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Apprentice Perspectives: Agency, resilience, and withdrawal in work-based learning provision.

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This paper draws on agency theories as a mechanism to examine students' emotional responses to withdrawing from work-based learning programmes. By examining tensions, impacts and competing ambiguities in current degree apprenticeship ecology, we argue that the existing policy regime has created an aporia in student and provider agency.

Since inception in 2015, degree apprenticeships have become an established tenet of UK higher education policy (Myers, Reid, and Bloomfield, 2023). Much government output, grey literature, and trade press focus on promoting tertiary work-based learning (WBL) models as important growth areas for universities and necessary alternatives for student success outside traditional Higher Education (HE) teaching frameworks (The Sutton Trust 2023).

Whilst we consider the value of WBL programmes to have great potential for future economic development, tensions persist. There are ongoing policy constraints that reduce flexibility for employers, universities, and apprentices, some of which affect pedagogical and theoretical underpinnings for programme design. For example, business and management apprenticeship Standards focus on more subjective competencies that are harder to assess than profession-specific skills such as in nursing or engineering.

At the policy level there is an implicit assumption that apprenticeship provisions are a good fit with universities and an integral part of future HE strategy. However, whilst there is a body of research on pedagogical approaches in programme design and delivery, the voices of individual apprentices are infrequently heard. Hearing those voices is particularly important when things go wrong.

Constraints and challenges from the specifics of WBL programme design add additional complexities to traditional HE lenses for analysing withdrawal. Whilst Tinto's (1975) seminal work on 'lack of congruency' – that mismatch between individual fit and institutional and social climate - remains a landmark for understanding the messy state of withdrawal, additional WBL factors from further stakeholder involvement on retention and progression, such as involvement from their employers, are worth examining especially in relation to resilience.

Our research uses a group of interviews with apprentices to explore individual challenges they faced leading to withdrawal from their programme. Composite institutional codes (Brown, 2015) are traditionally used by the sector to classify withdrawal reasons; however, they downplay actual student voices. We revisit agency theory as a lens to reframe apprentice narratives as emotional responses to withdrawal.

Using the fifth of Reich and Hager's (2014) threads for theorising professional practice as a starting point for empirical research, we consider the importance of historical, social, and political contexts

to ways of thinking and acting for students who are choosing to withdraw from apprenticeship learning. We explore how complex stakeholder relationships and demands between providers, employers, and multiple government regulations impact on both student and provider agency. The study centres important questions of how neoliberal orthodoxies around 'choice' may not apply to individual circumstances (Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015) for HEIs or their students. Referring to Archer (2000) we examine questions of how students weigh their circumstances and constraints against their personal goals to determine what is best for them in their social context.

For apprenticeship students, a lack of agency potentially spans their whole student experience. Apprentices may have been given no choice in either HEI or subject content in their degree apprenticeship, or in managing associated areas such as off-the-job time. Additionally, longstanding provider aims to manage an active constructive withdrawal where necessary (Myers et al, 2021) such as in the case of student redundancy from work, are hindered through regulation. This has profound implications as some students may be then forced to accept an unachievable status quo of imposed conditions that satisfy employer, HEI, and funding regulations, with the result that for the studied group of students, the only possible agency some could exert was withdrawal. Regulations here are therefore counter to expected good HE practices that encourage reciprocal pedagogies where students take ownership of their own learning (Cook-Sather, 2020) and develop a sense of belonging (Fabian et al, 2022).

For their institutions, the externally-driven apprenticeship Standard creates an inflexibility in what provision can be offered to different employers, dependent upon their needs, i.e., the same Standard is applied irrespective of the context, which means a less appropriate 'fit' of criteria for apprentices in public sector, not-for-profit organisations, and SME contexts. Additionally, funding rules constrain what assistance can be offered to struggling students.

Whilst our interview narratives capture a wide range of motivations in starting apprenticeship programmes, early analysis has identified several consistent themes in their withdrawal dialogues. A) the burden of work and administration required to complete, B) the lack of alternatives or insufficient safety net when things go wrong such as redundancy, and C) a lack of flexibility in acknowledging former experience in a Standards-based curriculum. These are not exhaustive, as our paper is a work in progress. Our initial findings suggest policy constraints are negatively impacting apprentices' agency, countering any resilience apprentices have for completing.

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