The Apprenticeship Experience at university:

an exploration

David Goodman

The last three years has seen a rapid growth in Undergraduate (Level 6) and Masters (Level 7) Degree apprenticeships, creating a type of student arguably different from those on traditional full-time, work-based and distance learning programmes. Here, I discuss an exploratory study of the experience of apprenticeship students at our university, whilst at work and at study, within two cohorts at a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) on a Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA) programme.

The exploration uses a broad grounded theory methodology and sought to reveal a deeper understanding of the student experience than those currently discussed in reports such as the 'Apprenticeship Evaluation 2017: Learners (IFF 2017).

A very small (N=2) sample was deliberately chosen in order to constraint the exploration and provide an opportunity for deeper and meaningful responses through a qualitative approach.

Through semi-structured interviews, memo writing, journal writing and visual representation, data was coded, analysed and evaluated to build a theoretical understanding about these student experiences. The main emerging themes related to questions of identity as an apprentice, perceptions of knowledge and skills, and inconsistent understanding of the wider policy intentions.

As growth in degree level apprenticeships continue to expand, policy makers, educators, employers and potential apprentices may need to reflect on their 'mindset'. The idea of apprenticeship, and its perceived value at degree level, seems to differ between the key stakeholders. If this discrepancy continues, in the longer term it will hinder the concept's progress towards becoming an established feature of Higher Education.

Introduction

A little over four years have passed since the launch of Degree Apprenticeships(GOV.UK, 2015), when then Prime Minister Cameron claimed this policy will be "Equipping people with the skills they need to get on in life and backing businesses to create jobs are key parts of our long-term economic plan.". It is now timely to take stock of 'apprenticeship' at degree level, and explore impact these programmes have had on the student-apprentice, and on their workplace.

In the Business School at the University of Chichester (UoC), new programmes have emerged, and apprenticeship numbers increased, replacing previous work-based learning degrees. Since 2009, the Business School has provided learning and teaching in a work-based context, with a Foundation Degree and BA(Hons) Top-Up Management, following a day-release model, in which students spend one day a week at University. This Foundation Degree informed the content of our BA (Hons) Management, a degree written to support the Chartered Management Degree Apprenticeship Degree (CMDA) at Chichester. In the Business School four small cohorts of students, from a wide range of backgrounds, organisations and experiences, are currently underway. With the vanguard group nearing the end of their level 5 studies, it is timely to now critically reflect on the notion of apprenticeship in the context of higher education.

Here, I draw upon the experiences and reflections of two CMDA students from small scale private sector family businesses. They have not directly entered the programme from full time education and were existing employees of their separate family businesses. Taking an interpretivist stance, I explore the phenomenon of 'apprenticeship' within these student's organisational lives through a series of conversations. My aim was to delve deeply into their apprenticeship experience and explore emerging issues through this discourse.

Where we have come from

Policy and numbers

2015 saw major announcements from the UK government on policy, funding and 'The Levy' (see: GOV.UK, 2019), representing a significant intervention following a strange symmetry in the policy cycle. Initiatives in 1964 (Industry Training Boards), 1993 (Modern Apprenticeships), and now 2015, suggest governments return to apprenticeship reviews approximately once in a generation. Earlier initiatives were responses to falling apprenticeship numbers (Fuller & Unwin, 1998) and 2016, (see Figure 1), witnesses another fall in overall numbers.

The general theme of apprenticeship announcements in 2015 was one of alignment between skills policy with industrial strategy. Moreover, they highlighted the benefits of combining higher and vocational education (McEwan, 2019 & GOV.UK, 2015). McEwan (2019) highlights the '**framing**' of the strategy with intentions of **reducing the skills gap**, **increasing productivity** and **boosting social mobility.** He explores these frames and challenges the current provision at a macro level, drawing on a report by Policy Connect: '*Degree Apprenticeships: Up to Standard?*' (Higher Education Commission, 2019).
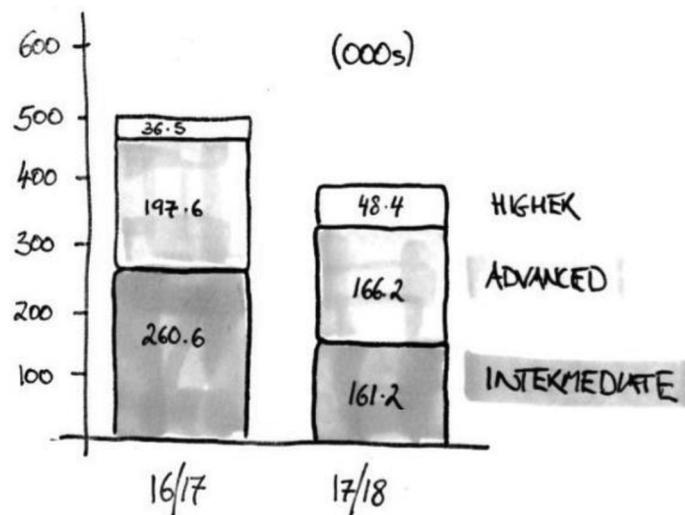
Figure 1: Local detail: apprenticeship starts by level comparison, 16/17 and 17/18 (after Powell, 2019, drawn by David Goodman.)

Recommendations, immediate and long term, stressed the need to improve Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) access to degree apprenticeships, and to investigate the barriers and incentives to participation for SMEs and 'non-levy' payers. Whilst the emphasis is on apprentices, I return to the three 'frames' noted above, and to the relationship between these, the students and their organisations.

Arguably a critical catalyst for creating apprenticeship momentum, 'The Levy' contributed a significant budget(Johnston, 2015) to fund apprenticeships. Alison Wolf (2015), reporting on the UK apprenticeship system following the 2015 election campaign, provided seminal thinking in support of this initiative. She makes the case for a funding framework that would allow the then government to deliver on its pledge of '…three million new apprenticeships in the next five years.' (Wolf, 2015, pg.2). (Based on Figure 1 it is hard to see how this target is achievable but that issue is not the focus of this paper).

However, Wolf (2015, pgs. 8-9) highlights an important aspect for me and crucial for part of the sample in my research, namely the expansion of apprenticeship 'starts' in age groups 25+. Recent government statistics(Powell, 2019) present a mixed and complex picture for the continued development of apprenticeship programmes. As the overall number of apprenticeships decline, the number starting at degree level grows nationally: in 2016/17, 7% of starts were at a higher, level rising to 13% in 2017/18.

Work based Learning

Work-based learning (WBL) is not a new phenomenon, but it could be argued shifting policies have moved the focus towards larger-scale systems such as degree level apprenticeships, and that support for businesses to participate in more local WBL has decreased.

Fuller & Unwin (1998) discussed relationships between work, learning and apprenticeship in detail and it seems the learning landscape of the UK seems has moved little. They paint a picture of frustration with skills training and apprenticeship learning reflecting themes within Richard (2012) and Wolf (2015). Echoing ideas from Sennett, (2008), they argued that, historically, apprenticeship is a transformational process, in which apprentices learn their 'trade', and in parallel develop into an independent adult.

Proposing a 'reconceptualisation' of this transformation forms one of three dimensions that constitute apprenticeship:

> '…the cultural and social aspects of going to, and being at, work which help socialize apprentices into workplace (and adult) roles.' (pg. 154).

As both apprentices in my sample were in existing jobs and had socialised into their roles and adult lives, this raises questions of the scope for transformation within an apprenticeship for an existing worker, and how this will impact them.

Contradictions between sites of work and study

Fuller & Unwin, (1998) suggest a third dimension relating to formal and informal learning experiences, including those on- and off-the-job. I argue this dimension surfaces contradictions between places of work and learning. In 'industry', the emphasis on efficiency, productivity and profit drives priorities and creates cultures where learning is a secondary consideration. The current apprenticeship contract requires employers to provide twenty percent of contracted time as off-the-job training, and this creates potential tensions. Moreover, this places pressure for the University to demonstrate clear and measurable added value, which can be challenging to evidence in the short and medium term other than through their direct contribution of the apprentice to their workplace.

Expansive learning: the university as a site of physical and intellectual 'space'

A WBL context provides more opportunity than didactic teaching and learning (Lave , 1977). Indeed Fuller & Unwin (1998) propose the fostering of 'Communities of Practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in relationship to all stakeholders, but primarily in the workplace. However, I argue the place of learning – or, in this context, the University - has an important role to play by providing physical and intellectual 'space'. Engestrom (1995) values links and input from the 'teacher', contrasting with Lave & Wenger, (1991). His idea of expansive learning relates very closely with the notion of WBL in the UoC context. Here a crucial facet involves

'…criticism of the given…' in addition to innovative thinking and new ideas illustrated through teaching practice where a student can participate, lead or instigate change, having identified some form of problematic situation.

While this adds to the notion of a workplace community of practice (CoP), it is within the one situated in the University, where students can experiment, challenge and criticize more openly. Collectively, this is shared by each of the apprentices who participates in this University CoP, which then supports and informs the other workplace CoP to which they individually contribute (see Figure 2).
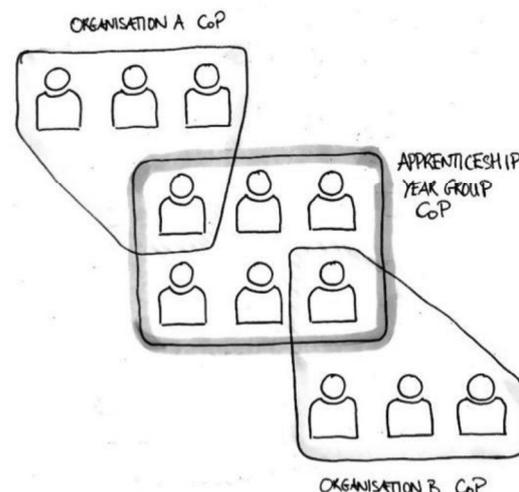

Figure 2: Possible range of Apprentice Communities of Practice (sketch by David Goodman)

Some may view the work-centric community of practice as the priority for aligning two of the apprenticeship **frames – those of reducing the skills gap** and **increasing productivity** - with the interests of the employer. However as discussed below, this perception is not shared by the two apprentices in my sample.

Apprenticeship programme design at the University of Chichester

Programme design at UoC evolved from an existing WBL course. McIver (2017) re-evaluated WBL as a field of study, suggesting pedagogy is being modified, and corresponding changes to curriculum design are leading to a greater 'hybridity' (pg.138) in programme design. Opportunities may exist to reinforce the multi-layered communities of practice within the programme. However, as discussed below, within an apprenticeship programme 'hybridity' is not necessarily straightforward, engagement from employers is low and the programme has to meet the overall apprenticeship 'standard'.

Standards

Apprenticeships have a long tradition in the United Kingdom, (Gospel, 1994, and Steedman, Gospel, & Ryan, 1998), although historically the focus has been on 'manual skills' (Gospel, 1994) rather than on higher level education. The current listing of apprenticeship standard reflects a shift away from 'manual skills' towards higher level skills and the apprentice educator of the 1960s and 1990s would probably not recognise recent standards.

Specifically for the CMDA, the standard sets out a range of criteria which students will have to meet(Institute for Apprenticeships, 2019). This illustrates a high level of specificity, in marked contrast to the 'QAA Benchmark Statement for Business and Management' (QAA, 2015), which presents a more generalised picture of knowledge and understanding under a different set of sub headings (pg.7-8). The creators of the CMDA standard appear to have, at best, ingored the benchmark statement.

Questioning the CMDA standards

There is one immediate challenge here: organisational life is not 'standard', change is a constant and seemingly growing phenomenon (e.g. Grey, 2017), how flexible will these new standards prove to be? The CMDA standard presents a rather binary view of organisational life. Does training someone to do a limited number of things repeatedly over their working lives make a contribution to their lifelong learning, and consequently help them to cope with constant organisational development (The Economist 2017)? Warwick (2018, pg.45) argues against a teaching approach which has '…a pre-determined trail of breadcrumbs…', suggesting instead that we adopt a 'foraging' approach within our classrooms. I think an argument needs to be made for developing this 'skill' rather than ensuring apprentices can, for example, complete a budget spreadsheet.

Three core strands: policy, WBL and standards

This section has very briefly drawn together three strands; policy, WBL and the idea of 'standards', creating a 'space' within which the interviews could take place.

The research approach

Paradigm

I set out with a loose grounded theory methodology, because I did not have a specific hypothesis or 'know what I was looking for' (e.g. O'Connor, Carpenter, & Coughlan, 2018), to make sense of a shifting apprenticeship landscape. Given the relative 'youth' of degree apprenticeships, there is little existing specific literature. This approach was also partially a response to Government reports (Thornton, et al. 2018 and IFF Research Report, 2017), consisting of broadly quantitative evaluations to specific questions, which I argue do not produce real meaning. Asking if students are 'satisfied' does not reveal the detail and depth of impact a degree level qualification is having or could have.

Although grounded theory was the basis, my interviews reflected a phenomenological perspective (Goulding, 2005) They sought to get below surface responses, and consider the symbolism or codes used in responses. Figure 3 sets out the framework, where 'scrolls' refer to the visual record taken during the interview.
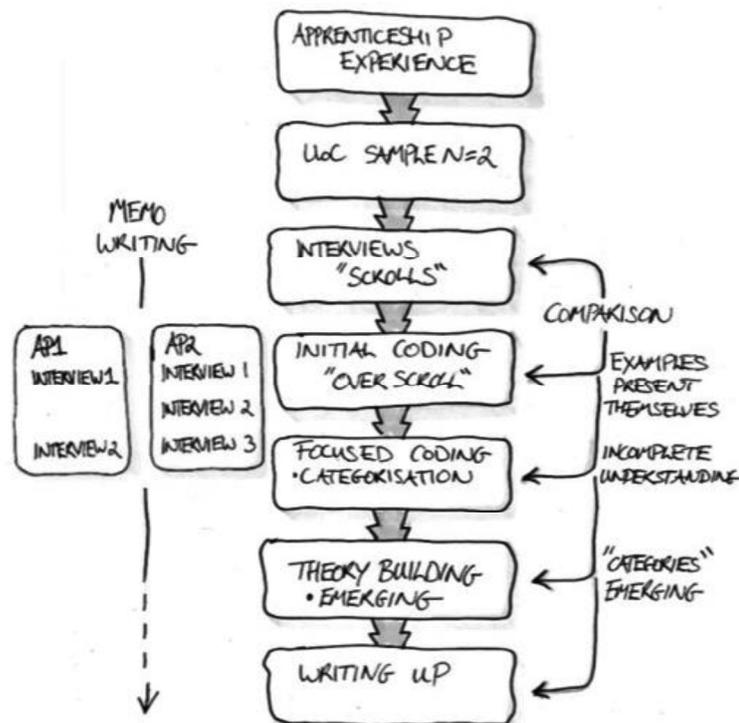
Figure 3: The Research Framework after Charmaz (2014), Goulding (2005), and Locke (2005); sketch by David Goodman

Locke (2005) discusses a plurality in grounded theory and within this project, I acknowledge the looseness of my approach. However, I argue this was situationally appropriate for the context. A limited timeframe and very small sample suggested flexibility rather than a strictly 'classic' framework. The classic work (Glaser & Strauss1967) initiated the grounded theory trajectory, but this research adopted Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory, because I wanted to acknowledge my subjectiviy resulting from a personal involvement in apprenticeship delivery while constructing and interpreting data.

Sampling, access and ethics

The sample was purposive, information rich, and access was based on convenience within the cohort of UoC apprentices, although small Charmaz, (2014, pg. 108) argues this can contribute to a '…study of lasting significance.'

Specific characteristics of employment within a family business and 'maturity', provided a degree of homogeneity in the sample, enabling me to explore the phenomenon of degree apprenticeship starting from some common ground. These characteristics were chosen because I initially speculated on the importance and likelihood of support from their business', and secondly responding to apprenticeship growth in the 25+ age group as noted above. Research was conducted in line with the University Research Policy 2018 and ethical approval was obtained on the 19th February 2019.

Data collection, coding and analysis

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, conversation was recorded and a visual mind map ('scroll') created (e.g. Figure 4). Buckley & Waring, (2013) suggest diagrams are an underused tool in grounded theory, and this was an attempt to utilise visual thinking to identify themes, connections and build some form of theory. Coding was also undertaken using a visual method (Figure 5), using a colour coding for comments which were either similar, contrasting and/or interesting.

Figure 4: Extract of an Interview Record 'Scroll'

Apprentice 1 (AP1) was interviewed twice, and Apprentice 2 (AP2) three times. The additional discussion with AP2 was an attempt to clarify some first interview comments which were limited by the workplace location. Following the interviews, researcher memos (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 and Locke, 2005) were written, and open research journal maintained throughout the whole process...

Figure 5: Extract of a Coding 'Over-Scroll'

Limitations of the study

The sample was small and the research restricted itself to specific student context allowing results to focus specifically on a 'type' of student and this restricted generalisability of the research. Locke, (2005) argues Glaser and Strauss did not intend for the researcher to effectively wipe minds, and suggest it is impossible to explore a field of study without some orientation suggesting using 'bracketing' to remove pre-existing theoretical positions and biases. This was attempted here, and generally worked. For example, I am concerned about the terminology associated with the label of 'apprentice', and so I consciously avoided using that term until the interviewees did.

Initial results

Interviews were semi-structured, the first interviews used a time-line discussion starting with getting a sense of 'where they came from', including some discussion about the catalyst for starting a degree, the 'impact' of their current study, and an exploration of what 'the future' might look like.

Where the respondents came from

Their situational history was important to understand if earlier formative experience influenced the decision to undertake the programme and impacted their study. AP1 had started a degree course and studied for one year, but AP2 had no Higher Education experience.

There was little relationship between decisions taken after leaving school and each person's different family business. In AP1's case, it was not yet in existence and AP2 had shown no interest, their initial choice of work after school was a public sector temporary role (six months). Throughout the discussion with AP2, there was a sense of frustration with their work, not uncommon in the workplace, but I was struck by the limited work experience they had with which to contrast the experience.

Having been at University for a year, AP1's starting point was different. But there was a critical issue in the new family business, AP1 stepped into the business and has now worked there ever since.

From these different starting points, the question was now why start a part-time degree?

AP1 wanted '…some sort of ceremony…' and there was a sense that '…status…' was important. AP2 emphasized a sense of '…regret…'. There was little obvious connection to the workplace in terms of needing skills, developing knowledge or in terms of the **frames**, **reducing the skills gap** or **increasing productivity**. Potentially the idea of recognition could be related to **boosting social mobility**, but it was not overtly discussed in the first interview.

Impact of the current study

Both respondents gave a sense of their personal development. In interview 1 I noted the use of the word 'knowledge' and explored this in interview 3 asking about the level of 'skill'. AP2 replied this had 'stayed the same' but stated their level of knowledge had increased. They specifically mentioned a motivational theory which had resonated with them in the context of their team, and this had provided a greater understanding of why individuals behaved in particular ways. They did not make a direct connection to 'skills', and in interview 3, I probed further. AP2 believed this was a consequence of not having the '…freedom to do stuff…' and partially '…not putting myself out there…'. I think this illustrates a sense of having knowledge, but lacking space to apply or implement creates a sense of '…frustration…'.

Both respondents observed interactions between students were important, discussing what each other does and how different organisations work has been useful, both in and outside of the seminar room. This experience highlights the notion that learning can be applied straightway, and critically illustrates the ways in which the student community of practice can inform workplace practice.

Thirty minutes into the first interview with AP1 was the first time the term '…apprentice…' was used, when questioned they saw themselves as on a '…part time degree course…' rather than an apprentice. As the joint business owner (Co-Director), this self-identity is understandable, but also in terms of identity inside and outside of the organization, where they are increasingly the figurehead. This was similar for AP2, they did not perceive themselves as being an apprentice, suggesting the theme of 'status'. When discussing further with AP2, in interview 3, they were critical of lower level apprenticeships, citing their staff undertaking level 2 apprenticeships, '…not learning anything…' implying that they have a lower level of esteem for lower level apprentices.

The future

AP1 was focused on immediate business issues and we did not initially discuss medium- and long-term prospects but their comments contained striking contrasts. One aspect was very 'materialistic', another was an ambition of owning multiple sites where employment opportunities were given to those furthest from employment, a combination of private and social enterprise. At a personal level, they used the word 'recognition' as a part of their motivation to continue and talked about the potential to be a 'Chartered Manager'. The ideas of recognition and status seem connected for AP1 developing the idea that being an 'apprentice' is not in itself important for them.

For AP2 the future was very complex picture full of paradox and tension. Firstly, they '…don't want to feel like this [at work] …' and in contrast '…things are OK, and I stay where I am…'. At the time of the interview, it appeared frustrations recorded earlier were being mitigated by factors outside of the workplace, such as family responsibility. It became clear the degree is not about their workplace, they mentioned teaching, or accountancy and they were '…flirting with being a Special [policeman]…'. The degree is something to '…open up further doors…'. Reflecting traditional professions, I suggested an association with a sense of identity. AP2 partially agreed and although I wondered why being a company director was not considered, AP2 rejected the idea despite the prospect of being able to influence things more directly.

Developing a theoretical position

I wanted to reflect on university apprenticeship within a context of the three **frames** presented earlier. Each **frame** was the focus of subsequent discussions with AP1 (interview 2) and AP2 (interview 3).

Frame 1: Reducing the skills gap

AP1 thought the programme provided skills, however at the start they did not think they needed new skills, saying '…I didn't know what I didn't know…'. AP2 does not see the programme as contributing to reducing their skills gap directly. This could also reflect the idea of '…I didn't know what I didn't know…', but I think this raises questions of different perceptions of knowledge, skills and practice.

Frame 2: Increasing productivity

Prompting a negative reaction from AP1, '…terminology really annoys me…', they suggested some data were simply '…empty figures…'. A shifting policy landscape, changing priorities of using new technology to getting people into work and now productivity seem to cause frustration rather than assist businesses. The frustration was clear, but ironically this policy frame does seem to apply to a business improving productivity through expansion. At an individual level AP2 initially said they '…don't see it…', and added that some of their team doing lower level apprenticeships were '…not learning anything…' suggesting some apprenticeships were having little business impact.

Frame 3: Boosting social mobility

AP1 responded 'What does that actually mean…?' but they referred to an apprentice they had taken on at a lower level which they would not have considered had they not been involved in their own apprenticeship. Here the sense of social mobility is indirectly related to AP1 because of their own experience they are making decisions directly impacting the social mobility of others. AP2 reacted similarly and could not see how it was relevant to them, they would always be able to move up the organisation because '…of my surname…'. However, they undertook the apprenticeship programme to '…do it properly…'.

A provisional theoretical position, and some initial recommendations

Within the limitations of this article, I cannot argue for a distinct generalizable theoretical position on current degree apprenticeship programmes. However, the small sample illuminated some themes within the discussion which begin to 'paint a picture', which I argue is useful for planning further investigation and inquiry.

The first theme is about identity. AP1 and AP2 do not readily see a clear connection between the idea of the 'apprentice' and their university programme. This is in significant contrast with those messages from the policy organisations, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Education and the Skills Funding Agency, where recent communications insisted the term 'student' is not used, and providers are only to talk about 'apprentices'.

Growth in apprenticeships is not coming from age groups under twenty-five years old. I argue the term 'apprentice' is not one that clearly resonates with older people. As Fuller & Unwin (1998) observed, an apprenticeship provides a form of socialisation, but this does not apply in this study. Although challenges exist, AP1 and AP2 are socialised in work and in life. At UoC seventy five percent of the small CMDA apprentice cohort are over twenty five years old and we should reflect on identity within the programme and workplace. I cannot directly state this is a barrier for participation from SMEs, but for some existing employees in this age bracket, this may prevent them from undertaking the programme. McEwan (2019) highlights challenges in this area, and further data needs to be collected at a more granular level to explore issues of SME participation.

Secondly, I think there are **questions about the perceived impact the programme is having for both the individual and their employer**. As noted, data collected so far focus on 'satisfaction'. As programmes start to send candidates to End Point Assessment (EPA), success rates will be added. But what about the short, medium- and long-term impact apprentices have in organisations? I think this can be partially related to the discussions about knowledge and skill, as it is difficult to measure explicitly how increasing either has influenced or impacted an organisation. As AP2 articulated, there may be problems arising from a lack of opportunity or the space to apply learning in their situation. But currently, it is not clear whether AP1 and AP2 see or understand the differences between knowledge and skill, or how to demonstrate that they meet the criteria of the standard. Simply recording success rates will not sufficiently add to the body of knowledge of the impact that degree apprenticeships have on individuals. Further longitudinal work is required to understand these programmes.

Finally, at a wider policy level, there are **issues with the overall objectives of an apprenticeship**. Neither respondent really accepted the three 'frames'. There were criticisms of their language and intentions. It could be argued that both AP1 and AP2 reflected these objectives in a tangential sense. They were gaining knowledge (or skills); AP1's business is becoming more productive, and while their own social mobility was not directly increasing, others in their organisations was. From an organisational point of view, I have not asked their sponsors to provide a view, but the views of AP1 and AP2 do strike me as important, because of their relative seniority in their organisations. If this leads them to reinforce a less positive view of the programme, where does work-based learning go next? Wolf (2015, pg.19) notes a decrease in employees attending training outside their workplace. However, while her proposal for a levy funded apprenticeship scheme may have been intended to halt this trend, data from Figures 1 & 2 suggest that it may not be successful. I have a sense that talk of 'apprenticeship' has 'bracketed out' other forms of work-based learning, and that further research on programme levels and WBL student numbers is urgently required.

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