

Beyond the echo chamber: adapting degree apprenticeships for lifelong learning in Thai higher education

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the potential adaptation of the UK's degree apprenticeship model within Thailand's higher education context. As global demands intensify for more work-ready graduates, the study examines how academic–vocational integration can be advanced through international policy learning.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative comparative case study was employed, drawing on document analysis and 15 semi-structured interviews with policymakers, university leaders and employers in both the UK and Thailand. Thematic analysis was used to explore structural, pedagogical and cultural contrasts between the two systems.

Findings – The UK model benefits from institutional autonomy, employer co-ownership and cultural legitimacy. In contrast, Thailand faces barriers including centralized governance, rigid curricula and persistent stigma toward vocational learning. The study finds that direct policy borrowing is insufficient without structural alignment and cultural reframing.

Research limitations/implications – This research focuses on two national cases, which may limit generalizability. It emphasizes qualitative insights over measurable outcomes and does not assess specific programmatic success metrics. Future research could expand to longitudinal impact studies, quantitative evaluations or incorporate perspectives from learners and marginalized communities. Despite its scope, the study provides a conceptual basis for countries with similar centralized systems to explore how global models can be localized without losing relevance or equity.

Practical implications – Insights from this research can inform the design of context-sensitive apprenticeship programs in Thailand and other middle-income countries seeking to strengthen university–industry partnerships and enhance graduate employability.

Social implications – Adapting degree apprenticeships can help reduce educational inequality and challenge hierarchies that devalue vocational pathways. Promoting cultural legitimacy of practice-based learning is key to advancing lifelong learning goals.

Originality/value – This research contributes to policy transfer literature by highlighting the conditions under which apprenticeship models can be meaningfully adapted. It offers an evidence-based framework for embedding work-based learning in higher education systems undergoing transformation.

Keywords Degree apprenticeships, Work-integrated learning, Higher education reform, Policy transfer, Vocational education, Lifelong learning

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction of the study

1.1 Background and significance

In the last decade, the apprenticeship model has gained global traction as a mechanism to bridge the skills gap between formal education and employment. This resurgence stems from concerns over graduate employability and the persistent disconnect between academic instruction and workplace realities (Arthur-Mensah, 2020; Quew-Jones, 2023). As economies evolve amidst rapid technological change and globalization, traditional university degrees often fall short in preparing graduates for the demands of modern labor markets (Altbach *et al.*, 2019).



Work-based learning (WBL) models, including apprenticeships, have thus emerged as vital strategies for building adaptable, future-ready talent (Zegwaard and Pretti, 2023).

The United Kingdom's launch of Degree Apprenticeships in 2015 marked a significant reform, aiming to bridge the divide between vocational and academic learning (Mason, 2020; Mulkeen *et al.*, 2019). These programs allow students to earn university-level qualifications while working, integrating academic theory with occupational practice (Mian *et al.*, 2020). The 2017 Apprenticeship Levy further incentivized employer involvement, aligning higher education with evolving industry needs (Baker, 2019; Hughes and Saieva, 2019).

Since their introduction, degree apprenticeships have led to growing partnerships between universities and employers, particularly in sectors like digital technology, healthcare, and construction (Hughes and Saieva, 2019; Lester, 2020). These programs have expanded access to higher education, enhanced graduate job readiness, and diversified learning pathways (Andrewartha and Harvey, 2017). Importantly, the dual-learning structure has also reshaped traditional notions of academic value by legitimizing experiential learning (Slattery, 2024).

By contrast, Thailand's higher education system continues to struggle with aligning educational outcomes with labor market needs. An entrenched focus on theoretical classroom learning has contributed to graduate unemployment and skill mismatches, especially in rural and informal sectors. While policy frameworks like "Thailand 4.0" aim to improve employability, the integration of academic and vocational learning remains limited (Buasuwan, 2018; Scott and Guan, 2023). Graduates often emerge lacking the practical competencies increasingly demanded by employers (Amigó and Lloyd, 2021).

Several Thai initiatives have explored work-based education. The "School-in-Factory" model, linking vocational colleges and industry, enables concurrent study and employment (Intarakumnerd and Jutarosaga, 2023; Schröder *et al.*, 2024). The Tripartite Education System fosters cooperation between schools, employers, and policymakers to develop relevant curricula (Anastasiou *et al.*, 2024; Ndukwe and Daniel, 2020). Yet these efforts remain fragmented, lacking national integration or university-level uptake.

Unlike the UK's institutionalized system, Thailand's WBL programs are still ad hoc and under-supported. The absence of clear standards, policy frameworks, and academic pathways hinders scale-up (Miller and Marion, 2017; Shutaleva *et al.*, 2023). Apprenticeship access is often limited to urban areas, excluding rural learners. Nevertheless, this gap offers an opportunity to adapt the UK model's structural, pedagogical, and financial innovations to fit the Thai context (Naafs and Skelton, 2020; Pongsin *et al.*, 2023).

A localized version of degree apprenticeships could strengthen university-industry linkages, align curricula with labor market needs, and promote lifelong learning. It could also bridge gaps between formal and non-formal education systems, especially in underserved communities (Ohashi and Abid, 2019; Intarakumnerd and Jutarosaga, 2023). The shift toward hybrid learning marks a broader transformation in how Thai higher education can meet societal demands.

However, implementing such a model nationwide would involve addressing key structural and cultural barriers. Bureaucratic rigidity, limited faculty expertise in work-based pedagogy, and persistent stigma toward vocational tracks remain major obstacles (Sarawat, 2016; Sullivan, 2023). Reforming funding mechanisms and ensuring quality across diverse institutions would also be essential. Furthermore, equitable access—particularly for rural, low-income, or marginalized learners—must be prioritized (Azfar *et al.*, 2018; Chiengkul, 2019).

Realizing this vision demands coordinated collaboration among government ministries, universities, industry, and civil society. National policy frameworks, monitoring systems, and incentive structures for employers are critical (Evans *et al.*, 2023; Thawesaengskulthai *et al.*, 2024). Equally, public narratives about vocational education must shift, with greater societal recognition of its value and legitimacy (McGrath *et al.*, 2020; Powell and McGrath, 2019).

In conclusion, Thailand is at a pivotal moment in its education reform trajectory. Insights from the UK's degree apprenticeship model can inform a more integrated, equitable, and skill-responsive higher education system. This study aims to provide a contextualized framework for adapting such models to promote lifelong learning and socio-economic inclusion in Thailand.

1.2 Research objectives

This study aims to explore the possibilities and implications of adapting the United Kingdom's degree apprenticeship model into Thailand's higher education system, with a focus on enhancing work-integrated learning and promoting equitable access to lifelong learning. In doing so, the study examines how structural, cultural, and policy-level factors influence the transferability and contextualization of apprenticeship systems across different national settings.

Specifically, the research objectives are:

- (1) To analyze the policy and structural features of the UK's degree apprenticeship model and its outcomes over the past decade.
- (2) To examine Thailand's current landscape of work-based learning and the readiness of its higher education institutions to support apprenticeship-based programs.
- (3) To identify barriers and opportunities for localizing the degree apprenticeship model in Thailand's socio-educational context.
- (4) To propose a contextualized framework for implementing apprenticeship-based learning in Thai higher education, with attention to equity, inclusion, and future skills.

1.3 Research question

In order to address the above objectives, the study is guided by the following primary research question:

How can the United Kingdom's degree apprenticeship model be adapted and localized to enhance work-integrated learning in Thailand's higher education system?

Sub-questions include:

- (1) What have been the key successes and limitations of the degree apprenticeship model in the UK since its inception in 2015?
- (2) What structural, cultural, and institutional challenges exist in integrating apprenticeship-based learning into Thai universities?
- (3) What strategies or frameworks can effectively support the transfer of apprenticeship principles to the Thai context while addressing equity and inclusion?

1.4 Significance of the study

This study contributes theoretically to comparative education by examining how the UK's degree apprenticeship model can be contextually adapted to Thailand. It addresses key gaps in the literature around policy transfer, localization, and cultural responsiveness—areas central to understanding how educational innovations travel and transform across systems.

Practically, the research offers a framework for aligning Thai higher education with labor market demands through structured, work-integrated pathways. It provides timely guidance for policymakers, universities, and employers involved in curriculum reform, university-industry partnerships, and regulatory design. The findings also speak to broader regional efforts toward inclusive, skills-based learning and support the global agenda for lifelong learning by showcasing how hybrid models can enhance access, relevance, and workforce preparedness.

1.5 Literature review

1.5.1 Apprenticeship as higher education reform in the UK. Since 2015, the UK's degree apprenticeships have reshaped higher education by bridging the gap between academic study and vocational training (Brockmann and Laurie, 2016; Powell and McGrath, 2019). These programs integrate university education with occupational competence, enabling learners to

gain industry experience while earning a degree. A key catalyst was the 2017 Apprenticeship Levy, which required large employers to fund training via payroll (Crawford-Lee and Moorwood, 2019; Hodgson *et al.*, 2017). This policy redefined universities' roles, positioning them as active partners in workforce development. Lester (2020) highlights how this reform spurred closer industry-academic collaboration and reinforced the employability agenda.

1.5.2 Equity, access, and social mobility in degree apprenticeships. Degree apprenticeships have expanded access to higher education by offering salaried training that removes financial barriers for underrepresented groups (Bradley *et al.*, 2019; Mulkeen *et al.*, 2019). Adult learners, those from lower-income backgrounds, and non-traditional students benefit from this dual student-employee status, supporting educational and career progression (Holzer and Baum, 2017; Sheerin and Brittain, 2024). Yet access to elite apprenticeships remains uneven, with top universities and prestigious employers underrepresented, potentially reinforcing rather than reducing social stratification (Smith *et al.*, 2021; Davis and Moore, 2019).

1.5.3 Pedagogical innovation and work-integrated learning (WIL). WIL has prompted significant pedagogical shifts, replacing lecture-driven methods with experiential, industry-aligned learning (Bakar, 2021; Van Wyk, 2019). Signature pedagogies now emphasize professional reasoning, reflection, and performance-based assessments such as portfolios and competency evaluations (Hobley, 2021; Harris *et al.*, 2017). However, the success of these models depends on institutional readiness and staff capability. Educators must navigate both academic and industrial domains to deliver contextually grounded and theory-informed instruction (Meyer and Norman, 2020; Taylor and Colet, 2023).

1.5.4 Comparative perspectives on apprenticeship transferability. Policy transfer across national contexts is complex. Apprenticeships are shaped by local economic, institutional, and cultural systems (Crawford-Lee, 2016; Fortwengel and Jackson, 2016; Jackson and Deeg, 2019). While the UK model is often held up as a global reference, applying it elsewhere—like Thailand—requires adaptation, not replication. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) caution against “uninformed transfer,” while Phillips and Ochs (2004) emphasize that recontextualization is essential. Steiner-Khamsi (2016) calls this “contextual translation,” urging alignment with local needs. In Southeast Asia, employer disengagement and weak governance often hinder reform (Soliman, 2023; Vandeweyer *et al.*, 2021), underscoring the need for flexible, collaborative models.

1.5.5 The emergence of work-based learning in Thailand. Thailand has introduced initiatives like the School-in-Factory model and Tripartite Education System to strengthen academic-industry ties (Mongkhonvanit, 2017; Schröder *et al.*, 2024). However, these efforts remain largely within vocational education, with minimal impact on universities. Thai higher education is still dominated by theory-based instruction, and lacks frameworks for crediting and assessing workplace learning (Tran *et al.*, 2020). Bureaucratic complexity and resistance to curricular change further stall WIL innovation (Ha, 2022).

1.5.6 Policy context and the push for lifelong learning in Thailand. The “Thailand 4.0” strategy positions education as a driver of economic transformation through lifelong learning and digital innovation (Buasuwan, 2018). Yet, the gap between national goals and institutional capacity remains. Many universities lack autonomy and resources to implement apprenticeship-style programs (Gibson *et al.*, 2016; Lester and Bravenboer, 2020; Vandeweyer *et al.*, 2021). Without systemic reform, including leadership, incentives, and policy alignment, work-based education may not realize its potential.

1.5.7 Challenges of cross-national model adaptation. Adapting UK-style apprenticeships to Thailand demands reforms in governance, finance, and pedagogy. This includes recognizing dual-status learners, establishing employer incentives, and creating integrated assessment systems (Jung, 2018; Power-Mason *et al.*, 2025; Šćepanović and Martín Ariles, 2020). The persistent stigma toward vocational education presents another challenge (Ajithkumar and Pilz, 2019; Chalamwong and Suebnusorn, 2018). Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) warn of “incomplete transfer” when such factors are ignored. Effective localization requires hybrid models tailored to Thai cultural and institutional realities (Nopas, 2025).

1.5.8 Contribution of this study. This research contributes a comparative policy perspective on how degree apprenticeships can be adapted to Thailand's context. It advances debates on WIL by exploring contextualized reform rather than direct imitation. Drawing on [Dolowitz and Marsh \(2000\)](#) and [Phillips and Ochs \(2004\)](#), the study emphasizes transformation over transplantation. In line with [Richards \(2022\)](#) and [Rosé and Ferschke \(2016\)](#), it challenges dominant narratives by positioning Thailand within global dialogues on equitable, future-oriented education.

2. Research methodology

This research employed a qualitative, comparative case study methodology to explore how the United Kingdom's degree apprenticeship model could be adapted to the Thai higher education context. The aim was to generate in-depth and context-sensitive insights into how apprenticeship systems are implemented, interpreted, and potentially localized in distinct national settings. The study focused on the structural, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions of degree apprenticeships in both the UK and Thailand, with a particular interest in the perspectives of institutions, policymakers, and employers. Comparative education frameworks guided the methodology, allowing for both the identification of transferable practices and the recognition of contextual limits.

2.1 Research design

The study was designed as a comparative case study situated within an interpretivist paradigm. This approach allowed for a context-rich exploration of educational phenomena across two national settings. The United Kingdom was selected as the base case due to its mature implementation of degree apprenticeships as part of higher education over the past decade. Thailand was chosen as the target context, aligned with its national push under the Thailand 4.0 policy agenda and emerging interest in work-integrated learning. The design emphasized understanding apprenticeship not merely as a policy innovation, but as a lived educational practice shaped by institutional structures and cultural norms.

2.2 Data collection methods

This study employed three qualitative data sources: documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and cross-case synthesis.

The documentary analysis reviewed over 50 primary documents (2016–2024) selected through purposive sampling based on relevance to apprenticeship systems and education reform in the UK and Thailand. Sources included white papers, curriculum guidelines, funding frameworks, and reports from governmental agencies (e.g. Department for Education, Ministry of Higher Education), quality assurance bodies, university consortia, and international organizations (e.g. UNESCO, ILO, OECD). Documents offering policy-level insights and stakeholder perspectives on degree apprenticeships were prioritized.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders in both countries. UK participants included university program directors, employer training leads, and policy advisors; Thai interviewees comprised higher education administrators, officials from the Ministry of Higher Education and OVEC, and private-sector partners. Interviews were conducted in English or Thai based on preference, then audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated where necessary to preserve nuance.

The interview protocol explored five domains: (1) policy context, (2) institutional readiness, (3) curriculum and pedagogy, (4) employer involvement, and (5) cultural perceptions. Open-ended questions encouraged reflective, narrative responses. The protocol was pilot-tested in Thailand for clarity and cultural relevance before full deployment.

A hybrid thematic analysis followed, combining inductive coding from interview data and deductive framing from literature on policy transfer, lifelong learning, and vocational

education. This enabled both within-case insights and cross-country comparisons, revealing patterns of convergence and divergence in apprenticeship adaptation.

2.3 Participant selection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with significant professional experience in apprenticeship design, policy, or implementation. Initial participants were identified through institutional websites, government directories, and professional networks. Snowball sampling was subsequently employed to identify additional informants recommended by initial interviewees. Inclusion criteria required participants to hold roles related to degree apprenticeship development or policy reform in either national context.

The final sample of 15 participants allowed for sufficient diversity across sectors while supporting depth of analysis. All interviewees held decision-making or leadership roles that directly shaped program implementation or reform strategy. [Table 1](#) summarizes participant roles by country and sector:

This participant structure enabled multi-perspective insights across government, academic, and industry sectors in both countries, strengthening the validity of the comparative analysis.

2.4 Data analysis

All documentary and interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following [Braun and Clarke's \(2024\)](#) six-phase approach. Data immersion, initial coding, and theme generation were performed using NVivo 12. Codes were reviewed and clustered into themes based on recurrence, conceptual relevance, and cross-case resonance. Vertical analysis (within each country) was followed by horizontal synthesis (between countries), enabling comparative insight. The analytic process was guided by frameworks on policy transfer and hybridization ([Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000](#); [Phillips and Ochs, 2004](#)), which supported interpretation of how apprenticeship models might be adapted or resisted in local contexts.

2.5 Trustworthiness and rigor

The study adhered to established qualitative standards. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation across documents, interviews, and policy sources. Member checks with selected participants validated preliminary interpretations. Rich, contextual descriptions were included

Table 1. Summary of interview participants by country, role, and sector

Country	Role	Sector
UK	Degree Apprenticeship Director	Higher Education
UK	Apprenticeship Lead	Employer/Industry
UK	Policy Advisor	Government
UK	Employer Training Lead	Employer/Industry
UK	University Work-Based Learning Manager	Higher Education
UK	Program Accreditation Specialist	Professional Body
UK	Industry Liaison Officer	Employer/Industry
Thailand	Dean of Faculty of Education	Higher Education
Thailand	Vice President of Academic Affairs	Higher Education
Thailand	Official, Ministry of Higher Education	Government
Thailand	Policy Analyst, OVEC	Government
Thailand	Director, Private Sector Training Dept	Employer/Industry
Thailand	Corporate-University Liaison Officer	Employer/Industry
Thailand	Dean, College of Innovation	Higher Education
Thailand	Program Developer, EdTech Start-up	Private Sector/EdTech

Source(s): The author

to enhance transferability. Dependability was supported through detailed documentation of data collection and analysis decisions. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive memos, peer debriefing, and maintenance of a full audit trail. Together, these strategies ensured the trustworthiness of findings and their grounding in empirical evidence.

2.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's university ethics committee prior to fieldwork. All participants received an information sheet outlining the study's aims, data management procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained. Interviews were anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting. Audio files, transcripts, and notes were stored securely in encrypted files, accessible only to the researcher.

3. Research findings

This section presents the findings from the comparative case study, focusing on the adaptation of the UK's degree apprenticeship model within the Thai higher education context. The analysis draws on both documentary analysis and participant interviews, with themes organized into four categories: (1) governance and institutional autonomy, (2) curriculum design and pedagogical delivery, (3) employer engagement and work-based assessment, and (4) cultural and societal perceptions of vocational learning. The documentary data were instrumental in identifying formal structures, policy intentions, and statistical trends, while interviews provided grounded perspectives on practical implementation and lived experience.

3.1 Governance and institutional autonomy

In the UK, policy documents such as the *Post-16 Skills Plan* and Ofsted inspection reports highlight the structured yet flexible governance underpinning degree apprenticeships. Universities operate within nationally approved apprenticeship standards but retain the autonomy to tailor delivery to regional needs. This balance is reflected in institutional strategies and Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) documents that emphasize responsiveness to local labor markets. A UK university program director commented:

We have the freedom to innovate within the guidelines, allowing us to tailor programs that meet both academic standards and employer expectations. That flexibility is key—it lets us be responsive, agile, and more connected to what's happening in the local labor market.

However, this autonomy comes with complications. Several UK stakeholders—supported by reports from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)—acknowledged difficulties in interpreting fragmented apprenticeship standards and adjusting to shifting funding priorities. One administrator shared:

Sometimes it feels like the ground is constantly shifting—funding rules change, quality assurance audits tighten, and we're left scrambling to keep our programs compliant.

Documentary evidence also critiques the standard-setting process. Reports from the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfATE) and external evaluations reveal low levels of employer participation in the development of standards, contributing to qualifications that are sometimes misaligned with actual workplace needs.

In Thailand, policy documents from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) and Thailand's 20-Year Education Plan underscore a centralized system of educational governance. Curricular reforms require multiple levels of bureaucratic approval, which slows innovation and decentralization. A Thai university administrator observed:

Our ability to adapt quickly is hindered by bureaucratic processes; even minor changes necessitate extensive approvals. Sometimes it takes over a year just to revise a single module.

3.2 Curriculum design and pedagogical delivery

Documentary sources from the UK—such as institutional curriculum frameworks and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines—describe the co-design of apprenticeship curricula between universities and employers. These documents promote work-integrated learning, modular alignment with industry competencies, and assessments that combine academic and workplace outcomes. An academic coordinator echoed this ethos:

Our curriculum development is a collaborative process with employers . . . That collaboration means our students are always learning something immediately useful.

Yet, according to both interview data and external evaluations (e.g. Ofsted annual reports), concerns persist that some apprenticeship programs prioritize vocational skillsets at the expense of academic depth. A UK lecturer remarked:

There's a tension between academic depth and employability focus. We sometimes compromise critical thinking and theoretical grounding for the sake of practical alignment.

Further analysis of sectoral reports (e.g. from the Learning and Work Institute) revealed that standards in high-growth fields such as digital technology and healthcare are frequently outdated by the time they are approved, contributing to persistent skills mismatches.

In Thailand, policy texts and curriculum audit reports reveal that higher education remains heavily theory-oriented. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and university curriculum templates provide limited room for experiential or workplace-based learning. This aligns with an account from a Thai faculty member:

Our courses are predominantly lecture-based . . . Even when students go to do internships, the learning isn't assessed. There's no real structure for what they're supposed to gain.

3.3 Employer engagement and work-based assessment

UK government publications, including evaluations of the Apprenticeship Levy, document how employer engagement is encouraged through financial incentives, regulatory co-governance, and structured mentorship. In practice, interviews reflect this formalized collaboration. A UK employer partner noted:

We are deeply involved in shaping the apprenticeship programs and assessing student progress . . . It's not just about taking students—we help create professionals.

Still, government reviews and employer surveys highlight persistent issues with SME participation. Despite being eligible for levy transfers, many SMEs lack administrative capacity and struggle to navigate the application process. This was echoed by an SME manager:

The paperwork is endless. It's hard for us to commit . . . when we don't have dedicated HR teams like big companies.

Documentary data from the Department for Education (DfE) confirm that apprenticeship starts dropped following the introduction of the Levy in 2017, with further declines during the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly affecting underrepresented learners and younger applicants.

In Thailand, employer-university partnerships are frequently described in policy strategy documents but remain informal in practice. Internship arrangements are common, but co-design and joint assessment are rare. A Thai industry representative shared:

We offer internships, yes, but we are rarely invited to help shape what students learn . . . Right now, it's more like a checklist.

This mismatch between policy rhetoric and implementation was reinforced in annual reports from Thailand's Office of the Vocational Education Commission (OVEC), which identified limited private sector involvement in program design and assessment.

3.4 Cultural and societal perceptions of vocational learning

In the UK, promotional campaigns and public communications from the Department for Education have attempted to rebrand apprenticeships as prestigious, employable pathways. This messaging has gained traction in official statistics and longitudinal studies from the Social Mobility Commission, showing growing support among parents and students. One UK apprentice reflected:

Choosing an apprenticeship was seen as a smart move . . . Even my parents, who were skeptical at first, now tell others how proud they are.

Nonetheless, interviews and equity audits reveal continued skepticism among some university staff and unequal access across socioeconomic groups. A faculty member observed:

Apprenticeships are still seen as second-tier . . . There's an unspoken hierarchy.

Furthermore, data from the Education and Training Foundation show that post-COVID recovery in apprenticeship enrollments has been uneven, with disadvantaged learners struggling to re-engage due to lost income, family responsibilities, or reduced employer hiring.

In Thailand, cultural narratives embedded in documents such as the Thai Education Reform Roadmap reflect ongoing hierarchical views of academic versus vocational pathways. As one student remarked:

Many view vocational training as a fallback for those who couldn't get into university . . .

A Thai education officer added:

It's not just about prestige—it's about what people associate with success. Changing this perception is not easy, but it is essential.

These findings mirror media discourse analysis and survey results published by Thai educational think tanks, which document persistent social bias and structural inequality in access to vocational routes.

4. Research discussion

This section reflects on the complexities of adapting the UK's degree apprenticeship model to Thailand's higher education system. Drawing from comparative findings, it examines governance, curriculum, employer involvement, and cultural perceptions, while addressing underlying political and epistemological dynamics. Although the UK model offers institutional integration, this study emphasizes that policy transfer is neither linear nor universally applicable. In Thailand, reform requires structural recalibration, cultural shifts, and awareness of the socio-political context ([Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000](#); [Phillips and Ochs, 2004](#)).

4.1 Institutional autonomy and the politics of reform

Institutional autonomy in the UK allows universities to align apprenticeships with labor market needs, supporting flexible program design. However, participants noted regulatory ambiguities and fragmented oversight, especially where employer input was limited, complicating long-term planning. In contrast, Thai universities operate under centralized control that slows reform and fosters risk aversion. As [Dolowitz and Marsh \(2000\)](#) argue, importing models without addressing structural differences risks superficial reform. Greater autonomy and adaptive governance are critical for Thailand's institutions.

4.2 Curriculum and pedagogy: reclaiming workplace learning as legitimate knowledge

In the UK, workplace learning is integrated into formal curricula, co-developed with employers, and rigorously assessed. While this fosters applied learning, some standards lag behind industry evolution and may narrow space for critical inquiry. In Thailand, work-based learning is marginal, poorly assessed, and rarely embedded in curricula. Faculty are seldom prepared to oversee such learning, reflecting academic hierarchies that devalue experiential knowledge (Nylund *et al.*, 2017; Phillips and Ochs, 2004). Moving forward, Thailand should adopt co-designed modules, establish credit mechanisms, and invest in faculty development aligned with workplace pedagogy.

4.3 Employer engagement: beyond collaboration toward Co-ownership

UK employers play an active role, supported by the Apprenticeship Levy, but challenges remain—SMEs often face barriers accessing funds and influencing standards. In Thailand, employer involvement is limited and rarely influences curriculum or assessment. Strengthening this requires tiered engagement models: large firms can co-develop curricula while SMEs receive support via regional hubs. Tax incentives, co-funding schemes, and liaison units could foster stronger university-industry partnerships.

4.4 Cultural legitimacy and the stigma of vocational pathways

Despite policy support, UK apprenticeships still face status hierarchies. Post-COVID declines in uptake underscore concerns around equity and public confidence. In Thailand, stigma is deeper—vocational paths are seen as second-rate, reinforcing social stratification (Shahjahan and Edwards, 2022). By contrast, Germany's dual system integrates apprenticeships into national identity, offering prestige, clear progression, and employer co-ownership. To emulate this, Thailand must pursue cultural transformation via public campaigns, revised guidance systems, and dual-degree tracks to elevate vocational pathways and dismantle binary hierarchies. The proposed framework for adapting degree apprenticeships in Thailand is summarized below (see Figure 1).

5. Conclusion of discussion

In sum, the adaptation of the UK's degree apprenticeship model to Thailand is not a matter of technical feasibility alone but one of contextual integrity. While the UK system offers valuable lessons in employer engagement, curricular integration, and institutional autonomy, it is not without flaws—especially in its engagement with SMEs, responsiveness of standards, and post-pandemic equity outcomes. The study highlights that policy borrowing, if done uncritically, may lead to symbolic or ineffective reform. Following Dolowitz and Marsh (2000), meaningful transfer entails deep engagement with institutional structures, pedagogical beliefs, and cultural narratives. Thailand's path forward must center on transformation—not transplantation—by crafting hybrid models that respond to local constraints while drawing selectively from global practices.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the prospects of adapting the United Kingdom's degree apprenticeship model to Thailand's higher education context through a qualitative, comparative case study. Drawing on policy documents, stakeholder interviews, and cross-national analysis, the research illuminated key structural, pedagogical, and cultural dynamics that shape the feasibility of such a transfer.

While the UK model showcases how institutional autonomy, employer co-ownership, and curricular integration can embed work-based learning within higher education, its challenges—such as inconsistent employer engagement and tensions around academic

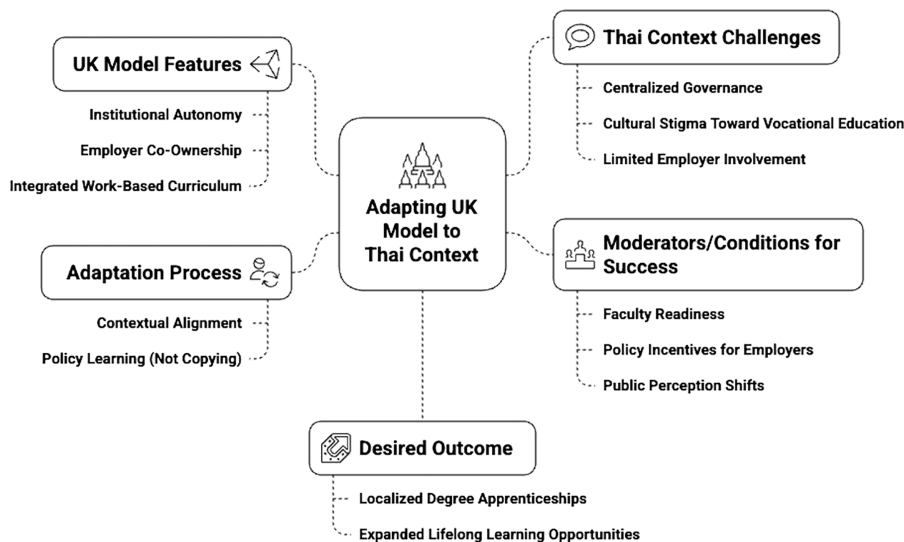


Figure 1. Adapting degree apprenticeships for lifelong learning in Thai higher education. The author

rigor—underscore that the model itself is not without limitations. In Thailand, however, deeper constraints persist, including centralized governance, limited curricular flexibility, and persistent stigma surrounding vocational pathways.

The study finds that successful adaptation will require more than borrowing structural elements. It must involve context-sensitive reform, addressing governance logics, pedagogical assumptions, and societal perceptions. As [Dolowitz and Marsh \(2000\)](#) and [Phillips and Ochs \(2004\)](#) emphasize, effective policy transfer depends on thoughtful reinterpretation—not replication—guided by local realities.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the literature on transnational policy learning and comparative vocational education by offering Thailand an evidence-informed foundation to build its own, contextually grounded approach to apprenticeship-based higher education—one that is inclusive, skill-responsive, and aligned with the goals of lifelong learning.

7. Implications for policy and practice

This study offers key insights for adapting the UK’s degree apprenticeship model to Thailand, highlighting both structural mechanisms and the broader cultural and pedagogical shifts needed to embed work-integrated learning within Thai higher education.

7.1 Policy implications

Thailand should establish a national framework for degree apprenticeships that differentiates them from vocational tracks and integrates them into higher education. Core elements should include recognition of dual-status learners, academic credit for workplace learning, and employer participation in curriculum design and assessment.

A pilot mechanism for fast-tracked curriculum approval—targeted at apprenticeship-linked programs—could empower select universities to innovate collaboratively with industry. These pilots could inform broader policy rollouts.

To engage employers, a tiered partnership model is recommended: large firms contribute to curriculum and mentoring, while SMEs are supported through sectoral clusters facilitated by

regional offices. These clusters can co-develop standards and reduce administrative burdens on smaller businesses.

Financial incentives are essential. A co-investment fund could match employer contributions to training, while tax deductions and training vouchers can encourage SME participation.

Public legitimacy must also be addressed. A national campaign showcasing successful apprentices—emphasizing career progression and contribution to economic development—can help shift social perceptions. Integrating apprenticeship metrics into national dashboards would reinforce policy visibility and value.

7.2 Implications for institutional practice

Universities must establish dedicated units to manage employer engagement, coordinate placements, co-assess student learning, and track satisfaction.

Faculty development should include CPD on authentic workplace assessment, student reflection facilitation, and triadic supervision. Universities must revise credit transfer and RPL systems to accommodate employer evaluations, replace classroom modules with project-based tasks, and integrate joint assessment panels.

To deepen collaboration, universities can initiate “Industry in Residence” programs, bringing practitioners into classrooms to co-teach and mentor. This fosters trust and curricular relevance.

Finally, outreach should extend to underrepresented sectors such as agriculture, crafts, and start-ups through regional roadshows, MOUs, and innovation hubs. These partnerships would align apprenticeship pathways with local economic development goals.

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