be involved in the development of the apprenticeship standard and assessment plan and should ensure that their requirements towards professional status and or ability to practice are included.
Educations and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The Educations and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) sets a range of requirements with which higher education institutions need to comply, some of which will impact on the standards and quality of the apprenticeship that the institution designs and delivers, others must be complied with to access funding and to remain on the relevant register. The ESFA maintains the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers and the Register of End-Point Assessment Organisations; institutions must be registered on one or both of these to deliver and/or assess apprenticeships. The specific requirements set by the ESFA are outside the scope of this paper but must be complied with when designing, delivering and assessing apprenticeships (see www.gov.uk/topic/further-education-skills/apprenticeships for further information).

Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills. The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) have a statutory responsibility for ensuring quality in apprenticeships; since the introduction of higher apprenticeships in England, this has created an overlap of duties with OfS who have responsibility for regulating higher education. It has been agreed through the Quality Alliance (see below) that the OfS and Ofsted will be jointly responsible for quality at levels 4 and 5, where a higher education qualification is included and that Ofsted will undertake inspections of the education providers where this occurs; OfS provide data to inform the Ofsted inspection. The OfS will be responsible for higher levels apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7 where the provider comes under their regulatory framework and is a registered provider.

As a consequence of the different responsibilities of Ofsted and the OfS, higher education providers, who are involved in apprenticeships at levels 4 or 5 and 6 or 7, will be involved in different quality review and inspection processes. Definitive process for review and inspection are being developed and are likely to be finalised and published in 2019 or 2020.

The quality alliance. The Department for Education (DfE), who are responsible for apprenticeships in England, published a statement (DfE, 2017, pp. 3-4) setting out the respective roles of the seven organisations responsible for different aspects of quality assurance:

1. DfE: overall accountability for the apprenticeships programme and all aspects of apprenticeships policy.
2. ESFA: has operational management of the apprenticeship funding system including the Apprenticeship Service and Registers of Training Providers and End-Point Assessment Organisations.
3. IfA: accountable for designing and operating the approval and review processes for (apprenticeship) standards and assessment plans, advising on funding bands and ensuring end-point assessments are quality assured.
4. Ofsted: inspect and regulate quality in apprenticeships from levels 2 to 5.
6. Office for Students (OfS): regulate universities, colleges and other higher education providers in England. It covers higher and degree apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7, and it will reach a joint judgement with Ofsted for levels 4 and 5 where the apprenticeship includes a higher education qualification.
7. QAA: monitors and advises on standards and quality in UK higher education.

Three organisations are also named as advisors to the groups: Association of Employment and Learning Providers, Association of Colleges and Universities UK.
The Quality Alliance consists of a strategic group and an operations group to bring together the member bodies to:

- advise the IfA (2018c) on the development of the quality statement, including appropriate performance metrics;
- develop and agree an overall strategy for quality;
- monitor quality across apprenticeships; and
- work together collaboratively to deal with quality issues and problems as necessary.

This cross-sector approach is intended to provide “assurance that an agreed framework is in place within which [the] bodies are clear about their respective accountabilities in relation to the apprenticeships programme, so that the Government’s objectives to raise apprenticeship quality are met and to secure value for money” (DfE, 2017, p. 3).

Other resources, advice and guidance. In addition to these stakeholders who provide a range of requirements, expectations, advice and guidance, there is further support available to higher education providers who deliver, or are considering delivering, higher education in apprenticeships. The provision of a comprehensive resource list is beyond the scope of this paper but one useful publication from the Association of Colleges, due to be published in Autumn 2018, covering ESFA Rules, ESFA Audit, Ofsted, QAA and HMRC is 360 Guidance: Subcontracting in Apprenticeships.

Conclusions
Universities and other higher education providers who are involved with, or plan to become involved with, higher level, graduate or degree apprenticeships have to enter a new culture and approach to funding, management, quality and compliance. This paper has shown how the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, with which the sector is familiar, applies to these apprenticeships and provides continuity with established practices that are proven to ensure academic standards and assure quality.

The role of the QAA, other organisations and respective responsibilities for quality in apprenticeships in England has been explained as has the role of the Quality Alliance in bringing these organisations together to develop quality apprenticeships.

It is inevitable that there will continue to be change in all four nations, but this paper should reassure those involved in higher education in apprenticeships that the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities can be effectively managed.

References


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Case study: establishing a social mobility pipeline to degree apprenticeships

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Abstract

Purpose – The government’s ambition is to have three million more apprentices by 2020. The newness of degree apprenticeships and insufficient data make it difficult to assess their relative importance in boosting the UK economy, meeting higher skills needs of employers, closing educational attainment gaps, increasing social mobility and supporting under-represented groups into professional employment. The purpose of this paper, led by the University of Winchester and delivered by a new collaboration of private and public sector partners, is to build a pipeline between those currently failing to progress to, or engage with, degree apprenticeships and employers seeking higher skills and a broader pool of applicants.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper provides an analysis of collaborative initiatives and related research in England as the context for university involvement in degree apprenticeships. The case study illustrates the benefits of collaboration in targeted outreach initiatives within the local region to address gaps in progression to degree apprenticeships.

Findings – This paper illustrates how establishing a regional picture of degree apprenticeship provision, access and participation can inform effective partnerships and build capacity locally to deliver the higher skills employers need, further demonstrating the potential benefits of university involvement in degree apprenticeship provision in contributing to local and national policy ambition. It also shows how effective targeted interventions can help under-achieving groups, including those in social care and women in digital enterprises.

Originality/value – The authors believe this paper is the only academic analysis of the impact of Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund activity in the region.

Keywords Collaboration, Partnerships, Widening participation, Degree apprenticeship, Social mobility, Higher apprenticeship

Paper type Case study

Introduction

In 2016, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills established an £8.5m Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund (DADF) to support the growth of degree apprenticeships. The funding was split across two phases. Over 70 institutions bid into the initial £4.5m funding pot, primarily for developing new degree apprenticeships. However, in the second phase of DADF (DADF2), the HEFCE (2017) encouraged projects addressing the government’s social mobility goals. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the lead regulator for higher education in England who provided leadership in support of assessing the quality of the funded projects, suggested bids focussed on promoting degree apprenticeships in areas with low-participation rates,
aligning with National Collaborative Outreach Projects (NCOP) target wards with low rates of progression despite high levels of achievement, or other under-represented groups in higher education. HEFCE also identified an interest in proposals that would act “as a vehicle for improving gender diversity in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) sectors”.

The University of Winchester, having already recognised the potential degree apprenticeships have in acting as an access mechanism (see University of Winchester Access Agreements 2016/2017, 2017/2018 and 2018/2019, respectively, Office for Students, n.d.), proposed a DADF2 project to build a pipeline between those currently failing to progress to degree apprenticeships and employers who were seeking higher skills and a broader pool of talent. The collaborative project utilised expertise in-house including widening participation, outreach, employer relations and degree apprenticeship provision, as well as support from local partners across the higher education, public and commercial sectors.

The University of Winchester’s widening participation and outreach teams not only raise aspirations among under-represented young people, but also seek to overcome obstacles that potentially prevent them from aspiring to higher education. The University has a long history of working with employers in design and delivery of tailored programmes to meet the needs of individual business and the employer engagement team is committed to working increasingly closely with the business community placing the need to continue to support business in developing the higher skills they need at the heart of degree and higher apprenticeship strategies. By working collaboratively with schools, local authorities, universities in the region, employers and other stakeholders, the University of Winchester provides balanced information and guidance about progression pathways into higher education including into degree apprenticeships.

The project identified intended outcomes including: increased availability and provision of degree apprenticeships; increased applicants from non-traditional or under-represented backgrounds including young people from low-participation neighbourhoods and care; more employers adopting flexible recruitment approaches for applicants from diverse backgrounds; greater collaboration between and across higher and further education providers to meet the higher skill needs of the region; and more women entrepreneurs having the skills needed to grow their business and use talents of local people and students.

The aim of the project, led by the University of Winchester and delivered by a new collaboration of private and public sector partners, was to build a pipeline between those currently failing to progress to, or engage with, degree apprenticeships and employers seeking higher skills and a broader pool of applicants.

The project comprised six strands of activity. The focus of the two largest strands will form the basis of the case study below. The case study discusses how these two key strands of activity not only met but exceeded the University of Winchester’s HEFCE DADF2 funded “Social Mobility Pipeline to Degree Apprenticeships” project ambition. Discussion will first provide background and context in terms of government reform before moving into the detail of the approach taken, lessons learnt and next steps.

Background and context
In today’s economic climate, raising UK productivity through improving the skills base is becoming increasingly important (McKinsey Global Institute, 2018). In 2014, the government, recognising the growing importance of developing employer demand for STEM subjects and higher level skills, decided to draw employers into a more meaningful engagement by giving them responsibility for setting up employer-led degree apprenticeships. The aim was to remove the complexity and confusion in education and training and ensure that degree apprenticeships supported business success and sustainable employment.
The government defines an apprenticeship as a “job, in a skilled occupation, that requires substantial and sustained training, leading to the achievement of an apprenticeship standard and the development of transferable skills to progress careers” (HM Government, 2014 as cited by Crawford-Lee, 2016). Similarly, degree apprenticeships are apprenticeships combined with degrees providing individuals with vocationally relevant paid jobs that incorporate on- and off-the-job training while also supporting the development of economically valuable skills in the future workforce (as noted in the UK Industrial Strategy, HM Government, 2017).

Degree apprenticeships are developed by employers, universities and professional bodies working in partnership. Since their inception in 2015, degree apprenticeships have grown from 1,670 degree apprentices in 2016/2017 (Department for Education, 2017a) to over 11,600 in 2017/2018 (Department for Education, 2018). There are currently around 75 different higher and degree apprenticeships providing level 4+ provision, with courses on offer ranging from accounting and cyber security, to law and nursing (Universities UK, 2017).

As the number of degree apprenticeships grows, policy makers, politicians and practitioners have supported degree apprenticeships as a progression mechanism for social mobility. The new regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), has publicly promoted higher and degree apprenticeships as “flexible and work-based” routes that providers may wish to adopt in targeting their access work towards under-represented students (Office for Students, 2018a). While, Nicola Turner, now Head of Sector Practice at the OfS, was quoted to have said that “emerging evidence suggests that Degree Apprenticeships appeal to a broader range of people than traditional undergraduate routes and are attracting more females into STEM occupations” (Willats, 2018). A sentiment echoed by Nicola Dandridge, Chief Executive of OfS, in responding to data suggesting that degree apprenticeships are already beginning to provide opportunities to under-represented groups of students (Office for Students, 2018b).

The Chair of the Education Select Committee, Robert Halfon, MP, (2017), offered his support of degree apprenticeships noting that “education should be a ladder of opportunity for all young people and (that) our higher education sector needs to up its game to recognise and support those who pursue technical Qualifications” (p. 51). In addition, Universities UK (2017) found that for those higher education institutions (HEIs) considering trialling or developing degree apprenticeships, widening participation to improve social mobility was recognised as one of the most important benefits.

Social mobility continues to be a major focus of education policy in the UK (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Wolf, 2002, 2011). This is based on the premise that increased social mobility will result in increased educational qualifications. Government policy makers have identified degree apprenticeships as a key mechanism to increase the economic participation of disadvantaged groups.

The government’s ambition is to have three million more apprentices by 2020 (HM Government, 2015), though “a wider set of performance considerations is needed if the UK is to win a race with its economic competitors and create a system that will drive productivity and social mobility” (Way, 2016.) This brings quality and progression for those undertaking vocational routes to the fore.

While achieving the three million target now looks challenging and there is a growing sense that quantity should not be pursued at the expense of quality, there remains a drive to build extra capacity. The DADF provided opportunity to bring partners together to develop the necessary infrastructure, collaboration and intermediary activity. The central engagement of employers in the project working with HE aimed to ensure quality was at the heart of the project whether on or off the job.

The following captures how the University of Winchester sought to establish a social mobility pipeline to degree apprenticeships through progression and partnerships.
Project strand 1: to develop and expand degree apprenticeship opportunities and pathways for “hard-to-reach” young people

In 2013, the English Government pressed for a major reform of the nation’s approach to apprenticeship provision through the Apprenticeships Implementation Plan, placing greater emphasis on the delivery of employer-focused higher apprenticeships that would enable “it to become the norm for young people to go into an Apprenticeship or to university or – in the case of some Higher Apprenticeships – do both” (HM Government, 2013, p. 3).

The data present a different story suggesting not as many young people as first envisioned are taking up with higher apprenticeships with over half of the 9,100 higher level apprenticeships starts in August to October 2018 being recorded as students over 25 years (Department for Education, 2018). In their last two reports exploring the “Future growth of degree apprenticeships” (Universities UK, 2016) and “Realising opportunities” (2017), Universities UK recommend that universities must work with careers services and schools to promote degree apprenticeships to parents and young people. This is seen as essential to challenge traditional parental attitudes that tend to favour academic routes over vocational ones and to address the needs of those who are not ready or able to go into full-time HE at 18.

There has, however, been a growth in the number of young people interested in studying higher level apprenticeships. The Ipsos MORI Young People’s Omnibus Survey, as reported by the Sutton Trust (2014), showed that over half of 11- to 16-year olds were considering studying an apprenticeship over going to university. Similarly, the University of Winchester’s access and outreach team have observed a steady increase in the number of young people from under-represented backgrounds demonstrating aspirations towards higher and degree apprenticeship routes in analysis of their post-outreach evaluations.

Notwithstanding the increased level of interest amongst young people, internal data demonstrates a distinct lack of awareness and understanding around degree apprenticeship routes in young people. This coincides with concerns being raised both nationally (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2016) and locally by the Enterprise M3 (2017) Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) that there is a lack of Careers, Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG) in schools and colleges supporting apprenticeships as an alternative route at FE and HE.

Much of this could be a symptom of the current “picture of low esteem, lack of progression and complexity” in the vocational routes available to young people held by key influencers (parents, teachers and careers advisors) as highlighted by the Sutton Trust (2014) in the Higher Ambitions report (p. 21). However, a more recent survey conducted on behalf of the Chartered Management Institute found that 61 per cent of parents would rather their child took up a degree apprenticeship with a major company than study at Oxbridge. Whilst this could be linked to circumnavigating high student costs, 62 per cent of parents felt that if money were no object they would still prefer that their child undertook a degree apprenticeship over studying at any university (Scott, 2016). This demonstrates some progress has been made in the esteem of degree apprenticeships amongst key influencers but that there remains a clear need for providers to proactively address the lack of understanding for young people and key influencers alike.

The first strand of the project sought to develop and expand degree apprenticeship opportunities and pathways for “hard-to-reach” young people through three areas of activity, as outlined below, to increase progression opportunities and pathways through partnerships developed with local schools and colleges, employers, and the Enterprise M3 Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) – partnerships between local authorities and businesses set up in 2011 by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to help determine local economic priorities and lead economic growth and job creation within the local area, and local authority. The Enterprise M3 LEP area stretches from the hinterland of London to the
New Forest covering mid to north Hampshire and South West Surrey. The LEP area brings together business leaders from 14 district authorities across two counties.

**Establishing a regional picture.** The picture of degree apprenticeship access and provision for young people from low-participation neighbourhoods, NCOP target wards and other under-represented backgrounds is still relatively unclear. However, as recommended by Universities UK (2017), degree apprenticeship growth is dependent on a greater understanding of what the demand looks like using national and local information on priority sectors, skills shortages and labour.

Prior to the proposal, a trawl through the data of students from NCOP target wards in the Southern Universities Network (SUN) region (Hampshire, Dorset and the Isle of Wight) identified 5,955 Non-Apprenticeship Level 3 learners aged less than 20 years old living in NCOP target gap wards. No data were available for those studying at higher or degree apprenticeship level.

To ensure that the University and other local providers are best placed to improve progression rates for young people, more research was needed into the uptake of degree apprenticeships across the region, alongside the levels of aspirations and perceived barriers towards degree apprenticeships held by local young people. The University therefore commissioned dataHE to conduct an analysis of 2016–2017 Higher Education Statistics Agency data sets. They found that Higher and Degree apprenticeship study in HEIs remains low relative to more traditional full-time undergraduate study. The data set further implies that 18-year olds are around 700 times more likely to enter HE as non-apprenticeship students.

The data demonstrated that in the SUN region females were more likely to enter level higher or degree apprenticeships than their male peers, reflecting the overrepresentation of women in full-time undergraduate study. Interestingly, this was not the case for university-ready 18- and 19-year olds where more males were seen to be studying higher or degree apprenticeships, replicating recent national data released showing more men are taking up degree apprenticeships (Office for Students, 2018b). Given that males, particularly those from white-working-class backgrounds, have been highlighted as a priority group currently under-represented in HE (Corver, 2018), the data set provides promising support for the narrative that degree apprenticeships could provide an alternative “more appealing” route, for widening HE access to this group (SUN, 2017). Further data suggest that students from low-participation neighbourhoods were more likely to enter a lower tariff university than an HE-level apprenticeship.

When looking at a local level, it was found that HEIs covering the SUN region were contributing 180 apprenticeship students, a larger share of apprenticeships than other universities relative to their overall full-time undergraduate entry. Most promisingly the data suggested that the participation rate of (university ready) 18-year olds in the SUN areas, based on uptake across SUN providers, is higher than the national average, by a statistically significant margin.

To complement the data, an online survey was disseminated to identify local young people’s attitudes and aspirations towards higher or degree apprenticeships. The survey, which reached 94 young people aged 16- to 19-year olds from across the region, found that the most popular careers were in technology and engineering (14 per cent of respondents), uniformed services (12 per cent) and health or social care (12 per cent). This evidenced some support in addressing local priority skills gaps (Enterprise M3, 2017) and aligning with the anticipated growth of public sector based degree apprenticeships, including policing, nursing and health care (Universities UK, 2017).

The survey also found that interest in studying degree apprenticeships was relatively high, with 46 per cent of respondents considering this route. However, understanding of progression routes was mixed. Although 67 per cent felt confident they understood routes
into studying a degree apprenticeship, over 63 per cent thought you could apply directly through a university. This replicated similar national surveys (Sutton Trust, 2014) and evidenced a continued need for further outreach activity to improve careers information, advice and guidance on degree apprenticeships.

**Improving local Careers, Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG) provision.** In response to the growing need for improved knowledge and understanding of degree apprenticeships across the region, the project worked closely with employers to develop a series of targeted outreach interventions to 483 young people and 175 key influencers (parents, teachers and careers advisors).

The interventions included information stands at careers events, school assemblies, parent and teacher talks, school workshops, on-campus information evening and a CPD webinar. Activity centred around a suite of YouTube clips featuring case studies of current degree apprenticeship students covering topics including how to successfully apply and dispelling common myths. The clips were featured in activity packs provided to all SUN partner schools and colleges which included student guides and tips information sheets on how to apply and preparing for interview developed with partner employers. The clips were promoted through a targeted social media campaign aimed at 14- to 19-year olds within the region that took place during apprenticeship week reached over 137,000 impressions across YouTube and Instagram, far exceeding the 15,000 target.

The resources and sessions were shared with careers and outreach professionals across the region and have been adapted to be embedded within on-going University’s access and recruitment activity. The additional CIAG resource has enabled the University to provide a more attractive offer to schools and colleges seeking support from local employers and HEIs in implementing the Gatsby Benchmarks as set out in the careers strategy (Department for Education, 2017b). The Gatsby Benchmarks are a framework of eight guidelines that define the best careers provision in secondary schools and colleges. The Gatsby Benchmarks provide a framework for best practice in careers, and a key part of the government’s careers strategy.

**Supporting care leavers to “step up” to degree apprenticeships.** Care leavers are “around 11% less likely to enter higher education than other young people with similar demographic profiles and qualification levels” (Harrison, 2017). Whilst little is known about numbers of care leavers on apprenticeships, the “Moving on up” report commissioned by National Network for the Education of Care Leavers recommended that local authorities provide more “second chance” opportunities via apprenticeships and other alternative entry routes (Harrison, 2017).

Drawing upon a pre-existing partnership between the university and Hampshire County Council (HCC) to address the low numbers of care leavers in the county advancing to level 4+ apprenticeships, a “step up to Degree Apprenticeships” scheme was launched. The scheme, led by the HCC Hampshire Futures team, aimed to provide additional pastoral support and an induction period to prepare learners with a tool-kit of skills and support networks that would enable smoother transition into higher and degree apprenticeships.

By March 2018, over 80 young people had engaged in the “step up” learning module. Accompanying the module, HCC provided CPD training to around 120 key influencers, reaching children in care teams, social workers, foster careers, careers advisors and those supporting young people with special educational needs and disabilities. A further 135 aspiration raising guidance interventions took place in the community enabling more children in care and care leavers to explore, understand and aspire to degree apprenticeships. The key outcome was an increased number of care leavers onto level 2 or 3 apprenticeships and into the pipeline towards level 4+ apprenticeships. There are now 16 care leavers working towards an intermediate apprenticeship and 1 taking an advanced apprenticeship.
The “step up” module has now been embedded within future work-ready schemes HCC offers to care leavers and young people at risk of being NEET (not in education employment or training) and the information sessions have a scheduled roll-out for professionals across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight for the 2018/2019 academic year. The University and local authority have committed to continue working together, seeking new opportunities to provide progression pathways for children in care and care leavers.

Project strand 2: social mobility – University of Winchester Women in Digital Enterprise (WiDE)

The second key strand of the project focussed on targeting women entrepreneurs – specifically those interested in progressing their business ambition, turnover and profit margins through engaging in digital enterprise activities and exploring the potential of degree apprenticeships in supporting that growth ambition.

Previous research has highlighted that upward mobility is less likely for women (Reay, 2013); therefore, in the belief that digital skills are key to tackling social mobility it was our intention in this project strand to sow the seeds for social mobility through digital inclusion and creating opportunity for digital learning.

Measures of success in regard to this strand were threefold: first, to deliver the University’s WiDE programme to 100 women entrepreneurs; second, to enhance their existing digital skills and to determine if this has had a positive impact on them personally or on their business; and third, to determine if they have gained improved knowledge and understanding of degree apprenticeships and recognise the potential of degree apprenticeships as a mechanism for skills development or a model of recruitment to support future business growth.

Why a digital enterprise for women focus? The argument for “digital” as a social mobility factor for women began with the concept of inclusive growth, defined by the International Development Research Centre, as growth that ensures opportunities for all sections of the population. The special emphasis on women supports the argument that achieving gender equality has a positive impact on society as a whole and on economic growth in particular (OECD, 2011).

Although statistics show that women make up 51 per cent of the UK population, only 17 per cent of the 4.8m UK enterprises are owned or majority-led by women (Jayawarna et al., 2016), so that women entrepreneurs are the largest under-represented group in terms of their participation in enterprise (Carter et al., 2015). The government’s reforms are ultimately intended to invest in the potential of people of all ages and backgrounds. We chose women business owners as the focus for this project strand not only because they are a large group but because our work with women entrepreneurs to date had indicated that an intervention, such as upskilling in digital technologies, had potential to positively impact their productivity. We saw this as an opportunity to not only inform them on the potential for degree apprenticeships but also to encourage them to consider how employing an apprentice might support their growth ambitions. Research conducted on behalf of Facebook in 2016 by Development Economics and YouGov found that the UK could potentially unlock £10.01bn if it successfully removes the barriers that prevent more women from starting and growing a business (Donnelly, 2016). Aside from financial upskilling and tools (52 per cent), respondents highlighted the need for practical, hands-on business innovation skills (41 per cent), and advice on how to identify and attract strategic partners and international customers (39 per cent); access to networks of innovation actors (35 per cent); and how best to lever their digital know-how (54 per cent).

Women’s access to employment (including self-employment) and educational opportunities reduce the likelihood of household poverty (World Bank, 2016). Resources in women’s hands...
have a range of positive outcomes for human capital and capabilities, both in the world of work and in the household (Kabeer and Natali, 2013). Both sets of findings highlight the importance on the one hand, of women’s access to social, technological and economic resource needed to achieve inclusive growth and on the other, in ensuring a pathway to gender equity in economic activity and in society as a whole.

There is a solid base of empirical research demonstrating that for the most part women business owners are disadvantaged in their orientation to risk and growth and their access to technology, human and financial capital, largely due to their personal backgrounds and employment experiences and the socio-economic and cultural context in which their businesses operate (Carter and Shaw, 2006).

**What is the WiDE programme?** The WiDE programme goes far beyond existing business support for enterprise schemes by developing higher level skills in finance and digital fluency that enable women’s businesses to harness the capabilities of “virtual” models for business collaboration and growth and innovation that unlock the channels to market needed to realise digitally enabled growth on more than a regional scale.

The project aim was to offer the WiDE Programme (free) to 100 women’s businesses in growth stage development who were well placed to achieve their growth ambitions through our WiDE digital business growth accelerator programme and who would be interested in collaborating with business students on projects and/or accessing the University’s Degree Apprenticeship Programmes.

The project consisted of setting up six “Achieving Connected Growth” hubs, where each hub consisted of up to 16 women’s led businesses that had applied to the WiDE growth accelerator programme. Applicants were selected based on the aims they set out with respect to their business growth ambitions, the digital skills they felt they lacked and the barriers they identified to achieving their goals. Each of the women entrepreneurs took part in six workshops, held over two months, in 2018. The women applied business growth modelling tools, joined a shared workspace and teleconference sessions and experimented with strategic modelling tools and financial accounting software. A total of 16 women’s businesses applied to the EIC entrepreneur exchange programme to collaborate first hand with a Europe-wide network of like-minded businesses willing to partner on the development of new products and services.

Six impact dragons acted as aspirational project champions so that each filmed interview clip could be used to set out the dominant theme for each of the six workshops. The women were introduced to higher degree apprentices and other undergraduate talent in search of regionally based career opportunities. The idea of cultivating a WiDE digital enterprise ecosystem recognises that it is not enough to come up with an innovative business accelerator programme. For women entrepreneurs to reach their full potential, they needed an introduction to systems thinking and a framework to allow them to respond with confidence to systemic social and market challenges presented by the speed and complexity of technology change (Kirsch *et al.*, 2015). The WiDE collaborative project acted as a gateway for women entrepreneurs to accelerate business growth through access to undergraduate business research and innovation skills and the University’s Digital Degree Apprenticeship Programmes.

The first digital dragon was the CEO of the Enterprise M3 LEP. Her eloquence on futures thinking practices adopted by the LEP inspired a newfound confidence that in this female leader, they have found a voice and a regional champion to widen access to the training and support they will need to scale up and compete successfully in the digital economy.

The Dean of the Business School and professor of Accounting encouraged the women to challenge the common perception that women “do not do finance”. By the end of her film clip, even the most reluctant women founders could see the merits of incorporating digital accounting software in their operations.
The University of Winchester’s Director for Employer Partnerships encouraged the women to consider how employing an apprentice including a degree apprentice, could provide potential future resource to support planned business growth. She also provided insight into how the funding would work for both levy and non-levy paying businesses highlighting the benefits of the latter in terms of support for their own growth ambition. Many of the women were not only interested in what benefits degree apprenticeships might bring to their business but, as many were mothers, they were also keen to learn more from a personal and family interest. The WiDE proposal was therefore included for its potential to contribute to government ambition and the DADF project targets including meeting the higher skills needs of employers, closing educational attainment gaps and increasing social mobility.

As such, the WiDE proposal was designed to equip women entrepreneurs with a far richer combination of knowledge, skills and leadership competences than may have been required a decade ago to effect growth sustainably. The aim was to sow the seeds for long-term impact on gender equality in business by empowering more women, whether young or old, to reach their potential by nurturing their skill at exercising judgement and decision making, and infusing their businesses with the inherent flexibility of entrepreneurial, fast growth firms in the digital economy.

**What worked?** The challenge was daunting and throughout its planning and delivery stages the planners questioned the direction and ability to achieve the ambitious aims set on paper. It was only by gaining the women’s feedback that a sense of what had worked well emerged:

The weekly sessions layered nicely. With no hesitation we jumped in to stripping back the layers of our businesses. There was no fluff and no waffle. It was brutally honest and often challenging but, wow, truly rewarding. We learned to pull our business apart, find the weaknesses, identify the strengths to focus on, and then build the action-based plans to make sure we meet our goals. The programme crams a lot information and strategy tools in just 6 weeks. We were shown how to break things down to 30/60/90 day goals. With this plan progress you make is clearer, less cluttered and far less overwhelming. Essentially it allows you to focus on the changes that will make your business flourish.

Each of the sessions was designed to challenge our thinking and unpick the things holding our business back (note; it’s mainly us!) [...] the peer-to-peer learning was a real eye-opener and [it] threw up so many possibilities, both in terms of collaboration and business development.

The real “lightbulb” moment on the vital role of digital accounting tools came when one of the women business founders, a well-known small-scale producer of gourmet curries, sat down and calculated her production costs. Her position was clear: despite growing demand, her profit margins were too thin to fund business scale up. Within a few weeks she had designed a “lean” production system, raised her prices without losing a single distributor and set new growth ambitions. Today, she has moved production to a rural facility sponsored by her Council. She works out of a professional kitchen, her curries come in beautifully rebranded, eco-friendly containers and orders from distributors have more than doubled in four months, as have her profit margins.

One of the most striking cases of lean thinking that emerged during the WiDE programme sprang from a conversation between two women founders who were intent on solving the resource shortages slowing business growth and scalability targets set for their respective businesses. A veteran of the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Businesses programme, the first founder, came to the WiDE programme looking for fresh approaches to managing the growing operational complexity and pressure on sales brought on by recent expansion of her physiotherapy clinics. The second founder, a successful clinical therapist, felt she had lost control of her practice, overwhelmed by the variety of therapeutic interventions she was
called upon to deliver. The loss in focus helped her to realise that she had created her own “glass ceiling”.

The result of the two women founders finding common ground is that the clinical therapist delivers on-going motivational sessions to new patients directly in the physiotherapy clinic. Combining mental and physical therapy into a single service is entirely new and no other facility in the UK that has combined the two specialisms has been identified. Via a shared cost and revenue model, profits have quadrupled for both businesses and the women report that streamlining their combined service and managing growth has become easier to plan. In their own words, WiDE has left them feeling “[...] braver and more inspired that we can grow”.

**Awareness of degree apprenticeship and follow-up opportunities.** The first survey conducted aimed to understand women business owners’ awareness of apprenticeships, 80 per cent had heard about apprenticeships. However only three women founders (4 per cent) were able to draw the distinction between apprenticeships programmes *per se* and degree apprenticeships.

The survey also asked them how useful they would find a degree apprenticeship student for their business. Most did not know what to look for in an apprentice or indeed which channels to use to recruit an apprentice. In a follow-up focus group, 16 out of the 28 women’s businesses that took part commented that the WiDE programme had opened their eyes to the positive impact of technology on their ability to scale their business through the process and cost efficiencies offered by digitisation. Every business owner asked for the opportunity to collaborate with business undergraduates and to work more closely with the University to better understand and lever the opportunity and funding models open to small and micro businesses to employ a degree apprentice.

Of the 86 women’s business owners who participated in the WiDE accelerator, 35.2 per cent are managing five to ten staff and generating annual turnover in excess of £250,000 and 44 women’s businesses are micro enterprises working as sole traders with average annual turnover around £50,000. As a follow-up to the WiDE programme, two focus groups were held on apprenticeships: one in Woking and another in Guildford. When the women founders were asked if they would struggle to find the resource to pay for an apprentice, most felt that the prospect of managing an apprentice presented a greater barrier to uptake than the cost of an additional salary or releasing the apprentice one day a week to pursue an apprenticeship. Only one business owner had recruited an apprentice over the course of our programme, and her experience of the scheme offered by another training provider largely echoed the concerns voiced by the women. She reported that the time and effort required to support her apprentice was far more burdensome than she had anticipated and she suggested that for a small business employer, new to the scheme, a structured programme of support in parallel to the degree apprenticeship would give her the oversight and management skills she felt she lacked.

**Women business founders’ engagement with STEM and working with the university.** In evaluating the success of this strand of the project in meeting the three identified targets, we were slightly disappointed as although we had interest from over 100 women entrepreneurs due to their individual challenges in fitting the programme into their busy lives, we fell slightly short of our target delivering the University’s WiDE programme to 86 women entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, as highlighted above those who did attend reported positively on their skills development and positive impact on self-confidence and there are some excellent examples of business growth.

Moreover, when presented with a detailed overview of the Digital and Technology Solutions Degree Apprenticeship, just under a third of the women business owners were attracted by the opportunity to learn to code. They saw the one day per week commitment of
a degree apprenticeship as an opportunity to balance the demands of their business and learning without sacrificing their ability to realise the goals they had set to grow their business over three years:

I never realised that I could actually enrol as an apprentice myself [...].

Beyond the women’s application of digital technologies, the way in which the WiDE women changed their mind-set on university students as ideal project partners and interns was inspiring. The women spoke eloquently about gaining a “sense of accomplishment” and direction, largely gained by working as a cohesive group, sharing their challenges and working in partnership with fresh talent:

[… ] WiDE is a place where no one judges you. There are no preconceived ideas around what you should know about business […] I was in search of that ‘breakthrough moment’. I wasn’t sure what it would be, but I’m delighted to report I found it!

Conclusion and future actions
It has been highly valuable to explore joining up two critical policies for economic and social improvement, namely apprenticeships and social mobility. The creation of a pipeline is ambitious and worthwhile but cannot be achieved overnight. Degree apprenticeships are an important part of the drive to boost productivity, fill higher skills gaps and raise standards of training. However, serious challenges remain to ensure they benefit all parts of the community.

This paper illustrates how establishing a regional picture of degree apprenticeship provision, access and participation can inform effective partnerships and build capacity locally to deliver the higher skills employers need.

It also shows how effective targeted interventions can help under-achieving groups, including those in social care and women in digital enterprises. Indeed, the results of these interventions have been especially impressive and will be evaluated in more depth because the lessons emerging are of wider national interest.

Stakeholder buy-in across multiple partners in order to develop local strategy around the uptake of degree apprenticeships and to build a collaborative multi-agency delivery capability was essential. The University of Winchester was able to position itself as a source of regional expertise on degree apprenticeships in catalysing social, economic and cultural enrichment. Creating effective collaborations has begun to build more effective local and regional infrastructure development across teams. This starts to make best use of total resources including working with hard-to-reach young people.

The LEP and local authorities were critical supporters. Both rely on access to rich and varied data sets to inform the policy measures they formulate to redress hardened social and economic inequality. These resources included the Enterprise M3 (2015) digital technologies report and their skills and STEM strategies bringing together key parties concerned with degree apprenticeship provision and developing higher level digital skills.

Engaging employers in the project is also providing opportunities for business owners to collaborate with business undergraduates and to work more closely with the University to better understand and lever the funding models open to small and micro businesses to employ a degree apprentices.

The University recognises and appreciates the value of the DADF funding and its responsibility to ensure on-going benefits for employers and students. To that end, it has prepared a sustainability action plan. In this context, sustainability means how to extend the positive experiences that have been derived from the process and product that DADF funding has enabled.
Sustainability will take many forms including:

- Partnership working, with the university now having enhanced its reputation as an active leader in promoting degree apprenticeships in local communities and with partners, including other education institutions, LEPs and local authorities. While there is still much more for the University to do, the immediate response from partners has been highly encouraging. They have welcomed the University’s presence in this policy and delivery space. This gives confidence in future collaborative partnerships and approaches are already being made that may produce further funding and delivery opportunities. The University is also working with the FE sector to ensure a smoother transition for students from FE to degree apprenticeships and a seamless service for employers.

- Continuing product delivery including where evidence of effectiveness makes the business case for continued delivery. The best way of ensuring future continuity and growth is to demonstrate success and this has certainly been achieved with the WiDE programme and support for care leavers. The University is planning to fine tune the WiDE programme and offer it to fresh cohorts of women entrepreneurs as part of scaling up its participation and extending its reach. The many people ready to champion the programme provides great confidence in its future growth and success.

- Shared learning and ideas. The Centre for Apprenticeship Research and Knowledge Exchange (CARKE) has been established at the University and has a growing number of articles about degree apprenticeships and social mobility, including the baseline research into degree apprenticeship uptake. These will be supplemented by sharing the experiences of the DADF project in Winchester and in other universities as well as research projects. The first research project looking at more flexible recruitment and training practices, including degree apprenticeships, is already underway.

- Adapting other university services and products that have vocational or employer-focused content to benefit from the learning derived from DADF, including how to attract more young people from low-participation communities and how to work with employers on higher skills needs. The University recognises that it has gained valuable practical learning from the DADF project that is being shared with university services that attract and teach students.

- Enhanced employer engagement through extending the uptake of degree apprenticeships by employers, SMEs and by individuals. The wider and deeper experiences of working with employers are fuelling greater interest and confidence in the University and its work-based learning offer. The University is increasingly able to adapt existing standards and contribute to the development of new ones.

- Enhancing the University’s apprenticeship and business engagement strategies that will be refreshed in light of the DADF project, learning and results. Degree apprenticeships are at the heart of the University’s business engagement strategy. The DADF project and experience is enabling this strategy to be informed and under-written by growing practical experiences that reinforce the direction of the University’s work on behalf of employers and their student employees.

- Enabling other organisations to support project delivery objectives. The University recognises that it does not control everything that will underpin the successful expansion of degree apprenticeships in the region. Core partners have contributed fully to the project and have been able to produce materials that have been vital to success, for example, giving better information about apprenticeships. There is
confidence that, having seen their value, partners will themselves continue to invest in the maintenance of effective materials, especially in areas of advising young people on future career and learning opportunities.

- Further research including into more flexible recruitment and training practices for employers. This will be part of the CARKE centre dissemination programme. The Sustainability Action Plan will be managed centrally in order to ensure that the University and its partners are able to build on the DADF project and maximise the benefits for employers, young people and for HE/FE institutions in the region.

References


Establishing a social mobility pipeline


Further reading


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Driving social mobility?
Competitive collaboration in degree apprenticeship development

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Abstract

Purpose – Apprenticeship reforms have paved the way for higher education (HE) providers, including universities, to become Degree Apprenticeships (DA) training providers, creating new work-based HE routes. The changes aim to generate a new cohort of skilled individuals to support national economic growth, as well as improve levels of social mobility. The purpose of this paper is to focus on an HE partnership project which resulted in a number of collaborative models for development that address these aims.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper focuses on qualitative interviews undertaken during the process of creating DAs through a consortium of HE providers. It considers the collaborative relationships which were built on and which developed across the course of the short-term project. It assesses the concept of competitive collaboration and its link to social mobility.

Findings – The paper considers the various manifestations of collaboration which supported the DA developments in a competitive environment: collaboration as embedded; collaboration as negotiation; and collaboration as a driver for social mobility and social equality.

Originality/value – Working collaboratively across HE providers sought to raise the status of apprenticeships, provide opportunities for the development of new degree apprenticeship curricula and enable practitioners to establish these as a new route into HE. This paper contributes to what is currently limited knowledge about the impact of degree apprenticeships on social mobility and equality.

Keywords Higher education, Social mobility, Degree apprenticeships, Competitive collaboration, Social equality, Under-represented groups

Paper type Case study

Introduction

This paper considers the doing of social mobility, drawing on the findings and recommendations from a short-term project around Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), driving social mobility (DSM) through DAs, led by a university in the north of England as part of a consortium of higher education (HE) providers. The project took place from October 2017 to March 2018 and was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (henceforth HEFCE), the functions of which have now been largely replaced by the Office for Students as part of its Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund Phase 2 (DADF2) programme. The paper takes the following form. First, it covers the background to the project and the context in which it took place. Second, it considers the concepts of social mobility and competitive collaboration within the broader area of the national drive to create apprenticeships. Third, it sets out the methods employed for the project and for its research and evaluation. Fourth, it focuses on the analysis of interview data from the project evaluation, drawing on these concepts. Fifth, it presents a summary, indicating areas for further research and opening a discussion for how doing social mobility in this way enables new understandings of the concept in a fast-changing educational context.

In writing this paper, we seek to open up a discussion of DA and the possibilities they embody for considering social mobility in contexts of collaboration and in this emergent area. The project which forms the main focus of this paper contributes to the UK government’s 2015 commitment to provide 3m new apprenticeship starts by 2020 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015). These reforms have paved the way for HE providers, including universities, to become DA training providers, creating new
work-based HE routes. The changes aim to generate a new cohort of skilled individuals to support national economic growth. We therefore consider here how these drivers might enable the development of practice-informed theories around social mobility in complex and uncertain times. Our work contributes to an emergent and growing area of practice and research, asking important questions which are relevant for HE providers developing provision in this area and seeking to address educational inequalities particularly for members of those communities either under-represented or under achieving in this sector. Although discourses around the promotion of social mobility are within government focus, the concept is not new. It formed the basis for widening access and participation policy and practice in the further and HE sectors for over two decades.

Context: the Driving Social Mobility (DSM) project
The DSM project was supported by the government’s DADF2 project funding stream (HEFCE, 2017), aiming to stimulate the development of DAs, addressing a range of areas including widening participation and access, productivity and economic performance. The programme was underpinned by governmental ambitions to widen access to HE and, more broadly, “to increase productivity and to improve economic performance” (HEFCE, 2017). The DADF2 funding followed an initial HEFCE-funded programme around degree apprenticeships (DADF1) for which the lead institution had been successful in obtaining funding in 2016. This first phase focused on the creation and implementation of DAs for "starts" from September 2017 and the initial activity contributed to the development of infrastructure at the lead institution and across partner institutions to support the further development of DAs.

Areas of degree apprenticeship development
The DSM project had defined objectives for 2018/2019 with regards to the creation of specific DAs with the five areas of targeted development summarised as building and engineering, childcare and education, healthcare sciences, protective services and social care. The project targets themselves are not the focus of this paper, instead our argument concerns how theories and practices around social mobility come to the fore through collaborative engagement around apprenticeships.

The impetus for the DSM project arose from the collective need to consider specific challenges around skills development and retention in the West Yorkshire region, in line with governmental objectives. Through embedding the project within a partnership of HE providers and working directly with the regional enterprise partnership, the project team sought to develop routes into HE that would meet the economic needs of the local area. This was seen an opportunity for HE providers and employers to work in partnership to identify, develop and promote the “talent” of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and mature employees within organisations. The overall aim was to generate future opportunities in education and skills for the regional landscape while paving the way for the development of further DAs across different fields. Social mobility underpinned the activity, as a thread running through it, with these new routes targeted at marginalised groups who might not currently be able to access HE for a wide range of reasons.

The five strands
The project had five core strands which intersected with each other. The first of these focussed on working directly with schools, colleges and local communities to build a productive dialogue around DAs with under-represented groups. The second was concerned with market development and building relationships with employers, ensuring
that HE providers were able to design DAs to fit the skills and knowledge required in the workplace and regionally. The third and fourth strands focused directly on institutions. Programme development was a key area, with HE providers working directly with employers and with consultants with expertise across the strand themes to build programmes, ensuring that these met the requisite standards and could be approved. Likewise, institutional readiness was a major concern, with HE providers developing their own systems to prepare for programmes that might differ quite radically from their existing provision. On-going evaluation formed the basis of the fifth strand, to include documentation and reflection on how these processes were taking place and how the project could respond to emergent opportunities.

The role of the regional partnership

Although the DSM project was led by a HE provider, it was developed in close collaboration with a regional partnership of 12 HE providers. The partnership’s overarching objective is to develop access and outreach and improve educational outcomes for children and young people. This organisation formed a representative body and was considered a suitable fit for the project because of its successful track record of developing collaborative widening participation activities across the region and its focus on social mobility. It also acted as regional hub for the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), also HEFCE-funded (now Office for Students), for which the focus was on opportunities for young people from under-represented groups to progress to HE. The large body of activity developed through NCOP had direct links to the DSM project, and working collaboratively offered multiple opportunities for dialogue with young people, as was the focus for strand one. As the organisation’s director explained:

[...] we exist really to sort of broaden [...] push forward the widening participation and social mobility agendas in our region, and so degree apprenticeships are an interesting answer to the question around why certain particular groups aren’t participating in higher education at the moment. (interview, April 2018)

This collaboration resulted in a suite of outward-facing resources being developed which aimed to show the reality of working and studying, directly contributing to strand one of the project. It has also served to highlight the fact that for many groups, referred to in the interview above, there are a number of external barriers to participation, some of which could be addressed through collaborative partnerships between employers and HE providers as suggested in the findings of the work of the Social Mobility Advisory Group (Universities UK, 2016).

Resources including effective careers education, information, advice and guidance for the engagement of school and college students and their influencers, continue to be developed and disseminated. The role of the umbrella organisation was pivotal in many ways, not solely in terms of the development and delivery of DA-focused resources. It facilitated learning networks across the five areas and strands, implemented to support HE providers as they invested in staff across this area. These also provided important networking opportunities for those involved, enabling the filtering of up-to-date information for HE providers and staff, contributing to the institutional readiness and programme development strands. The partnership shed light on the lived experiences of developing DAs across different institutions. HE partners, although in many ways in direct competition with each other, worked together to create programmes and navigate the administrative and bureaucratic processes required to implement DAs. This process foregrounded the complexity of working this way: something which we consider as key learning from this project and which we are defining as competitive collaboration.
Questions of social mobility and competitive collaboration

Two overarching themes for the project are social mobility and competitive collaboration. We will now briefly introduce these concepts in the context of the DSM project and in relation to the current policy agenda. While social mobility was embedded within the project as a core concern, competitive collaboration emerged as the partners began to work together to develop and prepare for DA programmes.

Social mobility

Although it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a detailed historical and contextual analysis of the term “social mobility”, we present a short summary of it here in the context of DAs. The DSM project is both embedded in and contributes directly to understandings of social mobility, a term which is often problematic and contested (e.g. Reay, 2013). In this sense it contributes to what Diane Reay describes as a “long history” (2013, p. 660, e.g., Savage and Egerton, 1997), continuing with recent debates around access and HE (Elliot Major and Machin, 2018). Social mobility is considered key to a fair and just society and how, as a country, we can look to a more equal future. However, is it a case of “mobility good, immobility bad”? Here we take a critical lens on social mobility, aligning with Reay, who states:

[...] whilst social mobility is increasingly seen to be a major source of social justice in contemporary society, a strong version of social justice requires much more than the movement of a few individuals up and down an increasingly inequitable social system. (Reay, 2013, p. 661)

Reay argues that social mobility provides no solution to “either educational inequalities or wider social and economic injustices” (p. 674). Moreover, she goes on to state that it is highly problematic at an individual level, negating the loss that occurs when we might leave a particular place (or class): the problematic nature of “mobility”. Concerns about the ways in which social mobility is interpreted can cause further issue (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007; Payne, 2017) and the tendency for this to be accepted as a proxy measure for “equality” make it difficult to unpick the issues which are present for both a technical definition (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007) and the wider emotional explanations. For the purpose of this paper, social mobility will be described as a person’s ability to improve on their own parental social and economic position in accessing opportunities and so achieve their full potential in terms of income and occupation (Universities UK, 2016).

Social mobility implies that movement – of multiple kinds – is necessary, a notion which becomes increasingly problematic when considering the needs of individuals and the needs of the local region. In 2010, Stephen Ball described what he called the contradictory nature of educational policy under Blair’s Labour government. Social mobility cannot and does not act as a panacea to the multiple injustices people face across wide areas of their lives, for which education plays a central role. Practitioners working in outreach and widening participation recognise that social mobility, although used widely in widening participation policy and practice since the “massification” of HE in the 1990s (Stuart, 2012), is a concept that must be unpacked and problematized. There has been a growing argument that the approach to widening participation in HE needs to shift from a deficit model where the marginalised – and therefore excluded – are seen as the problem and hence not participating, to one where the education system per se needs to be examined and barriers addressed (Stuart, 2012).

What lies behind social mobility (and immobility) and what ethical commitments do we have, as outreach and widening participation practitioners and researchers, to making this visible? We suggest that practitioners have significant contributions to make to on-going theorising of social mobility and to engaging directly with policy in dialogue, as demonstrated in this paper. DAs occupy an interesting and fertile space for discussion of
social mobility, both in terms of how it is understood across different sectors and how we might work together to increase opportunities for young people. As Fuller (2016) notes “When done well, apprenticeship can significantly enhance the skills and life chances of individuals as well as having economic benefit for the employer” (p. 433).

The activity generated through and by the DSM project therefore questions what we might mean when we use the term social mobility, particularly when working collaboratively across the sectors.

Competitive collaboration
The concept of competitive collaboration emerged strongly as a useful term when considering the ways in which the 12 HE providers in the partnership worked together to design and create programmes together within a highly competitive market. The project was designed as a short-term intervention, or stimulus, with clear and tangible objectives for DA starts. At the time of publication the data is not available for how many starts have been achieved. As a concept it is often used in contexts of international business (e.g. Hamel et al., 1989) where it is described as a methodology which includes “joint ventures, outsourcing, agreements, product licensings, co-operative research” (p. 133), Gary Hamel et al. consider it as strategic alliance, stating that “collaboration is competition in a different form” (p. 134). In the context of HE providers and widening participation, it shifts. The collaboration between providers is necessary to develop DAs, therefore meaning that institutions must work together to create programmes, working directly with employers, but must then subsequently work competition with each other to recruit. This takes place within the broader context of governmental educational policy and regional economic development, both of which state the aim of promoting a skilled and diverse workforce. Put simply, working collaboratively has a potential impact on the development of education and skills at regional level. However, at the same time, institutions need to recruit to their courses and to develop strategic partnerships with employers, and therefore work in highly competitive and fluid markets. How do we work collaboratively, retain institutional distinctiveness, while acknowledging the competitive environment in which we are working? These kinds of questions were foregrounded through the lived experiences of those working to develop DAs.

Methodology and approach to the project evaluation
Here we describe the methodology for one part of the DSM project evaluation, which was carried out with the broad understanding that legacy is a dynamic process (Facer and Pahl, 2017, p. 238). The timeline proposed by Facer and Pahl, in the context of interdisciplinary and collaborative research, centres on three stages: opening, holding and reflecting.

Opening stage
During the opening stage of the project, the initial aims and purposes were established and outlined in the initial grant application. Key milestones were set out in addition to the methods that would be used in order to meet these milestones. The two research questions for consideration at this stage (adapted from Facer and Pahl, 2017, p. 239) were as follows: What does success look like for the DSM project? and What kind of legacy should the project have?

Holding stage
The interviews referred to in this paper took place during the holding stage of the project, with participants invited to reflect on the project in terms of their own institutions, areas of focus and their role in the project. These first stage interviews were carried out by the project evaluator. Attention was given to responding to both challenges and opportunities
that arose and these were documented by the project manager. The evaluation sought to capture these and how they affected the project development, and, eventually, its legacies. This is a processual issue (p. 240) with the processes highlighted during the interviews.

**Reflection stage**

Reflection takes place at the final stages of the project and is where the outcomes and the processes are brought together. It is at this point that the particular contributions made by this project are highlighted, including its legacy and the opportunities it presents for DAs across HE providers in the region.

**Structured conversations**

A series of interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders, predominately the consultants and institutional leads, during the second half of the project. As the DAs commence, additional interviews will be carried out with the apprentices and employers. The qualitative methods employed for the evaluation were iterative and reflexive, with emerging findings fed into the on-going evaluation. The unstructured interviews, or “structured conversations” (Conteh and Toyoshima, 2005) sought to document a particular stage of the project and demonstrate the complexity of what took place within the project framework but also more widely.

The evaluation was granted full ethical approval. The interviews were audio recorded and the data transcribed. A thematic analysis of the data was undertaken, focusing on the overarching themes of competitive collaboration and social mobility, in addition to the four main areas of awareness-raising with under-represented groups, employer engagement, programme development and institutional readiness. From these data, a series of cases were developed, focussing on the project’s four strands.

The process had a number of limitations. The institutions working together for the DSM project were at different stages of growing provision, therefore the relationships, and the ways in which these might develop in the future, differed across institution and across each area. In some cases these were historical relationships and in others these were new and emergent. Interviews gather a particular kind of data and reflect people’s understandings and opinions at a certain point in time – in this case, towards the middle to the end of the project.

**Questions and findings**

Here we consider the findings from the research undertaken to evaluate the project, focussing on social mobility and competitive collaboration. Over the course of the project the emerging findings were discussed by the project team, in dialogue with the data collected through the interviews and the wider political landscape. A number of significant questions were raised, including:

- How might a focus on DAs “drive social mobility”?
- What is it about DAs – as a route to HE and employment – that might drive social mobility? What characteristics should they have and whose responsibility should it be to monitor and document progress? What kinds of characteristics might “improved social mobility” have?
- What can we learn from the DSM project about social mobility as a concept and as a lived experience?
- How might DAs create spaces for rethinking what we mean by social mobility, in HE institutions but also in the workplace and in schools?
The concept of competitive collaboration, in terms of how HE providers work together to develop the programmes, but also looking forward to how these degree courses would necessitate a way of working in a competitive environment, has implications for how social mobility is being conceptualised and addressed across sectors. This raised another series of important questions:

- How might the concept of competitive collaboration enable an alternative lens on social mobility?
- How does competitive collaboration foreground tensions around understandings of social mobility and how can these be addressed?
- And, is social mobility the right concept, or should we be shifting towards social equality and social justice as underpinning threads for this work?

Here the focus is on a number of extracts of data from the interviews conducted with project members which illustrate some of the initial findings. Three main areas around competitive collaboration and DAs are set out, with reference to the data. These are as follows: competitive collaboration as embedded, competitive collaboration as negotiated, and competitive collaboration as a potential driver for social mobility.

**Competitive collaboration as embedded**

There was HEFCE wanting to promote a greater uptake of apprenticeships in the university sector. (Interview, higher education provider 1a, March 2018)

The concept of competitive collaboration arose, not only as a lived reality for HE partners working together to create and develop DA programmes, but in considering the future for these relationships as the DAs launched. Working collaboratively in this way presented opportunities, in terms of diversity of input into the programme design and the sharing of good practice across the different subject areas, but it also presented clear challenges, particularly in the area of competitive recruitment for employer partners and for apprentices as the months went on. Here the role of the regional HE provider partnership was pivotal, not solely from a logistical perspective and to enable the project to run, but also because of the trust between partners which is fostered by the partnership:

[...] so that’s one of the good things about the project is that we had the collaborative platform to start with, so in a way, we were already aware that we were all competing within the same area, but there has been an element of trust built up because that was established and that’s been going for a number of years in different guises, so before the current organisation it was the Business Engagement Group, and they were looking at different things, but skills, high level skills, have been a real central part of that. (Interview higher education provider 1b, February 2018)

Colleagues from competing HE providers meeting regularly to work on the project was embedded from the start of the project. But it was also a requirement for the funding. The partnership umbrella enabled these working relationships, building in part on existing joint activity over the previous years. It provided an infrastructure for this way of working. Moreover, it provided a space for what could be potential tensions to be brought into the open. The regional partnership’s role here was also to mediate and to alleviate these tensions.

**Competitive collaboration as negotiated**

However, although existing regional partnership work existed prior to the DSM project, we found that working together to create and then deliver DAs as an innovative model of
provision, involved a specific kind of competitive collaboration. This was referred to by one partner institution as a “tacit understanding” (HE provider 1a). This tacit understanding requires HE providers to look backwards at their progress, partnerships and areas of expertise to consider the present, in terms of negotiating cross-institution engagement necessary to develop programmes. It also requires looking forward to the future, envisioning potential scenarios which might arise, and possible tensions and conflicts of interest. One HE provider explained it in terms of programme design and institutions offering different kinds of provision:

We’ve mapped out every year, when that would happen, but what we’re seeing and what HEI1 is seeing, that’s how we’re managing to work together on this, is the market could be so big, and as us sort of leading in the country, well, certainly in the region.

We’re also delivering block release, which they can’t do, so we’re doing [...] the company that we’re working with now, they’re doing ten-week blocks, 35 hours a week, so their apprentices are coming to us for ten weeks, then they’re going back on to site for ten weeks, and then coming back to us for ten weeks. (Interview higher education provider 2, March 2018)

This case exemplifies how HE providers, working together on a subject-level strand, might negotiate their positions, with institutions offering differing kinds of provision which will suit different employers. This acts to differentiate each provider, building on their strengths and their institutional structures, a way of working which is reinforced by the institutions working closely together.

However, the negotiation must be managed at multiple levels. This way of working creates new situations for which staff may not be yet equipped. One institution highlighted the caution expressed by their staff at how much information they might be able to disclose at DSM meetings:

I think some of the other degrees have been a bit more challenging [...] these were bringing people together from other universities that wouldn’t necessarily know each other, and I’ve had a few conversations with staff, so they’ve got together, been with the consultants that have asked them loads of questions and have said, could you do this, how do you do this at higher education provider 3, next meeting could you share this with the group? Or what you do, and how you do it and who do you talk to? And then I’d get calls from them going, I don’t feel very comfortable about sharing this with the group. And I was like so, tell me why, sort of thing. Because, well, I just feel as though we’re giving away [...]. (Interview higher education provider 3, March 2018)

Creating spaces for articulating these concerns and for responding at an institutional level was therefore of pivotal importance. HE providers had to reflect on this process, driven by the DSM project as a catalyst, and redefine some elements of accepted cross-institution working. New ways of working collaboratively in competitive contexts had to be considered and put into place.

Competitive collaboration as a driver for social mobility/social equality
The social mobility aspect of degree apprenticeships was important for all partners. The lead institution had a particular investment in understanding how DAs might open up opportunities for students who might not access more traditional routes into HE:

We were interested in the social mobility aspect of apprenticeships because of really the institution’s interest in providing access to HE for all kinds of groups that perhaps don’t get the same opportunities to access HE. (Interview higher education provider 1b, February 2018)

Social mobility and the perceived affordances of DAs to open up new opportunities for students from under-represented groups were central to the lead institution’s investment in the project. But as a concept it raised practical questions for higher education providers,
keen to ensure they were targeting under-represented cohorts already in the institution, but unsure as to who might fall under this category:

[...] it’s a problem with regards to, how do I monitor, how do I monitor who falls under the social mobility remit? [...] it seems to be very complicated for young people nowadays. (interview higher education provider 2b, March 2018)

Additionally, this related to documentation and tracking not only in terms of project accountability, but also in terms of targeting and working with under-represented groups and in ensuring that potential and actual apprentices are not viewed as being a homogenous group. This ensured that the project recognised the importance of apprentices’ unique protected characteristics and the impact it had on their access to information and recruitment to a DA. If different institutions had different definitions of under-represented or those falling “under the social mobility remit”, how could the project demonstrate its effect on social mobility? In this sense, the broadness of the concept of social mobility can make it challenging for HE providers to be sure they are working with the cohorts the project seeks to reach. A tension lies also with employers wishing to use DAs to upskill existing staff, or, “recruiting from the inside” as one project participant put it. This presents a complexity, particularly when considering the project objectives and different conceptualisations of social mobility. Likewise, the meaning of “under-represented” differs across fields. In the case of protective services, the DA and its potential integration into the new framework could lead to an expansion of the recruitment base. As one participant put it, “that’s not about social mobility as such, but it is about opening the service to a wider audience” (protective services interview, February 2018). For the employers, these potential recruits may come from under-represented groups but social mobility may not be the primary concern; it is perhaps more about a broader, more diverse talent pool which may ultimately impact the workforce dynamics and performance in a positive way.

Social mobility also links to the concerns of the city and regional enterprise partnership and their strategy for investment in the city and the surrounding area:

OK, so within the LEP [Local Enterprise Partnership] and the combined authority, we have an inclusive growth agenda that runs throughout all our work, so it plays a key part in supporting those. (Interview city and regional enterprise partnership, March 2018)

Although the focus of the project and the subject areas that became the main focus for the DSM project shifted more towards the public sector than towards the business-oriented side of the city and regional partnership agenda, there was significant alignment in terms of educational attainment and advancement. At a regional level, the interest lay in how DAs might open up opportunities for disadvantaged groups within the region and how they might contribute up-skiilling. This was a core thread for the project:

But the city and regional enterprise partnership also has a responsibility for the kind of educational attainment and advancement, so they’re interested in the opportunities that apprenticeships might offer for disadvantaged groups in LCR, I think, to either become, you know, through this, they can access HE and they can become professional jobs, that might not you know, it’s a different route isn’t it, to coming through as learning, and going through A levels, undergraduate sort of stuff. (Interview higher education provider 1a, March 2018)

DAs create a space, not only for HE providers to work with each other, but also to work directly with employers. The concept of social mobility, therefore, can present as a potential point of tension as different sectors rub up against each other. HE providers’ definitions of social mobility align with educational policy and, although differing in focus depending on the nature of the institution, must all develop access agreements which meet the requirements of the Office for Students. Understandings of social mobility by different
employers involved in developing DAs will vary greatly from each other, and may not align completely with those of the HE sector. This poses a potential area of tension as universities strive to develop employability and progress from HE into employment. Working together to create DAs sheds light on how understanding of social mobility might differ across sectors. Not only do these differences come to the surface but they must be tackled in order to co-create programmes.

Developing programmes collaboratively, across institutions and across sectors, raises questions of alignment. Can HE providers’ understandings of social mobility and commitment to widening participation (including but not limited to what is set out in institutional access agreements) ever align with that of employers? The emerging field of DAs therefore creates what might be considered a contact zone (Pratt, 1991) with these different views and approaches made visible and foregrounded. An imperative is created: to move forward there must be communication, negotiation and then translation. More generally the project required a rethinking of HE programme development and shift towards embedding employer needs. This was articulated by one of the project participants, speaking on behalf of the city and regional enterprise partnership:

They need to have it in their terminology, not in academic speak, so I think there’s been a massive culture change there about how their provision engages with the business community. (Interview city and regional enterprise partnership, March 2018)

**Implications and next steps**

This paper has sought to open up discussion of two concepts, social mobility and competitive collaboration, within the context of creating a suite of DAs for the DSM project. It has considered the context, the project itself, and a summary of the two concepts in relation to DAs. It then focussed on competitive collaboration as embedded, as negotiation and as a potential driver for social mobility.

At a regional level, the challenge for the DSM project and for the HE partnership going forward, is how all those involved in DAs might be enabled to retain responsibility for access and social mobility, while also being mindful of the ethics and principles around achieving inclusion and equality. More generally, these findings have implications across the sector for the development and delivery of DAs that are inclusive.

Working in this way means that multiple opportunities open up for meaningful dialogue about disadvantage, and social equality, across HE providers and employers. This dialogue has practical implications, in terms of how DA programmes are created and then delivered, theoretical considerations, in terms of how this area opens up new understandings of social mobility, and ethical considerations, and in terms of how HE providers and employers work collaboratively to ensure apprentices are well equipped and ready for a rapidly evolving employment market. There is an imperative then, as driven by the DSM project and other initiatives of this kind, to keep the channels of communication across institutions and across sectors open.

**References**


Further reading


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Responding to the NHS and social care workforce crisis

The enhancement of opportunities through collaborative partnerships

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyse the development of a foundation degree, including a higher apprenticeship route, which enables learners to access both higher education (HE) and health and social care professional programmes. The underpinning rationale is the urgent workforce crisis in health and social care services.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors will review the multiple drivers which stimulated course development and the creation of a community of practice to ensure quality management. This case study illustrates the potential of a higher apprenticeship to enable both personal and professional development.

Findings – The paper provides insight into working with a number of further education colleges, how to ensure consistency in delivery and assessment and the strategies which contribute to quality assurance. This case study illustrates the potential of work-based learning to transform lives and to provide the workforce required by our public services.

Practical implications – This paper explores the lessons learnt from setting up a new collaborative partnership and the processes that need to be in place for success.

Originality/value – The government is committed to the expansion of apprenticeship learning in health and social care. This paper shares the authors’ experience of working with a range of employers and education providers, the challenges and successes and recommendations for development.

Keywords Health and social care, Community of practice, Progression, Assistant practitioner, Foundation degree, Higher apprenticeship

Paper type Case study

Background
Key drivers
It has been widely reported for many years that as a result of an enlarging and ageing population, the demands on the health and social care services in the UK are increasing year on year. It is also widely accepted that due to multiple factors it is unlikely that sufficient additional funds could be found to increase national spending on health and social care services to keep pace with the expected increased demands. The King’s Fund (2017) recently reported that NHS spending would need to rise by £30bn between 2017 and 2022 in order to keep pace. However, current spending plans allow for a £5bn increase. Many reports between 2010 and 2015 highlighted significant issues with providing a workforce fit for purpose to address the challenges in the health and social care sector.

These included the following:

- Health Education England’s (2014) Strategic Framework 2014–2029: highlighting the changing demographics of patients and staff; the increasing population size and age profile with a resulting increasing demand on services.
Centre for Workforce Intelligence’s (2015) study, *The Public Health Knowledge and Intelligence Workforce*, identified that due to the nature of patients’ needs and the financial constraints on health and social care economies, the demand for a lower skilled workforce (e.g. bands 1–4) will significantly outstrip that of higher skill levels, i.e., degree-level health and social care practitioners.

In response to the increasing demands being placed on the UK’s health and social care system, George Osbourne announced in his spending review and Autumn statement speech in November 2015, four objectives for the country. The first of these was “to develop a modern, integrated, health and social care system that supports people at every stage of their lives”. The statement included “modernising the way we fund students of healthcare”. This meant for nursing, midwifery and allied health students that they would no longer receive grants and bursaries to fund their studies and instead, for courses commencing after 1 August 2017, they would need to apply for student loans. The chancellor claimed that this would help increase the number of students completing nursing, midwifery and allied health professional degrees which would help address the shortages in staff. The rationale being that this would remove the cap on places on health profession courses and so encourage universities to train larger numbers and more cohorts.

Many involved in, or responsible for, the education and training of student nurses, midwives and allied health professionals could not understand how asking students to fund their own education at £9,000+ a year for three years, along with having to take on additional loans to cover costs that were previously funded by bursaries, in a period of austerity, would lead to an increase in the number of students applying or the number of placements available in practice.

The RCN’s (2015) response on the proposed changes to student nurse bursaries, in their Policy and International Department Policy Briefing, made clear that they believed the changes would have “a disproportionate adverse effect and act as a disincentive for those from lower income backgrounds, women, mature students, people with dependants and BME students” (p. 4).

At Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), the consensus was that we would see a reduction in both UCAS applications to our nursing, midwifery and allied health portfolio of courses and that it would represent a significant barrier to those students who would normally undertake an access to higher education (HE) course, particularly within those groups identified by the RCN. Sheffield Hallam has traditionally recruited a significant number of students from the local area and through regional further education (FE) colleges, many of whom would identify as mature, BME, women and carers. At subsequent meetings of the University’s Health and Social Care College and School Liaison group, partner colleges were quick to update on the significant reduction in applications from mature students and those with caring responsibilities to their access courses.

In December 2015, the government announced a refresh of nursing and support workers career pathways. Both announcements “Creating a modern nursing workforce” by Ben Gummer and “Nursing associate role offers new route into nursing” by the Department of Health and Social Care highlighted that unregistered support workers would have development opportunities under the Apprenticeship and Higher Apprenticeship Framework.

These latter announcements built on the recommendations of Willis (RCN, 2012), Francis (2013), Cavendish (2013), Keogh (2013) and Willis (2015) who recommended a generic practitioner (assistant practitioner) that could work across health and social care roles with the potential to fast track to professional undergraduate programmes via the recognition of prior learning process.

**Developing higher and degree apprenticeships**

In a Department of Health and Social Care (2016) press release on 25 January, the government clarified its intentions and promised to create in the NHS, “100,000 apprenticeship opportunities
for young people to work in the Health Sector”. These opportunities would be in a variety of roles including: IT, estates and facilities, domestic and housekeeping services, business administration and accounting as well as nursing and healthcare assistants.

This announcement followed the 17 December 2015 one in which Health Minister Ben Gummer (2015) announced a planned new role to “work alongside healthcare support workers and fully qualified nurses” and focus on patient care. These new workers would be called nursing associates (NAs) and would be trained through an apprenticeship leading to a foundation degree.

An HM Revenue & Customs (2016) policy paper in February on the Apprenticeship Levy made clear that the proposed changes to funding apprenticeships would affect employers in all sectors. The Levy would only be paid on annual pay bills in excess of £3m, and so less than 2 per cent of UK employers would pay it. However, as most NHS Trusts have pay bills over £3m, most would be required to pay the levy. A report “The Apprenticeship Levy Study: NHS Trusts” commissioned by BPP University (2018) in partnership with Education & Skills Funding Agency and Health Education England (p. 5) found that “Virtually all NHS Trusts are levy payers (97%) and plan to use it (95%)”.

The levy of 0.5 per cent of the Trust’s pay bill is paid each month and each contribution expires after 24 months if not used by the employer to fund apprenticeships. Unsurprisingly, many of the University’s partner Trusts made their intentions to try clear, and ensure that they have spent all of their levy payments on apprenticeships to aid with workforce planning and staff development.

The problem for NHS Trusts was that at this point there were very few suitable apprenticeships approved for delivery by the Institute for Apprenticeships and on top of this where there were apprenticeship frameworks approved some would be superseded by apprenticeship standards in development or draft. This complexity did not help Trusts attempting workforce planning in an uncertain and austere climate.

A significant uncertainty that was apparent in early 2016 was the EU referendum vote on 23 June 2016. There were many reports in the press in the run up to the referendum about the potential benefits and threats to the NHS. One such report in May 2016 on the BBC was an interview with Sir Simon Stevens (Chief Executive of NHS England), who had highlighted his view that the NHS had “benefited enormously” from doctors, nurses and care workers from the EU working within the health service. He predicted that there would be a negative impact on NHS services if any of those 130,000 staff chose to leave because of uncertainty over work visas.

Post the Brexit referendum, it is clear that the uncertainty and “hostile environment” (Kirkup and Winnett, 2012, para. 7) created by the Government has meant many EU nationals working in the NHS, as nurses and health visitors, has reduced from 7.4 to 6.8 per cent (Baker, 2018). In addition, the number of new registrants from the EU has dramatically reduced. A recent report (March 2018a, p. 4) by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) highlighted that Steven’s concern around a reduction of EU workers due to uncertainty over Brexit had come true with a significant impact on EU nurses registered in the UK. “In 2017/18 25,577 fewer people from the EEA joined our register than in 2016/2017 (a drop of 87 per cent) and 881 more people left it (an increase of 29 per cent)”.

On top of the drop in EU healthcare workers, other recent articles highlight the increase in recruitment problems faced by the NHS over the last few years. A newspaper article published in The Guardian, January 2018 by Denis Campbell reported that the NHS Digital quarterly update showed that “one in 10 nurses leave the NHS in England each year” and that “across England as a whole, only one in seven of all empty nursing posts were filled”. This fall in numbers seems to be due to both Brexit and to an increased dissatisfaction with employment in the NHS, particularly by registrants. In addition, the falling birth rate during the early millennium and the increasing numbers retiring has impacted on the number of staff employed by the NHS (NHS Digital, 2018).
Sheffield Hallam University strategy

Against the backdrop of great uncertainty regarding traditional school leaver nursing, midwifery and allied health profession students opting to study at University, the University was reviewing its overarching strategy and direction with the arrival in January 2016 of a new Vice Chancellor, Professor Sir Chris Husbands.

The previous University strategy already had a focus on “expanding horizons” which had encouraged “developing pathways and partnerships” as well as “shaping the professional workforce of the future through partnership with business, the professions and employers”. In March 2016, the University strategy refresh did not alter these aspects and in fact increased the priority on applied courses and partner engagement.

In late 2015 the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing received a number of requests from both potential and existing university partner colleges for new developments in health and social care courses as many were either unhappy with their existing course provision or they wished to progress their existing levels 2 and 3 health and social care offer to levels 4 and 5.

Discussions took place in late 2015 about how best to respond to all of the previously identified drivers along with how to provide a suitable award that would benefit colleges, provide a vehicle for the expected developments in apprenticeships and maximise the opportunities for students.

Course design and approval

The outcome of the further deliberations between the three departments of Nursing and Midwifery, Allied Health Professions and Social Work, Social Care and Community Studies was to create a multi-disciplinary cross-department planning team to design a suitable Foundation Degree that would maximise the progression opportunities to a range of health and social care professional degrees and also a level 6 top–up award BSc (Hons) in Health and Social Care. The University’s Apprenticeship and Work-Based Learning Standing Panel would be used to ensure key principles of apprenticeships and work-based learning were appropriately incorporated into the award.

The Foundation Degree’s design needed to address a number of potentially conflicting requirements, these were, to:

- map against the existing health (assistant practitioner) higher apprenticeship framework;
- map against the draft assistant practitioner (health) higher apprenticeship standard;
- allow for expected developments in NA apprenticeship and role;
- allow as wide as possible entry into the FdSc to help address widening participation agendas at the University and in the colleges; and
- provide progression opportunities to as many professional courses as possible.

In early discussion, it was also decided to:

- Incorporate into the course the Care Certificate, which had been developed by Health Education England, Skills for Care and Skills for Health to meet the requirements set out in the Cavendish Review.
- Employ an appropriate assessment strategy that took into account the learners’ backgrounds and previous academic study. This required utilising a wide range of assessments and scaffolding them to build learners’ confidence and skills.
- Allow for students to step off after Year 1 with a complete award – this would enable those students wishing to pursue a career as a midwife to join year one of the professional midwifery course (This was required as it is not possible to join a midwifery degree at Level 5 from a FdSc, due to NMC standards).
• Provide students exiting at the end of Year 1 (Level 4) with a certificated award, rather than just a transcript. This was achieved by designing a Certificate in Higher Education Health and Social Care (Cert HE HSC).

• Include multiple routes and modes of delivery in order to widen access and respond to both employee and employer requirements.

In order to facilitate the requests from partner colleges for a September 2016 enrolment, a very tight set of project milestones were set and actively managed. The first course planning team meeting was in January 2016 and the design of the course was carried out alongside the required internal approval processes. In February 2016, the senior management teams in each of the three departments approved the development and the Faculty approved the business case on 4 March 2016 by which time most of the course had been designed, written and mapped against the apprenticeship framework and draft apprenticeship standard as well as the Care Certificate.

The resultant award FdSc Professional Practice in Health and Social Care (FdSc PPHSC) was validated by the University’s Work-Based Learning Standing Panel on 12 May 2016 and then approved via individual college-based events for franchise to five colleges (University Campus Barnsley (May), Sheffield College (May), North Lindsey College (June), Dearne Valley College (June) and Chesterfield College (July)). SHU staff supported the college staff through the recruitment for September and across the five colleges the numbers enrolling in September 2016 were 104 full-time (FT) students (Figure 1).

Management of college partnerships
Although the University and Faculty already had many partnerships including franchise and external validation arrangements, it was clear that if a single award was to be franchised to a number of colleges there would need to be a robust management and oversight provision ensuring that all students, regardless of where they studied, had a

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120 CREDITS

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120 CREDITS

All modules are 20 credits unless otherwise stated
Red coloured modules are year long, blue are single semester

Figure 1. FdSc professional practice health and social care – course structure
comparable experience and that FdSc awards would be the same, regardless of where students had studied.

The proposal that was approved by the Faculty was to create a new management role for this development; a partnership academic lead. This person would liaise with senior staff at each of the colleges and support the collaborative course leaders (CCL) appointed at SHU. To further support the CCLs, module coordinators (MCs) were also appointed to create assignments, liaise with module staff in colleges and to moderate the marked assignments. As the course had been a development across three departments and the FdSc was to provide a “ladder of opportunity” enabling completing students to access a wide range of professional awards, it was decided to create the course team from all three departments. To facilitate a range of options including higher apprenticeship status the University decided to act in a quality capacity, rather than claim the apprenticeships as their own through engaging in delivery. This strategy also respected the employer relationships held by each college with their locally based Trust, to comply with apprenticeship funding rules (Figure 2).

Ladders of opportunity and progression
During the design of the course, multiple ladders of opportunity were in-built through careful consideration of the various requirements of each profession, the relevant professional body standards and achievable milestones for the students.

As can be seen from Figure 3, students who commence the FdSc can:

1. Step off after one year on the FdSc and undertake a range of health and social care professional awards.

2. Complete the FdSc and choose to either:
   - Continue to Level 5 (Year 2) of one of six professional awards at SHU.
Continue to a BSc (Hons) Health and Social Care award which allows them to complete a BSc (Hons) in three years from commencing the FdSc. Students completing the BSc who then wish to join a professional register can choose to join a pre-registration MSc in five key disciplines.

In 2017/2018, work was undertaken to validate a route for Nursing Associates (NA) utilising the framework of the FdSc and a number of existing modules. The NA Apprenticeship Standard was mapped against the existing foundation degree and where shortfalls were identified the required changes were incorporated into a new 40 credit module at Level 5. The recent publication of the draft NMC standards for proficiency (NMC, 2018b) has resulted in further mapping and modifications to this route.

Maintaining and enhancing quality
As the interdisciplinary planning group had been such a success and the course design so integrated, it was obvious to the course team that establishing a Community of Practice with all relevant staff at the colleges was a natural progression to ensure operational consistency and quality monitoring across the partnership.

A key factor for the University when considering the franchise of an award to a partner institution is that all students should have a learning experience that is comparable to that delivered at the University. Another key aspect is to ensure that academic standards in delivery, marking and feedback are at the right level and consistent with the University’s expectations. A particular challenge for the course team at Sheffield Hallam, with initially five and then seven colleges all delivering the course, was ensuring that a piece of work marked as 68 per cent at one college would receive the same mark at all the other colleges. At the University, there is a robust assessment and marking verification process and it is a requirement that a similar process is established with franchised awards. This was achieved for the FdSc by buddying the colleges for moderation of marking and feedback. College A was responsible for the initial moderation of College B’s marking and College C was responsible for College A’s marking. Once this first moderation tier was complete, the University course team staff would subsequently moderate across all the colleges, thereby ensuring the comparability of all marks and facilitating a robust ecosystem of skills development.

At the first Community of Practice event, the University course team led the first round of table moderation event. Feedback from the college staff, who had never had their marking
moderated by others outside of their own institution, was extremely positive. This positive response to unfamiliar and potentially challenging experiences by the college teams is one key factor in the success of the Community of Practice. Over time, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect has been cultivated. The outcome is effective and open communication from both university and college partners with a collaborative approach to problem solving (Shepherd, 2018).

The Community of Practice events occur monthly throughout the year with a different focus and agenda each time. Examples of the activities and agendas of the various meetings over the last two years are:

- service providers invited to join discussions;
- scheduling assessment hand in and return of marks and feedback;
- sharing of teaching material;
- marking and moderation workshops;
- meeting with administrative, technical and library staff to confirm communication strategies, SHU quality processes and availability of appropriate resources;
- meeting with marketing staff to ensure parity of information provided to all applicants and students;
- collaborative student status, entitlement and access to resources;
- Students’ Union;
- Sheffield Hallam Learning Centre Inductions;
- Virtual Learning Environment demonstrations and Q&A;
- formal module evaluations;
- staff/student committee meetings;
- monitoring of placement provision;
- management of WBL and supervision;
- module handbooks and assessment briefs;
- assessment criteria and feedback;
- assessment regulations;
- IT and blackboard training; and
- plagiarism, academic misconduct and Turnitin.

In addition to these formal events, a number of more informal and enhancement events have taken place. Examples of these are inviting college staff and students to existing and bespoke sessions at Sheffield Hallam University:

- Annual Death Café;
- FdSc PPHSC Celebration Event/Wellbeing Conference; and
- FdSc PPHSC Progression Event.

Death Café was an event which was part of Dying Matters Awareness week (14–18 May 2018). Sheffield Hallam Palliative and End of Life Care Interest Group ran an event to enable students and staff to think about and talk more openly about death, dying and bereavement.
The purpose of the Celebration/Wellbeing Conference was to inform and raise the expectations and aspirations of the students as well as to celebrate that so many were achieving and progressing. This event proved to be a great success, in total 34 students attended along with 7 college staff from 4 of the colleges. The event was evaluated via a feedback sheet and provided very positive feedback (Table I).

The Progression event was held only a couple of weeks later on 6 June 2018 – the purpose of this day was to address any issues that the second-year students had about progressing to university from the FdSc. As with the earlier event, feedback was sought from the students in order to refine the event for future cohorts.

Again very positive feedback was provided by the attendees on the day along with comments that students would like more guidance on the types of placement they should undertake on the FdSc (Table II).

It was particularly satisfying to the team that so many students reported that they were now more positive about going to university, which had been a key focus of the day (Figure 4).

In addition to all the above the course team at Sheffield Hallam regularly visit each college to meet with students and staff and to listen to the student voice and feedback “you said, we did” actions.

During the 2017/2018 academic year, three of the colleges that have been running the FdSc underwent collaborative partner reviews as part of the University’s quality assurance process, and 183 students from these colleges responded to the review, indicating that the FdSc programme is meeting the standards expected by the University.

### Table I.
Feedback from celebration event

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student feedback comments</th>
<th>College tutors’ feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed attending</td>
<td>Loved the celebration part at the end. Good to share in the successes of the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s been very nice and learnt loads</td>
<td>The students say that it was a really positive experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was a really good and helpful event</td>
<td>Fun, inspirational and memorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you, its been great</td>
<td>Great workshops, good for students to meet from different colleges. Inspirational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very well run, organised day. Enjoyed the event</td>
<td>Loved the day!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Really insightful workshops. Enjoyed it!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would say it was very educative and eye opening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good day, interesting workshops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting workshops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great recognition for all our hard work. Thank you for a lovely day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoroughly enjoyed. Activities were interesting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Really enjoyable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Really enjoyed the day. Very informative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fab!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table II.
Feedback comments from progression event

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Developmental</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fantastic</td>
<td>Some more detail such as how to get a good placement that is accredited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>[Information on] how things work in terms of placements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covered everything I wanted to know</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brilliant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five star</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleared up concerns and questions I have</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
assurance processes. At two of these the Community of Practice was “commended” by the University panel. In addition, during the approval of the three additional colleges for the FdSc PPHSC and other college approvals involving the Faculty, the Community of Practice was identified as “best practice” and once again “commended”.

Growth and expansion
As mentioned above, 104 FT students enrolled on the first intake in September 2016. Along with the partner colleges the course team and senior staff in the Faculty had been in discussion with a number of local NHS Trusts and other HSC providers about course development and workforce needs and higher apprenticeship routes.

The first cohort of higher apprentices started in May 2017 with additional cohorts at multiple colleges in January 2018.

During the first year of operation, we were approached by two other colleges who requested to run the FdSc. The approval of these colleges took place in the academic year 2016/2017 ready for enrolment in September 2017.

The second intake in September 2017 across the college partnership was 209 new FT students into Year 1 and almost a hundred FT students continuing into Year 2.

This meant that in 2017/2018 there were 339 students in total enrolled on the programme including 50 higher apprentices across the colleges.

The numbers expected to be enrolled on the award across the colleges in 2018/2019 is around 400 FT students and 100 higher apprentices.

Progression to BSc/BA (Hons) and retention
The retention on the FdSc in its first two years of operation has been very high and in September 2018 the progression onto both the professional awards at Level 5 and the Level 6 top up BSc (Hons) has far exceeded expectations.

Of the 104 that commenced the FdSc in September 2016, 80 entered Year 2 of the FdSc. Of the 24 who did not progress to the second year, five were accepted onto Level 4 of professional awards at SHU and two others are known to have used their first year to gain access to professional awards at another university. As progression to professional awards from Level 4 was an aim of the programme, the total progression rate is 84 per cent (87 of 104). Anecdotal evidence from the colleges of students being offered employment in health or social care accounts for more than half of those “lost”.

Throughout the first two years of operation, the course management team at SHU have closely liaised with their counterparts in the colleges to inform and record the intentions of the students with regards to further study. It has become clear that although many students start the FdSc with a clear focus on what they see as their future career, the placement experiences that they have on the FdSc often make them aware of roles and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compared with before the session – how do you feel...</th>
<th>More Positive</th>
<th>The Same</th>
<th>More Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About going to university in the future</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About your options post school/college</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Feedback on progression event

Overall
ingression of the event
professions that were previously unknown to them. This is felt, by the course team, to be a very positive aspect of the course. It is thought that exposure and awareness of the range of roles available in the NHS and the corresponding desire to gain employment in less well-known and hard to recruit roles will assist with workforce shortages in the NHS.

As part of the collaborative approach demonstrated above in the Community of Practice created across the partnerships, Sheffield Hallam University have hosted tailored open days for the FdSc students to explain the requirements for all of the awards available for progression at SHU. On these days, the course leaders and admission tutors for the various awards have been available to give profession-specific advice. In addition, work has been carried out by the course team and other colleagues at SHU to prepare the students for their chosen careers and courses including interview preparation, help with personal statements and UCAS applications.

As of 1 October 2018, the number of unconditional offers accepted by graduates from the first cohort of the FdSc totals 54 and these are split across the range of courses as indicated in Table III.

As 80 students have completed the FdSc, the above 54 students represents a progression rate of 67.5 per cent which far exceeds the expected progression rate from a Foundation degree to a “full” degree particularly considering the geographical spread and distance of some of the colleges involved. This data will provide positive reporting material for the college apprenticeship OfSTED inspections.

**Examples of students on the FdSc**

One of our students is a 40-year-old woman from Rotherham who left school with no recordable qualifications. This woman has been accessing the free maths and English tuition at her local FE college and has been supported to gain these qualifications. Her experience as a healthcare practitioner for 20 years was assessed through a verbal interview and a short writing piece rather than through UCAS points. She is now able to consider progressing to a BSc (Hons) professional health or social care course, such as adult nursing. Since beginning the Higher Apprenticeship route, this woman has been awarded Apprentice of the Year.

Another example is a student who completed the FdSc and secured a place on Level 5 of the SHU Radiography course. During the summer she has attended radiography placements to ensure she has had appropriate placement experiences. The course team received excellent reports of her progress and she has just commenced the BSc (Hons) Diagnostic Radiography. This achievement has been facilitated through a collaborative approach to securing the placement and the monitoring of quality. The demographic of the students studying the FdSc is quite different to the overall demographic of undergraduate students at SHU. As shown in the table below 81 per cent of the SHU UG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Number of unconditional firms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BSc (Hons) Nursing (Adult)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA (Hons) Social Work</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc (Hons) Diagnostic Radiography</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc (Hons) Paramedic Science</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc (Hons) Health and Social Studies (top-up)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table III. Number and destination courses of progressing FdSc students**
population are 21 years old and under whereas for the FdSc only 43 per cent are 21 and under with a corresponding much higher percentage of mature students. Moreover, the gender split differs in that there is a higher percentage (20 per cent) of males undertaking the FdSc compared to 14 per cent health and social care UG university students. Thus, demonstrating a positive contribution to both life-long learning and widening participation in the sector (Figure 5).

There is a similar marked difference when the entry qualifications are considered. Typically, the UG population at SHU comprises 40 per cent who studied A levels compared to 6.5 per cent on the FdSc. There is a very similar percentage of 2.5 per cent on the FdSc and SHU UG awards who completed an access course before commencing their studies but a very significant difference in the “other qualification” category which accounts for 45 per cent of all FdSc students in marked contrast to the 6 per cent for the UG population at large.

The fact that so many of these students are successfully completing their apprenticeship and/or a FdSc and that a significant percentage are progressing to professional awards and Level 6 study is testament to the design of the award, the excellent partnership oversight and the dedication of the staff and students.

Summary
The development of a foundation degree with both FT and higher apprenticeship routes in partner colleges has far exceeded initial aspirations. The course has proved popular with both students and employers and has led to high progression onto university-based professional health and social care courses after just one full delivery, again providing the partners with very positive positions to report to OfSTED in this area. This has been achieved through a true partnership approach to all aspects of development and delivery and through robust quality frameworks and mechanisms. We have worked together to ensure mutual respect is paramount and that each profession is seen as of equal value. Differences are valued, opinions encouraged and heard. Decisions may take some time to emerge but are more likely to be taken with shared responsibility and ownership. Each member brings unique professional knowledge and educational expertise. This supportive network enables each college partner to own and develop their apprenticeship provision and relationships with the local employers that matter to them.

It is early days when assessing the impact on the NHS workforce and on the individual lives of these students but early indications are that this initiative will enable “non-traditional” students and those from lower participation groups to access HE and to contribute to the future health and care of the population.

Figure 5.
Student demographic comparison
References


Further reading


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Post-levy apprenticeships in the NHS – early findings

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate apprenticeship developments in two National Health Service (NHS) organisations since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in April 2017 and considers potential impact on social mobility. This is a pilot for a broader exploration of implementation of government apprenticeship policy in the NHS.

Design/methodology/approach – Following ethical approval, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two key informants with responsibility for education and training in their respective organisations. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify major and sub-themes of the interviews.

Findings – Four major themes were identified – organisational readiness, the apprenticeship offer, opportunities for further development and potential problems with implementation. Both organisations were actively seeking opportunities to spend their levy and had developed local strategies to ensure this. The levy was being used to develop both new and existing staff, with leadership and management being particularly identified as an area of growth. Similarly, both organisations were using levy monies to develop the bands 1–4 roles, including the nursing associate. The affordability and bureaucracy of apprenticeships were seen as potential problems to the wider implementation of apprenticeships in the NHS.

Practical implications – Although the apprenticeship levy is being spent in the NHS, there are some challenges for employers in their delivery. The levy is offering new and existing staff the opportunity to undertake personal and professional development at a range of educational levels. This has the potential to increase and upskill the NHS workforce, improve social mobility and possibly lead to larger cultural and professional changes.

Originality/value – This paper offers an early insight into the implementation of apprenticeship policy in a large public sector employer such as the NHS.

Keywords Nursing, Healthcare, Apprenticeships, National Health Service, Social mobility

Paper type Research paper

Introduction and literature review

The introduction of the apprenticeship levy in April 2017 will mean that circa £200 m is ring-fenced by the National Health Service (NHS) for spending on apprenticeship training per annum (Dunne, 2017). In addition, public sector employers have been set government targets for increasing the number of apprentices in their organisations (Enterprise Act, 2016) with 2.3 per cent of the organisational head count needing to be apprentices by 2020. Kirby (2015) reports that apprenticeships have significant potential to have a positive impact on social mobility in the UK but questions whether this potential will be fully realised.

This study investigates how two managers with responsibility for learning and development within their NHS Trusts view the use of both the levy and apprenticeships in their respective organisations, and is a pilot study for broader research of apprenticeship implementation in the NHS. Trust A is a large tertiary care provider and Trust B a medium sized tertiary care provider. Both are fully engaged with the current apprenticeship agenda, but had been working with apprenticeships prior to the recent developments.

The introduction in 1994 of the “Modern Apprenticeship” agenda is described by Brockmann et al. (2010) as an instrument of government policy. Faced with rising youth unemployment, the apprenticeship was seen as a way to provide a meaningful route into employment for this sector of society (Scarpetta et al., 2010). However, the scheme was plagued
with problems and, as Hogarth et al. (2012) noted, there were issues with lack of participation in certain sectors of industry, lower levels of educational merit being attached to most apprenticeships with a subsequent lack of progression to further or higher education, plus low levels of completion of apprenticeships and a lack of meaningful employer engagement. Kirby (2015) describes disproportionate numbers of apprentices from less-advantaged backgrounds in lower level apprenticeships, with the reverse true in higher level routes and suggests this needs to be addressed before social mobility will be improved as intended.

The Leitch Review (2006) indicated that there needed to be a programme of skills development across the UK and called for greater engagement with employers to ensure that this process was demand rather than supply led. The Wolf (2011) report noted that many of the vocational qualifications offered at school or immediately post-compulsory education had been micro-managed by central government which made them overly bureaucratic. Wolf warned that this element needed to change in order to give vocational qualifications more credibility and also to make the choices available to young people clearer. More recently, the Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education (Sainsbury, 2016) again called for a focus on skills development in the UK and offered support for the current apprenticeship strategy. Richard (2012) proposed a review and renewal of apprenticeships in the UK in a bid to address these needs.

Hordern (2015) describes two distinct elements of apprenticeships – the model of learning needed to take on the role, but also the social construct within a political context. Anderson (2017) notes that social mobility is an anticipated benefit of most recent apprenticeship developments, particularly degree apprenticeships. Apprenticeships in the NHS have the potential to both address the government’s Social Mobility Strategy (Department for Education, 2017), offering a route through from entry to professional registration (and beyond), as well as partially addressing the current workforce supply issue (Kings Fund, 2018). Anderson (2017) further notes that employers are looking to engage in higher level apprenticeships and Baker (2019) suggests that apprenticeships offer the NHS opportunities to support staff development into professional roles.

A wider review of literature on this topic suggests that implementation of government policy (such as apprenticeships) is an area for monitoring and further investigation. Therefore, this small scale study aims to provide an early insight into the implementation of the most recent iteration of apprenticeship policy in England in the NHS and reflects on whether social mobility aspirations are likely to be realised.

Methods
Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with two managers with responsibility for training and development within their respective NHS Trusts. The aim of the study was to explore attitudes towards and knowledge of apprenticeship policy, determine how or if this was being implemented locally and reflect on the potential for apprenticeships in the NHS to impact on social mobility. Both key informants have responsibility for and influence over how apprenticeship levy is being used for staff development within their respective organisations. This study was a pilot for a larger scale investigation to explore implementation of apprenticeship policy in the NHS, but early findings are deemed of interest for dissemination. A qualitative approach offered opportunities to gather data to compliment and enhance the statistical data generated in governmental reporting, and also provide a unique commentary on early levy experiences which could otherwise be lost.

Participants were recruited through existing partnerships. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University, but clarification also sought about the need for formal ethical approval from the NHS via the Health Research Authority website (www.hra.nhs.uk/)
As no formal approval was required, local research offices were contacted to inform them of the intent to interview their staff.

Semi-structured interviews were deemed an appropriate data collection tool as this would allow exploration of organisational, policy or personal issues relevant to local implementation practices (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015) but still offer some opportunity to explore unique practice in either organisation. At the time of data collection, the number of key personnel with responsibility for apprenticeships in the respective organisations were very small, so focus groups may not have been of particular use, although could have provided additional perspective. Similarly, the depth of data may not have been as rich if questionnaires (even with open questions) were used. It is acknowledged that this is a very small sample size, and findings may not be generalizable to the wider population; however, the findings of the study may still be of interest to employers and training providers alike. They also form a timely narrative of the apprenticeship policy implementation process in its earlier stages and may offer some insight into how or if apprenticeships could impact on social mobility as is proposed.

Interviews were conducted by the researcher and recorded at the interviewees’ place of employment in February 2018. The semi-structured interviews asked about previous as well as current experience of apprenticeships, plans for further implementation and identification of any possible barriers to success. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher to allow full immersion in the data. Analysis of the interviews was based on a narrative paradigm (Roulston in Flick, 2014) with the identification of themes which were later grouped to give major and sub-themes. Data were also reviewed by an independent third party to ensure impartiality.

Findings
Four major themes were identified from the interviews: organisational readiness for apprenticeships, terms and conditions associated with employment of apprentices, opportunities for further development within organisations, and potential problems with implementation.

Organisational readiness for apprenticeships
It was clear that there was previous experience of delivering apprenticeships in each organisation. This had helped to prepare both the infrastructure and organisational knowledge required to move ahead with planning for implementation post levy.

Both managers spoke about how apprenticeships had originally been introduced into their respective organisations historically:

[...] a scheme at (the) Council [...] was looking at how they supported long term unemployed young people back into work [...] they were taking all the financial risk of employing them and we were getting the benefit of having them in the workplace and providing them with those learning opportunities (Interviewee two).

[...] clinical apprenticeships were introduced [...] the first couple of groups were made supernumerary [...] to try and entice people in and [...] once people had experienced an apprentice and it was a good experience then they were happy to take them again (Interviewee one).

With apprenticeships already established in the Trusts, work had also continued since then in preparation for the introduction of the levy:

[...] we’ve done [...] an apprenticeship strategy which has gone through the various committees in the organisation for sign off (Interviewee one).

We’ve established a levy board [...] we’ve identified what our levy will be for the year and then we’ve allocated each of the divisions a nominal target dependent on their whole time equivalents for them to meet in relation to that (Interviewee two).
The identification of further opportunities to employ apprentices is also evident in both organisations:

[...] where there were any band 2 vacancies [...] before they got approval to appoint, they had to review if it could be an apprenticeship (Interviewee one).

[...] whenever we have a vacancy [...] they go through to a review panel to determine [...] whether we fill that vacancy or whether it was a (potential) apprentice post (Interviewee two).

With organisational infrastructure already in place, both informants described how planning for future apprenticeships was progressing and identified the terms of employment as an area of further interest.

**Apprentice offer**

Each informant described on what terms apprentices had been employed in the past and how they foresaw this developing in the future. Both spoke about the terms of employment being offered to apprentices in their organisations:

[...] we’ve [...] got three brackets of pay for apprenticeships dependent on age. By paying the national minimum wage as opposed to the apprenticeship wage what we have found is we have attracted a far better standard of apprentice into the organisation (Interviewee one).

We recruit all our apprentices on the national apprenticeship salary [...]. It’s quite clear in our job descriptions that these are apprentices and the aim of the role is for them to complete an apprenticeship and learn through work (Interviewee two).

Interviewee one noted the importance of pay, terms and conditions of an apprenticeship:

[...] with social care [...] pay terms and conditions is a really important part of it [...] they’re not going to attract gold apprentices if they pay them £6,000 a year [...] we have widely different pay terms and conditions for apprenticeships (Interviewee one).

And added:

Whilst we’ve given them a decent salary, we’ve not been soft with some of the other conditions. They don’t get as much annual leave [...] they (only) get statutory sick pay [...] (Interviewee one).

Interviewee two spoke about the need to make the apprenticeship role distinctly different to other lower banded roles in the organisation:

If we recruited an admin (sic) apprentice, they would be on the rotation [...] they’d start as an apprentice on apprentice salary, and once they’d got the qualification, they would move onto the band 2 (Interviewee two).

It was evident that both informants were conscious of how the apprentice “offer” was shaped in their organisations, but this focussed mainly on new apprentices entering the organisation. Whilst this would still be the case, there was also consideration of how existing staff would be developed using levy monies.

**Opportunities and developments**

The introduction of the levy had certainly created opportunities for both new and existing staff and changes were apparent in both organisations:

[...] it’s created a momentum to employ more apprentices [...] because that funding’s there and we want to make best use of it [...] (Interviewee two).

We are looking at apprenticeships in other areas [...] it’s kind of opening up the doors to do other stuff (Interviewee one).
Both managers spoke specifically about leadership and management as one example of where funding for training had previously not existed, but the levy would now provide this opportunity. The introduction of the levy was also seen as a good way to upskill existing staff:

I think in the future, ALL of our workforce will be qualified [...] And actually, isn’t it bad that we haven’t done it before [...] for years and years and years, we’ve had healthcare assistants [...] with a set of competencies but not with a qualification (Interviewee one).

[...] perhaps the learning gap has always been there but because there’s no money [...] I think people are being much more proactive about it now[...]. the level 2 apprenticeship provides [...] an assurance that individuals (have) reached a minimum standard required to do the role[...] what the apprenticeship gives us [...] is the literacy and numeracy [...] (Interviewee two).

Whilst it was clear that each organisation was making a conscious effort to both use the levy but also develop staff, there were issues which were possibly delaying developments.

**Potential problems with implementation**

Neither informant felt that there were disadvantages to the development of apprenticeships in their organisation, but there were particular areas which generated a greater strength of feeling. Affordability of apprenticeships was an issue for both organisations:

[...] it isn’t that we don’t agree with the apprenticeship, it’s around the cost of putting a nurse through an apprenticeship [...] (Interviewee one).

[...] (that) we can’t use levy to support the salaries of apprentices [...] is a barrier to us expanding apprentices [...] we must have a minimum of a hundred (staff) currently doing an apprenticeship, yet we can’t [...] access any of our levy to put a clinical educator in place to support their learning in practice (Interviewee two).

The availability of apprenticeship standards was also an issue:

[...] at the moment I would say we haven’t spent as much as we would have liked [...] because the frameworks (sic) aren’t there (Interviewee one).

It is possible that these possible problems are due to the newness of the new apprenticeship arrangements and that as the system matures these will dissipate. Certainly, there is now greater clarity on the use of levy monies for clinical educators in the nursing associate apprenticeship (NHS Employers, 2018).

**Discussion**

The insight offered in this small study identifies key areas for consideration following the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in April 2017: organisational preparedness, the apprentice offer, further opportunities and potential problems. Future research into this area will focus on how apprenticeships are being implemented more widely within the NHS and how organisations are operationalising national policy, but this study describes early implementation experiences.

Several models or theories of implementation exist (see Damschroder *et al.*, 2009; Durlak and DuPre, 2008; Leeman *et al.*, 2017) but all propose that there are many factors which influence implementation of new practice within an organisation (Chaudoir *et al.*, 2013). Both interviewees describe the process by which apprenticeships were historically introduced into their respective organisations, each suggesting that their organisations needed to see the value of the apprenticeship route before committing to future engagement. Similarly, there appears to be an active approach to increasing numbers of apprentices in the organisations by converting some vacant posts to apprenticeships. This tentatively suggests that adoption of policy and acceptance of the need for change are
already established in both organisations, which Proctor et al. (2011) acknowledge as the early required outcomes of implementation. Durlak and DuPre (2008) suggest that many factors have the ability to influence each step of the implementation process, including capacity (or readiness to adopt change). The current vacancy levels and rising service demands faced by the NHS may mean that each organisation will meet less resistance to this change and policy may be more easily implemented in comparison with other organisations. Both organisations have also actively sought opportunities to recruit from their own localities in a bid to address on-going workforce shortages, and the increase in the number of apprenticeships could therefore offer significant social mobility, particularly as the health and social care workforce is so heavily female dominated (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2016).

Apprentice offer

Each employer spoke about the terms and conditions of employing their apprentices and how both financial and training requirements were critical to this. Apprentices in studies by Spielhofer and Sims (2004) and by Mangan and Trendle (2017) identify salary (or finances) as a reason for non-completion of apprenticeships. The latter study was unable to provide a specific reason why apprentices did not complete their training, but hypothesised that those in more skilled “trades” would be in greater demand and could thus change employers if a better financial offer was made. Conversely, apprentices in the Spielhofer and Sims’ (2004) study were from retail, a traditionally poorly paid sector, and described the opposite – it was easier to change employers as there were more employment opportunities. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2016) noted that many lower level apprenticeships are associated with lower levels of pay on completion, and that the government had a responsibility to improve pay, terms and conditions where this is an issue. The NHS has not mandated the required apprentice salary, but suggests that there is “consistency” in pay for degree apprentices (NHS Employers, 2017). However, it makes no recommendations for lower level apprenticeships.

Evidence from previous apprentice research in the UK or from overseas perhaps suggests that there should be a clear pay structure for apprenticeships in health and social care. Without this, there is a chance that potential apprentices will be deterred from entering employment with the NHS due to the lower or varied salary levels offered. This is even more likely in social care, and with health and social care offering large scale employment and ideal opportunities for progression, the potential to influence and improve social mobility should not be ignored.

Both respondents noted that the origins of their apprenticeships schemes were for “predominately younger people” (Interviewee one) and “long term unemployed young people” (Interviewee two) but that the current offer was beginning to focus more on existing employees. Fuller (2018) reports that whilst apprenticeships can offer meaningful social mobility, the focus on development of existing employees can reduce new skill acquisition and thus mobility can stagnate. Unless apprenticeships are fully embedded in organisations and progression through career or professional frameworks valued, the desired impact on social mobility will not be realised.

Opportunities for further developments

Both interviewees spoke about how apprenticeships generally had changed their approach to training, with interviewee two noting the additional requirement for apprentices to gain qualifications in maths and English being an advantage over National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ). Interviewee two also noted that the removal of funding for NVQ qualifications was a further incentive to switch to apprenticeships.
In the study of apprenticeships in the NHS by Turbin, Fuller and Wintrup (2014), health employers reported a similar move from NVQ to apprenticeships for healthcare support workers for funding reasons. However, the additional requirement for the “off the job” element of apprenticeships was not well planned and consequently, the training remained as a method to increase skills amongst band 2 workers rather than an instrument for career progression suggesting that social mobility is dependent on more than an apprenticeship. In the same study, pharmacy technicians made a similar move to an apprenticeship model, but the rigour of the existing NVQ curriculum afforded those apprentices a more rounded learning experience.

Pullen and Clifton (2016) warned that the levy could be used predominantly to develop existing staff rather than bring new staff into the workforce. There is some evidence of this happening in the organisations in this study, but the scale of the study is far too small to generalise further. The presence of the levy, is undoubtedly viewed as an incentive to increase the number of apprenticeships offered in the NHS. Both interviewees seem to suggest that apprenticeships are being used for both new and existing staff in their organisations, and where funding had previously not existed, there is now a mechanism to deliver training locally. This is particularly evident in this study as both interviewees suggest that leadership and management programmes would be funded by the levy for existing employees across a range of educational levels, including level 7 (Masters). Whilst development of existing staff was not a priority of the Richard (2012) review, it was acknowledged that apprenticeships did offer employers the opportunity to retrain (and subsequently retain) staff. The advent of even higher level degree apprenticeships (e.g. the Advanced Clinical Practitioner) at academic level 7 presents a possible route through from a level 2 or 3 clinical apprenticeship to advanced level skills.

Interviewee one talks particularly about a review of the skill mix in nursing:

How do we productively use bands two, three and four to support the qualified workforce?

This has partly been made possible because of the introduction of the Nursing Associate role (Health Education England, 2016), but the introduction of the apprenticeship levy has certainly enabled the NHS to address what interviewee two describes as “the learning gap” (where the levy is being utilised to develop existing staff now that funding is available. Previously the funding did not exist and development opportunities were limited). It could therefore be suggested that the apprenticeship levy will drive both a cultural and professional shift as nursing once again becomes a “two tier” profession. Would this wholesale review be taking place if the levy was not available? Could the apprenticeship levy drive changes to professions and professional boundaries? Is there potential to significantly drive social mobility or will apprenticeships replace “traditional” university programmes for those who would seek to enter Higher Education anyway?

Whether either of these becomes a reality, there is now a real opportunity through the apprenticeship route to recruit, train and retain staff in the NHS. Whilst the number of apprenticeship starts for younger people remains disappointing (Department for Education, 2018) the opportunity for social mobility (particularly for females) cannot be underestimated in the NHS.

Potential problems with implementation

Neither interviewee felt that there were any disadvantages to the apprenticeship levy, but spoke at length about the bureaucracy surrounding apprenticeships and their affordability. It is interesting that these were not seen as barriers, but perhaps accepted hurdles when new policy is being implemented. Neither interviewee felt that there would be a wholesale adoption of degree apprenticeships for pre-registration education, but did feel that the “hard to recruit” professions (such as therapeutic radiography, podiatry, prosthetics and orthotics and optometry) may be an exception to this.
Both spoke about the reluctance to become employer-providers and how the prospect of being inspected by OFSTED was not attractive. One of the major criticisms of apprenticeships in recent times has been the quality of the training, and so it is understandable that the move to improve quality is important, however, the data collection and record keeping alone required to be OFSTED compliant may be seen as an additional burden for NHS employers. The reputational risk associated with failed or failing OFSTED inspections are significant, although the suggested change to subcontracting arrangements would see all employers in receipt of funding needing to be monitored. The scale and pace of change is also challenging:

Every week there’s something different coming out which is slightly changing the way that we [...] think about things (Interviewee one).

These interviews were conducted prior to the “levy transfer” rules being issued in April 2018. Now, large levy paying employers will be able to transfer up to 25 per cent of their levy to other employers to support the training of apprentices in the “supply chain” (NHS Employers, 2018). This may offer some advantage to the NHS. As interviewees in this study noted, the breadth of apprenticeships standards on which to spend their levy is not currently there, although there are a range of suitable apprenticeship standards in development (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2018). The pace of development for the “high cost” apprenticeships (which lead to professional registration for example) has been slow, so organisations have needed to focus on high volume of lower level (lower cost) apprenticeships or leadership and management awards. The Open University (2018) suggests that only 8 per cent of the money paid into the levy since its inception has been utilised within the first year, although this figure is expected to rise. The Open University report also confirms the views of the interviewees in this study, that salary costs are a significant deterrent to the wider implementation of apprenticeships in the NHS. The changes announced to policy on subcontracting at the end of 2018 will inevitably bring additional complexity to apprenticeships as even small employers would be required to join the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers (HM Government, 2018).

As Baker (2019) noted, there are particular professional requirements in pre-registration apprenticeships which present additional challenges, and this is a potentially a significant issue for the NHS. Billett (2016) emphasises that apprenticeships are not solely for the development of occupational competency at a point in time, but should develop skills needed to sustain development over the length of a career. Unwin et al. (2004) comment that the NHS is often focussed on achievement of competence and the focus on informal learning is lost. If social mobility is truly to be achieved, then the NHS will need to place equal relevance on both, otherwise there is a risk that once the workforce becomes more stable and sustainable, the opportunities offered to those seeking to progress will decline.

Conclusions and recommendations
This initial study offers early insight into the introduction of apprenticeship policy in the NHS now that the levy is established. Whilst there are clearly opportunities, both interviewees identify barriers to implementation including affordability. The levy is being used to train both new and existing staff at a range of educational levels, but cultural and organisational changes need to take place in order to successfully achieve wholesale adoption of government policy. The potential for a positive impact on social mobility is clear, particularly in a female dominated sector such as health and social care. However, the reality may be that this is not realised due to prioritising development of existing staff and lack of clarity around pay. This pilot study indicates the value of apprenticeship implementation as an area for further research.
Recommendations

- NHS Trusts should actively review where apprenticeships could be introduced and ensure management and governance structures are in place to support this.
- Terms and conditions of employment should be standardised for apprentices entering the NHS to ensure successful completion.
- Affordability of apprenticeships needs to be reviewed to ensure widespread adoption of apprenticeships in the NHS and subsequent achievement of apprenticeship targets.
- The prioritisation of the development of existing NHS staff should be reviewed and moderated if real social mobility is to be realised.
- Social mobility in health and social care, and particularly the in NHS is an area for further investigation.

References


Further reading

About the author
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**How are universities supporting employers to facilitate effective “on the job” learning for apprentices?**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to review a range of mechanisms used by universities to support employers to facilitate effective “on the job learning” for apprentices. It reflects on how these mechanisms can be used to address some of the challenges, reported in the literature that employers face to in supporting apprentices in the workplace.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A short questionnaire administered to colleagues prior to attendance at a workshop, identified a range of activities, at various stages of engagement with employers that were used by universities to facilitate effective workplace learning and also to address some of the challenges faced by employers. These activities were then discussed and explored within the workshop to identify areas of best practice from the HEI sector to promote effective workplace learning.

**Findings** – Engagement with employers needs to occur from the outset of the development of the apprenticeship. Embedding the on the job learning within the design of the academic programme, with explicit links between the theoretical learning (knowledge element of the apprenticeship standard) and practical application of learning (skills and behaviours within the apprenticeship standard). Regular interactions with a range of staff within the employer ensure that there is a clear understanding throughout the apprentice’s journey, of how to promote an effective learning environment for the apprentice within the context of the organisation. The role of the workplace facilitator/mentor key. A range of approaches to providing training and ongoing support for facilitators/mentors was identified.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study was limited to the participants within the workshop at the conference, a self-selecting group from a relatively small number of HE providers. The HEIs represented provided apprenticeships in a range of subject areas, working with both public sector and private sector providers. Further studies are required to encompass a broader range of providers, including drawing on best practice from the FE and independent sector, and applying principles used there in the context of HE.

**Practical implications** – Engagement with employers from an early stage of the development of the apprenticeship is imperative, viewing the apprenticeship holistically, rather than as an academic programme with some work-based activities. Resources need to be devoted to regular and frequent contact with a range of personnel within the employer organisation, so that a partnership approach to supporting learning is developed. Training and ongoing support for work-based mentors/facilitators continues to be a key success factor. This needs to be managed to balance the learning needs of the mentors with the potential impact on workplace productivity.

**Social implications** – The paper identifies a range of approaches that will enhance the effectiveness of learning in the workplace. This will both enhance the apprentice’s learning experience and ensure that higher and degree apprenticeships are developed holistically, meeting the academic requirements of the university and the workplace needs of the employer. This, in turn, will enhance success rates and reduce attrition rates from apprenticeships, which, in turn, may encourage more employers to engage with higher and degree apprenticeships.

**Originality/value** – The paper collates a range of best practice from the sector to promote effective workplace learning.

**Keywords** Employers, Apprenticeships, Work integrated learning, On the job learning, Workplace mentors/facilitators

**Paper type** Case study

**Introduction**

Madeleine Atkins (2016), in her foreword to the special issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Skills and Work-based Learning* comments that the “reform of higher and degree apprenticeships presents a powerful means to meet employers rising demand for higher
level skills and the potential to improve life chances of learners for whom a traditional degree may not be an option”. She goes on to comment that employers need to proactively engage with higher education noting that there “undoubtedly” are barriers to overcome and that “providers will need to adapt to […] develop new ways of working with employers and funders, and to explore new methods of teaching and learning”.

A higher or degree apprenticeship combines “work with study” (HM Government, 2018) thus for successful completion of an apprenticeship, learning occurs both in a formal educational setting (such as a university classroom or lecture theatre) and in the workplace. It is therefore important that employers understand and are supported, by the partner university, to provide an effective workplace learning environment for their apprentices. Universities are responsible for managing the quality of the apprentice’s learning experience, including within the workplace. This paper reviews the current approaches undertaken by universities to support employers to provide a high quality learning experience in the workplace.

The recent literature outlines a range of challenges facing employers in supporting their employees undertaking higher and degree apprenticeships, including: creating an effective learning environment in the workplace (Cortini, 2016); the provision of work-based mentoring and coaching; monitoring progression and achievement; (Mikkonen et al., 2017; Gurtner et al., 2011) and loss of productivity of key members of staff (Mulkeen et al., 2017).

The aim of this paper is to review the challenges experienced by employers supporting apprentices identified in the literature and identify a range of approaches (obtained by questionnaire and explored within a workshop), adopted by universities to address these challenges, with a view to sharing best practice in the context of higher education provision.

This paper focusses on the specific context in higher education and the need to support employers and apprentices through a higher education programme, whilst balancing the demands of a career and home responsibilities.

**Literature review**

At the heart of the apprenticeship learning experience is “on the job” learning, which according to English regulations, could comprise up to 80 per cent of the learning experience of the apprentice (ESFA, 2017 Clauses 34.3, 211.2 and 211.4). This is not a new concept to those working in the field of work-based learning, where the learning occurs through the lens of the learner’s job, with “learning tasks being undertaken in conjunction with work, in order that these learning tasks meet broader educational goals” (Boud, 2001, p. 48). Theory is then applied to practice in this context, following a broadly constructivist approach to curriculum design (Minton, 2005). Anderson et al. (2012) noted that many universities have developed academic programmes that are tailored to meet both the needs of the employer and are linked to professional standards, and thus are experienced in integrating workplace learning activities within an academic programme. Rowe et al. (2017) noted that the development of degree apprenticeships provides an opportunity for universities who have developed pedagogical approaches to work-based learning, often linked to professional development, to build upon these strengths and utilise this pedagogical approach to design a curriculum to meet the needs of the apprentices and their employers, whilst remaining academically robust.

*Providing effective learning – programme design*

Apprenticeship programmes need to be designed drawing on work integrated pedagogical practice (Lillis, 2018, p. 7). Anecdotal evidence, and experience of attending a number of multiparty apprenticeship events, reveals that there is frequent referral to “the academic programme” and the “work based” or “on the job” learning, as though they are two discreet entities. In an apprenticeship there is no “academic” or “practice” programme it is
a seamless and holistic approach. Thus a symbiotic relationship is developed between the academic and the practical (work based) elements of the programmes so that they are synonymous. As Bravenboer (2016) noted for those universities that have the experience of working with employers to co design programmes of work-based HE study the idea of “off the job is largely unhelpful” employers and the HE provider should look at the apprenticeship as a whole, which requires a close relationship with the employer for design purposes (Chan, 2016), to embed work-based activities within the programme to evidence application of the learning in the workplace. In order to facilitate this, the employer and the work-based facilitators must have a fundamental understanding of the programme design and the key principles related to higher education expectations at various academic levels to ensure that the work-based activities are fit for purposes both professionally and academically.

Equally academics must be sufficiently aware of the job role and the opportunities within the apprentices’ workplace to encourage them to share these examples with colleagues during “off the job” discussion sessions. The regular tripartite review session, required as a part of an English apprenticeship, should highlight such evidence and examples to facilitate this activity.

Providing effective learning – organisational environment

Apprentices need to be able to identify opportunities within the workplace through which they develop the knowledge and skills and behaviours to enable them to achieve the apprenticeship standard. In order to do this, apprentices must feel that the organisation supports the learning process by having supportive and encouraging learning structures in place. Cortini (2016) noted that “recent literature on the learning climate has shown that specific organizational conditions may be capable of either hampering or stimulating learning activities as well as being a motivation to learning”.

Chan (2016) suggested that in order to be able to identify these opportunities apprentices need an insight into the workplace and to feel as though they belong. To assist with this it is recognised as good practice to appoint a facilitator, mentor or workplace tutor (Hughes, 2004; Evanciew and Rojewski, 1999) to help to sign-post opportunities and open doors for the apprentice initially, going on to support the apprentice to learn how to do this for themselves in a supported manner. As Billett (2016) suggested “Rather than viewing this mode as being just learning ‘on the job’, it is characterised as being mediated by learners themselves, rather than the kinds of activities and interactions though which others (e.g. teachers and practitioners) directly attempt to mediate that learning (e.g. teaching and direct guidance)”.

Importance and role of workplace facilitators

Coaching, tutoring and mentoring are similar activities which all have the underlying intention of providing support and facilitating the professional development and learning of individuals (Mikkonen et al., 2017), hence the use of the term “facilitator” in this paper. Apprenticeships require employers to identify and assign a workplace facilitator to ensure appropriate apprentice support in the workplace (Rowe et al., 2017).

Whilst on programme, apprentices need to be integrated into the workforce (Chan, 2016). Formally supported, employer-led learning facilitation has been found to substantially enhance the development of professional skills in the workplace. Metso and Kianto (2014) and Evanciew and Rojewski (1999) commented that workplace facilitators enable learning as their “enthusiasm, standards, knowledge, attitudinal values and skills”, play a key role in contributing to the success of the apprentices learning. As workplace facilitators are employed by the same organisation as the apprentice they need to understand how to convey these skills to the apprentice too so that there is gradual transfer of emphasis
between the facilitator “teaching” and the apprentice driving the learning (Billett, 2016). Thus, workplace facilitators require a variety of skills in order to effectively support the on-the-job element of the apprenticeship.

Evanciew and Rojewski (1999) stated that apprentices benefit from their facilitators’ descriptions of their insights into their role and thereby gain access to information unavailable in formal educational settings, such as at college or university. The process of explanation can also be seen as involving the sharing of tacit knowledge with newcomers at the workplace. The transfer of tacit knowledge seems most efficient when more experienced professionals work together with inexperienced apprentices (Koskela and Palukka, 2011; Onnismaa, 2008; Mikkonen et al., 2017).

Supportive workplace facilitators trust their apprentices and enhance their self-esteem by praising them when they have carried out their work duties well (Chan, 2014; Evanciew and Rojewski, 1999), we would also add that they provide positive support where apprentices are struggling with elements of their work, providing encouraging and supportive feedback and highlighting areas and opportunities for self-development. In our experience, workplace facilitators sign-post opportunities within the workplace to acquire and develop the requisite knowledge and skills, they make introductions to key personnel to enable the apprentices to develop and enhance their network within the workplace, thereby developing further opportunities for learning.

There is therefore a clear need for formal support (Rowe et al., 2017) for workplace facilitators so that they understand their role and maximise the learning opportunities available to their apprentice.

**The challenges faced in implementing an effective work-based learning apprenticeship**

*Organisational challenges*

Providing workplace facilitator support inevitably incurs cost to the employer, in terms of the time taken away from their substantive role to undertake reviews, and provide one-to-one support for apprentices. Some employers see this as a loss of productivity of an experienced member of the team, which is exacerbated if a formal training programme for facilitation has to be undertaken to acquaint the facilitators with the knowledge and skills to ensure that effective apprentice learning takes place.

As Mikkonen et al. (2017) commented, a number of authors (Gurtner et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2008; Onnismaa, 2008; Smith, 2000), noted that the employers may not devote sufficient resource to guidance activities, prioritising the productivity of the organisation over apprenticeship development.

The cost of the training and the loss of productivity is not covered under the ESFA (2017) funding for apprenticeships in the England and so employers may be resistant to encouraging and supporting training for facilitators if it involves additional cost, for example, in tuition fees for accredited mentoring/facilitation programmes, or simply in terms of loss of productivity due to abstraction to attend a training course. Mulkeen et al. (2017) in their study, noted that “Employers were of the opinion that they should be eligible for a proportion of the levy given a large proportion of training would be taking place within the workplace and this requires appropriately qualified staff”.

*Challenges experienced by apprentices*

If the approach to work-based learning develops an overreliance on the work-based facilitator, then apprentices do not develop the self-direction, independence and autonomy required for them to fulfil their role once the apprenticeship is completed (Mikkonen et al., 2017).
Tanggaard (2005) also noted that apprentices are sometimes exposed to poor or substandard practice where the work-based facilitator has developed poor work habits, especially if personal and professional development is not a key feature of the organisational culture and the facilitator has not been exposed to concepts of professional development and cortical reflection on practice.

Methodology

This practitioner-based inquiry utilised a short questionnaire (ten questions), drawing on the key themes identified from the literature. This was administered to colleagues prior to their attendance at a workshop. A short questionnaire was chosen as it is a relatively quick and easy method of collating information from a range of people (Wisker, 2007). The questionnaire identified a range of activities, at various stages of engagement with employers that were used by universities to facilitate and quality assure effective workplace learning and also to address some of the challenges faced by employers. These activities were then to formulate the basis of discussion and to be explored within the workshop, to identify areas of best practice from the HEI sector to promote effective workplace learning.

The workshop was on part of a wider conference “Apprenticeships: Delivering Quality and Social Mobility” and participants chose from a range of options to attend the workshop, which was advertised as an interactive workshop to share best practice working with employers to support work-based learning. Respondents were therefore self-selecting and are therefore prone to bias, reflecting on the experiences of the group.

The responses from the questionnaires were collated and reported on a slide to structure discussion within the presentation. In order to avoid investigator bias, verbatim responses were recorded but authors and their institutions were anonymised.

Workshop and group discussion

The workshop participants were again self-selecting, from a number of universities. They included experienced practitioners in the field of apprenticeships and work-based learning, as well as those who were just beginning to develop apprenticeships. The workshop facilitator provided theoretical background to the study and then shared the responses to the questionnaire, inviting further discussion and debate from the audience, with contributions and further explanation from those who had provided the examples in the questionnaire.

The outcome of the discussions was recorded by an observer, adding in new ideas or activities and additional detail to clarify the areas previously provided in the questionnaire. Everything mentioned was included, irrespective of whether the facilitator agreed with or used the activities mentioned.

Results and discussion

Methodology

There were only eight responses received to the pre-workshop questionnaire, representing colleagues from five different HE institutions, although significantly more delegates had signed up to attend the workshop. The use of the questionnaire prior to the workshop enabled facilitation and encouraged audience participation. Whilst this only represented about 20 per cent of the sample, it did provide useful examples, beyond the author’s own, to promote the discussion within the workshop. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather a range of ideas to promote discussion at the workshop rather than to provide a quantitative analysis of practice.

Some people in the audience had limited experience in the field and were attending the workshop to learn and did not feel that they were in a position to share practice on paper,
but were happy to contribute to the discussion and ask questions at the session to enable them to enhance their practice. The collation of different aspects of practice from a number of people facilitated broader and deeper discussion than if it had been a discussion based on the facilitator’s practice and research of the literature.

The study was limited to the participants within the workshop at the conference, a self-selecting group from a relatively small number of HE providers. The HEIs represented provided apprenticeships in a range of subject areas, working with both public sector and private sector providers. Thus, the study has limitations in that it represents only a snapshot of practice related to the key themes and discussion that arose from developing organisational the questionnaire and conference. Further in-depth study in key areas, such as the role of mentoring and coaching in degree apprenticeships, support for learning in the workplace and the impact of dimensions and methods of communication between the employer and provider would be of value.

Furthermore, it can be argued that there is much to be learned from research into how the further education sector and private training providers, with many years of experience of delivering apprenticeships, work with employers to provide vocational education. They have well developed systems of tracking apprentice performance, managing the interface with employer and ensuring that the apprentice-mentor/facilitator relationship is effective (Andrews and Radcliffe, 2018). It would therefore be worthwhile repeating the study with a broader group of participants, including representatives from FE colleges and private training providers, to collate information from other types of provider.

Discussion

Participants discussed a range of activities to promote a close working relationship with employers. It was agreed that the key to an excellent workplace learning experience was a close working relationship between the employer and the HEI. This in turn ensures that there is clarity of expectation from both parties and in particular the employer is clear about the requirements to promote learning within the organisation.

A key success factor to good employer–HEI relationships is the involvement of the employer in the development of the academic programme. This addresses some of the issues raised by Cortini (2016) as “the development will involve discussion about a range of learning activities to stimulate learning and the employer will be able to contribute to the discussion providing a realistic indication of what is possible within the workplace whilst ensuring that the environmental conditions support the learning”. If the programme is designed in partnership with the employer there will be a mutual understanding of the requirements of the programme and how each partner contributes to the learning experience (Chan, 2016). The programme of workplace learning activities will be co-developed so that the employer can provide the best opportunities to achieve evidence of the acquisition of the knowledge skills and behaviours required for the apprenticeship standard. Bravenboer (2016) emphasised that “high levels of collaboration” between universities and employers are needed for high level skills development.

Prior to the programme beginning, most HEI’s held meetings with employers. These covered a range of purposes:

- to explain the requirements of the programme in some depth;
- to discuss the responsibilities of the employer, e.g. 20 per cent off the job;
- to identify potential workplace mentors and discuss their role;
- training for mentors; and
- to discuss the kind of workplace learning activities that need to occur to drive and inform the learning.
Other interesting initiatives include a stakeholder event at the university, where employers attend to discuss a range of apprenticeships, with programme teams available to discuss each one in some depth.

Most HEIs held an induction event for the programme to which apprentices were invited. Some also invited the employer (usually the line manager) and/or the mentor to part of the induction, so that the same message was shared with all parties, and access to information was shared.

These activities were identified as responding to the challenges identified by Gurtner et al. (2011), Nielsen (2008), Onnismaa (2008) and Smith (2000) to ensure that employers devote sufficient resource to guidance activities and being aware of their responsibilities as an employer in receipt of funding for the apprenticeship.

HEIs reported that they spoke to a range of staff at the employer, including the human resources manager, the line manager and the designated facilitator. During discussion it was noted that it is important that a range of staff are involved in discussion with the university, especially the line manager if he/she is not the workplace facilitator. Colleagues noted that difficulties can arise if the line manager is not fully aware of the requirements of the programme and the regulations regarding apprenticeships (such as 20 per cent off the job). By talking to a range of staff at the employer the HEIs feel that they are ensuring that the apprentices are less likely to feel more integrated into the workforce (Chan, 2016).

HEIs reported a number of challenges that their employer partners experienced in managing the “On the job” learning. A number expressed concerns about the “burden” of workplace facilitation, the loss of a productive member of staff for training and mentoring apprentices. This can result in time pressures for the mentor who finds themselves torn between the demands of their role and the need to spend time with the apprentice, or in the worst cases, lack of real engagement from the workplace facilitator and/or line manager. This reflects the finding of Mikkonen et al. (2017) although no HEI’s reported any experience of employers feeling that they should receive a proportion of the levy in recognition of their contribution to the learning and the loss of productivity of the facilitator as, reported by Mulkeen.

Some employers struggle to release their apprentices for their off the job learning, particularly at peak business times or emergencies and may require the apprentice to miss sessions to ensure that there is sufficient cover in the workplace. The importance of the employers understanding the off the job learning requirements and what it involves was noted during the discussion and emphasises the need to have clarity in the initial discussions with the employer (Chan, 2016).

There was discussion about how HEIs make employers aware of professional body requirements, in particular the professional body competencies that students will need to demonstrate they have experienced in order to pass their apprenticeship. Again, the involvement of employers in programme design, and the in-depth discussions about the requirements of the “on the job” learning and how this could be achieved and evidenced through workplace activities, was felt to be paramount. Where sensitive/confidential material was used to evidence the learning it was important that there was a clear plan in place, from both parties to address any issues. This would involve redacting key information to anonymise; encryption of commercially sensitive information and the use of conflict of interest policies for internal and external examiners. Lack of understanding of such issues could hamper the learning as described by Cortini (2016) and reinforces the need for frequent detailed discussions (Chan, 2016).

**Mentors/facilitators training**

All HEIs agreed that in company facilitators required training, in order to ensure that they were fully acquainted with the role and responsibilities. This confirms the suggestion
from Rowe et al. (2017) who noted that work-based facilitators require formal support from the education provider. Most also recognised that making facilitators available for this training was a challenge for employers and most HEIs sought to minimise the impact on business where possible. This was achieved by:

- informal meetings in the workplace;
- distance learning/online provision;
- attendance at joint induction day with apprentices, with specific sessions targeted at mentors; and
- provision of a facilitator’s handbook.

These activities support facilitators to enable the apprentice to drive the learning as opposed to the facilitator “teaching” (Billett, 2016) and support the professional development of the apprentices (Mikkonen et al., 2017). Programmes discussed support the comments of Evanciew and Rojewski (1999) as they enable facilitators to share their “tricks of the trade” and provided access to information unavailable in formal educational settings, thereby sharing tacit knowledge with newcomers at the workplace (Koskela and Palukka, 2011; Onnismaa, 2008; Mikkonen et al., 2017).

A number of universities have, or are looking to develop formal, credit bearing mentor awards. Bromley et al. (2012) recognised that there is a need to upskill those who are supporting learning in the workplace. The use of a formal qualification may also secure enhanced engagement by the facilitator, if they can see that they get a qualification for themselves.

There was no consensus within the discussion as to whether training should be mandatory. Mandatory training, whilst burdensome, could overcome some of the issues raised by Tanggaard (2005), where facilitators may have developed bad practice and risk passing it on to apprentices.

Support for in-company mentors/facilitators include a range of dedicated apprenticeship university staff identified to support facilitators and apprentices, in addition to the usual university academic teams. Of particular interest is the job coach, employed centrally by some universities to undertake the tripartite reviews and support the facilitators in the workplace. One university reported that their employers had requested an online forum where they can discuss best practice and challenges with other mentors/facilitators from their desk. Another reports that they have an online “toolkit”, so that if the facilitator comes across a particular issue they have access to relevant information to support them in dealing with the difficulty, providing a “just in time” support.

**Monitoring the quality and standards of the “on the job” learning**

Where the university is the main provider of the apprenticeship they are responsible for ensuring the quality of the workplace learning, it is therefore necessary to have monitoring processes in place to ensure that the learning experience in the workplace is positive and facilitates the development of the knowledge, skills and behaviours outlined in the apprenticeship standard.

At our discussions, a range of mechanisms were outlined by HEIs to monitor the “on the job” learning. These included: feedback from the workplace facilitator; feedback from apprentices; and business development manager reviews in the workplace.

Discussion highlighted that for some HEIs there is limited formal independent review of the learning experience in the workplace, much relies on the discussions within the tripartite reviews and feedback from facilitator and students.
Further studies are required to encompass a broader range of providers, including drawing on best practice from the FE and independent sector when monitoring and managing the on-the-job learning, and applying principles used there in the context of HE.

Conclusion
It was clear from the responses and workshop discussions that engagement with employers needs to occur from the outset of the development of the apprenticeship, with the development being viewed holistically, rather than as an academic programme with some work-based activities.

The importance of embedding the on-the-job learning within the design of the academic programme was clear, so that there are explicit links between the theoretical learning (knowledge element of the apprenticeship standard) and the practical application of the learning (the skills and behaviours within the apprenticeship standard).

This is followed by a series of regular interactions with a range of staff within the employer (e.g. HR manager, line manager and work-based facilitator), to ensure that there is a clear understanding from the beginning of the apprenticeship, and throughout the apprentice’s journey, of how to promote an effective learning environment for the apprentice within the context of the organisation. Resources need to be devoted to regular and frequent contact with a range of personnel within the employer organisation, so that a partnership approach to supporting learning is developed.

Mikkonen et al. (2017) noted that: “Support from the designated workplace trainer is an important feature of guidance that has been shown to support workplace learning”. The questionnaire and workshop discussion outlined the different approaches to workplace mentor/facilitator training. These include: credit/non-credit bearing; mandatory/voluntary; and face to face/online. Training and ongoing support for work-based mentors/facilitators continues to be a key success factor. This needs to be managed to balance the learning needs of the facilitators with the potential impact on workplace productivity.

Whilst the paper represents a small sample survey from a self-selecting group of participants it highlights some areas of good practice that can be shared within the sector. We also find that a broader-based study, including representatives from all providers of higher and degree apprenticeships would be of value. Further studies specifically investigating the training and support for workplace facilitators would be of particular value, given that both this study and the literature find that this is an area of some concern for employers.

The paper identifies a range of approaches that will enhance the effectiveness of learning in the workplace. This will both enhance the apprentice’s learning experience and ensure that higher and degree apprenticeships are developed holistically, meeting the academic requirements of the university and the workplace needs of the employer. This, in turn, will enhance success rates and reduce attrition rates from apprenticeships, which in turn may encourage more employers to engage with higher and degree apprenticeships.

References


Further reading

About the authors
Ann Minton is based at the University of Derby’s Academic Lead for Apprenticeships and University Principal Tutor in Work-Based Learning. An enthusiastic Advocate of Work-Based Learning, largely due to her own personal and professional development adopting this approach, her work develops education programmes integrated within the student’s own workplace experiences. Winning a number of industry awards, Ann has developed bespoke and innovative education solutions for a range of organisations to meet their learning needs, including the developing higher and degree level apprenticeships. Her work is characterised by strong and constructive relationships between the University and its partners through frequent communication and mutual support and by providing an effective mechanism for extending the mutual partnership approach of working to employer partners. Ann Minton is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: a.m.minton@derby.ac.uk

Jane Lowe, BA (Hons) and MSc, is based at the University of Derby as Head of Apprenticeships, the strategic and operational lead in the development and implementation of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships. Following a successful £250,000 bid for Degree Apprenticeship Development Funding (DADF) in 2017, the Apprenticeship Hub was launched. The Hub provides commercial, academic and compliance support for apprenticeships across the university and has seen a growth in starts of over 30 per cent in 2018. The Hub has been an integral part in the development of the UK’s first Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship, and has lead on three successful End Point Assessment Organisation applications. The wealth of experience that Jane brings to the University comes from being an employer of apprentices since 2003, when she started up a family business. Having seen first-hand the benefits that apprenticeships can bring as an employer, Jane became Head of Apprenticeships at Learning Unlimited in Chesterfield in 2013, growing the business to be the seventh largest provider of apprenticeships in the country.
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on developing a deep understanding of the nature and impact of the workplace mentor role in degree apprenticeships (DAs). It investigates a theoretical model of DA workplace mentoring activity, with findings used to develop a set of principles for supporting the development of effective mentoring practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Data underpinning this paper were collected as part of the monitoring and evaluation of the first year of a Chartered Manager DA programme at a post-1992 university. Workplace mentors and mentees were interviewed to explore their experience of mentoring within this programme.

Findings – This study found there to be many positive benefits of workplace mentoring for apprentices, their mentors and the organisation. This understanding can be used to support the development of principles for effective mentoring practice.

Research limitations/implications – The data support the validity of the proposed model for DA workplace mentoring activity. In order to become a helpful guide to mentors’ planning of areas of support, the model may need to be refined to show the relative importance given to each activity area. The findings of this small-scale study need now to be extended through work with a larger sample.

Practical implications – The set of principles offered will be valuable to workplace mentors of degree apprentices across organisational sectors to ensure the quality of delivery and outcomes.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to an understanding of the impact of mentoring as a social practice on mentor and apprentice development. Such an understanding has the potential to positively influence the quality of delivery, mentoring practice and thus apprentices’ learning.

Keywords Quality, Transformational change

Paper type Research paper
standards for discrete occupations, describing the knowledge, skills and behaviours in which an apprentice should be proficient by the end of their apprenticeship. As of October 2018, the Institute for Apprenticeships has approved 44 standards at level 7, 90 at level 6 and 31 at level 5, all with allied assessment plans, stipulating arrangements for academic learning and workplace competency and end-point assessment arrangements.

A belief in the value of employer-led curriculum development (Wall and Jarvis, 2015) and a close integration between job and learning opportunity is central to achieving such levels of competence and meeting sector and wider economy demands. However, a learning environment which encompasses both university and workplace can place complex demands on learners. Structuring appropriate support for such multi-faceted learning appears central to degree apprenticeship (DA)’s success, through an effective tripartite relationship between employer, apprentice and HEI, enacted in part through the collaborative working of a workplace mentor, apprentice and employer liaison tutor.

The role of the employer liaison tutor within the DA structure is a new one within many universities and remains in the process of development. Similarly, the role of workplace mentor is yet to be wholly elaborated and understood. An exploration of the general aims and processes of mentoring proved helpful in illuminating how the role of workplace mentor in DAs might be conceptualised. The centrality of the interface of work and learning and the workplace mentor’s crucial role in facilitating this places them in a key position to determine the quality of the apprenticeship provision and successful outcomes.

What do we understand by mentoring within DA programmes?

Developing a shared clarity over what is understood by the term mentoring was a key to our emerging understanding of how to support effective mentoring practice within DA programmes. The conflation of the terms coaching and mentoring in everyday parlance is reflected in their contested nature in the literature (Western, 2012). Attempts made to differentiate them generally concentrate on areas of focus and skills used (see, e.g. the Scottish Mentoring Network (careerdevelopmentplan.net) and Curee’s (2005) national framework for mentoring and coaching). However, this “crude positioning of different viewpoints” (Garvey et al., 2009, p. 10) tends to homogenise coaching and mentoring’s aims and approaches. We are interested instead in exploring a particular type of mentoring, one which would occur in the workplace and positively impact on a degree apprentice’s learning and development. We therefore found it instructive to consider the roles, focus and process of mentoring activity to evaluate how the traditional differentiation between the roles of coach and mentor might be disrupted in DA mentoring activity.

In general terms, the role of a coach is predicated on professional expertise in the field of coaching whilst mentors have experience in the mentee’s area of work. Mentors are therefore often allocated to colleagues new to the organisation, with a focus on the development of understanding about organisational processes and functions. The role of the mentor of a degree apprentice surpasses this functional level; however, with mentors habitually supporting their mentee’s professional learning within an organisational context (Arnold, 2009) and, in some cases, promoting an agential approach to their own self-development. Such depth of professional influence is catalysed by the longevity of the mentoring relationship within a DA, where the professional relationship sometimes lasts up to six years.

In terms of process, Garvey et al. (2009) suggest that both mentors and coaches adopt a similar set of skills and adapt them according to their particular focus. A view of coach as technician, for example, would be supported by a range of coaching models, from structured conversational guidance such as the GROW model (Arnold, 2009) to the employment of psychometric tools. Conversely, a view of coach as development partner would be supported
by processes such as the offer of a contained place and time for reflection and the
development of a creative space within which the coachee can be authentic.

Mentoring processes have traditionally been construed less as joint exploration than as
sharing from expert to new colleague, where experienced colleagues – adepts – provide access
to practice which supports the development of newcomers’ – apprentices – professional
aptitudes and organisational relationships (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The clear power
differential here could be seen as an interesting distinction between coaching and mentoring.
Indeed, Barton and Tusting’s (2005) work highlights the darker sides of collegial working,
where exclusion rather than inclusion can dominate the mentee experience. However, the
structure of DA programmes, with learning overtly taking place concurrently in university
and workplace, casts the mentor more firmly in the role of inclusive development partner
explored above. The status of many apprentices as long-standing employees, themselves
adepts in many organisational practices, supports this conceptualisation.

A pragmatic approach to an understanding of DA mentoring can be suggested by
considering the implications of the system of apprenticeship standards which define what it
is to be a professional in a named role. Opening with a descriptor of this role, the standard
goes on to describe the knowledge, skills and behaviours expected of role holders. Drawing
from theories of identity development, it is useful to consider the Standard’s description of
the growth of a professional persona as rooted in a discoursal perspective on identity. Such a
perspective suggests that we are who we are because of the way others recognise our
accomplishments (Gee, 2001). Thus, we become an accepted member of a professional group.
The purpose of mentoring then becomes to support the apprentice in developing as a
professional in a named role such that other role holders would recognise them as “one of
their own”. However, such a professional persona is not a fixed state. Accepting Erikson’s
(1975) view of identity as a work in progress rather than a static end gives mentoring the
potential to support the development of an authentic work self which may change over time.

The identity of the mentor is also relevant here. Within the structure of DAs, mentors are
drawn from the mentee’s organisation. They may well have multiple roles, being the mentee’s
line manager and colleague, and thus need to manage a dual professional relationship colleague
(Brennan and Wildflower, 2014). Indeed, in some cases, mentors may be mentoring those in a
senior position to them in the organisation. This position of insider mentor can effect long-
lasting development but equally brings its own challenges (Knights and Poppleton, 2007).
Developing clarity around necessary boundaries (Zur and Anderson, 2006) may well be
fundamental for the success of DA mentoring.

Supporting the development of an understanding of the link between theory and
practice is a key function of the mentoring role. Le Maistre and Paré’s (2004)
conceptualisation of the transition from school to work is useful here. Understanding this
transition as a move from strategy to enactment, Le Maistre and Paré (2004) consider how
individuals move from a study of practices to their performance. Thus, the accounting
theory which a student learns at university within a module on their DA programme
becomes, in practice, used to be able to provide meaningful information at a budgeting and
planning meeting for a new project.

Whilst welcome, such a model may not take full account of the difficulty in bridging this
theory-practice gap across a range of complex contexts, as observed in disciplines with
established pedagogies of integrating academic and work-based learning. Addressing a
long-standing issue in nursing, for example, Musker (2011) points to the imperative for the
space for reflection in this process for nursing students, whilst Salifu et al.’s (2019) work
exposes the difficulties of bridging this theory-practice gap in international nursing contexts
with limited resources and a lack of agreed educator roles. Mentoring thus becomes a key
factor in supporting individual apprentices in establishing the connectivity between
previous learning and current activity.
What is the impact of effective mentoring?

A discussion of the proposed impacts of effective mentoring raises an issue – how might such impact be reliably observed? Given the nature of mentoring activity, it may not be appropriate to employ solely quantitative organisational metrics, such as return on investment, as a success indicator. Indeed, Clutterbuck (2005) raises the issue of the incompatibility of the notion of measurement and review with the need to maintain a high degree of responsiveness in a mentee-focused relationship. Such measurement may additionally form an ethical and practical challenge to the relationship set up through individual mentoring agreements. Instead, softer measures may be appropriate such as mentee’s general well-being, retention and creativity (Arnold, 2009).

Despite these procedural misgivings, a strong evidence base exists to suggest the positive impact of employer mentoring on the behaviour, engagement, attainment and educational and career progression of young people (Hooley, 2016). Effective mentoring within DAs supports the apprentice in developing their professional persona through the acquisition and refinement of knowledge, skills and behaviours. This is achieved through “an exchange of wisdom” (Parsloe and Wray, 2000, p. 12) which supports not only individual development but also the achievement of organisational strategic goals. Additionally, studies show the potential for positive impact on the mentor and their ability to create a learning environment for co-workers (Senge, 1990; Billett, 2003).

Positive impacts on apprentices’ development include improved resilience, engagement and performance (Grant et al., 2009). However, the critical enhancement of professional skills (Rowe et al., 2017) through support for work-based learning is the key indicator of effective mentoring practice. The concept of work-based learning is therefore itself in need of theorising here.

Work-based learning can be simply defined as “curriculum controlled by higher education institution, content designed with employer, learner primarily full-time employee” (Brennan and Little, 1996). Providing more detail, Boud and Solomon (2001), work-based learning can be conceptualised as a partnership between organisation and university to foster learning in which:

- learners are employed/in a contractual relationship with the external organisation;
- the programme followed derives the needs of the workplace and the learning: work is the curriculum;
- learners engage in a process of recognition of current competencies prior to negotiation of programme of study;
- a significant element of the programme is through learning projects undertaken in the workplace; and
- the University assesses the learning outcomes against a trans-disciplinary framework of standards and levels.

Whilst apprenticeship standards have been written by employer-led trailblazers, the organisations involved in the employment of apprenticeships, and the mentoring relationship may not have been directly involved. This can affect the partnership, and the contextual understanding of the outcomes, as noted by Smith and Betts (2000) whereby the “occupational and maybe professional standards have been described or delineated by bodies outside the partnership”. They do, however, acknowledge that “it is, of course, very difficult to conceive of an individual carrying out all but the simplest of work-based activity, who cannot learn from the experience of doing it”.

Work-based learning focuses on both the outcomes, learning as a product, and the experience, learning as a process. Apprenticeship standards focus on not only the
instrumental product in terms of knowledge and skills, but also the process with an additional focus on behaviour which can only be developed experientially. Given the iterative nature of skills development and the individualised timelines required for the development of behaviours, an important part of the mentoring relationship is to journey through the process together as mentor and mentee, supporting Erikson’s (1975) concept of the authentic work self-developing over time.

How can the development of effective workplace mentors be supported?
Despite the demonstrable positive impact on mentees, the impact of mentoring activity on mentors must also be considered. Billett (2003), for example, raises the issue of work intensification, exacerbated by mentors’ feelings of being underprepared. A clear acknowledgement of the importance of mentors’ roles and the instigation of appropriate developmental support for colleagues undertaking this role appears crucial then (Hooley, 2016). Such support is often conceived as short-term and focused on skills, knowledge and understanding of the various elements of the mentoring role (Hirst et al., 2014). However, there is evidence to suggest that longer-term mentoring can have positive results for mentors ranging from improved professional performance (Grima et al., 2014) to enhanced job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Ghosh and Reio, 2013). It appears that long term development programmes need to take account of several other factors which influence the likelihood of successful mentoring for all stakeholders. Garvey (2014) identifies these as:

1. the relationship between mentor and mentee: this includes issues such as length of relationship, intimacy, dependence and power;
2. the social and organisational context: this includes issues such as practical and structural concerns, the formality of processes and motivation; and
3. the use of advice, knowledge or experience: this includes issues such as the recognition of learning as a social activity and an understanding of the knowledge economy.

The relationship between mentor and mentee is of crucial importance in DA mentoring programmes, with the level of ability to relate to the other a key determinant of success (Machin, 2010). Mutual respect and joint learning would be an ideal in such a relationship. However, consideration of Garvey’s (2014) inclusion of power relations in the determinants of mentoring success is pertinent here. An interpretation of the main impetus of organisational socialisation as ensuring the fit of the individual into organisational norms (Weidman and Stein, 2003) could position the mentor as organisational servant rather than co-learner. A consideration of the organisational context for employee development is therefore a key.

Within DA mentoring such contextual information is often overlooked (Cox, 2003). A command and control management style, for example, may favour a transmission form of mentoring, where the mentee is initiated into organisational norms. Conversely, a distributed leadership culture may favour mentoring for individual growth and, by extension, organisational stability. Equally, the strength of the organisational learning culture can also impact positively or negatively on the extent to which mentors can stimulate effective learning activities (Cortini, 2016). The development of appropriate workplace norms for learning, for example, has been seen to be a key factor in determining the likelihood of successful mentoring activity, with mentors’ direct guidance to apprentices afforded influence by a working environment which invites and values learning (Billett, 2001). Such learning organisations (Senge, 1990) promote opportunities for the transfer of learning to others, which is at the heart of the mentoring process.

In summary then, the social relations between people, activities and contexts (Bourdieu, 1997) influence the degree of mentoring success. This recognition of learning as
a social activity comes in spite of the relatively procedural and compliance-driven nature of the apprenticeship process. In this context, it is crucial that mentoring’s development potential for both mentor and apprentice is foregrounded in the development of any mentoring programme.

A research agenda
Our developing clarity over the practice and impact of effective mentoring within DA programmes led to the formation of a clear research agenda, that is, to develop a deep understanding of the nature and impact of the workplace mentor role in DAs. Our initial exploration of relevant literature and DA guidance suggested the potential value of constructing a particular model of mentoring activity for supporting the development of degree apprentices, shown in Figure 1.

The model suggests five interconnected mentoring domains which support the learning of degree apprentices: providing induction, setting workplace expectations of professionalism, proactively facilitating learning within and outside of the workplace, encouraging engagement with support networks and supporting the achievement of the apprenticeship standard. It sets these activities within the context of a workplace which recognises and supports learning as a social activity.

Our research investigated the validity of this model for degree apprentice mentoring. We were interested in exploring the degree to which this theoretical model is reflected in and illuminates the reality of mentor and mentee experiences. This paper gives us a formal opportunity to critique this model, in order to develop and offer a set of principles for supporting the development of effective mentoring practice.

Figure 1. A model for mentoring degree apprentices
The data gathering and analysis process

The apprentices who are the subject of this research were undertaking the first year of a Chartered Manager DA programme in a post-1992 university. The mentors were supporting these apprentices. This research was carried out by the authors as three academics, all of whom have key roles in the development of DAs within our university. We sought to undertake and present authentic research and were initially concerned by Patton’s (2002) suggestion of a move towards researcher “neutrality” as fundamental to securing such authenticity. However, it appears that Patton’s “neutrality” does not equate with a search for objectivity. Instead, he proposes the adoption of a research approach which does not set out to prove or disprove a specific reality, but which supports the researcher in her attempts to understand the world revealed by the data.

Following Pring (2000), our intentions were not then to attempt a revelation of the elusive fixed truth of mentoring but instead to reveal and interpret the multiple realities implied in how mentees and mentors understand the mentoring experience they were involved in. The potential of qualitative research to reveal internal states – worldviews, values, symbolic constructs – in addition to externally observed behaviours (Denzin, 1989) aligned with this purpose.

In common with much qualitative enquiry (Patton, 2002), these purposes were best served by focusing on a small sample of five mentors and mentees. Rather than securing a representative sample which would allow for generalisation in the positivistic sense, we instead intended to use our sample to illuminate our understanding and, through a thematic analysis, offer a tentative model and principles for practice for ourselves and others to refine. A purposive and convenience sampling approach allowed us to fulfil these aims. This approach allowed us strategically to select participants whom we believed would provide information-rich cases and with whom we could work meaningfully within the resources available. Workplace mentors and mentees in one organisation were therefore interviewed informally over the telephone. The conversation was guided by a series of interview prompts, circulated to participants to consider in advance, to explore their experience of mentoring within this DA programme.

Given our current professional relationship with our research participants, we sought to adopt a non-hierarchical, collaborative research approach. The informal conversational interview (Patton, 2002), otherwise termed the unstructured interview (Fontana and Frey, 2003), appeared appropriate. Such interviews have more in common with conversations than interrogations (Kvale, 1996), challenging the normal hierarchical relationship which interviews generally imply.

In analysing our data we did not seek to bracket (Tufford and Newman, 2010) our empathetic understanding but instead used it as a tool to support deep insights into participants’ experiences. We undertook a thematic analysis of the data, using structured analytical processes to identify patterns and to ensure the validity of our analysis. However, we also overtly sought to develop a holistic approach to the data through surfacing and acknowledging resonances and dissonances.

What we discovered

Our thematic analysis of the data was guided by the central concerns of our research, that is, the development of a deep understanding of the nature and impact of the workplace mentor role in DAs. The data collected suggested that this understanding could best be developed through the consideration of three themes: expectations of mentoring, mentoring impact and barriers to effective mentoring practice. These are considered in turn below.

Expectations of mentoring

Apprentices expressed wide-ranging expectations of their mentor. These varied from offering guidance on day to day workplace issues (Participant A), to supporting professional
development and sponsorship (Participant B). One apprentice imagined their mentor as having a key role to play in supporting an understanding of university “assignments and ideas” (Participant C).

Mentors conceived their role to focus on:

Helping the student to understand the “world of work” and how best to operate within it. Participant D

Examples of this “world of work” included problem solving, career planning and dealing with workplace change. It also encompassed the process of professional identity formation, with Participant E exemplifying Gee’s (2001) understanding of identity development, conceiving her role to be to:

[...] encourage certain behaviours. Participant E

So that her apprentice would be appropriately recognised as a professional in their field. All mentors also saw their role as extending supporting progress through the DA programme. This picture supports the proposition of expected activity across all five domains of our proposed mentoring model.

Mentoring impact

The expectations held by apprentices and mentors were variously reflected in the reality of the mentoring relationship. The impact of the mentoring relationship on apprentices, mentors and their organisations is therefore considered here.

On apprentices. Apprentices varied in their perceptions of the impact of mentoring activity. Where a positive impact was cited, this was often skills-based. Participant A, for example, noted the positive impact of her mentor on the development of skills and competencies needed for her job.

A range of impacts of differences in skill-set between apprentice and mentor was articulated by apprentices. Apprentice A, for example, appreciated the potential for cross-function learning which his mentor offered him. He wondered, however, if having a mentor in his specialist area of interest might support the development of professionally valuable collegial relationships.

In some cases, the impact of the mentoring experience was identity rather than skills-based. Participant B, for example, referenced the impact of her mentor on her development as an autonomous professional, commenting that her mentor:

[...] did a great job of helping me to come up with solutions to my own problems. Participant B

For Participant C, this professional identity formation was supported by his mentor’s brokering of relationships with more experienced colleagues.

Mentoring’s impact on career progression formed another key theme. Participant A conceived this as sponsorship, whilst mentoring inspired Participant C to give of his best which in turn had a positive effect on his performance and organisational reputation:

He gave me the extra motivation to exceed expectations to impress management. Participant C

This apprentice supports Gee’s (2001) contention of recognition by others as a key element of professional socialisation.

Where mentoring works well, then, the experience exemplifies the positive view of the learning potential of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In these cases, the mentor often supports the apprentice not simply with the detail of their day to day work but in “seeing the bigger picture” (Participant E) of organisational culture and norms. For some apprentices, the expected impact of mentoring on their learning and development had yet to be fully realised, however. In these cases, apprentices do not appear to be consciously
excluded from becoming full community members, in contrast to Barton and Tusting’s (2005) proposal. However, some mentors’ lack of time or expertise in the mentoring process can result in apprentices being unconsciously denied a valuable development opportunity.

On *mentors*. Participants evidenced various motivations for working as mentors for degree apprentices. One such motivation focused on an imperative to support the learning and development of less experienced colleagues and “to give something back” (Participant E):

I enjoy the opportunity to coach/guide people and I like seeing how they develop. Participant D

Mentoring of others can also be seen as the opportunity to provide the kind of professional support lacking from one’s own organisational history:

However, not having had a great deal of guidance/support network in my own career […] certainly see the advantages and was happy to sign up. Participant E

Mentoring activity was generally seen as fulfilling its promise and, in some cases, providing a valued experience for mentors:

I always find mentoring very energising. People at the start of their career are over-flowing with enthusiasm and the desire to learn, it’s infectious. Participant D

Some mentors found the mentoring relationship gave them the opportunity to gain insight into other departments and thus increase their own organisational understanding.

On *their organisations*. Apprentices appreciated the value placed on learning by their organisation, through its commitment to the concurrent funding of the DAs of a number of employees and to supporting their learning whilst in the workplace. This positive learning culture, with workplace norms valuing learning (Billett, 2001), appeared to provide a favourable context for effective mentoring (Cortini, 2016).

Apprentices offered some interesting views on the positive impact of mentoring at organisational level. For some, this impact centred on enhancing a positive workplace culture whilst others focused on developing stronger employee relationships through more effective networking and thus stronger cross-functional working.

Not all mentors were clear about the general impact of mentoring to the organisation, although in some alluded to their role in ensuring organisational benefit. Participant D, for example, supported an apprentice in deciding to leave the organisation which the mentor saw to be both personally and organisationally appropriate.

The reality of the mentoring relationship evidences the emphasis placed on discrete domains within our proposed mentoring model. Setting workplace expectations of professionalism and supporting the development of the apprentice in their professional role appear to be an important aspect of mentoring activity. Mentors and apprentices both put a premium on the impact of mentoring on learning and networking. However, mentors did not feel empowered to support the achievement of the apprenticeship standard in a significant way.

The areas of impact raised by both apprentices and mentors support our proposition of mentoring as a social practice. The relationship between mentor and apprentice is seen as a key to securing positive impact, as is participants’ perceptions of the value placed by the organisation on learning.

*Barriers to effective mentoring practice*

Mentors and apprentices provided some helpful insights into barriers to effective mentoring practice. Commitment to the process on the part of the mentor was viewed as vital to the programme’s success. Apprentices had a variable experience of this commitment:

My mentor is very committed to mentoring – others may not be so lucky. Participant B
Issues around finding a regular time for a meaningful dialogue were given as an example of this lack of commitment.

For one mentor, issues around professional truthfulness provided a barrier to the positive impact of the mentoring relationship:

It is difficult to get beneath the surface [...] being told that everything is ok/no particular issues whilst knowing that there are certain performance/behaviour issues that need to be handled by the Manager/HR [...]. Participant E

Here, the apprentice appears to be choosing to present a front-stage, external self to his mentor, whilst living an internal backstage self-alone (Goffman, 1959), an ability confirmed by Winter (2009) in his discussion of organisational identities.

A lack of adequate information on various aspects of the mentoring process can also hinder effective practice. Mentors generally felt that a greater knowledge of the detail of the “university” aspects of DA programme would help them to support their apprentices’ progress more effectively. Equally, less experienced mentors would welcome more supporting material, such as case studies and “top tips”, to ensure that the mentoring process fulfils its developmental potential.

Implications for effective mentoring practice: developing guiding principles
The empirical data gathering process for this research was guided by a model which proposed five key domains of mentoring activity and suggested the importance of a supportive workplace context for the successful mentoring support of degree apprentices. Whilst activity across the areas varies between mentoring pairs, the data generally support the validity of the proposed model. The majority of mentoring activity focused on proactively facilitating learning both within and outside of the workplace, alongside the development of an appropriate professional identity. Supporting induction activities was given a low priority. Support for gaining of the apprenticeship standard was constrained by mentors’ lack of information around specific requirements and their role in supporting their achievement, although this may also be influenced by the data collection point being at the early stage of the apprenticeship programme. Learning was clearly recognised as a social activity, despite the process and compliance-driven nature of DAs, where success is defined against externally prescribed knowledge, skills and behaviours. In order to become a helpful guide to mentors’ planning of areas of support, the original model may need to be refined within organisations to show the relative importance given to each activity area.

The data also suggest the need, in some cases, for further mentor development in a role which is a key to apprentice success. The following set of guiding principles for effective mentoring practice arises from the data and is offered as a tool to support the development of organisational and personal mentoring strategy and practice.

Guiding principles for the effective mentoring of degree apprentices
Examining both the literature on mentoring and the research data gathered allows the formulation of a set of guiding principles to assist with the successful mentoring of apprentices. Taking this approach has been used as a successful framework for discussing curriculum development within the same post-92 university and has allowed academic staff space for reflection whilst affording a good amount of flexibility in meeting similar ends in different ways. As guiding principles do not stipulate the precise actions that need to be taken but rather provide a conceptual structure that maps out the broadest sense of journey, it allows for disciplinary difference within a shared vision of good practice. The precision of actions to be taken can then be devised and adapted to suit the needs of the organisation, the apprentice and the discipline within which the apprenticeship standard is located whilst establishing consistency of expectations in the quality of delivery across all apprenticeships.
Within these guiding principles it is important to note the need for mentoring to take place in an organisational context which values learning, provides support through organisational structures and takes account of the impact of other organisational roles held by each participant – both mentor and mentee. The guiding principles are framed under each of the proposed domains of mentoring activity; this enables them to be considered as influences on the process of mentoring, alongside the activities which are the product of mentoring thereby mirroring the work-based learning which the mentee is undertaking within their apprenticeship:

(1) Provide induction:

- structure the mentoring relationship to support the induction process intensively throughout the first phase of the apprenticeship, before moving to a longer-term pattern of support;
- establish agreed ways of working that are mindful of the needs of the apprentices and the mentors, including appropriate professional boundaries;
- focus early support on identifying what areas of the organisation the apprentice needs to understand immediately in order to do their job;
- consider what the needs of an apprentice might be that may differ from the induction and mentoring requirements of a regular employee; and
- set up ways in which information can be shared, and questions raised as this is likely to be more intense in the first phase of the apprenticeship as norms are established.

(2) Set workplace expectations of professionalism:

- model a sense of self as a professional, sharing a sense of understanding of the need to be able to represent the organisation;
- explore the behaviours which are often tacitly understood within an organisation in terms of professional cultures and practices, including etiquette and expectations;
- share a historical and wider context understanding of the organisational culture, structure and norms;
- assist in understanding the wider world of work, but particularly the corporate identity of the organisation and/or the professional identity of the apprentice; and
- balance the need for the emotional intelligence as a mentor supporting developments and the requirement to identify when issues require management intervention.

(3) Proactively facilitate learning within and outside of the workplace:

- regularly review progress in terms of action learning and target setting, both informally and in a structured way as required by the apprenticeship;
- use a model of reflection to examine the experiential learning with the apprentice to help in the identification of key learning points which can be evidenced;
- structure conversations to focus on the transferability of knowledge, skills and behaviours learned;
- broker relationships with colleagues who can support learning both within and outside of the organisation; and
- cross-fertilise learning by connecting the apprentice to other areas of the organisation which are outside of their immediate work area to extend and enhance learning.
Encourage engagement with support networks:

- assist and encourage the apprentice to join and connect with regional and national networks associated with a relevant professional body or industry group;
- introduce apprentices to their own internal and external networks, sharing the professional connectivity;
- empower the apprentice to participate in wider networks associated with developing identify and well-being, which may be connected to protected characteristics or personal circumstances;
- signpost internal development opportunities that assist in the development of the knowledge, skills and behaviours required of the apprenticeship and if required, act as a sponsor; and
- identify the professional development learning opportunity provided through unexpected and additional tasks taken on, as part of the ongoing reflection on learning.

Support the achievement of the apprenticeship standard:

- balance the supportiveness nature of mentoring with the need to push, stretch and challenge the apprentice to achieve their goals and meet the standard;
- review progress, encouraging reflection and documenting of evidence as an incremental process to enable a coherent picture of their development and achievement of the knowledge, skills and behaviour;
- provide the space for conversations which enable the apprentice to articulate a holistic understanding of their development as an autonomous professional;
- foster a deep and trusting relationship in which honesty and authenticity lead to conversations which provide a sense of professional truthfulness; and
- engage in professional development to ensure confidence in the precise requirements of supporting the achievement of the apprenticeship standard.

Conclusion

The apprentice and mentor experiences presented in this paper have contributed to the nascent understanding of the impact of mentoring within DA programmes. The interesting findings of this small-scale study need now to be extended through work with a larger sample, with particular attention paid to developing a deeper understanding of mentoring as a social practice. An evaluation of the impact of the proposed principles for effective mentoring practice would equally form a valuable contribution to the field.

References


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Degree apprenticeships – an opportunity for all?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how curriculum design, internal infrastructures and support systems have had to be innovated to best meet the requirements of Higher Degree Apprenticeships (HDA) programmes within the business management portfolio at Solent University. This paper is written from the perspective of University, apprentice and employers’ journeys to support accidental and aspiring managers in the pursuit of the destination of “management professional”.

Design/methodology/approach – Feedback and insight from both apprentices and employers were gathered from a range of organisations within both public and private sectors; these were then reviewed as part of this case study approach. All of the samples either had practical knowledge of an HDA and were currently active in the study or were supporting apprentices in the workplace. The other sample groups were internal colleagues who were identified because of their current working knowledge of providing infrastructure support for the HDA provision. From this, thematic analysis was conducted to allow the analysis of patterns of feedback or concerned areas of employees, which allowed researchers to identify where the challenges and blocks were occurring along the journeys. The samples were identified from within the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship and Level 5 Operations and Departmental Manager HDAs. A case study methodology was used.

Findings – From the analysis of the feedback and insights, there were a few themes which were identified and will be discussed further within this paper as to how Solent has approached these areas and will provide outcomes around how Solent worked with employers to help them understand the benefits of implementing HDAs; outline how innovation in central service infrastructure took place to support employers and apprentices in the on-boarding both to ensure the correct assessment of apprentice suitability and route and also to support their apprenticeship journeys; discuss how we have effectively de-mystified some of the more challenging areas of the HDAs including that the 20 per cent off-the-job training will be “time out of the office” and how this can be positively managed to benefit both the apprentice, employer and organisation; and define how support mechanisms can ensure a high-level “apprentice experience”, whilst supporting them to balance the rigorousness of work and study.

Research limitations/implications – There is still much research to be completed in the area of impact and added value not just at the micro-organisational level but also at the macro-UK economy and GDP levels, alongside further research on how to market and de-mystify the common misconceptions so as to avoid blockers to enter the market. Finally, research needs to be undertaken around the best pedagogic practices to support these apprentices.

Practical implications – The challenges and complexities of being involved at the trailblazing stage are that you are working on a pilot basis, which does not always make for a smooth journey. This case study does not offer any final solutions, and the expectation is that these areas will evolve and require change over the next few years. Instead, this case study hopes to give the reader the knowledge and confidence that they are not alone in the challenges they face; by being trailblazers in a new wave of HDAs, solutions will evolve over a period of time.

Social implications – All training providers should also regularly remind themselves, especially when those bumps in the journey are felt, that by developing and delivering HDAs they are greatly moving forward widening participation to an even wider net of people than ever before and assuring a future of well-developed leaders and managers.

Originality/value – As HDAs are new area, there is currently ahead of limited discussion on the practicalities of developing and delivering these, and this case study aims to aid this discussion for peers across the sector who have either not entered or are very new to HDAs, providing them guidance on areas to consider.

Keywords Work-based learning, Widening participation, Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship, Higher Degree Apprenticeships, Operations and Departmental Manager Apprenticeship, Social mobility

Paper type Case study

The authors would like to express thanks to the apprentices and employers and internal colleagues who provided insight into this trailblazing journey so we can all learn lessons on how to make the journey smoother.
Introduction
Solent University (Solent) has a history of strong vocational education and is a widening participation university; therefore, like other training providers, it has responded positively to the government’s drive for higher and degree apprenticeships (HDAs) to target non-traditional students for supporting widening participation strategic goals and also because this “real-world learning” approach has played an integral part in Solent’s teaching and learning ethos (UUK, 2016). HDAs are designed to be practically academic in which apprentices undergo knowledge-based learning whilst studying with the training provider and then, within their working positions, collect a range of evidence for their End Point Assessment (EPA) Apprenticeship portfolio to show application within the work-based setting. The EPA requires a portfolio of evidence to be collated across an apprenticeship standard made up of “knowledge”, “skills” and “behaviours”. Each standard is designed in collaboration with employers, training providers and professional bodies/Trade Unions to ensure that the standard is appropriate to the industry (GOV.UK, 2017a). Besides being a natural contributor to widening participation and social mobility, HDAs have also assisted with the recruitment strategies as a way to potentially supplement university income as external challenges prevail across the wider UK university sector, for example, the decreasing demographic of 18–21 year old, a potential decrease of European students post-Brexit and an increasingly competitive market place (Davies, 2017; Beech and Bekhradnia, 2018). Understanding both the infrastructure and support required in the curriculum design has been key to develop a fit for purpose programme that achieves success against the complex pressures these apprentices face. This should also take into account the variety of skills the apprentices enter with in regards to their academic knowledge and HE confidence levels. Thus giving way to a better understanding of how to support these non-traditional students in managing their complex work-life balance pressures as well as the taught academic elements.

Very early in this journey, it was realised that there were going to be bumps along the way and also the realisation that some blind corners were present which would need navigation. For example, apprentices fed back that they struggled to work through the amount of evidence that had to be collated for the EPA, academic writing did not feel natural to all or the rigorousness of work and study was challenging. With this in mind, it became apparent that the traditional infrastructure, curriculum design and support mechanisms are needed to be re-designed with strong support mechanisms and high levels of service provision for both the employer and apprentice. The aim of this paper is to provide a case study approach to show how Solent, as the training provider, has taken a lead in shaping employers thinking around how HDAs can positively impact their training, development and retention strategies to manage talent and succession planning. Alongside this, discussion has been put in place for the support of HDA apprentices who have different profiles in the context of traditional students and non-traditional students.

Methodology
Feedback and insight from both apprentices and employers were gathered from a range of organisations within both public and private sectors; these were then reviewed as a part of this case study approach. All of the samples either had practical knowledge of an HDA and were currently active in the study or were supporting apprentices in the workplace. The other sample group comprised of internal colleagues who were identified because of their current working knowledge of providing infrastructure support for the HDA provision. Thematic analysis was conducted to determine the patterns of feedback or concern areas of employees, which allowed researchers to identify where the challenges and blocks were occurring along the journeys. The samples were identified from within the Chartered
Manager Degree Apprenticeship and Level 5 Operations and Departmental Manager HDAs. Feedback and insights were collected by two main methods: one-on-one structured interview; and feedback through working on the processes and a digital polling tool to allow rich qualitative data collection. This allowed the researchers to understand the depth of the pedagogic and support structures that are needed to be innovated, beyond the surface view (Cousins, 2009). This case study will focus on a “snapshot” time horizon (Saunders et al., 2012) of the last 18 months, which is when the first HDA was introduced at Solent, all of which were based on qualitative outcomes from primary and secondary research studies and used a case study methodology.

From the analysis of the feedback and insights, a few themes were identified and will be discussed further within this paper as to how Solent has approached these areas and will:

1. provide outcomes on how Solent worked with employers to help them understand the benefits of implementing HDAs;
2. outline how innovation in central service infrastructure took place to support employers and apprentices in the onboarding both to ensure the correct assessment of apprentice suitability and route and also to support their apprenticeship journeys;
3. discuss how we have effectively de-mystified some of the more challenging areas of the HDAs including that the 20 per cent off-the-job training will be “time out of the office” and how this can be positively managed to benefit the apprentice, employer and organisation; and
4. define how support mechanisms can ensure a high-level “apprentice experience”, whilst supporting them to balance the rigorousness of work and study.

Research themes
To fully understand the apprenticeship journey of Solent working with employers to assist their strategic visions of benefits of HDAs, it is important to understand the drivers around HDAs from the stakeholder viewpoint.

Background to HDAs and governmental objectives for these
The productivity of our nation forms a key part of government policy; therefore, when the plan was published Fixing the Foundations: Creating a More Prosperous Nation (HM Customs, 2015), it was clearly reported that productivity was important for growth and determined living standards, yet UK productivity fell behind its other G7 partners. It was further determined that a highly skilled workforce is needed to be created, with the employers at the driving seat. This was in response to a range of UK-based industries indicating that they faced a lack of skills when recruiting. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills Employer Skills Survey 2015 states “when some employers are faced with applicants who lack the requisite skills, they leave the post unfilled, while others choose to recruit someone who is insufficiently skilled”. The UUK (2015) Supply and Demand for Higher level skills report further highlighted “the demand from employers for both technical and professional qualifications, and graduates”. Wilson’s (2012) review recognised that higher apprenticeships could play an important role in meeting the “long term skills needed for employers” and provide “a highly valued alternative for school leavers who wish to combine work with gaining a higher qualification” (p. 46).

With employers playing a central role in the co-design and delivery of apprenticeships, it was anticipated that degree apprenticeships would meet the demand for higher level skills and provide progression routes for those who had completed apprenticeships at lower levels and wanted to progress themselves further.
Diversification of income for training providers

The government introduced the Levy tax where employers with an annual pay bill of more than £3 million paid a percentage contribution to the government (GOV.UK, 2018a). This tax could then be used to pay for apprenticeship training; for those small, medium enterprises (SMEs) who did not meet the criteria, the government would contribute 90 per cent of the funding (GOV.UK, 2018b) so that all organisations have the opportunity to use funding for HDAs. With this funding available, training providers viewed HDAs as an important new opportunity to assist in the diversification of current income streams (UKK, 2016). Therefore, vocational provision was quickly aligned with employer needs, to be able to adapt and be agile to this new market. The diversification of a new market was also necessary for many providers due to the continuing decrease in the young population predicated up to the end of the decade (UUK, 2014) which has forced HEIs and other training providers to “think outside of the box” in traditional student recruitment methods and streams. This was also the same for employers where with the decrease of the younger population going hand in hand with the current skill gaps, HDAs were potentially the way to ensure that their workforce was equipped with the appropriate skills and also a way to attract the top talent; all of which would have a positive impact on their bottom line.

Diversification of student base

Working with the non-traditional student, the HDA offering can provide an opportunity to support widening participation goals. This allows HEIs to support those who, for a variety of reasons, either could not afford to attend a university with all the associated costs or had reached a point in their careers where the necessity of having a degree was now inferred by their organisations or were restrictive to their potential career progressions. The nature of the apprenticeship was based on academia but then related to work-based learning opportunities for practical application. This was to assist the embedding of theory against workplace scenarios to decrease skill gaps and increase productivity. Depending upon the nature of the apprentices, applicants were normally divided into two groups: those who had been doing their job for quite a time and wanting validation of their approaches; and new managers who wanted to broaden their knowledge to give them confidence. However, both groups came with very little academic experience but with deep experience of their own sector. Whilst this brought challenges in academic writing skills, it did add to a wide and varied rich discussion about many business challenges across different sectors. From an employers’ point of view, this has enabled their employees to develop their skills and approaches to creative problem solving. This could also potentially promote up skilling across a wider range of the workforce (Husband, 2018).

Diversification of the employer recruitment, talent and success strategies

“Employers looking to expand their workforces are likely to face growing headwinds as organisations find it more difficult to source the people and skills they need” (Davies, 2018 cited in Burt, 2018).

The UK Higher Education system has had long-standing work-integrated education learning programmes. Graduates are more likely to be equipped with the skills that employers want if there is a genuine collaboration between institutions and employers in the design and delivery of courses. With the majority of learning and training taking place “on the job”, the apprentices work must be aligned to the knowledge areas of the apprenticeship standard, allowing the collection of evidence to underpin the requirements of the EPA. The integration of on- and-off job learning and training is fundamental for the delivery of high-quality apprenticeships. This integration and focus on delivering occupational competence are what differentiates an apprenticeship from part-time learning while at work (QAA, 2018).
In addition, there seems to be a strong demand of 16 to 18-year olds in jobs where apprenticeships are attached as they would then be able to study for nationally recognised qualification(s) being financed by their employers. Successful organisations are then using this approach as a competitive advantage in the war for talent as an addition to the reward package to both attract and retain in-house talent.

Training providers that respond to the delivery of HDAs have dual responsibility for quality assurance and data returns; therefore, the employer-led characteristics of apprenticeships require additional and many unfamiliar administration processes such as assuring academic standards and quality, more work integrated programmes designed by employers, legal requirements of national apprenticeship policies and underpinning PSRB standards as appropriate. With QAA undertaking the quality assurance of the university sector, OFSTED also quality assures L4 and L5 HDAs; the HEI sector has cited some concerns that the two systems do not align with each other and there is a lack of clarity in what is being audited (Linford, 2018). Additionally, data returns are provided to HESA for HEIs, while degree apprenticeship returns are submitted via the Individualised Learner Record which results in duplication. The Universities UUK (2016) The Future Growth of Degree Apprenticeships Report outlined a range of approaches to best co-ordinate degree apprenticeships, to include dedicated staff to co-ordinate implementation and address administrative processes (funding applications, quality assurance requirements, and data return requirements), to build business collaboration and liaison – industry account manager role, internal knowledge sharing networks across departments delivering HDA’s, exploring capital build projects to provide a dedicated space for apprenticeship delivery.

Solent University has recently completed an HDA Process Mapping Framework, outlining the processes required from first employer contact with the organisation through to the end of programme delivery (completed EPA) so as to assure the quality and standards of the HDAs, whilst also fully supporting both apprentices and employers. This then ensures the uniformity of approach and quality infrastructures across all apprenticeships being provided; further research will be undertaken as this is embedded into “everyday” practices to see the added value that this brings.

The next discussion point is to identify the key themes in assisting employers to understanding the how to implement HDAs and the support required through all the stages.

Range of concerns of employers

A part of our initial insights was taken from internal colleagues who were liaising with employers at the trailblazing front edge of “selling” the HDAs, whilst academics were working hard in the back-office writing and constructing the curriculum. These included the following topics which came up regularly:

- why the HDAs would be of benefit to an organisation;
- the concern that the staff member would be developed through this course, complete the course and then leave the organisation;
- how they would identify who would attend and what to do if this snowballed which would lead to a workforce resourcing issues, especially in the cases of SMEs;
- how the most appropriate HDA level would be selected and how would they know if they could academically achieve;
- what involvement as “employers” they would have to support and also how would their line managers understand their roles and responsibilities; and
- concerns centred around the mechanisms for drawing down the funds and admission onto the course.
Another area of discussion which came about with employers was how we adapted the course to their industries. Apprenticeships tend to have a very diverse range of employers including large public sector organisations, large private sector organisations with international reach, a variety of SMEs, ranging from service provision to charities and a number of entrepreneurs running their own businesses. The answer to this challenge in some cases meant offering subject-specific additionality, but mostly it was bringing them to the understanding that regardless of the industry many challenges faced by business were in the similar areas. This then led to a strength of HDAs being identified in the learning from peers as to different approaches across sectors so as to broaden knowledge and agility in managing challenging situations/scenarios and fits with active learning and peer-led models to embed deep learning and building of confidence and independence (Johnson and Johnson, 2009 cited in Linton et al., 2014).

Solent, therefore, carefully collated these concerns and began to, in our talks to employers, interweave answers to the questions before they were even raised. This included educating employers as to the value of the HDAs to their organisation as a part of their training, development and recruitment strategies, for example, in the form of upskilling the workforce which would improve productivity and broaden their employees’ approaches to creative problem solving by learning from peers about the broad range of practice across multiple industries. This was particularly of noted interest within the public sector where there is a clear indication that this sector has acknowledged the need to “[…] become more commercial in its outlook and practices. Managers need to become more skilled when entering into new partnership arrangements, joint ventures and sharing of services of engaging with private sector contractors” (CIPFA, 2018).

Another area for discussion was the ideology that HDAs could positively impact organisational retention and talent management strategies. By identifying those key staff members that had been highlighted with “potential” and had either been or would be promoted, this would be a perfect way to equip them with strong leadership and management skills, which would be essential for their success in these new promoted roles. This would not only further strengthen the workforce but could inspire loyalty for the faith that organisations placed in them, whilst also keeping them as minimum for the duration of the courses which could be from two to four years. The led onto the next area of concern for organisations in that they invest in the training and development and then the employer would leave. This enabled us to have the discussion to challenge this, for example, is it likely that the person would have left anyway? Discussion then took place that through those 2–4 working years organisations would be gaining valuable strengthened outputs from the individuals, so even if they did leave the organisation, which could happen anyway, the organisations would gain the added value outputs. Hence, the rate of return on the levy or non-levy money spent would not be wasted.

Another area of concern was how they would go about selecting people and also managing the provision so as to maintain the balance between the need to allow employees to have “time out” to study and having resources to meet the business requirements at the time. This was where we innovated the provision and found timelines for delivery and cohort started to meet these demands so that not all employees needed to be out at the same time. This overcame many issues that particularly SMEs had with managing the resources of their businesses and was well received by employees.

It was also apparent from insights from colleagues and also from our discussions with employers that they were grappling with which of the HDAs would be most effective to meet their organisational and individual personnel needs. There were also concerns that whilst they knew that they were extremely competent within their working skill knowledge, they did not have an understanding of whether they would withstand the academic study elements. We, therefore, drew up a suite of HDAs ranging from Level 5 to 7 so as to offer a clear
progression route and also put in place a strong infrastructure of assessment to assist the employers in this decision. This included an initial briefing with our internal Business Development Manager (BDM) to identify from a paper-based analysis which level of HDA would be the most appropriate. In-depth interviews then took place with both the line managers and the employees so as to make an academic judgement on the ability to undertake the rigorousness of HE studies, managing to work at the same time and then finally still having the ability to maintain a healthy work–life balance. After these interviews, our academic judgement was shared with the employers and any areas of concerns were fed back and a recommendation was made as to the level of HDA that the employees should enter into. Progression was also factored to enable the employees to see clear progression pathways onto other HDAs so as to further develop their workforce capability. These interviews also enabled open and frank discussion about the roles and responsibilities between the three parties, namely, employer, apprentice and training provider, and also enabled to test the support that would be in place for the apprentice within the workplace setting as well as the apprentices understanding of just how much work was involved in not only studying for a degree, but also all of the requirements that were attached to the apprenticeship. It also enabled a quick fostering of a strong relationship setting to embed the ideology that it was a tripartite relationship and to ensure support for all parties through the HDA journey.

Infrastructures to enable on-boarding onto HDAs

There were lots of uncertainties within employer bases as to how the funds would be drawn down from either the levy or non-levy funding digital streams and also because there was no “UCAS” system to apply to, thought was needed to put in place a clear admissions process. This needed to include provision to not only assess basic entry requirements, but also the Recognition of Prior Learning which forms a big part of the HDA apprentice profile. We also provided clear guidance in these documents as to what data as an apprentice/employer they had to provide so that we could draw down the funds. With this in mind, the application documents asked very clearly for necessary personal data and in-depth contracts were drawn up to cover all the elements that were required by the ESFA and also to outline the requirements and steps for drawing down funds and ensuring each party was aware of their collective roles and responsibilities. By innovating this infrastructure, employers were more easily able to go through these new processes feeling supported. On discussing this as part of interviews with internal colleagues, one of the challenging areas in setting up these infrastructures was the changing goal posts, the minimal information and the fact that everything, including the funding streams, was so new and different. There were no pre-existing “blue-prints” to follow. However, ironically because there were no “blue-prints” this encouraged innovation and natural thinking outside of the box, because there was no “norm” to follow. By putting these systems in place, the employer and apprentices through this initial stage were supported.

Demystifying the HDA!

Many of the issues above were just myths or natural concerns because of the unknown nature of many of the elements. This is why having candid and open discussions with all parties are vital when working in the HDA arena so as to enable de-mystification. One of the most challenging demystifying areas that we came across was around the 20 per cent off-the-job training requirement laid out as compulsory across HDAs. The 20 per cent off-the-job training rules state that “Off-the-job training is defined as learning which is undertaken outside of the normal day to day working environment and leads towards the achievement of an apprenticeship” (GOV.UK, 2017b). There was a perception that the 20 per cent off the job training was prescriptive and in-flexible to the needs of the business and that it would be difficult to release apprentices from their working week to meet these requirements. We received feedback from our BDM that we were losing potential apprentices due to the lack of
understanding and reluctance in relation to the 20 per cent rule. Therefore, we focused heavily on engaging the employer with the concept that this was flexible to both the apprentice and business needs and that how this was achieved could be in a variety of modes, including 1:1 mentor meetings, attendance at CPD events, whilst working on assessments or evidence collection. After having these conversations employers soon realised that this could be managed in a way to minimise impact on the day-to-day operations and should not be viewed as a blocker to the added value that studying for an HDA would bring back to the workplace.

Support infrastructures for apprentices on HDAs who were working and studying to ensure a high-level apprentice experience

The aim of any training provider is to ensure that their HDA apprentices get to the end of their “professional management” journey, and to ensure this success, “teaching” alone is not enough. In addition, proper design needs to be given to the correct pedagogy to support these students, and also strong support mechanisms are needed to be put in place.

As already outlined, the apprentices are part of a widening participation strategy, and some of them lack experience or confidence of studying at the HE level. However, they come with expert knowledge of their field and often have been high achievers within their workplaces. Entering into an HE course then feels like an alien environment to them as they enter into a new area where they are no longer the expert; this does lead to some difficulties giving rise to insecurities. For example, being “high-achievers”, they set their bar high at gaining grades and secure them a first. This is great and aspirational, but then they try to study, whilst working and having outside commitments, and find that in some cases, this is not possible. At this point, they reach down to grade “B” or even “C”; consequently, the confidence levels of these high achievers are easily knocked and there develops a need of supportive conversations to take place at this point. This is where the support of a personal tutor is required to have re-framing conversations regarding that these are acceptable grades and this is not failure given all the other responsibilities, they are balancing. This from our research perspective is a key area that all training providers should emphasise on how they are addressing this mental stress support requirements of the apprentices and how they coordinate with other employees at the workplace to ensure that this ideology is supported within the workplace too.

The other area is academic writing which focuses on how to actually immerse oneself in academic learning whilst on campus and then translating that acquired knowledge within the workplace so as to embed the deep learning and added value. To this end, the apprentices need a lot of support in academic writing, referencing and how to collate this work-based evidence so as to meet the gateway requirements. Hence, we innovated the curriculum so that through each unit this knowledge was being built in, whilst running alongside there was a support unit specifically focussed on the collation of knowledge and skills for the EPA. Even with this support, apprentices still found this confusing and we were constantly asked for an example EPA portfolio, which we did not have at this point. Many lessons have been learnt across this and the support that is required is very detailed and pretty much bespoke to each student; still there simply is no one size that fits all. Group sessions are useful to run through generics, but the unit tutor’s time was most valued in one-on-one sessions with each apprentice to guide them through this EPA elements.

There should also be a lead that is the conduit of the tripartite relationship between employer, apprentice and the training provider to smooth over challenges and have frank and open conversations about progress and achievement. It is important to lay a proper setting from the very first meeting and outline complete transparency around progression and achievement attendance to the apprentices, which is designed as a support strategy. This is especially important given the work, study and life balance that the apprentices are trying to achieve and the fight between academic rigorousness, and deep learning and pragmatist approaches to surface learning are very real issues that the pedagogy has to
Within our cohorts, we have found ourselves supporting our apprentices with difficulties of navigating the appropriate split of the 20 per cent balancing study and the business needs and also in gaining support to gather evidence pieces for the EPA. In this case study experience, the training provider needs to identify an academic staff member who is comfortable in both the nurture- and challenge-type scenarios as certainly both are needed when working across HDAs.

The other areas are relationship building with the apprentices themselves, fostering an open and constructive relationship. As professionals they are very used to giving feedback and expecting very high-quality service from their peers and managers. HDAs are no different in this context, as harnessed imposed can well and positively drive not only the course innovations, but also can result in academics own development of pedagogy as there is nothing better to make you innovate than being challenged on the norms.

Conclusion

Impact and added value

This case study started off by defining the reasons that HDAs evolved and how this could positively diversify areas for both the training provider and employer. But there is one more element that should be discussed in this topic area and that is the current results to date; this would then highlight whether the ideologies are indeed working.

Secondary data collected suggest that already a positive impact and added value have been observed and produced by the CMI (2018):

- The average apprentice increases productivity by £214 per week. For every £1 of government investment in apprenticeships £18 is generated for the wider economy. 70% of employers said apprenticeships improved quality and service.

These promising outcomes are also backed up by the primary research findings of this paper where similar positive patterns have been observed. Apprentices all noted that their confidence had grown and employers fed back the same message that the apprentices had broader views on managerial issues and had confidence in the skills they had developed. The other theme was that these apprentices were now in positions to handle greater responsibilities/scope in projects.

Apprentices outlined the following positive developmental aspects of studying across the HDAs:

- “I felt that I was an accidental manager and this is validating what I knew and assisting me in seeing how to approach situations in a variety of ways”.
- “I now have knowledge and pool of resources to draw down upon and fills that previous skills gaps”.
- “I am learning new things and looking at things differently it is making me realise I was capable and that I can do it. This course has given me confidence”.

Employers were also mirroring the feedback that the apprentices gave with regard to the impact of studying for an HDA:

- “x came back and explained what they had done and is now implementing this approach to the Board of Directors for our latest project”.
- “I am in no doubt that the learning from Solent has enabled x to consider such challenges in new ways which clearly are to the advantage of us”.
- “It is also helping the wider team as x is able to use their knowledge and bring in practices that perhaps weren’t done and by sharing this across the team it widens the knowledge”.

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The CMI (2018) also found that 71 per cent of apprentices stayed with the same employer, which suggests that the employers concern about employees leaving may be replaced at this point in time and that this actually enables stronger retention within their workforce.

There is still much research to be completed in the area of impact and added value not just at the micro-organisational level but also at the macro-UK economy and GDP levels, which was a strong driver in the initial ideology of HDAs (BIS, 2016 cited in Lester et al., 2016). There is also a need for further research on how to market and de-mystify the common misconceptions so as to avoid blockers to enable even more apprentices to enter the market. Finally, research needs to be undertaken around the best pedagogic practices to support these non-standards than non-standard apprentices even more.

The challenges and complexities of being involved at the trailblazing stage are that you are working on a pilot basis, which does not always make for a smooth journey. It is, therefore, perhaps important to remember the original ethos for the development of HDAs as outlined by BIS which matches the feedback that has been received from both apprentices and employers:

Employers, universities and professional bodies can come together to co-design a fully-integrated degree course specifically for apprentices, which delivers and tests both academic learning and on-the-job training [...] (BIS, 2015, p. 13 cited in Lester et al., 2016).

Future landscapes. As laid out in the start of this paper, there are clear and identifiable rationales for how and why HDAs were developed. Whilst this case study has identified the micro-bumps and blind corners, it can be suggested that at a national level there are macro-journey issues that need careful navigation as well. For example, the difficulties in achieving the creation of 3m apprenticeships by 2020 (Chapman, 2018) and the debate around who the levy funding should be aimed at, i.e., younger people using this as a working degree route or those already within the workplace and wanting to progress their careers as mature students (Camden, 2018).

This case study does not offer any final solutions on the challenges, as it is not considered that these complex issues have been finitely resolved to date; the expectation is that these areas will evolve and require change over the next few years, especially as new learning will take place when the apprentices reach their EPA assessments. Instead, this case study hopes to give the reader the knowledge and confidence that they are not alone in the challenges that are faced in this evolving area. All training providers should also regularly remind themselves, especially when those bumps in the journey are felt, that by developing and delivering HDAs they are greatly moving forward widening participation and social mobility to an even wider net of people than ever before and assuring a future of well-developed leaders and managers.

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Further reading


About the authors

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore opportunities for delivering sustainable leadership education through critical reflection embedded in the framework of higher and degree apprenticeships.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper contributes to leadership development research that focusses on “leader becoming” as an ongoing process of situated learning (in the classroom and everyday work life). The approach to leadership development adopted in this paper proposes that sustainable leadership practices and decision making are developed when leadership learning is firmly embedded in work-based practices and critical self-reflection.

Findings – The discussion of critical reflection methods focusses on utilising the learning portfolio as a core aspect of all leadership and management apprenticeships to embed sustainable and reflective practice and facilitate situated leadership learning. The paper explores the role of training providers in actively connecting higher and degree apprenticeships to embed this model of leadership development and seeing leadership as a lifelong apprenticeship. It also highlights the potential for resistance by managers and senior leaders in seeing themselves as apprentices rather than accomplished leaders. By paying attention to issues of language and identity in this discussion, it will surface practical implications for the delivery of sustainable leadership education through the framework of apprenticeships.

Originality/value – This paper adds to the theoretical and practical understanding of sustainable leadership education by exploring opportunities for re-framing leadership development as a lifelong apprenticeship focussed on personal and professional development. Recognising the resistance that often exists to reflective practice within leadership development contexts, this paper further explores ways of dealing with such resistance.

Keywords Apprenticeships, Leadership development, Critical reflection, Learning portfolio, Lifelong learning

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Leadership development and learning has for some time now been criticised for being too individually focussed and a need has been expressed for more socially orientated forms of leadership development (Day, 2000). In particular, Kempster and Stewart (2010) argued that leadership learning is fundamentally relational and situated in nature. The learner needs to engage in critical reflection processes where they consider their own working context, experiences and sense of self deeply and in connection with both their learning and role in the workplace in order to develop personally and professionally as a leader. Nicholson and Carroll’s (2013) research into leadership development programmes has further highlighted how, in order to become a leader, learners need to engage in processes of identity undoing of their old managerial or occupationally based identities. This has strengthened our understanding of how leadership development is not only about knowledge or skills acquisition and behavioural change but fundamentally about identity work, encouraging us to pay closer attention to emotions, struggles and resistance amongst learners and the need for reflexivity. Studies on creative leadership development methods and practices have demonstrated the need for aesthetic, sensory focussed and reflexive approaches (e.g. Cunliffe, 2002; Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Schyns et al., 2013; Sutherland, 2013) such as storytelling (Schedlitzki et al., 2015) in addition to cognitive-based development models. These creative and reflexive methods enable the learner to deal better with complexity, the unknowable and unpredictable in life and encourage them to engage emotionally as well as cognitively (Hansen and Bathurst, 2011;
Taylor and Ladkin, 2009) in the development process. They further allow space for critical considerations and contemplation where the aim is not to have definitive answers but to develop skills of deep listening and questioning in themselves and others.

Yet, whilst the emerging argument for creative and reflexive methods in leadership development seems compelling, we know little about the extent to which this is adopted in the wider practice of leadership development in the UK and indeed whether it is an approach to leadership itself that is welcome in organisational discourse and practice. The first section in this paper adds to our understanding of this conundrum as it looks more deeply at both the need for creative, reflexive methods in sustainable leadership development and the potential challenges that dominant, heroic leadership discourses pose to such methods in the classroom and work practice. This will set the scene for the paper’s exploration of how the new framework of work-based higher and degree apprenticeships in leadership and management in the UK may help to establish further such creative and reflective leadership development practices. More concretely, the ensuing discussion in this paper adds to our understanding of potential opportunities and challenges for the use of learning portfolios as critical reflection tools embedded throughout work-based higher and degree apprenticeships in leadership and management to develop reflexive and sustainable leadership practice. The paper argues that learning portfolios on apprenticeships have the potential capacity to move learners away from a desire for the latest cutting-edge model on leadership and towards embracing deep, situated learning practices that in themselves have a transformative effect in the form of lasting reflexive practices.

Sustainable leadership development – the need for critical reflection and situated learning

Leadership development has long been under criticism for its overly individualistic and functionalist nature (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014) where leadership competency models set aspirational – and often unattainable – standards that are then used to re-define the individual as a future leader without considering the individual’s social and work context. One of the main criticisms of this approach has been that it lacks reflexivity on the role of the educator and is often void of addressing issues of emotions, gender, power and identity (Collinson and Tourish, 2015; Ford and Harding, 2007). In response to this criticism, there has been a surge of research studies into leadership development that explore not only issues of power, gender and identity but also of resistance and struggle (Carroll and Levy, 2010; Ford et al., 2008; Hay, 2014; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Warhurst, 2011). There has also been a call for further attention to be paid to the lived experiences of participants on leadership development programmes (Carden and Callahan, 2007; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014) and their processes of identity undoing and forming that they may experience whilst on a leadership development programme (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013) and when back in the workplace (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006).

There is further some criticism that leadership development programmes are often not culturally attuned to the work context of learners (Edwards and Turnbull, 2013), leaving the individual unable to apply their learned knowledge and skills back in the workplace or indeed experiencing role conflict between their aspirational leader identities and hierarchically defined roles (Carden and Callahan, 2007) and expectations from others about what constitutes effective leadership. Leadership learning is further often treated as either a classroom exercise or an informal on-the-job activity. Kempster and Stewart (2010) challenged this perception with their co-constructed auto-ethnographic study that embraced a collaborative learning approach between academic and practitioner, bridging classroom-based leadership development and workplace-based, situated leadership learning. This study made two significant interconnected contributions: it helped to bring
the notion of social constructionism and socially constructed identities (e.g. DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003) more firmly into the realm of leadership learning and particularly with a view to demonstrating how the practitioner student required the structure of co-constructed auto-ethnography to become aware of the spatial and temporal situatedness of their work-based learning and development. Kempster as the academic educator took on the role as facilitator in a coaching style process where, through reflexive questioning, he helped Stewart to make sense of the experiences and emotions he had captured in a reflective diary in the early months of his new executive role. The connection with Kempster had been previously forged through a formal educational setting and enabled the further exploration of leadership learning as a situated practice in this more informal setting. This form of reflexive dialogic practice enabled Stewart as practitioner learner to think deeply about underlying assumptions he was holding about who he was striving to be as a senior leader, unearthing realisations about notable others in his life who had influenced these assumptions as well as individuals in his organisation who had held his role previously. It further enabled him to reflect on the organisation’s history and culture and how this influenced his own identity as a senior leader as well as his decision-making processes. Whilst other studies have also contributed to our understanding of creative and dialogic leadership development methods (e.g. Taylor and Ladkin, 2009; Cunliffe, 2002), this study shows particularly well the importance of the educator as facilitator and co-constructor within the learner’s reflexive process. It was through the facilitated process of co-constructed auto-ethnography that Stewart as the practitioner learner was able to “understand something that is already in plain view” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 89) and “the difference this new understanding may make” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 57) to his life.

Enabling learners to engage in such processes of deep reflexivity and more generally develop their skills for critical reflection arguably has a transformative effect on them (Smith and Martin, 2014). Rather than seeing leadership as a competence that they develop by attending a programme and applying a model, they start to see leadership as a situated work-based practice where the notion of effective leadership is socially constructed. When faced with competency frameworks, they have the “reflective tools” to step back and critically reflect on the underlying assumptions of this framework as well as the situated meaning that particular competencies may take in their workplace and hierarchy-based role. By seeing their own leadership practice as situated in space and time, learners may also develop a deeper appreciation of non-individualistic models of leadership where they can dispel with the myth of the leader as the person with all the answers. It may empower them to listen deeply and openly to others, consider other perspectives and see successful leadership as a collective and culturally situated process (Edwards and Turnbull, 2013).

One of the main challenges that this form of reflexive leadership development may face is the pervasive organisational discourse of the leader as the superior “Master” (Harding, 2014; Schedlitzki et al., 2018) that paints a dominant image of leaders – and to some extent managers – as figures of authority and bearers of certainty. The latter is often associated with assumptions that leaders and senior managers know and give direction for other employees, are able to solve difficult, complex problems and make or take singular responsibility for decisions (Schedlitzki et al., 2018). This image is deeply embedded in many popular depictions of effective leaders and managers, particularly in a business context. The notion of reflexivity and seeing contemplation as constructive inertia that enables individuals to cope better with complexity and embrace inclusive decision making may feel somewhat at odds with such an image of the individual, decisive, strategic – and at time almost heroic – leader or manager. This may indeed evoke resistance from participants within a leadership development setting or lead to identity and role conflicts back in the workplace if others and indeed the organisational culture do not recognise this as “effective” leadership and management. Whilst the development of critical reflection skills may enable
participants to become aware of their own and organisations’ assumptions embedded in this dominant leadership and management discourse and come to appreciate alternative ways of leading and managing, they may nevertheless experience difficulty in enacting their new self as leader and manager back in the workplace (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). This is, unless we start to see an organisation/sector or society wide change in what is seen as effective leadership and management practice.

The introduction of the new degree apprenticeships with its framework of holistic development of the learner and strong emphasis on the utilisation of learning portfolios could be welcomed as a potential means to enhance a focus on critical reflection and situated leadership learning. It offers through its reach into a large number of organisations in the UK the potential to support a shift in discourse from one that favours the individual, decisive, heroic leader towards one that embraces inclusive and sustainable decision making. In the following sections, we explore the potential that leadership and management apprenticeships have for enabling sustainable leadership development and creating a path for lifelong learning.

**Leadership and management apprenticeships – a path for lifelong learning**

The introduction of the apprenticeship levy and new apprenticeship framework, extending the notion of apprenticeships to degree level, has brought a potentially significant change for the world of part-time leadership and management education (see Rowe et al., 2016; Daley et al., 2016). Employer-led trailblazer groups have – through the format of apprenticeship standards from L3 to L7 – explicitly defined the role of leaders and managers at different hierarchical levels in organisations and specified the particular knowledge, skills and behaviours that are seen to be best practice at these levels. The underlying aim is to use these standards as benchmarks of excellence for the holistic development of employees to become successful leaders and managers and to enable organisations to use their levy in order to upskill their employees and develop a fully competent workforce (Rowe et al., 2016).

Whilst some employers have been writing off the levy contribution as an additional tax, others are now exclusively funding all learning and development activities through their levy contributions. Training and education providers thus have no choice but to align their own programmes and qualifications in line with this new apprenticeship framework. Particularly at degree level, the practice of developing learners towards a fixed benchmark setting out who a leader or manager is, what they should know, be able to do and behave is a significant change (Rowe et al., 2016).

In the context of a movement towards sustainable leadership development through a focus on reflexive pedagogy (Iszatt-White et al., 2017), this new apprenticeship framework may offer a variety of opportunities for educators. The notion of being an apprentice is arguably rooted in the socio-cultural and historical context (Rowe et al., 2016) of lifelong learning leading to occupational mastery as its end-goal. Whilst the apprenticeship as a programme of skills development is temporal and usually bound to only a few years of an employee’s working life, it can be seen to be potentially tied to this ideology of mastery as an achievement through lifelong learning. This may now be particularly enhanced through the presence of apprenticeships at L3–L7 and an employee may find her/himself developing their leadership and management knowledge, skills and behaviours throughout their career by completing several apprenticeships to support their work-based development.

As indicated earlier in this paper, leadership development scholars have argued that in order to get away from the popular idea of being a great leader by following ten easy steps, we may need to embrace and promote the notion of “leader becoming” (Kempster and Stewart, 2010) as an ongoing – lifelong – process of situated learning (in the classroom and everyday work life). Yet, particularly at senior leadership levels, this focus on reflective practice may be perceived to stand in contrast with the assumed organisational need for
leaders and managers to be innately experienced, omniscient and make quick, decisive decisions based on rational logic. It is certainly incongruent with dominant leadership discourses focussed on the heroic individual leader setting the strategic direction and having “all the answers” (Schedlitzki et al., 2018).

This is where the new leadership and management apprenticeship standards with their focus on holistic, sustainable leader and manager development measured through the completion of a portfolio of evidence which requires ongoing critical reflection could challenge the hegemony of the decisive, omniscient leader and manager discourse. Indeed, it may provide an opportunity to develop sustainable leadership practices and decision making through the delivery of programmes where leadership learning is firmly embedded in work-based practices and critical self-reflection. Where organisations develop managers and leaders at all hierarchical levels through leadership and management apprenticeships that embrace a focus on situated and reflexive learning as discussed in the previous section, this could have a transformative effect for their workforce. As we discuss in the next section, it can open up opportunities for seeing leadership and management as a situated process that is fundamentally relational (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). Developing critical reflection skills may enable leaders and managers to become more noticeable of who they are as individuals in relation to others and context and how these shape their assumptions of the skills and behaviours that leaders and managers should display (Kemper and Stewart, 2010). Embracing critical reflection and self-reflection as part of everyday practice could be key to sustainable decision making as it enable leaders and manager to embrace rather than fight uncertainty and tackle wicked problems (Grint, 2005).

Learning portfolios as a critical reflection method – opportunities and challenges for changing identities

Portfolios of evidence are one of the two key elements (work-based project being the other) of all leadership and management apprenticeships from L3 to L7. Within the framework of apprenticeships they act as a vehicle for capturing ongoing development of apprentices against the respective standard. They are further a means for individuals to demonstrate at end-point assessment that they have acquired all knowledge, skills and behaviours set out in the standard and to show that they are now working at the respective leadership or management level in their workplace. This paper argues that the incremental nature of these portfolios of evidence and their presence throughout the apprenticeship programme constitute an ideal space for embedding critical reflection and reflexivity. By re-framing portfolios of evidence as “learning portfolios” and giving learners structured exercises that enable them to go beyond capturing practice and starting to reflect critically, they empower learners to become reflective practitioners and to shape their own meaning of leadership and management as situated, cultural practices.

At the start of a leadership and management apprenticeship, particularly at the higher levels, leaders and managers may struggle with the developmental language of apprenticeships and indeed the need for and purpose of critical reflection. They may question how, if they are already practising managers in their organisations, they can dispel with this authority and become enquiring leader apprentices. Indeed, these apprenticeships ask individual learners to straddle across two identities: the accomplished manager in a hierarchical position and the apprentice learner. A key aim then of engaging in critical reflection is to shift this initial conflict of identities by challenging the very notion of the self as an accomplished leader or manager. Using learning portfolios as reflective tools (Zubizarreta, 2009) has the potential capacity to make visible the temporal and spatial situatedness of leader identities and leadership learning (Kemper and Stewart, 2010). By developing sustainable reflective practices through regular scheduled reflective activities, we may enable learners to see effective leadership as a socially constructed
phenomenon rather than the outcome of developing fixed competencies. Whilst the competencies set out in the apprenticeship standards provide a definition of effective leadership, they require further cultural interpretation and the creation of organisationally situated meaning of competencies through reflective practice. When seeing learning portfolios in this way and using it as a reflexive pedagogical tool rather than a container of information, we open up possibilities for enabling learners to reframe their own development as leaders as a lifelong apprenticeship.

So, what do we mean by learning portfolios and reflective practice? There are many different approaches to learning portfolios and the role of critical reflection within this, embedded in different occupational and pedagogical disciplines (Zubizarreta, 2009). This paper argues that, within the framework of leadership and management apprenticeships, the purpose of learning portfolios is closely linked to its role in the end-point assessment and as such consists of two elements: a folder (virtual or physical) of all pieces of evidence of personal learning and development gathered over the course of the programme; and a synthesis or narrative written by the learner that demonstrates how he/she has developed all knowledge, skills and behaviours set out in the apprenticeship standard by the end of the programme. Critical reflection, defined by Reynolds (1999, p. 538) as “a commitment to questioning assumptions and taken-for-granted embodied in both theory and professional practice” and “a perspective that is social rather than individual”, gives both aspects of the learning portfolio on apprenticeships a much needed depth of analysis. It enables the learner to go beyond surface-level assessment of self against the standard and empowers them to become aware and questioning of their own taken-for-granted assumptions and expectation as managers and leaders and how these relate to assumptions and expectations held by others (in their organisation and wider society) and indeed embedded in theory and the standard itself. For work-based programmes like the leadership and management apprenticeships, it is the integration of theory and practice through experiential learning that is at the heart of reflective practice during the gathering of evidence and writing of the synthesis in learning portfolios.

Within the field of leadership and management, Kolb’s (1984) work on experiential learning is probably the best known and widely used theoretical underpinning for reflective practice and arguably highly useful for structuring critical reflection in the development of learning portfolios. Kolb (1984, p. 26) argued that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” and visually demonstrated this ongoing process of “experiential learning” through his learning cycle. This showed the importance for learners to focus on learning as a continuous process grounded in experience and an external environment (Vince, 1998) rather than seeing it as an outcome of isolated knowledge download. This simultaneously stressed the experiential, situated nature of learning and the importance for learners to engage holistically by thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving. Kolb’s (1984) learning cycles depicts the learning process that individuals go through in four stages of direct experience, reflection, theorisation and experimentation and through these stages shows the importance of not just theory or practice but the integration of both and as such “experiential knowing” (Vince, 1998) for deep learning. For example, when starting with an experience as a piece of evidence for their learning portfolio, the learning cycle encourages the learner to go through several stages of sensemaking: taking stock of the experience and what happened, understanding and examining own emotions and reaction to and within the experience and then analysing this experience and emotions by drawing on theory, other previous experiences to make sense and becoming more aware of underlying assumptions and cognitive or behavioural patterns of self and others. Finally and crucially, it involves experimentation where learners need to think about how they are going to use this new learning about what happened in the future. Making visible these four stages of learning and indeed a need for holistic reflection on and
integration of thoughts, feelings, perceptions and behaviours has also been highlighted to be beneficial for individual’s self-awareness of learning processes (Vince, 1998). Kolb’s learning cycle and its four stages are particularly useful to structure reflection templates for learning portfolios as going through the stages will encourage learners to not just describe what happened but critically reflect on feelings, thoughts, embedded assumptions and prompt them to try out the newly learned knowledge on-the-job and thus develop skills in this area.

In his examination of Kolb’s work, Vince (1998) stressed that this reflective practice comes with challenges both externally and internally. Learners naturally get stuck in their own behavioural patterns where their individual cognitive and behavioural preferences may keep them trapped in one part of the learning cycle, such as experimentation without reflection or theoretical analysis without experimentation. This again stresses the need for careful facilitation and structure within the context of learning portfolios as tools for critical reflection and experiential learning. In Kempster and Stewart’s (2010) example, it was the coaching process within the method of co-constructed auto-ethnography that enabled Stewart to engage in deeper, critical reflection about the organisation’s culture and his own assumptions about leadership and his new role. Within the remit of learning portfolios on leadership and management apprenticeships, it is therefore advisable to develop learners’ critical reflection skills through guided reflective activities, critical reflection templates and by asking learners to submit and receive feedback on synthesis pieces where they need to critically examine their development to date. The benefits of developing such critical reflection skills and enabling reflexivity in learners go beyond the completion of the task of the learning portfolio. It enables learners to look at their own development and indeed future leadership practice in an embodied way where they become more cognisant of emotions, thoughts, underlying assumptions and behavioural patterns both internally and externally/socially. Indeed, it makes more visible how leadership development is a site of identity work (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013) and becoming leader is not an accomplishment upon completion of a development programme but a lifelong, contested journey.

Focussing on external influences and power dynamics in this learning process (Vince, 1998), it is important to note the potential tension between the ideological aim of apprenticeships to embed the idea of lifelong learning into leadership and management education and evoke sustainable, reflective practice through the use of learning portfolios and the very concrete and fixed nature of the apprenticeship standard. As a competency framework (Bolden and Gosling, 2006), the standard sets out in “black and white” who a leader or manager should be and only those who can evidence that they indeed know all the things and are able to do all the things and behave in exactly the way that the standard sets out will be able to complete their apprenticeships. Apprentices have to prove and evidence their development not only on programme but also at an end-point assessment event and in front of an independent assessor, thereby going through a symbolic ritual that they leave with a stamp of having successfully become a leader or manager. As such, the standard and end-point assessment ritual work as a disciplinary mechanisms that regulate and control (Carroll and Levy, 2010; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013) the apprentice’s emerging leader identity. In the following section, we explore the role of the educator as a facilitator of reflexive contemplation throughout this process of self-assessment and self-alignment as a means to provide learners with agency.

The role of the educator
Engaging learners in critical reflection processes is not easy (Izsatt-White et al., 2017). Indeed, research (e.g. Schedlitzki et al., 2015) has demonstrated the importance of careful facilitation where reflexive tools actively engage learners in the process of self-assessment and critical reflection. Whilst there is great transformative capacity in such processes and
great potential value as argued above for impacting sustainable leadership processes, reflective practices evoke emotions and this may include heightened states of uncertainty and anxiety amongst learners (Izatt-White et al., 2017; Vince, 1998). Carroll and Nicholson (2014) explored the existence of resistance as an inevitable and potentially constructive part of leadership development work that openly invites critical reflection about self and work contexts. They saw this as a crucial aspect of identity work within leadership development processes where learners naturally resist when encouraged to consider and adopt new or alternative ways of being a leader. Schedlitzki et al. (2015) similarly demonstrated the variety of emotions evoked in participants when asking them to reflect on identities at work through the allegory of Greek Gods and Goddesses in development workshops. They stressed the role of the facilitator here to deal with such emotions and support participants in these processes of reflection so as to contain heightened levels of anxiety in the room and focus on the critical insights about leadership practices that can be drawn from the learning experience.

When engaging learners in creative and reflexive learning processes, it is also important for educators to be mindful of and constructively address the hegemonic assumptions on management and leadership that learners arrive with in the classroom. As discussed earlier in this paper, these may be focussed on deeply embedded, individualistic notions of leaders and managers as figures of authority in organisations who are judged by their capacity to take decisive action and show emotional resilience. Reflexive practice that asks for constructive inertia and contemplation may then be seen as contradictory to this image of the rational, logic decision maker. When encouraging all learners to engage in self-assessment processes and skills gap analyses at the start of an apprenticeship programme, educators have the opportunity to devise reflexive exercises that help apprentices to reflect on their embedded assumptions about leaders, leadership, managers and management and the potentially disciplinary nature of the apprenticeship standard as a competency framework. This frees up space for considerations of alternative assumptions and models of being a manager and leader at work and over the course of the apprenticeship.

Yet, the concreteness of the standard as a competency framework in itself may continue to pose a challenge for educators on leadership and management programmes engaging in reflexive practices. Bolden and Gosling (2006) have explored in detail the potentially constraining nature of competency frameworks that through their explicit description of ideal practices create a benchmark that is then utilised for two mutually exclusive purposes: assessment and development. This echoes concerns of others (e.g. Carroll and Levy, 2008) with competency-based leadership development as a tool of alignment to pre-set assumptions and ideals counter-acting its higher purpose of empowering individuals to become “better” leaders and managers. Indeed, the leadership and management apprenticeship standards and the focus on preparing individuals on demonstrating specific knowledge, skills and behaviours at end-point assessment inevitably bring back a fundamental focus on the individual as accomplished leader or manager. This presents a potential tightrope walk for the educator who needs to keep the balance between facilitating the individual’s self-assessment development against this concrete benchmark whilst also enabling the individual to understand the importance of social context in relation to the self. In light of the complexities and potentialities for resistance within reflexive practices highlighted above (Vince, 1998), it is vital for educators to design a careful infrastructure throughout the apprenticeship programme that guides the learner through stages of their personal and professional development. This needs to include a clear narrative connected to the particular knowledge, skills and behaviours set out in the respective apprenticeship standard and a set of reflective tools – including the learning portfolio – so that apprentices are empowered to critically reflect on their incremental development towards this standard and the standard itself. It is then within this personal and professional development strand of the apprenticeship programme where the development of
the learning portfolio as both a key reflexive tool and output is situated and facilitated through ongoing coaching practice between the educator and learner. As highlighted in the previous section, educators could draw on Kolb’s learning cycle and embed the four stages within reflection templates as a guiding structure that deepens learners’ analysis of their learning and development. Regular synthesis pieces further support the learner in their self-assessment against the standard and offer great opportunities for feedback on the learner’s ability to stand back and examine their changing identity and practice. This infrastructure will help to keep the learner engaged at a critical level and navigate between the self and social context in their awareness and challenging of embedded assumptions on leadership and management.

Furthermore, where an educator provides apprenticeships at different levels, there is value in developing an interconnected framework across apprenticeship programmes that enables facilitators, learners and employers to see how the standards and connected personal and professional development strands reflect potential career progression within the organisation. Firmly connecting the tri-partite progress reviews to these personal and professional development strands by giving them a developmental focus linked to a clear, individual personal development plan further supports the shift towards embedding an alternative assumption of leadership as a lifelong apprenticeship rather than quick accomplishment into organisational discourse and practice.

Going forward
This paper has explored in depth the opportunities for sustainable leadership development and potential practical challenges of learning portfolios as reflective tools embedded in the framework of leadership and management apprenticeships. This discussion has revealed the potential capacity of apprenticeships to move learners away from seeing leadership development programmes as focussed on buying in the latest cutting-edge model on leadership as an “easy fix” solution to competency and productivity gaps. Instead, it offers the opportunity to create and embed reflexive skills and practices in learners that last beyond the scope of the programme. The learning portfolio as a reflexive tool engages the learner in ongoing, deeply situated learning practices that enable them to reflect deeply and critically on actions and decision-making processes at work. It develops the crucial skill of constructive inertia where, instead of rushing into making a decision under pressure, managers and leaders in organisations feel comfortable and empowered to pause for long enough to consult and gather evidence from different perspectives and critically reflect on assumptions made to inform their decision-making processes. Particularly where such skills and practices are embedded in apprenticeship frameworks from L3 to L7 and an organisation benefits from employees completing several of these apprenticeships at different levels, we may indeed be able to see a shift within organisational decision-making processes and discourses that reflect sustainable and collective leadership practices.

Going forward, it will be important to conduct longitudinal research studies that capture learning and development of leadership and management apprentices during and after the completion of specific apprenticeship programmes where learning portfolios are used in the way discussed in this paper. Of particular interest would be ethnographic studies that are able to follow the development of apprentices at different levels and over time within the same organisation to capture the impact this may have on organisational practices.

References


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