Juggling hats: Academic roles, identity work and new degree apprenticeships

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2018 Society for Research into Higher Education

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/03075079.2018.1550478

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
Juggling hats: Academic roles, identity work and new degree apprenticeships

Abstract
This study considers academic identity and the performance of identity work in the context of the design and delivery of new degree apprenticeships. Recent UK Policies have driven many changes in UK higher education, including the rapid development of new awards combining an apprenticeship with a full bachelor’s or master’s degree. Delivery requires university partnerships with industry, supported by significant government funding – and targets. Semi-structured in-depth interviews identified the pressures on 30 participants to retain academic identity in managing relationships with a range of different partners as shown in a generative model of academic identity work. Results show the ambiguities and uncertainties embedded in supporting academic identity, with stress caused by managerial approaches and difficulties in maintaining the identity of ‘a proper academic’ with implications for university management.

Introduction
This article explores how rapid changes in UK higher education policy and systems affect academic identity. Specifically, the recent development of apprenticeships at degree level is discussed as a context to consider how academics form and support identity, during the design and delivery of these new workplace integrated degrees. These awards are part of the changes in the academic landscape described by Degn (2015, 1179) which put pressures put on academic identities through the rise of “entrepreneurialism, accountability and what is increasingly known in academia as new managerialism” (Deem et al, 2007). The higher education system in the UK has been subject to many overlapping policy initiatives in the last 5 years, changing curriculum, research and knowledge exchange assessments, altering funding models and the ability to recruit foreign students (Universities UK, 2018). This paper is important in considering how the individual academic is impacted, in their efforts to implement changing institutional imperatives.

As part of this shift to address market needs and increase University-Industry collaboration (Basit et al., 2015), apprenticeships at degree level have emerged, combining practical skills with theoretical knowledge, evidenced through their application in the workplace (Rowe et al, 2016). These qualifications offer new routes to both undergraduate and masters degrees as part of “one of the biggest changes in higher education for decades” (Rowe et al, 2016, 358) potentially challenging established institutional processes, routines and norms (Degn, 2015). Offered by some universities in the UK since 2015 and increasing in numbers year on year (UK Government, 2017), degree apprenticeships are a form of work-integrated learning which combine a full degree qualification with a paid apprenticeship. Degree apprenticeships include all levels of an undergraduate degree with some at Master’s degree level.

Curriculum derives from national standards agreed by groups of providers, recognised professional bodies and employers. Through the current government funding regime, employers gain apprentices to work as employees at a reduced rate in return for allowing them time for formal training, providing a workplace supervisor and giving them opportunities to apply their learning. Hence, these new awards require close partnerships with professional bodies and companies to agree content and assessment, far beyond previous internships and work experience placements. Higher education
has “values, norms, routines and ideas which significantly impact how it is possible to act and think within it” (Degn, 2015, 1, citing Olsen 2005) but these new awards require rapid processes to implement new curriculum together with an accompanying rethink of routines and ideas (Rowe et al, 2016; Mulkeen et al, 2017).

These apprenticeships also require great flexibility in delivery mode together with adaptability in institutional process to validate the degree within the timescales agreed with funders, professional bodies and employers. The development of these awards has been rapid and driven by political targets (HM Government 2015; 2018). The rationale for this paper lies in the current lack of research to understand impacts on academic staff of such rapid changes in the nature and process of university curriculum (Mulkeen et al, 2017; UCAS, 2017). The next section explores the nature of degree apprenticeships and their implications for universities while the section following that places this in the context of existing studies of academic identity.

The degree apprenticeship – university contexts.
Prior to the introduction of degree apprenticeships, universities in the UK had already experienced a period of change in terms of government expectations, targets and funding mechanisms requiring them to “justify the expenditure of public funds and to demonstrate ‘value for money’” (Deem, 1998, 48). These are set against European-wide changes to modernise higher education (Angervall and Gustaffson, 2016; European Commission, 2010). Policies globally expect universities not only to address excellence in teaching and research but also to be dynamic and responsive (Bendix Petersen, 2011; Etzkowitz, 2003) in order to meet broader socio-economic objectives (HEFCE, 2009).

Further, UK policy requires universities to engage in the broader community, business and industry (Basit et al, 2015). Doing so is expected to address gaps in governmental funding for core activities (Marginson and Considine, 2000) during uncertain times for governmental funding routes. Hence academics need not only to teach and do research but to engage with business and society, with direct encouragement of “innovative academic behaviour” including “wide ranging partnerships with external bodies and generating non-state funding,” (Shattock, 2005, 17). Partnership is to be expected, given that the status of university degrees “is created through a process of shared cultural understanding among major interest groups”. It is therefore important to engage these groups as the status of these new awards are likely to be based on social perceptions – “how employers, trade unions, university staff, parents, and students/graduates view the quality and usefulness of the education provided by different institutions” (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015, 1304).

Employers and professional bodies have been key voices in the development of national standards and are fundamental to the successful delivery of these new degree apprenticeships (Force, 2005; DCS, 2008; UK Government, 2017). Basit et al (2015) identify the need for the tripartite relationship between the employer, employee and the Higher Education Institution (HEI) to be successful. In the case of UK apprenticeships, the tripartite relationship is further complicated due to the close involvement not only of professional bodies but also funding bodies, local, regional and national, during the three-year evolution of these awards (Rowe et al, 2016; Mulkeen et al, 2017).
These awards are therefore not only shaped and assessed but also arguably ‘owned’ by them too (Mulkeen et al, 2017). As one example, the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship is currently provided by 44 universities offering “the triple guarantee of a quality degree, on-the-job experience and a professional pathway for future development” (The Manager, 2017). This degree apprenticeship was developed by a group of employers, with a number of Higher Education Institutions and the Chartered Management Institute (Rowe et al, 2016; The Manager, 2017). While national standards for management have been set, these are interpreted in different curriculum designs, e.g., sectoral pathways or online focus, to suit employer needs. These may cause some issues during the validation process, given the need not only to address market needs but also to do so quickly to meet demand. Therefore, course directors and course team members need to understand employer needs while understanding and upholding professional body values and those of the academic institution (Rowe et al, 2016; Mulkeen et al, 2017). These pressures gave rise to the study, to understand how these sets of different demands impact on academic identity for those designing and delivering these awards. The next step therefore is to explore the nature of academic identity.

**Academic identity and the nature of identity work**

Previous research has identified the changing basis for higher education in Europe and further afield, with modernization the watchword (European Commission 2010), coupled with the need for higher education to justify itself economically and societally (Deem, 1998; Deem et al, 2007). The resulting pressures on those working in academia have been discussed in terms of potential ambiguities and uncertainties as to the role and purpose of an academic (Angervall et al., 2017; Clegg, 2008). These studies also often consider impacts on academic identity of such pressures (Clegg, 2008; Bendix Petersen, 2011; Henkel, 2000, 2002).

Academic identity is constructed and negotiated in social interaction in everyday practices (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013). It is based on shared understandings of what a university and an academic does and what they are for, set within societal, media and historic discourses depicting the academic. The current series of policy changes in the UK necessarily impact and may be felt to threaten individual identities (Bendix Petersen, 2011; Clegg, 2008). Within the workplace, individuals are social beings in organisational contexts where identity refers to “subjective meanings and experience, to our ongoing efforts to address the questions, ‘Who am I?’ and, by implication, how should I act?’” (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2008, 5-6). In order to answer these questions, people engage in ongoing identity construction to make sense of their reality (Mills et al, 2010).

This suggests that identity is fluid rather than fixed, and that discourse plays a large part in its construction, “balanced with other elements of life history” (Alveston and Wilmott, 2002, 623). Through an iterative process (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012), identity work constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs academic identity by interpreting and re-interpreting experiences (Beijaard et al, 2004, 123). This requires individuals to invest emotional and cognitive effort in making sense of who they are (Beijaard et al, 2002; Elliot, 2014). This entails shaping and re-shaping self-hood in response to socio-environmental change and the individual’s perception of the views of others (Reedy et al., 2016; Knights and Clarke, 2014).
Hence, identity is constructed and reconstructed (identity work) to enable the individual to deal with the sort of changes entailed in the introduction of degree apprenticeships with impacts on role, context and location (Ashforth et al, 2008). In a university setting, expectations may be also related to the different roles academics are expected to play, as researchers, managers and teachers, working to fulfil traditional institutional aims while working at a pace and in ways to suit professional bodies and employers. They may also reflect media and societal pressures to act in specific ways in order to meet the expectations of society about what an academic is and what they do.

Here we discuss academic rather than personal identity, although some studies suggest the two coalesce. Ashforth et al, (2008, 356), for instance, found that occupations are a way for individuals to interpret who they are, serving as “major identity badges for situating individuals in the organisation”. In this way people define themselves through a generally understood term, often identifying themselves as their occupation “I am a teacher” (e.g., Ashforth and Johnson, 21; Thatcher et al., 2003). This may become more marked in times of rapid organisational change; if the status quo is threatened then individuals perceive their identity as fragile and seek to support it (Gautam et al, 2004).

Further, Ashforth et al. (2008) suggest that organisational and wider socio-environmental change may make occupational identity more important to the individual. While other aspects of the organisation become uncertain, the occupation badge appears to be a safe fixed point, even though in reality, it may be required to change rapidly, leading to difficulties for individuals in redefining their view of themselves (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001). People make sense of who they are expected to be, through interaction with the situation they are in and with others (Weick et al, 2005) whether directly expressed or indirectly perceived (Brown and Coupland, 2015). so using occupation or profession as an identity allows others to know what to expect.

Identities are also prey to institutional discourses about worth and value. Laine et al (2016, 509) suggest that “one’s desire to be seen as appropriate in the gaze of the other” determine what is appropriate and that this is “constructed in and through reiterating discursive norms” within a role, field or environment, hence, “autonomy and choice—or more specifically, the illusion of them—stem not so much from the individual but from reiteration of the conventions”. In this way identity work becomes a medium for managerial control in the institution (Alvesson and Willmott, 2001) identity (Brown, 2008; Brown and Coupland, 2015) where power relations are interwoven with views of selfhood (Brown and Lewis, 2011).

While Laine et al (2016) base their work on manager identity, ‘being appropriate in the gaze of others’ may also be useful in understanding academic identity, where institutional discourses are embedded in historic dialogue about how things are done and in shared bodies of knowledge about what it means to be an academic, what academic specialty conveys and what the university is for. These are embedded and implicit discourses for identity work rather than being directly expressed (Butler, 1993). Identity is constructed and understood through the stories told to and by individuals (Weick et al, 2005; Degn, 2015). However, to create and maintain a positive self-image, individuals will draw on memories and experiences selectively, identifying aspects positively as a response to perceived weaknesses or threats to identity (Brown, 2008; Brown and Coupland, 2015).
To understand the sense-making processes in designing and delivering degree apprenticeships, this study takes a qualitative approach, noting the emphasis on stories by Ylijoki and Ursin, (2013). Individuals are intentional beings who take action to shape their identity within a “social, cultural, and political context” within organizational and institutional boundaries (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Varghese et al, 2005, 37). Here we were interested not only in how participants viewed their own academic identity but also the work carried out to address perceived ambiguities.

Methodology
This article explores how changes in UK higher education policy and systems introducing new degree apprenticeships affect academic identity. How do academics interpret these policy and institutional changes in their everyday performance of identity? Although other countries have systems of ‘dual learning’ and two-tier degree structures with key competencies (Schaeper, 2009), UK universities have very recently developed apprenticeships as an alternative degree route, with traditional timelines for curriculum development overturned to meet market needs.

For this reason, academics in these universities are going through significant changes in curriculum, delivery mode and approach in working with companies and professional bodies. Therefore, participants were selected only from the group of staff in the UK currently designing and delivering degree or higher level apprenticeships. This necessarily restricted sample size and the disciplines in which participants worked, given that apprenticeships are neither currently available across all subject areas nor offered beyond intermediate and advanced stages across all disciplines.

Over 50 academics initially responded and from these 30 were selected based on similarity in subject areas and stages of the establishment of apprenticeship. Anonymised details about the interviewees are given (Table 1) in terms of their years of teaching, curriculum design experience, level of qualification, subject area and university. They offer insights into the range of experience and education level for those involved in university teaching in the UK, where although doctor level awards are now the preferred entry level teaching qualification, historically those with bachelors or master’s degrees have become lecturers, particularly in cases where the individual has significant relevant work experience or where the subject area favours professional rather than academic awards (e.g., accountancy). This also differentiates it from the research route within UK universities, where a PhD is the entry route.

This study is based on two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each person, averaging 120 minutes in total, plus subsequent telephone calls or emails to follow up points or check the meaning intended in interviews. The 30 participants discussed apprenticeships around four themes: (a) their definition and feelings about degree apprenticeships; (b) perspectives on working with companies, bodies, funders and other faculties; (c) curriculum experiences and their views of it; and (d) experiences with others, including students, parents, staff, academic peers. The emphasis for interviews was on those micro-level interactions embedded in everyday practice, with interviews collecting accounts couched in participants' own words via cue questions (Appendix 1) (Marshall and Rossman, 2014).
Transcripts were collected at participants’ own universities or at events to suit their needs to generate suitable data (Taylor, 2008). To ensure rigour in carrying out data collection and analysis, the researchers were careful to follow established routes for both. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis using NVivo software to explore key themes (Cheung et al., 2018). The text then underwent an iterative process, where transcripts were read and re-read in turn by the authors until text was categorised and all themes were compared against each other (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Odena and Burgess, 2017). Seven final themes emerged, listed in Appendix B. The transcripts and themes were reviewed separately by the research team members to audit the analysis, (Cheung et al., 2018; Elliott et al., 1999) and the team continued to review the analysis regularly throughout the process. Themes were also reviewed to meet study aims – to show how participants saw their apprenticeship work in the context of their own academic identity and how they perceived potential ambiguities, made sense of them and addressed them.

As in Odena and Burgess (2017), this qualitative study combines the results and discussion, in which participant experiences are contrasted with relevant literature on academic identity. The interviewees reported issues and described experiences and feelings with three emergent themes which will be related to relevant literature to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Subject area</th>
<th>Own qualification</th>
<th>Years of teaching</th>
<th>Curriculum design experience</th>
<th>Prior Company experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Science &amp; Tech</td>
<td>Postgrad</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Business related</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
show how they contribute to understanding of academic identity in the context of rapid change and degree apprenticeships. The three themes are as follows: *New qualifications and role pressures*, considering the pressures felt by academics to be exerted by their institutions; *Making things work, power and autonomy* exploring the way academics respond to these pressures through identity work and *Juggling hats – identity work needed to be a ‘proper academic’* which discusses individual perspectives and the gap between their perceived identity and a ‘proper academic’

**New qualifications and role pressures**
Participants all expressed positive views of the potential benefits for students of degree apprenticeships, given the enhanced employability that apprentices would have in working while studying and the importance to the university of engaging in these new opportunities. The language used was replicated in university documents. This was not seen as beneficial for participants or their own roles, however, due to tensions in role ambiguity and negative impacts caused by aspects of the management process. Participants expressed feelings of low worth due to the way the design and development of the awards had occurred. This was compounded by a lack of choice in getting involved with apprenticeships exposing feelings of ‘being compelled’. Three explained that they had been “drafted in” and others that they had been “identified as the person and that was that”. Typically, participants 1 and 24 explained:

“It was presented as a great opportunity to continue the sort of work I’d done before but then I’d done it before and already saw it as a bit of a cul-de-sac” (Participant 24)

“There was no choice actually, the School needed someone to pick this up and I was identified. I’ve been typecast as the one who does this stuff” (Participant 1).

Further, participant 26 felt that once you were identified as lead person, you then took over the pressures of a structure others had put in place, with time and internal processes to validate awards had suddenly become elastic to ensure contracts were met

“No one would choose the way these have been set up … 3 university committees, business development and the employers. The employers always want things instantly and the committees want to explore every comma and you’re in the middle … then there are senior managers pushing you to do more quicker for less…. certainly, it would make it all much simpler if I had any say in things” (Participant 26)

“We validate these in super quick time now because they use a template and just drop bits in, it’s worrying for me because I still feel quality is important and this feels like we’re paying lip service to it but its seen as unhelpful to focus on these things and none of it is under my control” (Participant 3).

“It’s not like a normal degree, there isn’t the same depth or creativity about it … it’s drafted by business development people filling a template in and we have to just make it work, there’s no room for the usual academic side” (Participant 14).

Here the participants’ comments make obvious those institutional pressures weighing on participants to be both published academic and to successfully liaise with business, professional body, university and student. Their response to these pressures is shown in terms of identity work to manage the many overlapping sets of expectations.

**Making things work, power and autonomy**
While all participants felt that others set the structures, content and the timeframe, they all recognised their own efforts in delivery of apprenticeships. In one way or another, each referred to the need to ‘make things work’. Making things work despite the pressures was seen as a positive thing, as a form of self-validation.

“A scramble but I feel validated in getting it off the ground because it was just a muddle” (Participant 24)

“It’s been very chaotic, the new Dean’s very inexperienced so keeps muddling in and out, there are business development types and heads of departments all butting in … so the agreements made are unrealistic … still we have made it work, I led on getting the delivery sorted and it’s worked very well” (Participant 8).

“I feel very good about the way I’ve managed to make it work because it was a mishmash thrown together to get through the degree validation process very quickly” (Participant 9)

Here their descriptions showed power relations embedded in views of selfhood (Brown and Lewis, 2011; Brown and Coupland, 2015). Firstly, there was ambiguity in power relations since so many people were involved internally and externally who felt able to pass comment on their work. This had necessarily led to uncertainty, with accompanying stress which participants described as related to anxiety re task fulfilment.

Participants were concerned about having enough time “to meet everyone else’s needs” (Participant 1) and felt ‘powerless’ and ‘undermined’ (Participant 7). More than half explained that meeting university management expectations meant addressing a set of targets which were outside their role and that they had no autonomy in agreeing which to meet (HM Government 2015; 2018). As well as feeling disempowered, they were uneasy about having the right skill set and knowledge base, especially for working with employers (e.g., Participants 2, 3, 11, 14, 21, 22), whom they felt “would know they weren’t authentic” echoing the need to be authentic in your role (Kreber, 2010), as seen in these comments.

“I’m not sure how long I can keep this up, it’s really hard to present a positive face to students and employers when time and quality pressures are so high” (Participant 26)

“You have got to keep up this façade but I’m just one step ahead all the time, making it up as I go along. Very stressful.” (Participant 21)

“I’m worried sometimes that I’m putting in all this effort to make them work but will they be around in ten years … governments change their minds after all and these awards came from politics rather than universities” (Participant 15)

“I’m uncertain about my own capabilities and energies in pulling these together, it’s very stressful and I feel like I’m bluffing most of the time in discussions with employers and senior management” (Participant 18).

The need to bluff or to present a façade, commented on above, had arisen due to the institutional discourse emphasising success and external market needs, without acknowledging that the anxiety rapid change might produce, (Hay, 2014; Laine et al. 2016). This uncertainty also underlay ambiguities for participants in terms of their ‘real’ role. There were also comments about shifting roles. Participants discussed the ongoing identity construction required in order to fulfil changing institutional
expectations over time (Mills et al, 2010; Learmonth and Humphreys 2012). Brown and Coupland, (2015, 1317) define identity work as “activities of formation, maintenance, repair and revision by which people seek to realise desired versions of their selves”. Here, though, the reconstruction of identity was not to realise desired versions of their own choosing, but to provide versions of themselves able to fulfil roles required for their university and faculty. Ambiguities arose due to what participants felt was expected from them when this might be a backward step in their careers.

“The employer work I did before was not seen as having the same value as a PhD or peer reviewed papers but now I’ve been forced back into that space...” (Participant 6)

“When I started work here my job involved teaching, it’s what the university does really well. But of course, the new vice chancellor and dean came with ambitions for us to become known for research, so we all got on PhD treadmills... now it’s back to teaching again but only this context gets any attention from senior managers... we’ll have to see how long this last...” (Participant 8)

“I’m not sure about taking on this work, we’re a research university and I feel like we (those in teaching) are seen as second class” (Participant 11)

In coping with these uncertainties and ambiguities, participants recognised that they were ‘rewriting themselves’ ‘reinventing themselves’ ‘slipping into new roles’ or ‘slipping back into old roles’ to make sense of what they were doing and to ensure they made sense to other people (Beijaard et al, 2004). In this way, they felt that fellow colleagues and academic peers might then make sense of the value of their roles in delivering degree apprenticeships. If participants could not do this, they were concerned about how they could legitimise their roles or feel authentic in carrying them out (Kreber, 2010). Those with first degrees were most concerned since they already felt their roles were not valued in changing institutions, as their role was that of teacher rather than researcher and their industrial experience not as valued as higher qualifications.

“I joined from industry and initially they made a lot of me but now I’m under constant pressure to get a doctorate and be scholarly rather than applying experience” (Participant 18).

“It’s a game of catch up now. We aren’t a research university but to hear the new VC you’d think we were Oxford. So, no new appointments without PhDs and all of us unworthy teachers need to prove ourselves, not in the classroom but through theory” (Participant 23)

“....we are second class. Though my teaching scores are first class I don’t have a PhD, and it’s clear I won’t get any further... so doing apprenticeships is fine for us as it’s not interfering with important things like research” (Participant 7).

This was especially true since some colleagues equated apprenticeships with vocational awards or with simpler curriculum (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015). Participants were anxious about their worth being judged similarly. “there have been comments about apprenticeships being ‘dumbed down’ degrees, the implication is that if they aren’t worth as much as normal degrees, neither are we, delivering them... I’m overcompensating, trying to publish more papers...” (Participant 26)
“Some people think these aren’t the same standard as traditional degrees, so you’re always stressing the rigour and the depth… if these aren’t legitimate degrees neither are the delivery team…” (Participant 18).

These quotes illustrate how the ambiguities related to this new curriculum required identity work to recover status or value. Because other colleagues judged the curriculum as low worth, participants felt that they were seen similarly, whether as teachers or researchers.

**Juggling hats – identity work needed to be a ‘proper academic’**

Participants described processes to support an academic identity that they felt to be threatened (Brown and Coupland, 2015); they discussed relocating, redefining or rewriting yourself both for internal and external audiences.

“You have to keep relocating yourself in ways people can understand - students and employers have their own idea what academics should be” (Participant 7)

“People [in the university] … don’t really understand what we are doing, I’ve been asked why I’ve got involved with apprenticeships as they are seen as vocational awards, so you have to explain what they are, then what that means to you as an academic. but this means we’ve shifted from normal practice … we are out of sync with our colleagues so we have to rewrite ourselves back into their story.” (Participant 9)

“Things change, reinventing yourself is what you do without thinking about it. The organisation changes direction and you have to shift with it… it’s difficult though because most people don’t get what these awards are about or why we are doing them as a university” (Participant 14)

The process described is captured as Figure 1. This shows participants’ views about the pressures they felt they were under and the fluctuations they were subject to, both recognised overt pressures and unsaid underlying issues which were felt to be more stressful. These ensued from being a ‘proper academic’ - being subject to continual pressures from the perceptions of others, to fulfil ‘the academic image’, based on historic and societal depictions. They also identified ‘compulsion’ and institutional rules, needs and discourse as defining an academic but as being subject to change which might be out of kilter with the perceptions of internal colleagues and external contacts (Brown and Lewis, 2011). While these images of the academic might be at variance with the participants’ current roles, these factors were felt to be out of their control in changing perceptions.

Those employer, colleagues and senior manager views of the proper academic were felt, however, to be open to change. Shown by double-headed arrows in Figure 1, these are the relationships that were focussed on during identity work as these views might be changed in the participants’ favour. As suggested by Gautam et al (2004), they actively sought to support their identity as academics rather than being seen as vocational teachers, as ‘proper academics’.

These overlapping sets of differing perceptions led to participants shifting their behaviours, aligning with the situation in an attempt to live up to the image held by each group. Not surprisingly, this was described as stressful and as producing considerable anxiety. Figure 2 shows the views of participants about the effort required
to establish and to retain legitimacy as an academic in the context of new apprenticeships delivery. In the centre of the figure is ‘rewriting identity’ with both recognised pressures and unsaid issues acting to pressure the academic to carry out identity work. Through this though, the participant might achieve validation and redefine themselves to be accepted as authentic and legitimate in their role as an academic.

In discussing identity construction and reconstruction, Degn (2015) suggests that these impact on the organisational context, producing a ‘new reality’ to deal with for colleagues. Here, however, participants felt separate - that they occupied an uneasy no man’s land between ‘proper activities’ such as research, and ‘improper activities’ linked to vocational training and the world of work. The worth of their work was judged by colleagues within their institution, by academics from other institutions and also by professional bodies and employers (Laine et al, 2016).

Participants were much more concerned about internal perspectives however as these determined “whether people think of you as an academic” (Participants 23, 8). These multiple overlapping groups had different expectations of what an academic should be, and it was only by “juggling hats” (Participants 1, 16, 22) that participants were able to manage their roles. “you switch identities to keep everyone happy … without doing it deliberately” (Participant 13). This was necessary because “People expect you to behave a certain way so you have to just meet their expectations” (Participant 19).

Conclusions
This study considers new degree apprenticeships in the context of the academic identity of those designing and delivering these awards in UK universities - and the identity work they carry out to support their persona in different contexts. While adding new insights to existing work in identity and identity work, the study also deepens understanding of the academic role in the 21st century. The results presented in this paper illustrate how academics reinvent themselves to cope with the downward pressures from universities caused by policy changes.

A complex situation emerged, with ambiguities and uncertainties embedded in what academics described as a constant rewriting of their performance of academic identity, as seen in Figure 2. Both internal and external factors led to identity work in reconstructing identity, all to achieve validity and legitimacy in their roles as academics. Their degree apprenticeships teaching meant that they needed to overcompensate by engaging in extra research in order to gain validity they felt they had lost, to be a ‘proper academic’ (Figure 1 and 2).

By juggling hats and depicting the kind of academic that the participants felt others required in different situations, they had managed the ambiguities but at a personal cost in terms of stress and anxiety. These had resulted not from the nature of degree apprenticeships, but from the way in which managers had introduced them, together with the pressures to do so quickly and meet employer needs while reducing the power of the individual academic to shape the content of the awards. Hence, results also showed the importance of personal autonomy in curriculum design and delivery to validate personal worth. This shows implications for managers in how they introduce and implement new apprenticeships, with participants feeling compelled rather
than motivated to be course leaders or course teachers. The way this occurs has implications for the well-being of academics managing to ‘juggle hats’ in order to meet multiple needs.

While the study has particular relevance within this context of new degree apprenticeships, it raises more general questions about the stressful impacts of policy changes and governmental pressures on academic identity and the efforts to create and retain an academic identity (identity work). In observing identity work this study adds to the literature exploring identity and identity work while illuminating the practical difficulties of working in a UK university during turbulent times. Becoming more attuned to the market means that university adopt different process and structures and make new demands on their staff, as seen in the perspectives of the participants.

Here the demands of partnerships and workplace learning were coupled with negative views from colleagues and mixed messages from managers leading to everyday stress and uncertainties – and to increased identity work in order to gain and retain legitimacy as an academic and to attempt to be a ‘proper academic’. The wider implications here concern what it means to be an academic, or perhaps a ‘proper academic’, in turbulent times for higher education and they suggest the need for further research in this area.

(Figure 1 about here)
(Figure 2 about here)

References


Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008. World-class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All, January, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office UK


*Figure 1. Being a proper academic.*
Figure 2. Identity work to achieve legitimacy as an academic.
Appendix 1
Participants were asked questions on apprenticeships around four themes: (a) their definition and feelings about degree apprenticeships and how this impacted on them as academics; (b) perspectives on working with companies, bodies, funders and other faculties, how they managed different expectations; (c) curriculum experiences, their role and their views of it; and (d) experiences with other staff internal and external to their university.
Questions were asked as cues for discussion since these were semi-structured interviews. Often the first question (Tell me about…) would lead to answers to subsequent questions so these were not all asked nor were they asked in the order indicated below.
Cues included:
1. Tell me about degree apprenticeships in xxxx at your university
2. What would you say a degree apprenticeship represents? To you, to students, to fellow staff?
3. What do you think about them? Good points? Bad points?
4. How did the degree apprenticeships at (your institution) come about? What sort of a process accompanied the development of the award?
5. How did design and validation happen?
6. Tell me about your role in this? How did that happen? How do you describe yourself now?
7. How did you feel about being involved then / now?
8. How does it relate to you other teaching / research / managerial roles?
9. What’s it been like to work with xxx (relevant employer) xxx (relevant professional body) xxx (funder)
10. Tell me how any issues are resolved
11. Tell me about fellow staff who aren’t involved, what’s their view of these apprenticeships?
12. How do senior staff describe these awards and what’s their involvement so far?
13. What do you know now that you wish you’d known earlier?
14. How do students on / not on the apprenticeships see them?
15. Has this experience changed your view of your own role or changed how others think of you? Plus follow up questions during the interviews to understand stories told or points made by participants.
Appendix 2.
Themes from data analysis.
− **Uncertainty** – stress related to task fulfilment and uncertainty about having the right skills / time and approaches to make them work / how this will affect others’ views of me / how will this affect my ability to carry out research?
− **Ambiguity** – related to curriculum and its worth, related to the gap in importance that the university / senior staff placed on degree apprenticeships; being accountable for these awards but having little power in their design and delivery processes, related to being a different set of things to different people in order to be a proper academic
− **Compulsion** – a lack of choice to get involved and to develop the award in the time and way they would prefer, having to work to short deadlines while managing multiple expectations, keeping university committees, business development leads and employers happy
− **Validation** – self validation involved in ‘making it work’ despite the university / the partner needs and demands / the difficulties involved
− **Rewriting yourself** – trying to help colleagues and external academic networks to make sense of what you do now / rewriting yourself to ensure your academic identity was recognized despite apprenticeships in different contexts / trying to explain what it means now to be an academic or what universities are for / juggling behaviours
− **Authenticity / legitimacy** – what it means to be legitimate in a role, as an academic and a degree apprenticeship designer / provider / advocate, authenticity as an issue
− **Judgements of others** – managers and senior managers and changing requirements, doubts about the consistency of current views when other agendas emerge (e.g., TEF, REF2020, vice chancellor ambitions to move up the league tables)