

Navigating tensions in higher education tripartite practice: experiences of the intrinsic–instrumental nature of apprenticeship

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the experiences of provider representatives within English higher and degree apprenticeships tripartite activity. By surfacing tensions in these Higher Education Tripartite Practitioner (HETP) roles it examines how practices are shaped by divergent transformative educational values and instrumental compliance demands.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative multi-stage approach was employed, using surveys ($n = 73$, HEIs = 25), focus groups ($n = 29$, HEIs = 9) and longform surveys ($n = 12$, HEIs = 6) with HETPs from a range of English Russell Group and Post-92 universities. Data were gathered around key apprenticeship stages and analysed using template analysis. Eight prominent tensions were identified, which informed a novel thematic framework.

Findings – Four key tensions were identified: Units of Measure, Positionality, Priorities and Time Horizons. These underscore an intrinsic–instrumental dichotomy central to apprenticeship practice, wherein practitioners simultaneously support intrinsically transformative apprentice development process whilst enforcing instrumental regulatory compliance. HETPs navigate this duality through relational strategies, professional hybridity and temporal negotiation.

Originality/value – This study offers original empirical insights into the tensions experienced by a boundary-spanning workforce in higher education apprenticeships. Identifying fundamental tensions within HETP practice, this novel conceptualization of dualities and continuums in role experience enhances theoretical understanding of boundary-spanning in work-based learning. Demonstrating how these tensions manifest from intrinsic–instrumental dimensions of apprenticeship practice arising from contemporary policy and professional contexts, it situates the HETP as a distinct construct with relevance to apprenticeship systems internationally.

Keywords Higher and degree apprenticeships, Higher education workforce, Work-based learning, Apprenticeship policy, Boundary spanning, Tripartite roles, Professional practice

Paper type Research article

Roles within the tripartite model of English higher and degree apprenticeships

English higher education (HE) policy frames higher and degree apprenticeships (HDAs) as a dual vocational education and training (VET) model, embedding learning in both academic and workplace settings. Central to this is the apprentice–employer–provider “tripartite relationship,” with clearly delineated roles (Roberts *et al.*, 2019). Over the past decade, evolving regulatory frameworks – from Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) [1] rules to Ofsted [2] inspections – have significantly shaped provider activity (Hodgson *et al.*, 2017; Power-Mason *et al.*, 2025), giving rise to new university roles and practices, still unacknowledged in HE discourses.



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The tripartite model underpins apprenticeship learning, facilitating personalised support and shared accountability. Effective collaboration across this relationship is essential for meaningful work-based learning and positive outcomes (Rowe *et al.*, 2018). It also acts as a boundary-crossing mechanism, integrating academic and vocational learning, balancing study–work demands and enhancing learner experience (Andersson, 2018; Hughes and Saieva, 2019; Sauli, 2021). Strong tripartite collaboration supports evaluation, workforce development and adaptability (Brockmann and Smith, 2023; Smith *et al.*, 2022).

However, the model is inherently complex, challenged by misaligned expectations, compliance demands, inconsistent support, unclear responsibilities and communication breakdowns (Bathmaker, 2013; Evans and Cloutier, 2023; Hansberry and Gerhardt, 2023). Such challenges are not unique to the UK; similar issues around employer involvement, role clarity and collaboration exist in dual VET systems in Switzerland, Germany and Denmark (Bonoli and Wilson, 2019). A key challenge for HE providers has been adapting to this collaborative model, including formalising tripartite roles through new job descriptions. This paper builds on the concept of higher education tripartite practitioners (HETPs) – university staff who act as the main point of contact and support for both apprentices and employers (Charlton and Power-Mason, 2025). HETPs are tasked with supporting transformative learning while ensuring compliance with funding and quality regulations (Power-Mason *et al.*, 2025).

Although workplace mentors are well-researched (Fabian *et al.*, 2022; Minton and Lowe, 2019; Roberts *et al.*, 2019), the provider’s tripartite representative receives far less attention. As a result, HETPs often operate without formal recognition or targeted professional development (Esmond, 2020, 2021) – despite substantial investment via the apprenticeship levy.

Tripartite relationships are characterised by the tensions involved in continuous shifts between work and study, often with conflicting priorities (Poole *et al.*, 2023). In broader work-based learning literature, HE staff are recognised for boundary-spanning roles – translating academic standards into workplace contexts, managing conflicts and enhancing learning at the interface (Algers *et al.*, 2016). Boundary spanning is understood as identity work associated with occupation of roles that cross professional and organisational domains (Martin and Ibbotson, 2021; Schein, 1971). International apprenticeship research also notes the facilitative function of provider staff (e.g. Andersson, 2018; Lester, 2020; Taylor-Smith *et al.*, 2023). Yet little is known about how HETPs experience these tensions or the strategies they use to manage them. This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experience of HETPs, identifying key tensions in their practice and offering theoretical and practical insights to inform the support and development of this essential intermediary role.

The emergent role of higher education tripartite practitioner

HETPs occupy a pivotal yet under-recognized position at the nexus of academic learning and workplace practice in HDAs. Akin to “brokering” roles across academic and professional communities of practice (McMillan *et al.*, 2016), HETPs manage complex responsibilities, balancing apprentices’ educational and developmental needs, employer productivity requirements and compliance demands imposed by regulatory frameworks (ESFA, 2025; Lambert, 2016; Ofsted, 2024; Smith *et al.*, 2021a, b). Functioning as enablers of apprentice learning and enforcers of apprenticeship, this dual accountability inevitably generates tensions, as practitioners oscillate between development and compliance (Mulkeen *et al.*, 2019; Charlton and Power-Mason, 2025). Such roles frequently operate within siloed teams, with limited professional development opportunities (Dalrymple *et al.*, 2014; Esmond, 2020).

Germany and Switzerland feature formalised, institutionally embedded roles that are central to apprenticeship success and occupational innovation (Deissinger and Gonon, 2016; Bonoli and Wilson, 2019). In contrast, the United States adopts more fragmented, uneven approaches due to limited governmental coordination (Lerman, 2012). Coaching and

mentoring practices also vary. Australia prioritises employer-led pastoral support to improve outcomes (Smith, 2007), while Germany's dual VET system effectively integrates advanced knowledge with practical skills – unlike the UK, where weaker academic–industry links persist (Esmond, 2021). The UK also struggles with mismatches between apprentices' aspirations and workplace realities, highlighting the need for stronger mentor training and employer engagement (Rowe *et al.*, 2020; Smith *et al.*, 2021a, b).

Limited exploration of the English context positions these practitioners as “subaltern educators”, perhaps limiting their professional visibility and growth (Esmond, 2020, 2021). Universal definitions and identity are further complicated by institutional differences, cohort demographics and discipline variance (Martin and Ibbotson, 2021; Smith *et al.*, 2021a, b), alongside variances in scope of responsibility and workload (Charlton and Power-Mason, 2025). Addressing this requires targeted strategic interventions to clearly define and elevate the professional recognition of HETPs, aligning their career pathways with their contributions in managing complex apprenticeship environments (Bordogna, 2019; Lauvås and Vie, 2021).

Conceptualising tripartite practice as a boundary spanning developmental practice

HETPs occupy boundary-spanning roles between university and employer settings, operating at the intersection of education, industry and regulation. This involves translating policy into practice, and mediating between curriculum and industry needs (Bordogna, 2019; Powell and Walsh, 2018). Responsibilities encompass theoretical and practical domains, supporting apprentices' career progression and facilitating employer engagement through appropriate work-based learning (Mulkeen *et al.*, 2019; Smith *et al.*, 2022).

As boundary-spanners, HETPs foster collaborative innovation and knowledge transfer between higher education and industry, aiming to enhance apprentices' employability and sector-specific skills (Lauvås and Vie, 2021; Rebelo *et al.*, 2023). Role conflict is common due to institutional pressures and market demands, requiring navigation of internal complexities alongside external partnerships (Martin and Ibbotson, 2021).

Effective apprenticeship experiences require support beyond technical training, highlighting coaching and mentoring practices. HETPs blend these approaches (Charlton and Power-Mason, 2026). Coaching facilitates apprentices' reflective practice and problem-solving abilities non-directively, whereas mentoring provides directive guidance and explicit expertise (Garvey, 2018). This dual approach enables flexible, context-sensitive support, addressing pastoral, academic and professional needs.

HETPs offer complementary capabilities distinct from workplace mentors who typically focus on practical skills. HETPs have deeper insights into apprenticeship modalities, academic standards and relevant professional expertise (Charlton and Power-Mason, 2026). Consequently, they proactively address gaps, preventing apprentices from becoming disconnected (Rowe *et al.*, 2017). Regular engagement through integrated mentoring and coaching ensures balanced academic and workplace support.

Nevertheless, tensions exist between developmental roles and compliance-driven obligations, especially around institutional progress review meetings [3] (PRMs). Fabian *et al.* (2022) highlight varying apprentice attitudes towards work and study, influencing their success when support is lacking. Quew-Jones and Rowe (2022) propose coaching-infused conversations that merge compliance with developmental dialogue. This structured yet reflective approach enhances motivation, aligns expectations and promotes active engagement (Roberts *et al.*, 2019; Poole *et al.*, 2023).

Institutional emphasis on coaching and mentoring varies widely. Institutions with expansive apprenticeship cultures empower HETPs in developmental roles, including curriculum co-design. Restrictive contexts emphasize compliance and administration, presenting different pressures, such as heightened workloads or engagement challenges (Martin and Ibbotson, 2021; Fuller and Unwin, 2003).

Ultimately, HETPs enhance apprentice outcomes and bridge systemic gaps between education and workplace contexts. Strengthening coaching and mentoring practices involves investing strategically in mentor development, clarifying roles and acknowledging the complexities practitioners navigate. Addressing these elements is essential for optimizing apprenticeship effectiveness and sustainability, underscoring the critical supportive roles of HETPs.

Method

Data collection commenced with an initial high-level survey ($n = 73$, HEIs = 25). This collated descriptions of participants' roles and challenges, establishing preliminary contextual insights and guiding the subsequent stages of investigation.

The second stage comprised semi-structured online focus groups ($n = 32$, HEIs = 9). Each focus group lasted approximately 45 min, exploring key apprenticeship stages: initial onboarding and skills assessment, periodic PRMs, ongoing engagement and support practices and preparations for End-Point Assessments. Discussions were supplemented by participant reflections from plenary sessions on each of the four topic areas.

The third and final stage involved a long-form survey ($n = 12$, HEIs = 6) purposefully drawn from eight different apprenticeship standard routes (subject areas). This validated and enriched the earlier findings, exploring commonalities and differences across disciplinary contexts, thereby enhancing the study's overall breadth and robustness.

Ethical clearance was provided by both institutions for each stage of the data collection. Subsequent template analysis (King, 2004) was employed with rounds of iterative refinement and team discussions leading to a final hierarchical structure capturing eight central tensions experienced by HETPs.

Evidencing the inherent duality and tension of tripartite practice

Our analysis identified eight interrelated tensions in HETPs' accounts, grouped into four overarching themes, reflecting ongoing negotiation between competing demands. Units of Measure considers whether apprenticeship success are framed holistically or in fragmented terms, and whether support is directed collectively or individually. Positionality addresses HETP identity, particularly in navigating roles as mentor or coach, and development/compliance balance. Priorities contrasts process-focused and outcome-driven approaches, and compares disciplinary expertise with apprenticeship modality knowledge. Time horizons captures conflicts between short-term tasks and long-term goals, and duality of reflection and forward planning. The following sections explore these tensions through participant quotes and analysis, illustrating the complexity of tripartite practice.

Units of Measure

Holistic and fragmented perspectives

Initially, checklists helped establish a foundation for guiding apprentices through their journey. However, I now focus more on understanding individual learners' needs, tailoring my support to integrate their workplace responsibilities with university learning. (Business and Administration)

HETPs articulate tension between a holistic view of apprentice development and a fragmented approach focused on isolated, often hard-to-align tasks.

The apprenticeship system seems to try to help by applying further pressure to develop professional standards by engaging with outreach or extra activities. The need for this is questionable throughout the apprenticeship and should perhaps be limited to specific periods [during] the apprenticeship. (Engineering and Manufacturing)

The many discrete facets of the apprenticeship journey can lead HETPs to experience competing priorities rather than a unified purpose. Broader development risks becoming fragmented under the weight of multiple regulatory demands. The challenge for HETPs lies in meeting short-term requirements without losing sight of the long-term goal: developing competent, reflective practitioners.

I am able to see with the apprentice and employer the development so far within programme using a skills radar ... the OJT [4] (Off the Job Tracker) amount, engagement and timelines within programme. I look for how the apprentice has contextualised their theory to practice, and we reflect on academic growth and engagement of each module. I use some elements of a CBT [5] approach within this. I support with 1:1 outside of PRM for any unmet needs, I am contactable via email at any time. (Health and Science)

This duality between holistic and fragmented perspectives positions HETPs as translators between two value systems. They support apprentices through a complex developmental journey-fostering identity, reflection and applied learning-while also meeting modularised demands like competency checklists, learning outcomes and audit trails. These requirements, often enforced with little room for synthesis, risk reducing learning to procedural compliance. Consequently, HETPs do more than facilitate; they negotiate competing visions of success: authentic growth versus instrumental performance.

The integrated support approach, incorporating tools like CBT techniques and skills radars, illustrates how HETPs innovatively to bridge this divide. By embedding reflection and context into progress tracking, they actively resist fragmentation. This is deeply relational work, involving co-construction of meaning with both apprentices and employers. The capacity to balance regulatory demands and the individualised learner journey is a defining hallmark of effective HETP practice.

Apprenticeship journeys as collective and individualistic

We run workshops as a group to get them ready for the EPA [6] but in the end it's an individual assessment they have to face on their own. (Business and Administration)

HDAs can be experienced either as a collaborative journey, where apprentices support and learn from one another, or as a more individualistic path. HETPs must balance fostering a sense of community while encouraging apprentice's personal responsibility for progress. This dynamic affects apprentice experience, development and engagement. Many facilitate group learning and collaborative activity, reflecting the often blurred boundaries between apprenticeship delivery roles.

We hold workshops where we talk to them. This could be half a day, sometimes a full day, where we do some work around the report in the morning followed by an afternoon of writing and possibly peer feedback. (Business and Administration)

Yet, the nature of HDAs, rooted in the unique work-based learning context where the apprentice spends the majority of their time, can lead to isolation.

The issue about people feeling quite isolated is a real one. (Business and Administration)

Interestingly, the individual/collective dynamic and isolation of apprentice experience is mirrored in the HETP experience of their own professional practice.

The team do work together on campus sessions. But if that isn't happening and most of your work is either virtual on the screen or out in the workplace, that can be quite a lonely place to be. A little bit like this workshop today, you know, I can sense that people are finding it really valuable to come and talk together about the practice. (Business and Administration)

These perspectives highlight the social dimension of apprenticeship support, and the emotional labour involved in sustaining motivation and connection. Collective learning environments – such as workshops, writing sessions or peer feedback days – offer more than just content delivery. They foster belonging, identity affirmation and peer validation. When HETPs create these communal learning opportunities, they mitigate the isolation of work-based learning environments and help apprentices to construct socially reinforced narratives of development.

Yet this community-building is tempered by the reality that end-point assessment remains inherently individual. The apprenticeship model thus demands both group identity and individual responsibility. HETPs navigate this pedagogical paradox: fostering collaboration within a system structured to recognise individual capability. This tension mirrors their own roles – while they may share insights with colleagues, their work is conducted in professional isolation.

The emotional resonance of these experiences points to an important implication: tripartite support must address technical competence and psychosocial support structures. Thus, HETPs occupy a hybrid role including educational design, pastoral care and boundary-spanning academic, personal and workplace spheres. By creating spaces of encounter within systems that often favour isolation or fragmentation, they offer a counter-narrative to individualised success models, affirming that apprenticeship journeys are both deeply personal and inherently social.

Positionality

Development or compliance orientation

It can be difficult to support apprentices in their personal and academic challenges whilst holding them to the expectations of the apprenticeship. However, this can be done in a collaborative way by forming a good rapport with them from the start. This requires being consistent in meeting and making time for the apprentice. (Health and Science)

Within a tightly regulated system where every hour of training, both on and off the job, must be documented, HETPs face a core tension—supporting personal and professional development while meeting compliance demands. Developmental work emphasises growth and mastery, whereas compliance focuses on rules, regulations and records. Balancing these priorities is critical to the successful delivery, and in doing so HETPs develop their own strategies for achieving these dual purposes.

I feel that honesty is the best path. If something is a regulatory requirement I explain this as such and the need for it. Most understand that this is the case and might grumble a bit but push on through. If it's possible I do point out the benefits that they may not see. For example, . . . logging [time] is often seen as a negative but pointing out that until about 7 years ago it was not a requirement, and employers did not NEED to give this time so having it now is a major advantage. (Construction and the Built Environment)

The coaching conversations focus on goals and growth, not just tracking progress. (Business and Administration)

This tension is not simply logistical but philosophical, reflecting differing understandings of success in apprenticeship education. HETPs who favour developmental models described identity transformation, critical reflection and holistic growth—elements not easily captured by compliance documents. Yet they also recognise their accountability to funding requirements, institutional policies and audit standards. Practitioners therefore create dual frameworks: one that supports the apprentice as a person and learner, and another that ensures institutional credibility.

HETPs navigate this through interpersonal and narrative-based approaches. By framing compliance not as a burden but as a part of professional development, HETPs reposition

administrative demands as learning opportunities. Such narrative reframing is pedagogically powerful, fostering learner buy-in and motivation. This underscores the creative and rhetorical dimensions of the HETP role, where policy is only implemented but interpreted and humanised.

Mentor and coach

I work within health and life science and have studied at masters level within nursing and health visiting. This experience allows me to relate to the apprentices and have a good awareness of practice which has a positive impact on providing support . . . I have attended coaching sessions to enhance my coaching and leadership skills to empower apprentices to enhance their learning and growth. (Health and Science)

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As the findings suggest, tripartite practice requires HETPs to serve as both enforcers and enablers of the apprenticeship journey, drawing on different roles and strategies. Mentoring offers empathy, emotional support and fosters long-term growth. Coaching, meanwhile, is task-oriented, focussed on helping apprentices meet specific objectives. Practitioners view the ability to balance these approaches as essential to providing both developmental guidance and the structure needed to achieve short-term success.

We've been talking about "coaching-infused" conversations where we blend mentoring and coaching depending on what the apprentice needs at the moment. (Business and Administration)

Yet a persistent tension emerges in HETP experience: while may express being eager to do more, the constraints, particularly in PRMs, limit what can be achieved.

We do have a mild frustration within our team about the ability to use coaching skills, pure coaching skills, in those PRM sessions. I think we're all agreed that [there's] not an opportunity . . . in the PRM to cover off all the compliance needs as well as potentially doing some more of that wider development work which you can get through a coaching conversation. (Business and Administration)

This dual role requires HETPs to modulate their interpersonal approach to context. At times, they act as assessors or compliance enforcers; at others, as nurturing guides, connecting learning to long-term career goals. Switching between these roles – sometimes within a single interaction – demands emotional intelligence, professional judgment and pedagogical flexibility. The "coaching-infused" model becomes not just a strategy, but an expression of the dual imperative to meet targets and foster transformation.

For many HETPs, the limits of the PRM structure highlight a broader systemic constraint: institutional processes that prioritise measurable outcomes over learning processes. Reported frustration highlights the need for apprenticeship systems to better recognise and support the relational, dialogic work that underpins success. Without this, practitioners face role strain, and learners receive a diminished tripartite experience.

Priorities

Process or outcomes?

Another important aspect is to bring reflection into the conversation. As a strategy I also bring the differences between my own journey in doing my degree as a full-time student and how important it is having the opportunity to learn while working and being able to get a professional degree while working. I try to highlight in any opportunity how valuable it is, what they are doing. It can be difficult, but it is worth it! (Construction and the Built Environment)

Beyond their practices, HETPs' attitudes and the value they place on apprenticeships significantly shape their relationships with learners. Some prioritize the learning journey,

emphasising continuous development, while others foreground outcomes, including End Point Assessment.

... every time we meet them; we remind them of the KSBs [7] in their standard. We remind them of the portfolio requirements, and we remind them of the EPA assessment activities and methods, and also timeline. We just have a set of slides that we kind of slot in at the beginning of each of these sessions that we do. So, all building towards that endpoint. (Business and Administration)

This tension reflects a wider philosophical divide between pedagogies that privilege reflective engagement and those which foreground performance metrics. The apprenticeship, as route to professional formation and qualification, sits uncomfortably between these two poles. HETPs must navigate the challenge of promoting deep learning while preparing learners for the summative demands of EPA. Importantly, this is more than a balancing act—it shapes apprenticeship culture, and the motivational frameworks learners adopt.

Process-oriented approaches centre on the transformative potential of the learning journey, fostering meta-cognitive awareness, values clarification and the integration of practice with theory. In contrast, outcome-oriented strategies foreground achievement, often through structured and repetitive reinforcement of requirements. While both are necessary, overemphasis on the latter can reduce learning to a transactional, box-ticking exercise. HETPs mediate between these perspectives, adapting emphasis depending on learner context, employer expectation and institutional priorities.

HETPs as experts – discipline and modality

I feel as an occupational therapist I use a lot of my professional skills as a practitioner in my role as educator and [HETP]. As an OT [*Occupational Therapist*] I used coaching skills in practice which I also use in this role. I work hard to ensure I stay up to date with professional practice to support my role by attending profession-specific CPD, speaking and listening to employers and apprentices, and visiting workplaces. The role can be difficult to navigate and ensure the correct boundaries for this role and the university could support better with these nuances. (Health and Science)

In contrast to [Esmond's \(2020\)](#) subaltern conception of tripartite practitioners, participants often positioned their professional practice and subject expertise as central to their apprenticeship work. However, many also saw tripartite practice as extending beyond traditional academic knowledge bases, emphasising the value of knowledge in practice and praxis.

Sadly, the large majority of HE providers are new to apprenticeships and are often career academics and have difficulty understanding the “real” working world. I feel it would be beneficial to have more real-world experience ... as understanding the technical subject matter is one thing but being able to put it into real-world action is another. (Engineering and Manufacturing)

Navigating the dual roles of industry expert and educator can sometimes be challenging but is also highly rewarding. It requires balancing the dynamic demands of both professional domains. However, I feel a deep sense of fulfilment when I witness my learners' growth at each step of the process. This dual identity enables me to bring industry relevance into the learning environment while fostering a supportive and reflective academic space. Overall, the impact is highly positive, dynamic, and rooted in continuous learning for both myself and my apprentices. (Business and Administration)

HETPs therefore represent a unique professional hybrid: neither wholly academic nor purely industry-based. The role demands continuous adaptation, combining subject expertise with fluency in funding, compliance, pastoral care and educational design. This reflects a growing consensus that apprenticeship education is a specialist field in its own right, deserving of professional status recognition and structured development.

Industry expertise informs the educator role, and there is an exchange of new knowledge between learner, mentor, and educator. The guidance to competency and development is gained through

practical experience, professional discussion, researching the apprenticeship standards and the correlation to practice. Taking the time to discuss what is required to be developed and how this is going to be achieved in what time scale. Linking everything to the apprenticeship standards and the ESFA funding regulations. Support development plans with achievable outcomes and encouraging quality evidence to demonstrate new learning. (Health and Science)

The reciprocal nature of the educator-learner relationship is particularly evident here. HETPs not only guide apprentices, but learn from them, continually updating their understanding of industry developments through ongoing dialogue with learners and employers. This dynamic reaffirms the apprenticeship as a site of knowledge exchange rather than unidirectional teaching.

Time Horizons

Looking both ways – past and future

I view my role as a project manager and the project is the apprentice. Trying to plan ahead and look as far ahead as possible to try and resolve these issues before they come up is one of the actions I carry out. This obviously does not stop the unforeseen or unplannable issues that need to be solved and can be broken down and prioritised. (Engineering and Manufacturing)

Tripartite practice is situated in an ongoing developmental journey – beginning before the apprenticeship starts, shaping initial skills analysis (ISA) [8] and extending beyond completion into ongoing professional growth. This holistic journey is experienced through a series of smaller accomplishments. Participants situate their practice within this context; looking ahead to future goals while reflecting on past milestones that inform the present.

Within our progress review meeting we will reflect on previous goals set and set new objectives for our next meeting, in collaboration with the employer/mentor. I find that reflecting on progress since our last review and really drilling into case study reflection is supportive in understanding competence growth. (Health and Science)

We revisit the skills assessment partway through, but often by then apprentices are too focused on past performance and not enough on setting future goals. (Business and Administration)

This dual orientation – looking backward and forward – is foundational to the pedagogy of apprenticeship education. Growth is rarely linear; reflection helps contextualise achievement, extract learning and reframe challenges. Simultaneously, apprentices must anticipate future demands, set aspirations and work towards longer-term goals. HETPs act as both historian and futurist: curating reflective spaces that account for progress while mapping trajectories toward professional maturity.

The ability to hold these time horizons in tension reflects a sophisticated form of temporal scaffolding. The past offers feedback and understanding; the future provides direction and momentum. Together, they create a dynamic framework that positions the apprentice as an active agent navigating a professional pathway. Within this, HETPs become timeline navigators, helping apprentices trace progress, interpret missteps and set ambitious yet grounded goals.

The long and short of it

[I] recommend students look at short, medium and long-term goals. From this, they can see what they need to do soon, in a year and where they want to be in 5–10 years and then work back on how these can be achieved. Reflection and lessons learnt is always a large part of engineering and an important part of any industrial expectations. (Construction and the Built Environment)

The findings highlight inherent tensions between macro and micro perspectives: the holistic vision of apprenticeship as a developmental journey versus the detailed requirements,

milestones and practical steps it entails. HETPs must balance immediate demands – such as deliverables, monitoring and compliance – with the longer-term goal of supporting apprentices' growth and career progression. Both are essential, but the ability to prioritise appropriately across contexts is a critical skill for effective practice.

We find ourselves managing short-term compliance deadlines while still trying to maintain a long-term developmental vision for our apprentices. (Business and Administration)

I thoroughly enjoy carrying out progress review meetings and supporting apprentices on their learning journey. I support the apprentices to create a learning plan for short and long-term goals and feel reflection is very important to discuss in progress meetings, this gives the apprentice a safe, private space to reflect on their learning whether this is positive or things they may change/improve on for the future. (Health and Science)

The coexistence of short and long-term priorities creates significant pressure on the HETP's professional judgment. Time becomes not only a logistical constraint but a pedagogical dimension. Practitioners must constantly decide how to use limited contact time: to address urgent compliance tasks or nurture reflective dialogue with longer-term value.

This tension is particularly apparent in PRMs – structured touchpoints burdened with competing demands. HETPs acknowledge their value but express frustrations when developmental intentions are curtailed by time or structure. Nevertheless, many demonstrate sophisticated strategies for embedding future-focused goal setting within even tightly framed agendas.

In this respect, boundary spanning applies not only to locations of learning, but also durations of learning. The distinct feature of apprenticeship education – its longitudinal and developmental nature – demands that HETPs think in layered temporalities. They must help learners connect past achievements with future ambitions, while attending to immediate requirements. Mastering this temporal navigation lies at the core of the tripartite professional identity.

A decade of HETP roles, where next?

Ten years into the implementation of HDAs in England, this study offers a timely examination of the HETP role. Drawing on detailed practitioner accounts, it reveals a nuanced set of tensions shaped by both structural constraints and expansive aspirations. The study contributes to extending the “expansive–restrictive” continuum (Fuller and Unwin, 2003), focusing on how practitioners experience and navigate this dynamic. It highlights how HETPs balance policy compliance with learner-centred development, offering conceptual and practical insights into sustaining expansive practices within restrictive infrastructures.

Findings illuminate the dual nature of tripartite practice as both intrinsically meaningful and instrumentally driven. Practitioners described their roles as deeply rewarding, centred on supporting apprentices' professional growth and identity formation. This intrinsic motivation aligns with expansive environments where learning is developmental, dialogic and relational. Conversely, instrumental demands – compliance, data reporting and end-point assessments – reflect the restrictive pole, where apprenticeship serves institutional metrics and policy agendas. These tensions stem not only from structure but from conflicting values embedded in apprenticeship design. HETPs must constantly negotiate apprenticeship as both a transformative process and an output-driven system.

The HETP role is central to enacting apprenticeship provision, balancing regulatory demands with the developmental potential of work-based learning. The expansive–restrictive continuum is not merely theoretical but experienced directly by practitioners in daily decisions. HETPs report that short-term compliance tasks (e.g. off-the-job training evidence, EPA readiness, audits) often compete with longer-term goals like reflection, autonomy and integrating theory with practice. Yet rather than yielding to these tensions, experienced HETPs

adopt creative strategies to manage both ends of this spectrum, positioning practitioner agency at the heart of the expansive–restrictive framework.

This study brings much-needed practitioner voice to a field often dominated by policy discourse. By examining how HETPs navigate tensions across Units of Measure, Positionality, Priorities and Time Horizons, it exposes overlooked dimensions of apprenticeship delivery. Boundary-spanning emerges as a defining feature of the HETP role. Far from being passive facilitators, HETPs act as meaning-makers and value brokers, mediating across pedagogical, procedural and practical domains. Their efforts directly influence learner progression and employer satisfaction.

Framing HETPs as agentic boundary-spanners resonates with international research. In Germany, apprenticeship success can similarly be seen to hinge on dimensions of work-based curriculum integration, pedagogical adaptability and practitioner professionalism (Billett, 2016; Esmond, 2021). Across systems, practitioner agency is key to managing competing priorities – whether through flexible delivery (Smith, 2007) or implicit boundary-crossing strategies in dual systems (Esmond, 2021). Following German and Swiss examples (Deissinger and Gonon, 2016), the institutional and cultural foundations underpinning HETP practice may also be critical to tripartite collaboration in HDAs.

The findings also indicate a shift in apprenticeship support, with growing integration of developmental and compliance functions. Earlier models often separated coaching from monitoring, resulting in fragmented provision. Now, approaches such as “coaching-infused” progress reviews illustrate how integration arises from practitioner creativity, not policy mandate. This is significant: the expansiveness of HDAs is often maintained not through systemic design but through everyday acts of translation, interpretation and advocacy by HETPs.

However, institutional barriers persist. As noted in wider literature, HETPs face unclear career paths, marginalisation and increasing workloads (Welbourn *et al.*, 2019). These challenges inhibit expansive practice. Without targeted institutional support, the burden of tripartite collaboration falls on individuals, risking burnout and inconsistency. Institutions must move beyond the apprenticeship “echo chamber,” apply the lessons of the last decade (Power-Mason *et al.*, 2025) and embed work-based learning expertise into mainstream academic culture. Clearer roles, better resourcing and strategic support for HETPs are vital.

For policymakers, the findings call for reforms that acknowledge the cumulative tensions HETPs face. While compliance and quality assurance are essential, so too is developmental, relational support. Simplifying documentation, encouraging innovation and aligning funding with educational value – not volume – would enable HETPs to work more expansively. Involving HETPs in policy development could also enhance implementation and coherence.

Practical implications are equally important. Professional development should reflect the dual nature of the HETP role, supporting skills in negotiation, coaching, stakeholder engagement and reflective practice. Institutions should foster apprenticeship communities of practice to share strategies and innovate across disciplines. Finally, creating formalised status for HETPs – through recognised competencies, frameworks or progression routes – would ensure the sustainability and professional recognition of this critical workforce.

Notes

1. ESFA, or the Education and Skills Funding Agency, was an executive agency of government formally responsible for funding education and skills providers in England. This responsibility was subsumed into the Department for Education in 2025.
2. Ofsted, or the Office for Standards in Education, is the government department in England responsible for inspecting and regulating education including apprenticeships, although it is not typically involved in higher education outside of statutory teacher education.

3. Progress review meetings are a formally defined mechanism in which all three parts of the tripartite (employer, apprentice, university) review and monitor the apprentices' development against their training plans, and provide pastoral support such as safeguarding and wellbeing.
4. OJT, or Off the Job Training, "is training which is received by the apprentice within their practical period, during the apprentice's normal working hours, for the purpose of achieving the knowledge, skills and behaviours of the apprenticeship they are undertaking" (Gov.uk, 2017).
5. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.
6. EPA refers to End Point Assessment, the final evaluation of occupational competence against the apprenticeship standard, undertaken by an independent assessor or assessment organisation following the gateway sign off by the employer and training provider.
7. KSBs refer to the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours, the essential attributes embedded within English apprenticeship standards against which apprentices are assessed as competent in their roles.
8. The initial skills analysis is a formal assessment of an apprentice applicant's prior learning and training needs to evaluate prior learning to be recognised and excluded from the training programme, as well as the developmental needs and starting point of the learner.

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