

Apprentice perspectives: difficult choices in work-based learning

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the reasons apprentices give for withdrawing from their degree apprenticeships.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 apprentices from a Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA) programme. Thematic analysis was used to explore insights around reasons for withdrawal.

Findings – Apprentices noted an accumulation of factors leading to withdrawal rather than single overriding reasons. Although each experience was specific to individual circumstances, three clear themes came from the data: (1) the burden of work and administration (2) change in job role and (3) benefits they derived from their experiences as apprentices despite needing to withdraw.

Originality/value – Although small-scale, this study offers novel ways to understand apprentice experiences around programme withdrawal. It deepens our understanding of the choices and challenges faced when making decisions about continuing or discontinuing an apprenticeship.

Keywords Attrition, Programme withdrawal, Withdrawal choices, Apprentices, Government, Situated learning, Apprenticeship ecology, Agency, Upskillers, Student withdrawal, Degree apprenticeships, COVID-19

Paper type Research article

Introduction

This paper examines apprentices' emotional responses to withdrawal from degree-level work-based learning (WBL) programmes. Through a study within English degree apprenticeship ecology, we argue that current policy regimes have created tensions hampering apprentices' ability to make appropriate decisions in relation to their learning.

More specifically, we identify constraints and challenges within WBL programme design that add complexity to higher education institution (HEI) understanding of apprentice withdrawal and diminish the impact of our typical responses to students. While Tinto's (1975) seminal work on "lack of congruency" (that mismatch between individual fit and institutional and social climate) remains a landmark for understanding the messy state of withdrawal, interplays with the specificity of WBL experiences are worth reflecting on as the field examines a decade of degree apprenticeship provision.

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An early version of this study (Myers *et al.*, 2024) was presented at the Researching Work and Learning (RWL) conference, 17–19 June 2024, Linköping, Sweden, <https://www.rwlconferences.org/conferences-events/rwl13-linkoping-sweden>



Contemporary WBL programme designs have also sprung new challenges for retention practices in general. Recent roles for employers and other institutional influences on HE retention and progression challenge the more traditional university context of programme design and student support. Additionally, degree apprenticeship provision has generated distinct challenges for integrating on-and-off-the-job learning (Lester, 2020) and recognising prior education and learning in the workplace (Bravenboer *et al.*, 2024), which can complicate traditional support mechanisms for mature learners in this context.

Within the study, we explore how complex institutional relationships and demands between providers, employers, and multiple government regulators impact on the apprenticeship experience. The study focuses on important questions of how neoliberal orthodoxies around “choice” that are part of programme design may not apply to individual circumstances (Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015).

Our research uses a group of interviews with degree apprentices in England to explore individual challenges leading to withdrawal from their programme. We examine the conflicts and tensions apprentices experience when deciding to withdraw. Referring to Archer (2000), we study how apprentices weigh their circumstances and constraints against their personal goals to determine what is best for them in their socio-economic environments. We consider the historical, social and political contexts (Reich and Hager, 2014) that inform their withdrawal decisions, which are, ultimately, a form of agentic practice.

The paper is structured as follows: after an overview of the complex regulatory context of degree apprenticeships in England, we contextualise our paper within literature around neoliberalised student choices. We then outline the qualitative methodology used to understand the withdrawn apprentice experience and present our findings. We finish with a discussion of implications for practice and policy, alongside concluding remarks.

Degree apprenticeship context

UK HE is heading fast towards a crossroads. Trends of economic insecurity and risk have gathered, increasing their impact in the current post-pandemic, post-Brexit environment of austerity and declining industrial productivity. While UK universities are touted as a “global success story” (McCann *et al.*, 2022, p. 1530), contributing some £130 billion to the UK economy (Universities UK, 2024), the economic performance of HEIs continues to be delivered at significant human cost. This can be seen within the trebling of tuition fees in England in 2012 and accelerating complexity and funding pressures from differentiated student regimes in the devolved nations, where UK economic struggles have left students as a “casualty” of rising costs of living (Russell Group, 2024). Additional tensions appear via the neoliberal rise of “the executive” (Shattock, 2013), with traditional university collective governance and academic participation stymied in favour of managerial decision-making. Human costs can also be recognised within the parlous state of academic staff, many employed on gig-economy contracts and labouring under significant mental-health pressures (Morrish, 2019).

Although this situation might be considered, by and large, a failure of a neoliberal era which promised individual choice, free enterprise and the ability to control inflationary pressures (Crouch, 2011, p. 22), it is in this turbulent socio-economic context that degree apprenticeships have been introduced as both welcome alternative to high student fees (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and as a way of overcoming national skills shortages. Individuals can earn-while-they-learn in gainful employment. This offer has proven attractive to both school leavers and already employed “up-skillers” who require a degree to progress their careers.

Marketed as “win-win for students and employers” (Smith *et al.*, 2021) alike, degree apprenticeships, which were introduced in 2015, have now become an established tenet of UK HE policy (Myers *et al.*, 2023a). Although the modern apprenticeship has been an integral part of the UK’s workforce development strategy for the past 20 years – including the launch of two-year, tertiary-level “Foundation Degrees” in the early 2000s (Wilson *et al.*, 2005) – the most recent iteration offers full undergraduate (and, in some professions, postgraduate)

qualifications alongside a paid, employment-based apprenticeship. Newer apprenticeships have a distinctive employer focus, with desired learning outcomes being developed by employer-led “Trailblazer” groups to form apprenticeship “Standards”.

There are numerous attractions for employers to engage with degree apprenticeships. For employers who pay the levy, there is of course the need to get value for money out of the fund. Smaller employers exempt from paying into the levy, who may have previously struggled to invest in staff development, can also draw on it to fund development and retraining opportunities. Thus, for all types of employers, there is the ability to train, develop and succession plan in a sector-specific context; supporting competitiveness promoting sustainable development and enhancing reputation (see Horáčková *et al.*, 2023).

Although WBL programmes are correctly touted as having great potential for future economic development (The Sutton Trust, UCAS, 2023), tensions persist within the complex network of state, industry and HE in England [1] (see Figure 1).

Partly due to complex structuring outlined in Figure 1, power-balancing appears tipped toward government institutions and employers within degree apprenticeships in England. The situation may be compared to Scotland (Collins and Gillion, 2024), where funding follows apprentices. In England, funding remains with employers, and apprentices in England can find their apprenticeship *and* funding ends if they are made redundant, which was a major issue during the pandemic and recovery (Myers *et al.*, 2023a). Funding rules also constrain what assistance can be provided to struggling apprentices.

Another important contextual influence in terms of whether apprentices stay/withdraw is the pedagogical structure of their programmes. The degree is just one element of their apprenticeship. Other elements have included accreditation of English and maths skills (“Functional Skills”) and an independently assessed “End Point Assessment” (EPA). In some apprenticeships, HEIs conduct an “integrated” EPA as part of the degree study. In other cases –

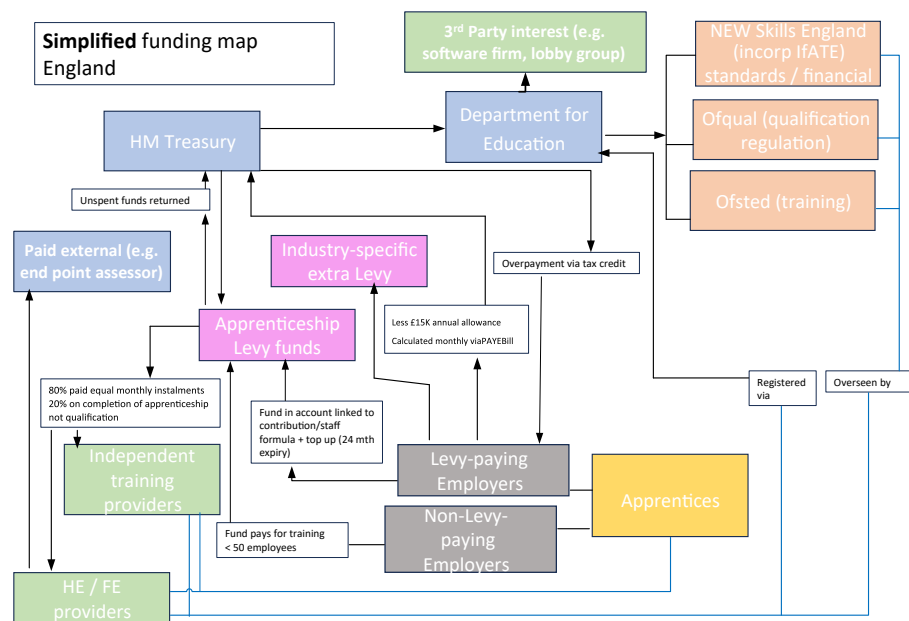


Figure 1. Simplified diagram of organisations, institutions and financial relationships within English degree apprenticeships (as of Spring, 2026). **Source(s):** Authors’ own work, updated from Myers *et al.* (2024)

such as with our participants – EPA is conducted after the degree has been earned and is a separate process requiring another set of assessment tasks (e.g. an employment-based project, professional interview and completion of a portfolio of evidence) to meet the Apprenticeship Standard. These other elements bring further complexity and wide-ranging contextual influences to bear on the success of the apprenticeship, often with financing at the centre of institutional decision-making rather than support for the apprentice (as per [Figure 1](#)).

Choice in work-based learning

Against the background of the highly complex environment of degree apprenticeships is the experience of individual apprentices, whose voices can get lost in the myriad relationships of institutional networks within apprenticeship delivery and governance. For example, there are questions about the extent to which the neoliberal orthodoxies around student “choice” apply to individual circumstances within traditional HE, particularly for those with dependents and other responsibilities or an inability to take on debt ([Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015](#)). [Archer \(2000\)](#) argues that “active” contextual choices differ substantially from the passive choice expected with rational choice theory. Students must weigh regulatory circumstances and constraints against personal goals to determine what is best for them in their social context ([Archer, 2000](#)), but how is that different or potentially more challenging in the degree apprenticeship arena?

English apprenticeships offer an attractive opportunity to view WBL as set within socio-historical contexts, namely those of New Public Management and the neoliberal “governmentalities” that shape and frame practice and the power relations embedded within them ([Reich and Hager, 2014](#)). This is evidenced when employers are encouraged to adopt a “standardised” development tool based on anticipatory governance ([Ye and Nylander, 2024](#)) of national skills need. As apprenticeships are seen as important workforce development tools ([Fabian and Taylor-Smith, 2021](#)), the socio-historical context is important for understanding the lived experiences of apprentices and indeed those who decide to withdraw. However, we argue that actor agency plays an integral role in withdrawal (much like learning) in important, empowering ways. Learning is a kind of freeing activity that addresses “imposed conformity” as well as the conflicts of power inherent in the practice environment ([Lave, 2008](#), p. 206). Here, knowledge and action are intertwined: “Situated activity always involves changes in knowledge and action, and ‘changes in knowledge and action’ are central to what we mean by ‘learning’” ([Lave, 2008](#), p. 201).

More importantly, many experiences of withdrawal are not only a form of learning but also take on characteristics of “practice”. Drawing on one of [Reich and Hager’s \(2014\)](#) depictions of practice as embodiment, we suggest [Yaklef’s \(2010\)](#) notion of “situated agency” and corporeality may be a useful framing of the experience of withdrawal. We argue that in a sense, the learning experience, however brief for these withdrawn apprentices, allows them to achieve a level of embodied “groundedness” in which to make an agential choice.

Methodology

Sampling

To gain understanding of both reasons and context surrounding withdrawal, we invited apprentices who had withdrawn from a university’s Chartered Management Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA) programme since its launch to participate in a semi-structured interview. Following ethics clearance (2022), we interviewed 16 former apprentices via Microsoft Teams, each lasting approximately one hour. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised for data analysis. Although our participant sample is small scale, their rich stories contribute significantly to understandings of apprentice withdrawal, giving voice to an often understudied and hard-to-reach cohort and offering important insight on degree apprenticeship retention and progression.

Participants

All participants worked for their employer prior to programme start. These “up-skillers” can be differentiated by profile, and potentially by need, from younger apprentices recruited as school/Further Education (FE) leavers. The apprenticeship, which included a business and management undergraduate degree, had been framed by their employers as developmental opportunities. Six of the 16 apprentices worked for larger organisations, with just a few in smaller enterprises. Most of the apprentices worked for private organisations, with only two mentioning a public sector employer.

Many participants were quite experienced in the workplace and had already held managerial roles in their organisations without holding prior university qualifications. Some participants obtained new job roles in their organisation during their studies – often as promotions – which impacted on their workload. Half of the participants had achieved the degree element of their apprenticeship but either chose not to complete the full apprenticeship (i.e. not complete the EPA) or were unable to complete due to moving employers. As the findings show, the difference between achieving the degree and achieving the apprenticeship was an important distinction for these participants – often with the former being seen as having more value than the latter. [Table 1](#) provides more detail on the participants.

Interview content

We consider learning experiences as empowering frameworks shaping learners’ perceptions of the world and their places within it. We therefore approached our interviews with [Archer’s \(2000\)](#) perspective of agency, that of an active participant in decision-making, rather than as a passive actor experiencing imposed or “rational” choices. We asked our participants to describe and explain motivations for, and experiences of, withdrawal from an HE opportunity. We were interested in whether they withdrew for simply “personal reasons” – as withdrawals are often labelled within composite institutional codes ([Brown et al., 2015](#)) – or whether there were more complex factors interplaying within the context of personal decision-making. Questions were ordered to help apprentices tell the story of their experiences, starting from initial motivations for undertaking the apprenticeship and who they worked for, through what they enjoyed about their studies, support they received and issues they encountered leading to the withdrawal decision.

Data analysis

It is important to note that the people who were prepared to talk to us were a particular subset of those who had withdrawn from their degree apprenticeship, each having their own reasons for agreeing to be interviewed. It was clear from the interviews that some chose to participate because they wanted to explain themselves as they felt remorse for having left their studies. Others agreed to be interviewed because they had issues they wanted us to know about. It was important therefore to be careful in analysing and drawing conclusions from the small number and specific population of cases. Having said that, common themes were clear within findings, resonating with what we already knew from working on these programmes.

The study used an interpretivist framework to explore the factors behind apprentices’ decisions to withdraw from their programme, alongside attitudes and opinions post-withdrawal, in part to facilitate programme improvements.

Inductive thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)) was adopted as appropriate for both acknowledging the subjectivity and emotional weight of participants’ accounts, while also allowing for construction of both semantic and latent data themes. Initial codes were generated through full independent coding from all three researchers, before collating, organising and refining into final themes.

Findings

Discussions during the interviews highlighted that for all respondents there was an accumulation of factors that led to withdrawal rather than just one overriding reason and

Table 1. Study participants

Resp	Gender	Completed degree element	Summary
1	M	Y	Quite senior in company with a lot of experience. Completed the degree and was unwilling to take the time to complete the “administrative side of ticking boxes” of the EPA. Also frustrated by the functional skills requirement
2	M	N	Experienced but did not yet have a degree. Changed jobs to a smaller company halfway through – did not complete the degree
3	M	N	Changed employers and did not complete the degree. Had degree from origin country already and considered profession specific studies they had undertaken more appropriate. Frustrated by functional skills requirement
4	F	Y	Experienced and with employer for over a decade. Completed degree but did not hear about EPA requirements until months after finishing degree and then that they had to do a bunch of work to sort it
5	F	N	Was in a management role with their employer but dropped out midway through the programme due to family issues (friend having cancer), found academic writing challenging
6	F	N	Was very experienced in management and role when starting the apprenticeship with their employer. Got a new role in the first year and needed to withdraw due to workload conflicts
7	M	N	Has a senior role in their organisation and already had higher level study, did apprenticeship for personal development. COVID meant significant increase in job intensity (caring profession) and then also took on a more senior role, so withdrew midway through programme. Also frustrated by functional skills requirement as their secondary school studies were outside of the UK
8	F	Y	Was quite experienced although did not have a degree but had studied other lower level qualifications in management. Completed degree (had always wanted a degree) but was frustrated by the EPA requirements
9	F	N	Worked for a small (but multinational) company, had a new boss who was less supportive, mother passed, workload increased. Asked for a break in learning after first module – found WBL more challenging – and found she was withdrawn by her employer
10	F	Self-funding to complete	Worked for a small firm – had completed all but the last WBL module and then was made redundant. Switched to a conventional degree and paid for final module to complete studies
11	F	Self-funding to complete	Wasn’t able to continue the apprenticeship after was made redundant at their company (construction sector). Did the first year and is now self-funding a business degree
12	F	N	Studied first year and then withdrew after “struggling” and taking a break. Had secondary-level study prior to this (quite some time ago) but much experience. Had caregiving duties during the pandemic: “life is too short”. Hadn’t wanted degree
13	M	Y	Worked for a large private employer and completed the degree, but soon afterwards moved to a new employer who was unable to sign off on the project part (EPA). Contacted End Point Assessment Organisation to ask if he could complete and was told he needed to go through “normal channels” – despite everything “done and dusted” with their portfolio
14	F	N	Moved employers and is waiting to restart with her new employer following probationary period
15	M	Y	Quite experienced and senior, completed the degree but changed jobs in organisation and didn’t feel the “accreditation” part as valuable and would have taken too much time to sort out

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Resp	Gender	Completed degree element	Summary
16	F	Y	Had a great deal of experience, and this was her first degree. She got a lot out of it but was frustrated by the portfolio requirement at the end, which would have required a huge amount of work to do, and apprenticeship completion wasn't necessary for her job

that those factors differed across the respondents. There were however three clear themes (some with their own subthemes) relating to participant withdrawal.

- (1) *Theme 1: The burden of work and administration leading to withdrawal*
- (2) *Theme 2: A change in job role leading to withdrawal*
- (3) *Theme 3: The benefit of the programme despite withdrawal*

Theme 1: burdens of work and administration leading to withdrawal

This theme manifested in four main ways. First, we saw straightforward emotional responses to the weight of tasks needing to be undertaken to complete the apprenticeship. The second covered additional work in producing a portfolio of competency-based evidence to meet the apprenticeship Standard. The third issue related to difficulties in securing required time away from substantive roles to study (i.e. “off-the-job” time). The final issue was around the need to have documented evidence of achieving set proficiency levels in maths and English (“Functional Skills”).

Workload pressures. General issues of workload and pressure of the programme were common for all respondents; “I’m a busy man” (R07). As R08 pointed out, as an apprentice you “work full-time and it was effectively a full-time degree ... it was full-on”. Another typical emotional response to this “full-on” experience came from R06, “something had to give. I couldn’t do both at the same time. It was overwhelming me. The pressure I felt was overwhelming ... it’s either my job or it’s my apprenticeship”. While hard for all respondents, those with vocational careers were particularly affected. R07, who worked in the medical profession, offered this highly charged statement, “I’ve got dying patients every day and now I’m dealing with this idiotic system”.

Portfolio requirements for EPA. In terms of the second issue, the sense of a “separate” (R02) portfolio of evidence on top of main degree requirements left many interviewees reflecting on the value that work offered if they had already secured the degree element. For many, what they perceived as extra work did not appear to merit further time sacrifice; “it felt like I’m just doing an admin task here. I’m not getting anything from this” (R01). Others felt genuine distress weighing up their options in relation to withdrawing from this element. R08 commented that it was “upsetting” as she felt her work had already been demonstrated to her employer, “I felt I had already done the apprenticeship”. For one participant who completed the degree, the portfolio requirement was just too much effort, “By the end I was just desperately trying to tick the boxes, fill the boxes in” (R16).

The portfolio itself, which demonstrates learned competences across the knowledge, skills and behaviours of the apprenticeship standard, was also felt to be uninteresting and repetitive in nature; “it’s a box-ticking exercise” (R02). R01 complained, it “was so laborious and so boring ... the administrative nightmare of finding it all. It brings me out in cold sweats just thinking about it”; with no perceived benefits for this work, he chose not to find the extra time. R10 chose to rationalise the effort needed, “it’s a pain. It’s an added pain. And the only reason

why people accept that added pain is because it's free". Much of this negativity could be attributed to the final push at the end of an already elongated and busy process. For example, R04 lamented that she hadn't "chip[ped] away" at her EPA preparation and rather had to "try and jam [it] in" in the last two weeks of a three-year programme.

Study time pressures. Even with regulatory requirements for employers to provide apprentices with the equivalent "off-the-job" time of a day a week to study, negotiating time proved challenging for some respondents. Sometimes this was due to lack of managerial support. R03 highlighted that a change in line manager was instrumental in her decision to withdraw. Initially, that new person was "a bit funny about [her] being off" despite the established commitment arranged and then went on to say that she "resigned because of [her] manager". Other managers were more explicitly noted as hostile to off-the-job time; "it was made perfectly clear that I had to do things, if I was going to do it, it was going to be on my own time" (R09). Some issues here may have come from lack of wider employer support for line managers or understanding of apprenticeship requirements (see [Myers et al., 2025](#)). For example, for one respondent, her employer's interpretation of 20% off-the-job learning differed substantially from regulatory expectations and ultimately contributed to her ending her apprenticeship:

I thought rather than just working [the apprenticeship] and doing [studying] every weekend, I'm going to book in every Thursday, let's say, that's going to be my day. And was told, oh no, you shouldn't need the whole day, because what you should be doing is applying what you're learning to your job and therefore that's the 20% you'll be using for your study. (R12)

On other occasions, the role they were in prevented apprentices from stepping away, whether that was R03 responding to recurrent business crises, or R06 whose promotion took her from a role she could almost do "in my sleep" to one where "there was no time for me" or even R10 who noted while she had some freedom to take time, her management role made it "really rather difficult". Those such as R07 in healthcare roles noted difficulties as they felt obliged to respond to short-staffing or operational peaks.

Functional skills. At the time of the interviews, a condition of the degree apprenticeship award was that, to complete, apprentices must hold secondary-level standard (Level 2) English and maths "functional skills". The need to gain or prove this contributed to withdrawal for some apprentices. R07, R08 and R09 all commented on how they felt the system-imposed bureaucratic hurdles on them as they struggled to prove functional skills exemption, such as when qualifications were achieved outside the United Kingdom. This also caused feelings of real anger and resentment at potentially discriminatory practice for R07, who struggled to have her British qualification certificates accepted as they were in her birth name. Another apprentice (R01) bemoaned UK record-keeping. As he could not find his certificates, he was forced to take additional functional skills assessments. There was also a group of individuals who struggled with passing this requirement. R03 related her struggles with numeracy, "it doesn't matter how much I tried and tried". In some instances, this struggle to pass functional skills surfaced deep-rooted emotions related to not already securing qualifications when they were at school, "I wish I could go back and kick my 11-year-old self" (R06). Guidance in this area has recently been updated ([Department for Education, 2025](#)), with requirements now shifting for non-school leavers unless the employer wishes to include it as part of formal training plans.

Theme 2: a change in job role leading to withdrawal

Our second theme reveals important weaknesses around programme compliance and offers some surprising ways respondents approached their decisions to withdraw when faced with redundancy or new job roles. As noted earlier in the paper, in contrast to other nations of the United Kingdom, England links funding to the employer as opposed to the apprentice. For many participants we spoke to, this then led to highly emotional decisions.

Challenges from changing roles. Six respondents did not complete their degree apprenticeship as they took on a new job in a different company, or a new role, often a

promotion, within their existing company. While the pandemic and aftermath influenced some respondents' work situations (either increasing workloads or, as in the case of two respondents, resulting in redundancy), half of the respondents we spoke with noted that changing roles made it impossible for them to continue. This might be due to very tight regulations (current government arrangements permit only 12 weeks of funding in redundancy situations). In R14's case, she had successfully transferred her existing apprenticeship to a new employer and was waiting out her probationary period before resuming study. For several, withdrawal timings meant that they had completed the degree element but did not undertake the final EPA to satisfy the full qualification requirements.

Withdrawal due to leaving employer. We noted a wide range of experiences in withdrawals due to leaving employers, such as one withdrawn apprentice who was made redundant just before final sign-off of his portfolio, having completed *all* required tasks. Despite having a new job, the apprentice was unable to complete:

The employer I'm with now is too small for levy funding. But even if they were large enough, I was told that they wouldn't be able to sign off the work that had been done because it's not relevant to them. The project was specific to the company I worked for. (R13)

Another respondent moved to a new company halfway through the apprenticeship and wasn't able to complete:

I think I was about roughly halfway through when I changed jobs, which meant two things, really. One, the funding disappeared, of course, because I'd moved to a much, much smaller organisation who don't pay into the levy. And, therefore, it would have been difficult for them to commit to funding that. (R02)

Another example came from a respondent who had completed all-but-one module of the degree before redundancy. They ended up self-funding the final module, graduating with a conventional degree rather than completing the apprenticeship. Reflecting her frustrations on being made redundant after coming so close, she commented, "My blood still boils when I think of it" (R10). Another participant was also self-funding after being made redundant and starting work at a new, smaller company. She had looked for apprenticeship roles when looking for a new job, explaining: "So there [weren't] that many apprenticeship roles available within my area, also covering the salary requirements that I had" (R11).

Promotion leading to withdrawal. Not all interviewees had moved companies. Some received promotions during study, finding increases in workload associated with new roles making it impossible to continue. For one respondent who worked in pastoral care, his workload increased tremendously during the pandemic, both in terms of management responsibilities and interactions with the public, leaving him feeling unable to complete.

Respondents judged increased workload in these conditions as insurmountable, with one respondent comparing it to drowning:

All I can see is this, like a black cloud, almost like a depressive cloud above my head, because I can't swim. I feel like I'm drowning. I'm literally drowning in work, and there's not enough hours in the day. But my fear was that it would put me in bad light, because you can't see, can you? (R06)

Another interviewee described increased demands:

I was putting pressure on myself because I felt like this can't be that complicated, and it turned out to be like a monster to me. (R03)

Theme 3: the benefit of the programme despite withdrawal

A third theme related to the benefits of apprenticeship study, despite needing to withdraw. While traditional views of HE perceive withdrawal in terms of "failure", for example the way

HEIs are assessed by regulators, some stories told within interviews pointed to personal successes. Some relate to satisfaction at gaining a degree despite not completing the full apprenticeship. Other stories relate to localised success and development within their workplace, which in some cases led to promotion (which in turn brought increased workload that led to withdrawal). The study therefore shed light on added complexities underlying withdrawal and attending emotions:

Not only do I feel as an individual I'm a better manager, I'm a better leader as a result of doing the course. My original line manager also has provided feedback to that effect [R15, who completed the degree portion of the apprenticeship]

I wanted to show that it's not always a choice to have to leave . . . that it was circumstances. And to give you that point of view that it wasn't just a case of I wasn't enjoying it. Because I was, I was thoroughly enjoying the course. It's hard work but I was enjoying it. I wanted to ensure that that point of view was also included in the study [R11, who was made redundant so had to withdraw]

While it was clear that several respondents had made their decision to withdraw due to improvements in their job circumstances, such as gaining a promotion/new job, that didn't mean they hadn't benefitted from their experiences, and it was for that reason that many of them had (perhaps subconsciously) chosen to participate in the research. For example, R15, who withdrew before completing, had received a promotion at work and found the last "accreditation" part of the apprenticeship just wasn't that valuable:

It was I guess a feeling almost of guilt. In that I know I didn't complete it. But I wanted to explain why and get across that I don't think it is a fault with the programme or the intent of the programme or, indeed, an awful lot of the content of the programme or the way that it's delivered. I think that is all of huge value. (R15)

Our data enabled insight into the influence of career experience in apprentices' withdrawal decisions. Though some felt challenged by HE-level study, most participants framed their learning experiences from the perspective of someone experienced in the workplace rather than as a traditional student:

And I went into it very much with a view of saying, look, I've got 40-odd years of work experience. Most of that is acquired knowledge. And I don't know whether it's right or it's wrong. (R15)

and as a benefit to the organisation:

The sell, the benefit that's going to be brought about as a result of that. If you're clear on that and you articulate it . . . and the line manager sees the value-added, both . . . from the individual but also the organisation. They become more invested in it. It just goes full circle there. (R01)

Discussion

In approaching this study, it was important to recognise that these programmes span a number of years, during which things can happen in the workplace (e.g. redundancy or promotion) or personal lives (e.g. pregnancy/bereavement) that are beyond the sphere of influence of any one institution. For several respondents, it was "personal circumstances" that were the most significant factors leading to withdrawal. Their personal circumstances were similar to those experienced by other groups of withdrawing students (Myers *et al.*, 2021). Life got in the way. However, apprenticeship regulatory frameworks alongside the benefits of substantive employment made options for taking a break harder than on traditional degree programmes. Although the programme does offer a formal "Break-in-Learning", many did not feel the need for substantial breaks, just a brief period away and the flexibility to work at a slower pace than mandated by funding terms.

We are aware that some participants had their studies adversely affected by COVID-19, which in several cases appears to have been a final, additional stress factor that may have led to breaking-point. Whether these apprentices could have completed in more normal times remains speculative, but additional pandemic impacts enabled heightened awareness of complexities around study/work/personal life paradigms and of the support mechanisms that apprentices may require at crisis points.

It should also be re-emphasised that the people who were prepared to be interviewed were a particular subset of those who had withdrawn from the degree apprenticeship, with their own reasons for being prepared to talk, including wanting to explain decisions, or to raise an issue. Although it is important to take care in drawing conclusions from small samples, our study gives voice to these individuals. In so doing, we find opportunities to reflect on what [Cunliffe \(2022\)](#) explains as “resonance – presenting insights that may connect, reverberate and provoke others into reflecting on an issue . . . and allows us to interpret those insights in ways that are meaningful and significant to us and to our situation”.

As the apprenticeship ecology depicted in [Figure 1](#) demonstrates, there are many powerful institutions and organisations within the apprenticeship context. These include government organisations, HEIs and employers, all with their own agendas. Apprentices who withdraw early are probably some of the most overlooked individuals in this context, and yet their stories paint a vibrant picture of what workforce development policy looks like as embodied practice ([Reich and Hager, 2014](#)) with people exercising agency situated ([Yaklef, 2010](#)) in the WBL context.

Success on degree apprenticeships is officially defined as full qualification completions; however, success could also be measured by achieving part of the programme if that enables the former apprentice to be better at their job (through increased confidence and/or provided with tools and ways of thinking) going forward, even if they did not finish. It is clear from our study that many apprentices and their employers did benefit from their experiences and professional development.

A key insight from the findings is that none of the participants withdrew because they didn’t find the apprenticeship worth doing. The factors stimulating withdrawal limited the choices they had.

- (1) Personal factors: for example family, health
- (2) Work factors: for example workload pressures, promotion increasing workload pressure
- (3) Programme factors: for example need to produce the portfolio for EPA after degree completion, lack of ability to meet functional skills requirement
- (4) Structural factors: for example no safety net when made redundant, or promoted, or gained a better job at another employer

The findings also provide important insights into the experiences of apprentices who are using the apprenticeship for “up-skilling” and professional development. Their experiences highlight the impact of programme design: how we integrate learning across work and HE contexts and developing better support mechanisms for apprentices who straddle them ([Lester and Bravenboer, 2020](#); [Lester, 2020](#)).

Ultimately, our respondents expressed their agency in the only way left to them – to choose withdrawal. Therefore, we need to reflect on how we can alleviate these exogenous factors. Longstanding aims to manage active constructive withdrawals where necessary ([Myers et al., 2021](#)), such as in the case of apprentice redundancy from work, are hindered through regulation. This has profound implications as some apprentices may be then forced to accept an unachievable status quo of imposed conditions that satisfy employer, HEI and funding regulations, with the result that, as we found with our participants, the only possible agency some could exert was withdrawal. Regulations here are therefore counter to expected good HE

practices that encourage reciprocal pedagogies where students take ownership of their own learning (Cook-Sather, 2020) and develop a sense of belonging (Fabian *et al.*, 2022).

Limitations and next steps

Importantly, participants who spoke with us are self-selected. It is interesting to note that all apprentices we spoke to were experienced, “up-skillers”, rather than traditional school leavers. That finding is itself interesting and worthy of further study as, despite degree apprenticeships being promoted as mechanisms for jump starting young people’s careers, a substantial proportion of UK degree apprentices are “mature learners”, such as has been found in Scotland (Smith *et al.*, 2023) and in England (e.g. Lester, 2020; Lester and Bravenboer, 2020).

Although we did not focus on demographics for our study, we note that the experiences related to us will have been influenced by age, career stage and experience and may have played an important role in giving these apprentices the confidence to withdraw and, subsequently, to speak with us about their programme withdrawals. Our findings underscore the need for better understandings of the disparity of apprentice experiences across different age ranges and by sector and career experience levels. More research is needed to inform practice and programme design, as well as policy, in order to ensure apprenticeship provision supports the social mobility agenda and lifelong learning aims.

Conclusions

Participants in this study were part of earlier cohorts of the business and management undergraduate degree apprenticeship, launched by English HEIs before assessment criteria had been fully tried and tested. Feedback from these early cohorts is already leading to improvements in the structure of specific curriculum design for individual HEIs and at the wider policy level. This specific business and management Standard (the CMDA) is soon to be discontinued (Myers *et al.*, 2023b), alongside more substantial evolutionary changes to apprenticeship design from governmental perspectives. At that point, it is hoped that several of the issues mentioned by our participants will be addressed, including exploring ways that the Scottish model of Graduate Apprenticeships, where apprentices retain control over their apprenticeship funding (Collins and Gillion, 2024), may be used in the English context. This might also bring benefits to UK-wide employers wrestling with multiple devolved administration regulations (see Alt, 2023). We can also note that learning from these early cohorts feeds into the growing “global apprentice agenda” (Vanderhoven, 2023), aimed at improving industrial productivity and economic growth.

With retraining and upskilling emerging as important areas for workforce development in light of technical innovations including Artificial Intelligence tools and other socio-economic trends, it is essential that more mechanisms for recognition of prior work experience (see Bravenboer *et al.*, 2024) can be integrated within the degree offering ways that allow for greater portability, more choice for apprentices and more effective use of the apprenticeship levy.

Notes

1. Although in 2026, the Apprenticeship Levy is collected across all four of the UK nations, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland each have their own skills strategies, funding arrangements and oversight for apprenticeship provision.

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