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Challenges, barriers and strategies for engaging in level 7 apprenticeship studies

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experience of apprentices on a degree-level programme and their perceptions of how elements of apprenticeship study that aren't components of traditional degree study – i.e. off-the-job training – impact their learner journey. This article undertakes a thematic analysis following qualitative interviews with eleven apprentices, who are early-career academic professionals nearing the end of their apprenticeships. Key findings offer a mixed picture, and suggest that the study habits and preferences of apprentices are personal to individuals and are impacted on by employment workload and access to off-the-job study time. Apprentices indicate that many factors encroach on their ability to utilise the allocated off-the-job study time, primarily the ability to be released from employed work and conflicting priorities around meeting study, business, and personal needs. Apprentices suggest that in reality it is almost impossible for them to spend 20% of their working time on their studies. Recommendations are offered to both institutions and individuals, regarding the need for sound dialogue and the removal of barriers to ensure that apprentices can meet the contractual requirements of apprenticeship study.

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Apprenticeships; workload; off-the-job training; study habits; priorities

Introduction

The notion of social mobility and the desire to instigate wider participation in higher education (HE) has been a political priority of various UK governments in recent times (Thompson 2019; Rizzica 2020). In an attempt to develop and improve this situation, there has been an institution-level strategy to initiate adaptations to student options around study, including more flexible study options, of which degree apprenticeships is one (Donnelly and Evans 2019). This has resulted in growth of higher apprenticeship numbers as employers seek to develop graduate-level employees through practice-based training mediums (Mason 2020). However, apprenticeships at degree and higher level are a contentious topic, where questions around the phenomenon of the provision abound. Various commentators suggest that the 'quality' of apprenticeship learning is questionable (L. Ryan and Lőrinc 2018), but this tends to focus on the primary element of direct teaching and learning.

The unilateral working of employers and universities in support of apprentices is a fundamental principle of apprenticeship delivery. Unfortunately, this employer support has also been an area of concern and anxiety since the inception of higher and degree apprenticeships (Rowe, Perrin, and Wall 2016; Mulkeen et al. 2019) with Jackson (2019) postulating that tensions between employers

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and apprentices in terms of the responsibility for the learning journey exist, and that they infer a potential conflict between the two parties. As James Relly and Laczik (2022) identify, workplace demands often mean that employers are reluctant to release their apprentices, especially for block release and that significant amounts of negotiation are required between the provider and employer. Employers' ability to effectively support and mentor apprentices will be highly dependent on the fiscal and time resources available to them; neither is necessarily abundant and each will add pressure to employers and their staff charged with supporting apprentices (Mulkeen et al. 2019).

Compounding these issues is the notion that the practicalities of delivering apprenticeships are complex, and there are pertinent intricacies in facilitating apprenticeship provision successfully with elements such as off-the-job training and end-point assessment (EPA) – relatively new concepts to many in the higher education sector (Saraswat 2016). Research has explored the challenges that employers and universities face when planning, resourcing, delivering and assessing higher level and degree apprenticeships (Antcliff, Baines, and Gorb 2016; Crawford-Lee 2016; Lambert 2016). However, although Hughes and Saieva (2019, 231) suggest that off-the-job training needs 'demystifying' for employers in particular, no research has specifically targeted any challenges potentially faced by apprentices around the off-the-job training allowance, once they are on the programme. This lack of research includes the exploration of the lived experience of apprentices on degree-level programmes and their perceptions of how the abstract elements of apprenticeship study, that aren't components of traditional degree study (i.e. off-the-job training) impact on their learner journey. Therefore, to fully understand and comprehend an apprenticeship as a full entity, it is important to explore these components and to understand the voices of those involved, to construct a coherent picture of any challenges faced in pursuit of these integral elements of apprenticeship delivery. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of academic professional apprentices and their relationship with workload commitments, off-the-job training requirements, and study habits.

The academic professional apprenticeship

Staff new to teaching in higher education are often required to work towards and achieve a teaching qualification. Arguably, the increased significance of gaining a 'teaching qualification' in higher education has been driven by the increased marketisation of higher education (Ingleby 2015). An increased focus on demonstrating quality through metrics has seen a recognised teaching qualification being linked formally to teaching enhancement by funding bodies and national league tables (Botham 2018). Despite its significance in the sector, Kushnir and Spowart (2021) cite a lack of research into the experiences of academics on such courses as a barrier to their improvement. The majority of universities in the UK offer training packages for new teaching staff joining their institution (Husband 2015) and with the advent of the Academic Professional Apprenticeship (APA), new academic staff have 20% of their working hours dedicated to off-the-job training. This article focuses on the experiences of a cohort who are early career academics at a large post-1992 institution in the UK. As with all apprenticeships, off-the-job training can incorporate both attending taught sessions and independent study. Apprentices achieving this minimum of 20% (i.e. a full working day for a full-time employee) is a prerequisite of attracting government funding for apprenticeships, which is one of the key reasons they have become such a desirable mode of delivery. For the cohort within the scope of this study, the APA programme consists of regularly timetabled taught sessions, covering a broad range of learning, teaching and assessment theories, as well as pedagogical and andragogical techniques and approaches. These sessions are designed to stimulate interdisciplinary discussion and debate, and cultivate each apprentices' professional teaching practice. Individual professional development is evidenced by practical workplace assessments, formal peer review and assessment activities, enabling apprentices to apply theoretical concepts in real-life teaching situations. Support is provided throughout by workplace mentors and course tutors to ensure that new learning is identified and captured appropriately. Summative assessment of the programme occurs via an external body who conduct the EPA. This consists of

practical observation of classroom-based delivery, followed by a professional conversation and submission of a portfolio of evidence, all demonstrating the apprentice's competence against the set *knowledge, skill* and *behaviour* grading criteria. Where this may differ from 'standard' degrees is that an apprenticeship is classified as work-based learning, designed to improve occupational competencies, and therefore this 20% is expected to take place in an apprentice's working hours and exclusively involve the teaching of new knowledge, skills, and behaviours (2017). Apprentices are required to record their hours spent on off-the-job training, which can take place anywhere:

off-the-job training can take place at an employer's workplace or off-site (e.g. in a classroom or from home via distance learning). It can even take place at the apprentice's normal workstation. It is the activity, rather than the location, that determines whether the training meets the definition set out in the apprenticeship funding rules (2017, 28).

Evidence from other apprenticeships strongly emphasises the value that off-the-job training adds to workplace learning, particularly when completed face-to-face (Smith 2002).

Potential challenges and barriers to engaging with off-the-job training

When applied to the APA, where apprentices are also academic professionals (e.g. lecturers), there are a number of potential challenges to engagement in off-the-job training. Not least among them is that the workloads of academic staff are notoriously complex and mercurial, creating significant challenges to any attempt to categorise them (Kenny and Fluck 2014). Academic workload has long been an issue in higher education, with it being cited as a challenge for areas as diverse as implementing technology-enhanced learning (Gregory and Michael Lodge 2015), the quality of teaching (Soliman and Soliman 1997), work-life balance (Cannizzo and Osbaldiston 2016), and career progression (Dobele and Rundle-Theile 2015). Cross-national research indicates that higher education sectors which embrace market forces in higher education show high levels of stress among academics, and that a key source of this is tied to managerialist conceptions of accountability and performance (Shin and Jung 2014; Chan 2018). Such managerialism both increases workloads and introduces the imperative to quantify and control them. Often hidden contributors to workload are academic citizenship, pastoral care, and academic 'housework' which fall disproportionately onto female academics (Heijstra et al. 2017). The challenges of workload are often exacerbated – such as citizenship having lower value placed on it than other academic activities – which, given this gendered dimension, can disproportionately affect the career progression of women academics (Barrett and Barrett 2011). A comparative study by Kyvik (2013) suggests that academic working hours have decreased over time, even while perceptions of workload have increased. The evolution of working practices to incorporate elements such as the adoption of learner analytics, the adoption of blended learning, and responding to the widening participation agenda, have all been suggested as contributing to this perception of an increasing workload (El-Mowafy, Kuhn, and Snow 2013; Avella et al. 2016).

The APA is a shift in structure and priority from a PgCert in Higher Education, a route which is well established almost to the extent that it can be seen as a 'hoop to jump through' (Robbins and Dermo 2016). With these structural shifts and a greater emphasis on evidencing both the time and focus of learning, there may be significant implications for academic workloads. The effects of an apprenticeship on academic workload (and vice versa) will be explored in this paper, with a particular focus on the lived experiences of apprentices as they endeavour to meet the requirements of 20% off-the-job training, their study habits; and the various elements that impact on these such as their employment workload, personal life, and relationships with colleagues.

Methodology

Participants were selected from a cohort close to completing their APA at a large, post-1992 UK university. As such, the participants are early-career academic professionals in lecturing, teaching

fellow, academic development or learning support roles. Given that this population is usually already highly educated and sometimes has substantial professional experience, it would be expected that they have well-developed approaches to their studies and personal development.

Method

To allow participants to discuss their personal narratives of being early career academics in a natural way (Gubrium et al. 2012), semi-structured interviews were used. As the data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted remotely using Google Meet. The interviews all lasted 20–60 minutes and covered a range of topics related to their experiences as early career academics and engaging on the APA. In this paper we specifically focus on the participants’ narratives around self-directed learning, engaging in off-the-job training and Learning Gain.

Because the research was conceived and designed by a team including academic staff who deliver the APA, a research associate was recruited to conduct the interviews which could then be anonymised at the point of collection. This would allow participants to feel more comfortable sharing challenging experiences or critiquing the course. It would also ensure that the accounts given would feel less like course feedback, which may occur in discussions with a teaching team, allowing for greater emphasis on personal narratives. However, given the personal nature of the accounts, various identifiable characteristics were discussed by participants during the interviews. The interviewer therefore reiterated the right to withdraw on these occasions and at the conclusion of the interview. To further protect the anonymity of the participants, the interviewer used a random name generator to allocate pseudonyms, preventing any association with their original name, and a private transcription service was used. These steps ensured that data either remained confidential or that consent was given, maintaining ethical research (Silverman 2013).

Participant recruitment & sample

As the APA has a relatively small cohort, the full population ($n = 31$) was invited to participate in the interviews, with eleven taking part (see Table 1). Both the academic course team and the course administrator sent invitations to the population including an information sheet. This sheet explained the nature of the research, the participants’ right to withdrawal and anonymity, as well as instructions to contact the independent researcher to participate. Data collection took place between July and September 2020.

Data analysis

Taking a Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 2017) approach to the analysis, large numbers of codes were developed inductively from the transcripts. To ensure consistency amongst a team of

Table 1. Participant Details.

Pseudonym	Role (self-described)	Faculty	Gender
Amir	Senior teaching fellow	Science and Health	M
Carol	Teaching fellow	Science and Health	F
Khadija	Teaching fellow	Humanities	F
Aaliyah	Careers advisor	Central Services	F
Terry	Academic development	Central Services	M
Emily	Senior teaching fellow	Business and Law	F
Brian	Lecturer	Creative and Cultural Industries	M
Rico	Teaching fellow	Humanities	M
Shirley	Academic skills tutor	Business and Law	F
Sofia	Senior lecturer	Technology	F
Elijah	Learning support tutor	Science and Health	M

four researchers, each transcript was coded twice by different members of the team and then merged after discussion amongst the team. Employing multiple coders, and comparing and verifying each other's coding allowed us to increase the validity and reliability of the codes generated (G. W. Ryan 1999). This multi-coder and multistage process also facilitated further development of the primary codes and the development of larger themes across different participants.

Results and discussion

The key findings of this study were that there are considerable structural barriers, both tangible and intangible, to apprentices undertaking study in accordance with the 20% off-the-job training mandate. The consensus was that actually achieving study time which equated to 20% of a working week, was extremely difficult and fraught with impediments. Associated with and impacted by this were the study patterns of the apprentices, with no singular or preferred approach in terms of structure and location of study evident for this group of participants. The approach to undertaking the 20% off-the-job training varied between the participants, with a mixed picture in terms of location and how individuals organised their study time. The dilemma of competing priorities in terms of study, work and personal life, and which to favour when, was a common source of conflict for the apprentices, with work commitments often taking precedence. A lack of boundary flexibility is observed, with the work environment not being able to incorporate a shift in priority towards their studies, by the apprentice.

Location of study

There seems to be a differential between apprentices regarding a preference to study at their place of work or at home, as well as whether these study sessions were meticulously planned and scheduled, or more sporadic and random in nature. This aligns to previous research that suggests the location preferences of students varies between individuals, and that home, work, and university buildings are of equal value and importance to students (Bickerdike et al. 2016).

Those who looked to study at their place of work used gaps in between periods of work and teaching to study.

I always do in the office, because I either would block out chunks of my calendar to be like, right, this is the time that I'm doing it, so it might be in between sessions ... and I'd only do it if I had several hours available because I knew I couldn't just sit down for half an hour and do something (Amir).

Other than their own desk space, some apprentices utilised specific study spaces, such as the library.

I'll basically go wherever I could to work. Okay, so library preferably. (Elijah)

Conversely, many apprentices preferred the opposite and undertook study at home, with some citing challenges around compartmentalising other roles and moving from one mindset to another – i.e. from an academic mindset to a student/apprentice one – as the key reason for choosing this location.

As, if I was in the office, I found it very difficult to take my academic head off ... [and] hat off and to say no, actually today I'm in student mode ... But yeah, in the end I had to be quite strict about having to go home and put my student hat on really (Khadija).

Moreover, the advantage of studying at home seems to have been accentuated due to the COVID-19 situation. When apprentices were 'out of sight' of colleagues, the chance of random and sporadic distraction from peers and managers was reduced.

I do think for this next academic year it might be a bit easier because if we're all still working from home a little bit longer we might be able to carry on with this system of booking stuff off in my calendar and then nobody even asks to, you know, chat to me or anything then, we can ... I can just crack on with a bit of luck (Carol).

The increased use of open-plan offices for academic work and the potential challenges this imposes not just for increased distraction, but a decrease in privacy and associated increased workload (Baldry and Barnes 2012). The results of this study indicate such challenges are perhaps more pronounced when academics are also studying alongside their work.

Current research offers an equivocal position regarding how working and studying at home has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students at all levels have undoubtedly been affected in terms of their social, emotional, and potentially financial wellbeing (Anthony et al. 2020), and also preferred independent study habits (Clarke et al. 2021). The result in the current study, regarding the home location facilitating avoidance of distractions, is slightly at odds with some literature positing that interruptions of all types increased with home working (Prodanova and Kocarev 2021). Interestingly, research has shown that sedentary, standing, and moving behaviours are similar when working from home and working in an office environment, indicating that time spent focused on tasks isn't necessarily influenced by location, thus inferring that distractions occur in a consistent manner at either site (Hallman et al. 2021). From the results of the current study, it can be inferred that the participants' choice of location was significantly influenced by the desire to avoid said distractions. These distractions were indicated as a barrier to productive study, particularly whilst in the workplace, due to the perceived availability of apprentices by work colleagues.

[I]f I was just sat at my desk in the office people come over and interrupt you all the time, ask you questions because, you know, you're just in the office (Carol).

However, aligned with Prodanova and Kocarev's (2021) findings, the home location wasn't completely void of distractions and challenges for some, especially with the social distancing and the limited access to different locations that people had during lockdown periods.

But then working at home itself, obviously has it's ... especially after, what are we now, at five months, nearly, aren't we? So, now that has that big fatigue elements and the dissolution of home and workspace, like, this is my workspace but then, you go out of that door, and actually, it's like, that's our bathroom, the bedroom, stairs, downstairs, living room, kitchen. So, it's then that trying to separate those spaces out, as well (Amir).

This notion of fatigue and the reduction of a productive home and work-life balance has been shown to increase if there is incongruity between the desire to work at home and the interference that this may cause (de Wind et al. 2021). This effect may be accentuated by apprentices having to study from home during the pandemic, due to a reduction in access to different locations at around the halfway point of the programme.

However, a singular place of study wasn't entirely ideal for all, nor was working in isolation. Some data revealed the benefits that some apprentices felt from collaborative working and collegial relationships with others in their place of work.

But what's also been good is because I'm in an office with a group of colleagues, we all started at the same time, all undertaken the qualifications, sometimes we would do ... we'd sort of get together and meet and we'd talk about the assignments or we'd support each other with it, it was a mixture really between the office and home (Rico).

This collaborative, group-study approach has been linked with improved motivation to study due to the social and learning benefits that it brings (McCabe and Lummis 2018). Linked with this perspective is the availability of resources and ease of access to equipment at the university and workplace, and the benefit to study that this can facilitate. The results showed that apprentices didn't always have the facilities at home conducive to effective study.

[T]hat was something I did struggle because, of course you know, the office is always so helpful because you've got access to, like the printer, for example you know, some of those things that, you know, and actual desktop compared to your little laptop (Khadija).

So, although a location devoid of distractions seems to be the preferred choice for apprentices due to an increase in productive study, there is a compromise to be made in terms of ease of access to

peers and resources. This reflects the work of Beckers, van der Voordt, and Dewulf (2016) who postulate that the choice of study location (or learning space) results from functionality rather than experience value, with students preferring to undertake individual study activities in a quiet location either at home or in university facilities. Ultimately, the results from this study indicate that the choice of location is characterised by individual preferences around where they are most productive, with the importance of not being disrupted or drawn into a work or social engagement being a prevalent rationale behind the choice of setting for study.

Study habits

It is widely acknowledged that the learning strategies and study habits of students have a marked impact on study progress and academic achievement (Entwistle and Peterson 2004; Bickerdike et al. 2016; Haarala-Muhonen et al. 2017). The current study found that, independent of the choice of location, the approach to the structure and organisation of their study time by apprentices also varied and wasn't necessarily linked to the choice of where they studied. Like the choice of location, there was a mixed picture with the apprentices, and an equivocal position in terms of how they organised and scheduled their study time, with a variety of factors influencing practice. Many interviewed offered a perspective of an approach which was 'as and when':

And so, it sometimes ... I think, it was sometimes quite haphazard, so I used to try and keep Wednesdays free totally because, of course, that's when our taught sessions were. But then sometimes work would creep in, then I'd find myself, you know kind of, actually having to take a couple of days to just focus on APA (Khadija).

It had to be here, there and everywhere, there's absolutely no opportunity to fully book a day off (Sofia).

The challenge of balancing workplace responsibilities and demands with apprenticeship study is a common theme in research (Hughes and Saieva 2019), and the difficulty in supporting apprentices with the time to complete their studies whilst still discharging business-necessary outputs is evident with APA apprentices as well. This unstructured approach to 20% off-the-job study was a consequence of workload pressure at the workplace.

It's all been fairly varied because of ... there's obviously different parts of the term and different parts of the year that are busier in terms of teaching and in terms of marking and that kind of thing. So, there's been various points where I've talked to my line manager about the fact that, right this week here because teaching's quiet I'm going to concentrate (Brian).

Conversely, many participants did manage to find the time to structure and schedule their study.

What I would tend to do is we'd have the taught session on the Wednesday afternoon, I would spend the Wednesday morning then or sometimes the Thursday morning after then doing actual written work and doing some independent study (Rico).

The potential to have ownership over one's calendar seems to be a significant factor in the ability to establish set patterns for study. By having time booked in for off-the-job training, this gave apprentices the ability to signal to others that they were not available for work related activities; with others respecting this allocated time and not encroaching or impinging on it.

I manage my own diary so I just say that's my day of study this week ... I just blocked it out of my calendar and they're fine (Shirley).

I put it into my calendar as one day a week alternating, a full day most times unless I have to split it into two days. It will be in my calendar upfront for months in advance. I warned people explicitly in my team this is what's going to happen (Elijah).

As well as the practical, structural benefits, the use of a calendar to schedule study seemed to work on a motivational level as well.

And funnily enough when it's in my calendar I feel like I need to do it. So, nothing else gets booked in there (Carol).

The desire to have a coherent structure to studying was certainly apparent, even if it was difficult to turn into a tangible reality.

If, you know, I think hindsight is a wonderful thing for everyone, isn't it. If you could tell yourself, look, just bloody do something every week. Just do the bit that you need to do, it will make that difference, but it's whether you actually can do that (Amir).

There was a concern for some that without a planned 20% off-the-job study day or time, they may struggle with the demands of the course. This is a position supported by Bickerdike et al. (2016) who postulate that a 'strategic, organised approach to learning' is associated with effective study and thus academic achievement. This lack of coherent structure may also reduce the potential opportunities for apprentices to undertake 'deep learning' (Parpala et al. 2010), something (given the nature of leading learning and teaching in HE) arguably an essential component of the apprenticeship. Similarly, without structure, progress can be limited and difficult to maintain (Entwistle and Peterson 2004; Haarala-Muhonen et al. 2017), something evident in this study's findings:

But that is a really interesting thing about if you lose the pace, it's really hard to catch it up again and I've found that and had it been possible to say, right, on Fridays, I'm only doing off-the-job training stuff on a Friday, that would have been ideal or even if it was, you know, Monday morning and Wednesday afternoon, or whatever, but I knew from the beginning that that was not going to happen, however much I would have liked it (Aaliyah).

Clarke et al. (2021) suggest that COVID-19 has affected study habits, with a loss of structure and routine to study patterns being a significant consequence of the global pandemic. In turn, the general lack of structure for studying and the workload pressures found in this study may have influenced the motivation of the apprentices to engage outside of the scheduled taught sessions. This seems to be the case even when interest and enjoyment was relatively high for apprentices.

[T]he biggest issue is I have enjoyed it, I've found it interesting, but focusing, prioritising, making the time, creating the mental and the physical space for it, that has been really challenging for me actually (Aaliyah).

Meeting the 20% off-the-job requirements

The use of the 20% off-the-job training and how much time apprentices actually spent studying was similar to study habits and location – again an equivocal position; no one practically had the equivalent of 20% of their working time to spend studying.

[N]o way, did I ever do, like, a day's work a week. (Aaliyah)

Attendance to taught sessions was generally good and apprentices could attend, but time to be allocated for independent study was limited. Realistically, apprentices suggested that they actually spent a small proportion of the 20% off-the-job training studying – the equivalent of approximately one to six hours a week.

I've done bits and bobs here and there, attended the odd workshop and teaching a class and I've done some webinars, I don't think I've logged a sufficient amount of hours. (Emily)

Employment workloads and the pressures and demands of a full-time job were the contributing factors to this situation. Even when time was formally allocated to workloads, the reality was that it didn't always materialise.

[I]t's not for the want of trying, you know, everybody really wanted me to have it, but it's the logistics of somebody's called in sick so we can't cancel a patient, for example ... so I would have to go and help the students with that. You know, it's just that sort of thing (Carol).

Conversely, the ebb and flow of academic delivery has meant that some apprentices experienced a fluid dynamic in terms of organising their studying.

[P]eriods of it's all been about the day job, if I'm honest, some weeks I'm not even really been able to log onto my student account or look at the student modules on Moodle at all, it's all just been compartmentalising with the work. But then there's other periods when I've almost put the day job to one side and just cracked on with doing it. Probably conflicting is the wrong word to use but actually balancing the two neatly has been a bit of a challenge (Rico).

Apprentices were often forced to choose between the completion of work priorities or the completion of required study. Invariably work priorities took precedence, resulting in a compounding of the internal struggle between these competing entities.

Now definitely a large part of that is my work guilt and my ability to priorities which, as in, I haven't just gone, no, I need to do my APA stuff today, and everything else can get lost, I just have not done that and that is on me, it's my responsibility I'm a, you know, fully grown adult with autonomy (Aaliyah).

Colleague and line-manager support for off-the-job training study was a melange picture. Often colleagues and line managers were supportive of the situation and this had a positive impact on the apprentice and their studies.

I would say they are really supportive, yes. They really, really want ... like I say, really want to give me the time and I book in study days, and things like that, all the time but I'm aware of the fact that I might get called in, I might get called away. So, they are supportive and they really want me to progress on and do more if I want to. So, yeah, they are and they're all saying to me, well I'll come ... I'll look at your drafts, I'll help you. You know, they're all really nice, supportive department, so I'm fortunate (Carol).

However, this wasn't always the case. Staffing pressures meant that apprentices couldn't always be spared or their workload absorbed, and they would have to subsume the hours elsewhere.

I think, in all honesty, keeping to the allocated time of literally having a day off each week has been a lot easier said than done, partly due to lockdown, partly due to the circumstances in our team that we've had quite an increase in the workload of the team, we've also got a member of staff on maternity leave who they've not been able to find full cover for (Rico).

And that business output was a priority over an individual's study requirements:

[F]rom the very beginning, my manager made it clear, not in a horrible way, but made it clear that work would have to come first and he was saying about flexibility, but it was clear that all the flexibility would have to be from me (Aaliyah).

These findings insinuate a tension between employer and apprentice in terms of who is responsible for the learning journey, and imply a conflict between the two parties observed with other in-service apprentices (Jackson 2019). Regarding possible tensions, apprentices indicated that they didn't want to impose upon their colleagues too often.

So, you can only ask colleagues so many times, can you swap with me because I want to do, I need to do my course? (Amir)

Again, these factors add to the internal struggle between the desire to meet work and study needs suggested by Creed et al. (2022). This concept of an internal battle between competing agendas and priorities, seen in the results of this study, is also supported by the research of Kinman and Jones (2008) who suggest that academics generally fail to mediate between work demands and a successful home-life balance. It can therefore be postulated that apprentices experience a heightened internal struggle caused by the need to meet the 20% off-the-job-training demands, in addition to any existing conflicts evident in academics who aren't undertaking additional study alongside full-time work. This all needs to be considered in the context that the vast majority of apprentices were enrolled on to this programme as part of a contractual requirement of employment at the university, and did not necessarily enrol from a position of free-choice. Therefore, this sense of

an internal struggle may be affected (perhaps heightened) by this positionality on the course as dictated by employer insistence. Further research would be needed to establish any robust inferences.

Balancing priorities

All of the factors discussed above contributed to a dichotomy for apprentices, between studying and using the 20% off-the-job training time on one hand, and work and personal life pressures on the other. Combining work and study has long held challenges for protagonists, with research demonstrating that one impacts the other, often in a negative way. Students attempting to combine work and study exhibit a prevalence of negative emotions (Liyanaamage, Glavas, and Kodagoda 2019); are prepared to accept lower grades to ensure adherence to working commitments (Hall 2010); and those working full-time are more likely to drop out of their studies (Hovdhaugen 2015). Apprentices in the current study struggle with work and study 'boundary-flexibility', whereby working patterns and allocation of their time and resources fluctuate to absorb changes to current demands, be it an increase in study or employment workload (Creed et al. 2022). It seems that apprentices experience a particular issue with 'flexibility-ability' where they don't have the capacity to modify work boundaries due to an increase in study demands. Results from the current study imply that this inability to adapt is primarily due to the work environment not being willing to accept a shift in priority from the apprentice – towards their studies – even though the apprentice has the desire and drive to do so. This lack of flexibility by the employer results in work-study conflict (Andrade and Matias 2017) and this dissension can lead to student burnout and a reduction in engagement (Creed et al. 2022). The main consensus between apprentices was that work obligations and teaching students were the priorities, and that apprenticeship study and personal life suffered as a consequence. The desire to satisfy the educational needs of students featured regularly in apprentices' reflections.

So, yeah, I'd always pick the work, the day job over ... because the students are what come first because, at the end of the day, it's their education, they're the ones paying for it, they're the future. ... (Amir)

Amir continues to imply that this was partly driven out of fear of not doing a good job and the resultant implications that this may have on their reputation.

And if they [students], you know, if they have a bad experience it's going to reflect badly on the university or on myself (Amir).

With the students taking priority, all other aspects of the apprenticeship suffered due to it being a lesser priority.

Yes, it was a bit of a toxic brew for the first few months. And the only thing I could do was do my student sessions online because they're kind of set in stone and I view them as my customers, whatever you want to call them. So that would get done, that always took priority. But because that took priority and it was just about the only thing I could get done, everything else suffered (Amir).

This coercion to favour one priority over another is a concern as Chu, Creed, and Conlon (2021) postulate that student agency and mental wellbeing are synchronous with harmony between boundaries and the ability to successfully balance competing interests. Even when apprentices had the opportunity to detach themselves from employed work and had regular access to the 20% off-the-job training time within their workload, the inconsistent nature of teaching workload pressure meant their studies often encroached on their personal life.

So, I can't say I was given 0.2 [workload relief] because with my teaching, as previous years, it's been well over 1. So, we ... there isn't any less teaching, if that makes sense. It kind of has to just sort of come in around ... you know, again your teaching kind of eats into your personal life, your weekends and evenings. You have to mark in the evenings, you have to mark on the weekends sometimes because the sheer ... the quantity of work is bunched up. (Emily)

The preference seemed to be that apprentices wished to study during the working week, in line with the notion and ethos of an apprenticeship.

And also I'm that person that sometimes thinks, I don't want to do on a Saturday, this is like job stuff. I mean I did do things on Saturdays but, you know, I tried to think to myself, I should be doing this Monday to Friday, but of course it doesn't always work like that (Carol).

However, reflective of the variety of apprentices' choice of study location, some apprentices actually preferred studying outside of work hours. This reinforces the eclectic nature of the apprentices' study behaviour and the ambivalent findings within the group.

So I have done some on weekends, evenings, the extended days, I mean, practically in terms of the hours, it was outside of work time, but it suited me for that's when my energy was good, so I didn't mind for that (Aaliyah).

Conforming to this notion of preferring to study outside of working hours, annual leave was also a period when some apprentices undertook their study elements.

So, my learning kind of fits in ... like I've been doing it in my annual leave recently. So, I've been taking two weeks off in June but didn't actually get to have any annual leave because I had to do extra marking. And then I took two weeks off in July, so I managed to make headway and catch up with some of my learning plans and activities and research, and what have, writing up my research. So, I guess annual leave is the time that I get to and personal time, evenings and weekends, to work on my learning for the course (Aaliyah).

How this struggle to balance the demands of work, study and social life impacts attainment on the apprenticeship programme is unclear. Previous research by Oonyu (2019) and Wang et al. (2010) indicate that academic performance isn't negatively affected by working commitments; a perspective at odds with the findings of Hall (2010). Additionally, Wang et al. (2010) go on to suggest that personal, social relationships can be positively affected by working during study, however family-based relationships may be harmed. Given the different contexts in which each of those studies were conducted – generally part-time work, with undergraduate students and across three different continents – it would be difficult to apply any implications or draw pertinent conclusions aligned to the current study.

Overall, whether through personal choice or necessity, the findings relating to balancing priorities suggest that apprentices use 'compensatory' strategies (where work is performed outside of the prescribed junctures) to meet the demands of the apprenticeship programme, as a mechanism to meet the cumulative excessive workload from study and employment combined (Melin, Astvik, and Bernhard-Oettel 2014). This use of fluid and unstructured working practices is a precarious approach discussed by Sargent et al. (2021). They postulate that the disruption of habitual routine and rituals, in our case, caused by an inability to subsume apprenticeship work within the working week, will lead to a reduction in well-being and that of a healthy lifestyle. Consequently, this accommodation of the additional workload outside of accepted working hours, is potentially detrimental to long-term, sustained working practices due to the consequence of workload stress and burnout (Boyd 2014).

Barriers to undertaking the 20% off-the-job training

As well as the inevitable external factors that influenced working and study patterns, some apprentices attributed their lack of compliance with the 20% off-the-job training requirements to themselves, rather than the influence of external pressures.

[M]y problem with the 20% is I sabotage myself. So nobody was stopping me from taking it, XXXX members occasionally, that's to be expected, but they are all good people. But yeah, I sabotaged my own 20%, so protecting it's another matter. Okay, so that's me, no problems externally, it is all internal (Aaliyah).

A fairly sinister consequence of the challenges of actually being able to allocate the required amount of time to studying was that some apprentices, rather than not meet the contractual obligation,

falsified the off-the-job training logs to indicate that they had completed sufficient hours.

So when I was truthfully going through I went, right, I went to these classes, I went to these training things, I've spent this time on the research, and things like that. I got to about 230 hours. But then I had to make up a hundred hours just because ... I'd like to think that I might have done that more, had it not been Covid and I'd not have the same opportunity to go out, but I genuinely don't know (Sofia).

Compounding the problem was difficulty in effectively recording the 20% off-the-job training time. This was partly attributed to apprentices' own organisational mistakes.

I'm also terrible at record keeping, this has been something that's been a problem since ... so, since forever (Khadija).

But there were also barriers created with the recording and logging system. Some apprentices were confused by the process, and a level of ambiguity existed around the comprehension of the log and its requirements.

It took me a while to get my head around that, to be honest, because it's not something I've dealt with before, and I had to keep going back and asking again does this count, does this count (Shirley).

Issues with understanding the process and the time-consuming nature of completing the sections exacerbated the situation.

The first form, I'll be honest, blew my mind 'cause everything just, sort of, got amalgamated in, it was just horrendous. And actually, I felt really stressed about the hours as well (Khadija).

Due to the vast quantity of data being collected a change to the recording system occurred part way through the programme, which further exacerbated issues and did not help compliance and adherence.

A little confusing with the fact that they changed the sheet they were using each year and that wasn't necessarily explicitly clear, so some of my hours were logged on one sheet and they should have gone to the other sheet, that kind of stuff, but not the end of the world (Khadija).

Therefore, confusion or a lack of importance placed on practical factors, such as recording of off-the-job training hours, is a concern for Higher Education Institutions as well as for apprenticeship providers at other levels (Saraswat 2016; Hughes and Saieva 2019). These findings affirm the inferences of Martin, Lord, and Warren-Smith (2020) that the practical implementation of degree apprenticeship programmes delivered at UK universities is very haphazard and lacks the coherent structures needed to facilitate logistical elements such as recording of off-the-job training hours.

Conclusion

The study reveals that, to adequately run an APA and afford apprentices the opportunities to fully engage, there are a number of key barriers, both structural and personal, to overcome. As such we make the following recommendations:

- Prior, meaningful discussion must be undertaken with employers (in this case, the university and line managers) to ensure adherence with and investment in the release of apprentices for the 20% off-the-job training.
- Reduce barriers to completing mandatory record keeping with regard to the 20% off-the-job training.
- Even though APA apprentices are often experienced academics working in HE, they may require guidance around good study habits and patterns and the benefits that they bring.

Meeting these recommendations would help reduce the internal struggle that apprentices experience with choosing between work and study (Creed et al. 2022), encourage deep and strategic level learning (Parpala et al. 2010) which has been shown to positively influence qualification results

(Diseth 2007), and meet the Department of Education's requirements around the amount and timing of off-the-job training.

While this was only a small-scale study at one institution about one apprenticeship standard, the consistency with which participants reported an inability to achieve their 20% off-the-job training raises questions about the rate at which universities are adopting the APA standard. We caution any institution currently running an APA, or considering doing so, to ensure that proper understanding of its nature as an apprenticeship is found among senior leaders, academic staff, and apprentices undertaking the course. This is particularly pertinent and relevant where staff are required to undertake this study as a condition of employment. In this situation in particular, institutions need to have a robust structure in place to allow apprentices fair and favourable conditions to effectively meet the demands of studying alongside employment, without fluctuating operational business needs (teaching, marking, etc) usurping time allocated for study. This would conceivably negate or reduce the potential for discord as apprentices won't have the dichotomy of choosing between the two conflicting and equally important priorities of: operational business needs and the contractual obligation of professional study. Given the funding requirement enshrined in legislation for apprentices to take 20% of their time for studying, it is alarming the extent to which this sample group were unable to do so. The complex and sometimes poorly defined nature of academic work, coupled with understaffed departments and overworked colleagues, is a threat to the operational effectiveness of offering an APA. One can infer that the seriousness with which off-the-job training needs to be taken is not reaching all aspects of the institution. In a market-driven environment when universities are increasingly competitive and seeking new funding streams, the financial benefits of establishing an APA (or any apprenticeship for that matter) may be very tempting. However, if this does not come with proper investment and systems to allow apprentices to meet their required off-the-job training hours, the costs in the long term could be much greater. Staff burnout from overwork, and the potential reputational and financial impact of poor performance in an Ofsted inspection which all degree apprenticeships are now subject to, are very real threats for under-resourcing such a programme.

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