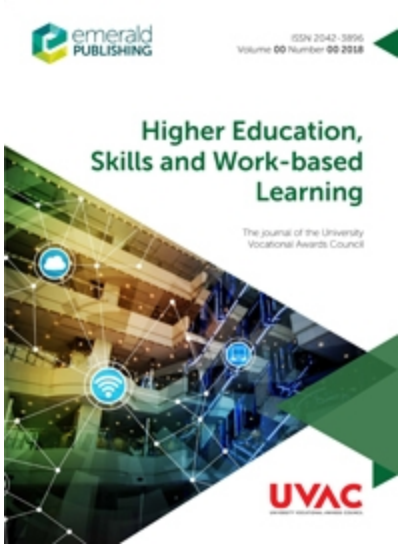

A Sector in Crisis? Insights from how English Higher Education Apprenticeships are Weathering the Storm.

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A Sector in Crisis? Insights from how English Higher Education Apprenticeships are Weathering the Storm.

ABSTRACT

Purpose

This viewpoint explores strategic lessons for wider Higher Education (HE) practices from university business and management apprenticeships in England. The paper highlights parallels between the challenges in apprenticeships and those confronting HE leaders and managers, especially regarding rising regulatory pressures, financial constraints, and the need for innovation. The authors present how collaboration and adaptive practices from university apprenticeships might inform broader institutional approaches.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper draws on autoethnographic experiences of business and management apprenticeship leaders to characterise the current state of the HE sector. Drawing together successful collaborative apprenticeship practices, the authors narrate how their own interactions have supported innovation in the face of resource constraints, regulatory compliance, and a complex stakeholder context.

Findings

Intense regulatory scrutiny and resource limitations have driven innovation and collaboration within business school apprenticeships, which could offer valuable strategies for the wider HE sector. Insights include enhanced personalised student support, proactive progress monitoring, and effective partnership. Collaborative approaches developed amongst apprenticeship providers have driven continuous improvement; highlighting potential benefits to traditional HE programmes of cross-institutional collaboration and the adoption of new practices in response to rapidly changing conditions.

Originality/value

Contributing to the discourse on HE resilience, the authors reflect on how innovations within HE apprenticeship practice offer potential solutions to wider challenges. The paper emphasises that addressing current and future challenges in the UK HE context requires shifting from competitive isolation to cross-institutional collaboration, and from top down to bottom-up innovation.

Keywords: Higher Education, Apprenticeships, Collaboration, Regulatory Compliance, University Funding, Student Outcomes, Higher Education Management

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A Brewing Storm?

For many leaders and managers in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector, it feels like the cold winds have been blowing for over a decade. Numerous storms have blown in, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape. These have included the shift in funding from government grants to tuition fees in 2012, which then failed to keep pace with inflation; the impacts of Brexit on core partnerships, funding sources and international standing; a hostile political narrative played out to the media; the perpetual flux and instability associated with ten education secretaries, eight ministers responsible for universities, all before the new Labour government; and the impacts of a global pandemic (e.g. Highman et al, 2023; Jarvis, 2023; Stern, 2023; UUK, 2024).

The outlook that 'winter is coming' to the sector, often cast across national media (e.g. Ashton, 2024; Hollick, 2024; Jarvis, 2024; Lewis & Evans, 2024), has done little to generate a national response to the biting chill that threatens to bring some institutions to their knees. The authors' combined experiences suggest the frigid operating conditions facing Universities present an unparalleled task; disavowed by successive governments as 'autonomous institutions', and yet operating in market conditions defined and constrained by government policy and regulation. This bitter embrace has been felt from both sides, with many of the challenges facing our sector, long heralded as a national success story, appearing to arise from the cold front of UK policy decisions (Scott, 2024a; House of Lords, 2023). These local conditions mirror patterns seen internationally. A complex interplay of global geopolitics, stricter national immigration policies, declining living standards, reduced government funding for HE, and the challenges of modernity in a post-COVID world have become common pressures on Anglophone HE systems, including those in Canada and Australia (Cassidy, 2024; OCUFA, 2024; Ross, 2024; Scott, 2024b).

In the UK, the Office for Student's (OfS) conditions of registration (DfE, 2017) have forced HE Institutions to engage in significant introspection. Self-examination has led to strategic development to address student inclusion and support. There is a renewed focus on the delivery of learning gains; most notably graduates' employment prospects, in which providers face new complexities in a world where leading knowledge finds itself antiquated before the final Teams meeting of the day is finished (see: Areshka & Bradley, 2024; Bradley & Quigley, 2023; Dandridge, 2019; Fryer, 2023). This sits within a national context of skills shortages, which in 2022 drove a third of UK job vacancies, with HE expected to play a leading role in delivering against these future skills needs (DfE, 2024). Yet in contrast to these aspirations for the sector, funding remains a key challenge as home student fees remain in a state of deep freeze. The decline of international recruitment compounds this, as the weight of highly politicised anti-migration interventions such as the removal of dependent visas for international students takes effect (Blake, 2024; Gov.uk, 2024a). The government's own advisory committee indicated there was little evidence to suggest abuse of the student visa system (MAC, 2024). Meanwhile, the "systemic challenges" of the wider funding model persist (Morgan, 2022; Public Accounts Committee, 2022), with little hope of a rapid thaw under a Labour government whose Minister for HE asserted that Universities can go bust 'if necessary' (Newman, 2024). The forecast of 'continued gloom' is also found in analysis of the first Labour party conference since the party formed its government after fourteen years out of power. Hillman (2024a) characterizes the live issues discussed at the conference around

changing demand, demographic flux, and persistent inequality. This was offset against financial uncertainties for both HE and HE students that the conference itself would do little to address (Hillman, 2024a). Add to this the blizzard of data reporting, scrutiny of performance, rankings and metrics (e.g. HESA, 2024; OfS, 2022; OfS, 2023a), the associated costs and administrative burden for registry services and digital infrastructure continue to bite at the budgets. All of this pointing to a sustained grey spell for a sector with a recent track record of contributing over £130 billion to the UK economy per annum (Universities UK, 2024).

So where might the warm rays of hope burst through from, given the seemingly unrelenting frostiness of a highly influential policy landscape? Our thought is that perhaps some of the answers may lie within, having navigated similar storms within HE apprenticeships. Where else has HE seen more radical change in resourcing, regulation, and relationships with stakeholders as in this area of provision (McKellar, 2019)? Drawing on our experiences of the micro-climate of higher and degree apprenticeships, we share some of our insights into how 'huddling together' has enabled us to weather some comparable features of the climate characterised. We conclude that as competition, marketisation, and regulation have driven institutions into cold isolation, the sparks of innovation needed to keep warm may be found in a fundamentally more collaborative embrace.

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The Forecast

At the time of writing, more than 70 UK universities were engaging in cost-saving exercises, 40% of universities are predicting to run in deficit, and several institutions were facing 'serious peril' (Griffiths & Wheeler, 2024; Jeffreys & Standley, 2024; UCU, 2024). The latest financial sustainability report from the OfS suggests that innovation and change are essential parts of the solution to this frosty context (OfS, 2024). This includes diversifying income and seeking increased productivity to drive improvement. The new UK government has committed to an education manifesto of extensive reform. This is borne out in the newly formed 'Skills England', in promises of changes to levy policy, and with further consideration of the awaited lifelong learning entitlement (LLE) (Salmon, 2024). The 2024 Labour party conference revealed implementation would be subject to further 'careful thought' to avoid any 'dead-weight' costs creeping in (Stephenson & Freeman, 2024). In his conference speech, the Prime Minister announced that restrictions on Level 7 apprenticeship funding were under consideration as part of a national effort to rebalance 'funding back to young people.' (ibid.). However, this announcement appears to pre-empt Skills England's stated goal of understanding employer skill needs in the short, medium, and long term; ensuring that provision meets that demand, and does so 'at all levels' (DfE, 2024).

At the time of writing, IfATE responsibilities are set to transfer into the Department for Education, and Ofsted are making changes to its evaluation processes for the provision it inspects, characterising ongoing changes that will continue to transform how HE contributes to skills development in the UK (Gov.uk, 2024b; Gov.uk, 2024c). For now, the only certainty facing HE is continued uncertainty. Bravenboer (2019: 75) framed a similarly tempestuous landscape more than five years ago, noting the "head-spinning array of challenges" facing HE which the "new and significantly unpredictable" apprenticeship market compounded. So, as the HE sector continues to be buffeted by this turbulence, leaders and managers at all levels are in need of the new strategies and tools to survive, if not flourish, despite strong headwinds. Such rapid adaptation has been characteristic of higher and degree apprenticeship provision, where rapid changes in regulatory scrutiny, increasing demands from and for students, and challenges to deliver much with little, have been common features of the climate (Hughes & Saieva, 2019; Mulkeen et al, 2019; Smith et al, 2021a; Smith et al, 2021b).

As four colleagues working within business and management apprenticeships across the UK HE geographic and institutional spectrum, we regularly come together as a group of apprenticeship 'blue sky thinkers' to lament the issues of the day over virtual coffees. Our caffeine-powered temperature checks emerged in response to finding that we did not have many of the required solutions to complex resourcing, quality, and design challenges alone. Yet numerous solutions that have emerged from this convergence have been far greater than the sum of their parts. Moving rapidly beyond the temperate conditions of our small group, we've witnessed a systemic intelligence arise through the broad and dynamic formation of communities and conversations spanning apprenticeship knowledge networks, conference break out groups, external quality appointments and approval roles, and informal groups on social media. In doing so, HE apprenticeship leaders and practitioners have created spaces for national conversations, a context for recognising the diverse strengths

that lie within and across our sector, and an understanding of how these approaches may help us all collectively to navigate the myriad challenges facing HE.

Apprenticeships are no panacea, and in many ways, they are still struggling through a difficult puberty in the face of stubborn immaturity in the wider policy and technical context (Lester, 2020). However, many a mainstream business and management degree programme would love to be able to show off "good degree" rates that have been evidenced within the authors' institutional experiences [1]. Driven by the demands of Ofsted's skills inspection framework, our institutions have pioneered shifts in practice, co-ordination, and governance to move from reactive to proactive student monitoring, introducing novel interventions and learning support. New models of delivery and resourcing have emerged rapidly in response to an unsympathetic funding environment (e.g. IfATE, 2024; McKellar, 2019) that demands, as an anonymous Deputy Vice Chancellor allegedly once framed, "champagne for beer money". And where else has professional development and career alignment been exemplified more than in a context in which industry and academia co-create an understanding of skills, competency and practice (c.f. Rowe et al, 2016; Rowe, 2018; Que-Jones & Rowe, 2022)?

In writing this viewpoint we have reflected on how practices across the apprenticeship sector have emerged not just within, but between, our institutions, triggered by conversations taking place on the fringes of higher education provision. Drawing on well alliterated examples from 'performance, progress and partnership' across our apprenticeship provision, the following section illuminates how a climate of collaboration has supported us to brave the elements, delivering new practices and processes, in resonance with many of the challenges facing the wider HE sector. These illustrations reflect how the collective intelligence that arises from coming together in response to a changing environment can support HE leaders to notice commonality, and, by doing so, to cultivate common practices which can address systemic challenges.

Navigating the Elements

Personalisation

The personalised entry processes of HE apprenticeships have posed a sharp learning curve to local department and programme teams. These processes contrast significantly from the often impersonal, distanced, massified admissions processes of UCAS, familiar to most in the UK HE sector. A traditional degree entrant experiences an open day with hundreds in attendance, and perhaps a brief chat with a member of faculty, before entering a semi-automated admissions process. Contrast this with HE apprenticeships, where a much more personalised approach is required to adhere to Education Skills Funding Agency's (ESFA) funding rules, requiring granular evidence of provider auditing of individual learning outcomes and a variety of other eligibility requirements (ESFA, 2024). On the one hand, these rules can be compliantly met through well produced forms and a procedural approach to auditing applicants and paperwork. Yet, as is often discussed in our communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002), this only tells a very small part of the story of our now collective strategies to onboarding.

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As leaders from very different institutional contexts, we noticed a common side effect of changing our administrative processes was the shift in programme teams' understanding of their learners before they even arrive. Applicants provide a detailed account of their prior learning and experience, participate in at least one interview, and the programme is mapped to their personal development. As a result, both learner and faculty are clear on the benefit of participation in the programme. Across our institutions we have supported the development of this practice, sharing opportunities to enhance the personalisation of signposting to student support, for example. This depth of engagement continues throughout the apprenticeship, enabling support services to be used to maximum effect. Programme teams know which learners require extra support from academic skills units, and what form that support should take. A more holistic understanding of degree apprenticeship learners has also supported an increase in identification and support of those with previously undisclosed or undiagnosed additional learning needs, often early on in their journey.

Whilst 97% of training provider respondents to the Impact, Policy and Good Practice Guide (Nawaz & Edifor, 2024) recognised the significance of providing additional academic skills support to degree apprentices, only 55% had distinct support mechanisms or structures to facilitate this. This reflects the experiences of the authors insofar that the understanding of the need and opportunities for change that arise in our collective understanding outpace the changes in practices driven by other internal forces. However, collectively reframing our understanding of the regulatory implications of poor outcomes, we have also shifted attitudes towards student-programme fit, actively deselecting applicants or referring them to other programmes. Even where UK HE has low levels of non-continuation compared to international benchmarks (Hillman, 2024b) pervasive non-continuation from poor fit on traditional programme continues to waste time and money, leading students to swap programmes, institutions, or in the worst cases abandon their aspirations for HE altogether, resulting in lost opportunity and sunk resources. Given that degree apprenticeship learners are not only working full time (albeit with a study leave day each week), they are also studying (at an intensity, which, in reality, we might as well call full time), one would expect to be losing even more learners than on traditional degrees, but the authors' own experiences are to the contrary (see previous footnote). OfS (2023b) analysis reveals that undergraduate continuation rates between apprenticeships and non-apprenticeship programmes are virtually identical (88.5% apprenticeship vs. 88.9 traditional), despite the significant bureaucratic requirements and work intensity of apprenticeship programmes.

Whilst traditional provision faces different regulatory drivers, most institutions have yet to introduce a greater depth of pre-enrolment 'fit checks'. Yet, similar checks to those in apprenticeships may well provide reassurance to parents and young people that they are embarking on the right journey, particularly in the context of ongoing cost of living pressures. Early interventions may also avoid the perils of Level 4 non-continuation, impacting both institutional income and performance in key metrics.

Significant enhancements to personalisation of learning have arisen from a set of tangentially related regulatory requirements. As a result, recognition of prior experience and learning, exemption from learning, and personalisation of curricula happen as a matter of course on degree apprenticeships. Through sharing our understanding of compliance, we have identified additional benefits to our learners and programmes, ultimately improving

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other performance measures. Personal knowledge, intelligent signposting, and genuine analytical insight (as opposed to abstract data trends) guide conversations with learners about customisation of their programmes. This feeds into the complexities we can expect in the life-long learning entitlement (LLE) models (London, et al, 2011) we are beginning to navigate, and the potential offering that may emerge in response to changes to the levy. Do the solutions for customisation of LLE also live within the models' apprenticeships have developed?

Progress

The nature of the apprenticeship regulatory environment also means that we know where our students are progressing. ESFA funding rules require a paper trail to evidence every single hour of apprenticeship learners' engagement with learning in and out of the classroom. Ofsted expectations require us to know not simply how they performed in their modules, but holistically how they are progressing towards the final summative assessment. This process involves compiling a learning portfolio and maintaining learner records that reflect the entire curriculum journey, extracurricular activities, and management of challenges, including local risks in their professional and personal lives. In response, apprenticeship leaders have developed an abundance of alternative metrics, 'Red, Amber, Green' (RAG) ratings, parallel assessment practices, monitoring, intervention and escalation processes, reporting tools, and governance meetings – often driven by practitioner responsiveness rather than institutional design. This has created a remarkable depth of insight into our learners' experiences. We joke that an apprenticeship programme leader can predict which learner hasn't had a good night's sleep from 20 paces. Through the sharing of these practices, what started as a shadowy set of 'quick fixes' has evolved into a set of increasingly standard practices, which in turn have become gradually integrated as common approaches in individualised university policies.

In this new realm of analytics, the emphasis shifts within HE apprenticeships from cohort performance and quality improvement between semesters or years, to individual learner action plans and interventions where results are expected this time next week, and most certainly before the next 12-week review. Attention turns from retrospectively reviewing outcomes, to proactively intervening in process. It has also led to fundamentally redefining what is valued, measured, and prioritised in our appraisal of engagement and performance. The other consequence has been the incidental reimagining of collaborative partnerships within our institutions, holistically supporting individual learning journeys across academic and registry teams, business development, account management teams, and student support services.

Together, these developments make the ghost of Data Futures look like the ghost of Data Past. The complexity and apparent surface costs of such high intensity approaches within HE apprenticeships looks daunting, but they bear dividend. Between improved continuation, better attainment, reduced referral rates, and targeted use of support services, associated cost savings occur. Considering the comparative sizes of our apprenticeship teams within our institutions against our traditional provision, they are highly productive in doing much with little, whilst still meeting the expected rates of return to central (eligible) overheads. Combine this with frequently impressive degree completion rates and awards, and consistent graduate

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employability figures, these suggest definitive evidence of impact that could be replicated across traditional programmes. Whilst we can each provide anecdotes that hint towards this organisational learning in our institutions, it is striking that the conversations we've characterised in our inter-institutional community are not commonplace within traditional curricular even within areas of practices within each individual University.

Partnership

Another outcome of the very tailored approach described above is the cultivation of genuine trust in our relationships across HE apprenticeships. Initial skills assessment has incidentally provided a vehicle for the foundation of trust, because the learner and their organisation recognise that the HE training provider is invested in them. These high trust relationships between university, learner and employer enable open and honest conversations. Where we demonstrate the individual investment in those relationships, all parties will come and talk to us when they have a problem. This is often facilitated by the intensive tripartite work required in apprenticeships, which includes quarterly individual coaching sessions (Horockova et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2019).

Whilst there are parallels to the HE personal tutoring systems, the difference is in the 'equal partner' role that the employer, learner, and training provider play. Within the funding and regulatory expectations, stakeholders including institutions, practitioners and professional bodies have come together to surface, share, and shape the boundary spanning role that the tripartite practitioner plays in representing the training provider within this dynamic (e.g. UVAC, 2024a). Millions of pounds have been invested in personal tutoring for traditional programmes, and yet personal tutoring itself remains under-researched, nationally under-developed, and with wildly varying practices and impacts between institutions (Walker 2022: Seraj and Leggett 2023). Longstanding good practices such as the integration of personal development into personal tutoring (AdvanceHE, 2006) have yet to become mainstream, despite the potential impacts this could have on achieving current performance objectives. The observation here is not that apprenticeship providers have solved the apprenticeship challenges, but that continuous improvement and impact on key performance indicators has been significantly benefited by the empowerment and partnership of a bottom up and discursive process in institutions, and the triangulation of practices between institutions through our collaborative networks. By focussing resources on apprentices' experience of personalised, professionalised and perpetual points of support, this has without doubt reduced the costs associated with student recovery, unsuitable support interventions, and withdrawals. Ask any apprenticeship leader in our community of practice groups and they'll have cases of learners whose studies, and even occasionally their employment, have been saved by the support that could be provided because of that depth of engagement. Professionalisation is a consequence of collaboration, not the other way around.

This more equal partnership cultivated at the best of times in apprenticeships, between provider, employer and learner, also provides a space for learners to articulate their own aspirations, including how these relate to the features and challenges of their own

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lives. Rather than expectations and definitions of success being dictated by the HE sector, apprentices are collaborators in their own education. Innate to apprenticeships is the co-production of the curriculum, in alignment to employment ambitions. This collaboration also supports personal agency, which in turn supports learner buy-in and commitment.

Turning the Tide

The HE apprenticeship model is resource intensive (Quew-Jones, 2023). It is also in many ways radically different and significantly more regulated than traditional degree provision. As HE faces increasing regulation and changing models of delivery, there may be lessons from HE apprenticeships that can illuminate some possible paths through the coming maelstrom. The first concerns the emergence of practices in the context of some comparable operating conditions between university apprenticeships and the wider HE sector, characterised by resource constraint and increasing regulatory demand and complexity. This is illuminated further below.

The second concerns a key message from this article regarding the role and approach to cross-institutional, and indeed cross-stakeholder, collaboration as a vital sectoral response to the current tempest. Tackling apprenticeship funding, regulation, and practice constraints has long required a combination of collaboration across the sector, between HE institutions, and with the wider stakeholder context (Lester 2020). Responding to our resource squeezed context has led to innovation, and a shift from competition to collaboration, most significantly through teamwork across institutions. Whilst our institutions are all radically different in many ways, what we have found from our cooperative experience is that working across universities, and learning from each other, is the key to success in the face of common challenges. Rather than working in silos, or indeed as competitors, universities should be working together – as we have in this viewpoint – to enable us to make a positive difference to our students, our universities, and to wider society (Horockova et al., 2024). The role of professional bodies is crucial (whether this be the University Vocational Awards Council for apprenticeships, or Universities UK, the Russell Group, and others across the sector), but these are no surrogate for direct collaboration and joint problem solving.

We do not suggest that HE apprenticeships have all the answers, but our learning from the few illustrations offered in this article demonstrate the potential grounds for novel solutions for traditional programmes and wider university management and administration that have arisen from the above.

Triaging and triangulating students' needs

Replicating the exhaustive individual initial learner assessments of apprenticeships across all traditional degree entrants is very likely to be unfeasible, and unnecessary given the differing regulatory requirements. However, developing more individualised understanding of learner needs at the entry point, and on an ongoing basis may have a far better net impact on financial performance than would appear *prima facie*. HE apprenticeship teams have developed holistic, integrative approaches that yield valuable insights into students' lives and ambitions, supporting targeted interventions. These interventions enable academics, services,

pastoral teams, and managers to allocate resources more effectively, allowing learners to engage more fully with their studies. If current generic support services often rely on student self-diagnosis, leading to delayed or inadequate interventions, would a more robust personal tutor process address individual needs and aspirations more efficiently by considering multiple, intersectional factors? Additionally, enhanced, live data sets, such as ongoing RAG ratings, could help close attainment gaps and provide a nuanced understanding of students' challenges by treating the qualitative experience of students' individual lives as a key variable in their engagement and performance. Beyond initial triaging, institutions could improve student outcomes by implementing similar structured, triangulated processes that monitor progress and identify issues early. Such processes, which look both backward and forward, enable timely interventions that promote well-being, personal and professional development, and academic success. While for some institutions this requires a broader perspective on progress and performance, integrating university functions and services in this way could enhance student retention and yield significant productivity gains. Where institutions have made progress in achieving elements of this to varying degrees, national, institutional-led conversations on such practices could yield benefits for all.

Transferable learning

The B3 conditions (OfS, 2023c) of registration provide the framework for evaluating student outcomes, through which HE providers are evaluated, and which contribute to permissions or penalties in relation to their degree awarding powers. These are already having significant impact on institutional and programme design priorities. Apprenticeship practice, particularly around identifying learning gaps to design a personalised curriculum, has much to offer a broader set of andragogic and heutagogic principles (Stoten, 2020), reflecting tailored choice in education. For graduates to succeed in their future careers, Universities still play an invaluable part in offering disciplinary expertise. However, a curriculum with an employability and experiential focus, and which takes the professional behaviours, mindsets and competencies as having an equal weighting to knowledge, (as is the case in HE apprenticeships) is critical to graduate success.

Pedagogic principles around Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) (Zegwaard et al., 2023), Work-Applied Learning (WAL) (Abraham, 2012) and Work Based Learning (WBL) (Boud and Solomon 2001), offer interventions for employability and experiential learning, an area which will only grow under the potential introduction of lifelong learning flexibility. These pedagogic principles support curricula that are embedded in the demands of contemporary working practices ensuring transitions into the workplace are seamless. Learning becomes transferrable even beyond the currency of specific theories and technical knowledge. As such, the personalised curriculum of HE apprenticeships could be applied to more traditional programmes. However, these approaches cannot be delivered in isolation. They require a change in approach to employer engagement and consultation to scope and define a broader set of learning objectives, extending beyond the boundaries on the HE institution, something apprenticeships have now established a track record in.

The Next Front

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UK HE faces continued turbulence. The quasi-marketisation of higher education, under a neo-liberal policy agenda (Maisuria, 2014) has left universities scratching for static home tuition fees or looking to turbulent international markets in which competitiveness is also defined by domestic immigration policies. While we can hope for the promised 'comprehensive' post-16 education strategy from our new government (Labour, 2024), we should recognise that successive governments have failed to provide a sustainable long term policy vision for the country's most successful knowledge-based sector. In this environment, innovation, resource efficiency and survival can only be a collaborative effort. In HE apprenticeships, and in our networking communities, collaboration has helped us to achieve some of this. Institutions have only to work more directly with their neighbours if they are to explore what lies beyond the fog of political and economic uncertainty.

We have also argued that institutions have ongoing opportunities to innovate that do not pit finances and quality as opponents. This demands ongoing introspection, the promotion of bottom-up and horizontal collaboration, and a balance of adaptability and foresight to implement changes that will benefit the future. We articulated the benefits of triaging and triangulating student needs from the outset, as highlighted in delivering successful outcomes through effective use of resources. Activities often regarded superficially as a cost burden (as higher and degree apprenticeships themselves have been historically branded in the sector), can provide opportunities for innovation and productivity, if leaders and managers are sufficiently engaged to see them. A review of the personal tutoring system and the acceleration of shifts towards genuinely live business intelligence around student experience and progress could dramatically enhance effective monitoring and could help to close pernicious attainment gaps. In addition, with an increasing focus on B3 conditions, a curriculum which treats traditional knowledge, employability, and experiential learning equally, and which links to professional behaviours, is vital to graduate success. Yet this requires a philosophical shift regarding what the HE sector values and emphasises in the delivery of education. By using the pedagogic principles developed in WIL, WAL, and WBL, it is possible to embed the demands of contemporary working practices, to infuse a need for lifelong learning, and to develop lifelong skills. This article has argued that many of the solutions to current volatility can be found by looking within; and by drawing from the partnerships and collaborations emerging within areas of expertise and practice. We do believe this still requires further formalisation with regards to the role of employer engagement and partnership, a key area in which HE apprenticeships have begun to contribute. And we recognise that in other contexts structures exist to support this. For example, organisations such as WACE (2024) internationally, ASET (2024) in the UK, CEWIL (2024) in Canada, and ACEN (2024) in Australia, play a vital role in facilitating the alignment of contemporary skills-based education to a variety of professional contexts. As the global economic and employment context places increasing demand for a high skilled workforce, looking towards established partnerships may be a crucial and cost-effective approach to meeting this global need.

More broadly, what do our experiences suggest about how higher education should trim its sails given the prevailing winds? Firstly, that solutions to rapidly emergent contexts are best tackled collaboratively. Networks exist across multiple settings in HE, and we would be foolish as managers at any level not to capitalise upon these distributed knowledge communities. To do this we need mechanisms where such learning can be brought into the

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light. While we four may have managed to bring this discussion to you presently, what other networks do your academic colleagues interact in, and what breaks in the cloud might they offer to your own practice? Beyond those formal professional networks, institutions have a responsibility (to themselves, their regions, and to the sector) to be proactive in the cultivation of informal partnerships and collaborations in the face of common challenges. The sector is a beacon of innovation and adaptation, and as apprenticeships have taught us, collaboration has dramatically reduced the risk and cost of each reinventing our responses in isolation. Furthermore, in response to the widespread corporatisation of HE as a response to the introduction of quasi-markets, our experience might suggest that bottom–up approaches to management and leadership innovation play a vital role in navigating the challenges of this context. While initially unsystematic, we have demonstrated how such approaches ultimately bear the fruits of good weather, where innovations often become the basis for new practice. We have provided illustrations grounded in our experiences of navigating the complexities of HE apprenticeship provision, but leaders and managers should be encouraged to look more widely across the HE estate for localised solutions which could transform our climate. How do we ensure these voices and innovations are built upon, and not swept away by the storm tides of institutional approaches?

If anything, our experience of collaboration has shown us that it is not the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, but rather something more unexpected. By sheltering under an umbrella together, we shared stories, best and worst practice, to deliver positive outcomes for our learners, partners and institutions. Diversification and inclusion of a wide range of practices, such as has been the case over the development HE apprenticeships, has also offered shelter to traditional Higher Education too.

[1] The eagle-eyed reader will be thinking of the variance in completion rates (the Quality Achievement Rate) of some apprenticeships. UVAC (2024b) data presented through Higher Education Reporting in Apprenticeships demonstrates significant variance across providers. However, we note that this discrepancy often arises because non-integrated degree programmes face challenges in motivating learners to complete the end-point assessment (EPA) after they have already been awarded their degree. While the completion rates for the degree component can be very high, the incentive to finish the EPA diminishes once the academic qualification is secured, leading to lower reported apprenticeship achievement rates. For example, 100% of learners on the lead author's Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship provision completed on target in 22/23 with a 2.i or first degree classification, in contrast to 56% on the non-apprenticeship equivalent. Variation in achievement and proportion of good degrees between comparable apprenticeship and non-apprenticeship programmes within institutions appears not uncommon.

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