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Level 7 degree apprenticeships – a story of challenge, resilience and success

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experience of both in-service and pre-service apprentices studying Level 7 apprenticeship programmes. Using qualitative questionnaires, this article facilitates a thematic analysis exploring how aspects such as: rationale for enrolment; study habits; prioritisation of workload; resilience and wellbeing are experienced by educators studying either an Academic Professional Apprenticeship or a Senior Leaders Apprenticeship programme. Results demonstrate a mixed landscape is apparent for Level 7 apprentices, with tangible differences, both within and between groups, exhibited regarding reason for enrolment and study habits. The challenge around balancing work-life priorities and the encroachment of work commitments on study time (and vice versa) are a common theme for both cohorts, with those who have better established working patterns and relationships more resilient to the challenges of Level 7 apprenticeship study.

KEYWORDS

Apprenticeships; study habits; workload; prioritisation; resilience; career aspirations

Introduction

The launch of higher degree apprenticeships (Level 7) by the English government in 2015 signalled an opportunity for universities to expand their educational offer. Degree apprenticeships offer those who do not have a degree the opportunity to achieve this qualification in a hybrid work and study environment, through a university led experience, whilst being supported via training in the workplace. Each apprenticeship has a nationally set occupational standard which is developed by a trailblazer group that consists of a wide range of employers and organisations, directly related to the individual apprenticeship (Institute for Apprenticeships 2017). The apprenticeship route is becoming more popular with students (Powell 2023a) due to the opportunity to access graduate level qualifications without

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paying the tuition fees attached to traditional higher education programmes, as all apprenticeships are funded by the Apprenticeship Levy, with capital generated by employers (HM Revenue & Customs 2022). Apprenticeship qualifications are seen as a more vocationally oriented alternative to gaining a higher education qualification, with a traditional focus on inexperienced (and often young) new employees learning the proverbial ropes (Lee and Helyer 2012). Conversely, apprenticeship study can also provide an opportunity for mature learners to undertake a formal qualification, which can lead to career progression opportunities which may not have been available otherwise (Humphries-Smith and Hunt 2017). Under these circumstances, apprentices may pursue such courses as a form of continuous professional development, in order to retrospectively accredit their professional experiences, or perhaps as a form of validation of their expertise. This means that some apprenticeships contain individuals who can be classified as 'pre-service' – beginning the apprenticeship whilst starting new employment linked to the qualification – or 'in-service' – already established in a workplace and undertaking the apprenticeship for career progression. These diverse cohorts can perhaps best be seen in Level 7 apprenticeships, which offer a qualification of equivalent weighting to a Master's degree and as such, naturally invite both those with prior academic qualifications and those without but who have a weight of professional experience.

Higher level apprenticeships (which include degree apprenticeships) have seen substantial growth since their inception, with the number of apprentices starting a higher apprenticeship increasing from 19,800 in 2015 to 106,400 in 2022 (Powell 2023b). This exponential rise in the number of starts has resulted in higher apprenticeships accounting for 30.5% of all apprenticeship in 2022, a significant rise from just 3.96% in 2015. Based on these figures it could be argued that higher level apprenticeships now play a key role in UK post compulsory education policy, therefore these programmes can have a significant impact on not only individuals, employers and the local community but also the wider UK economy (Cleaver 2022; Powell 2023a). Deploying apprenticeships as a model for staff development could be perceived as being part of an expansive approach (Fuller and Unwin 2003) to apprenticeship provision. Fuller and Unwin (2003) have described how the process of workplace learning has the potential to meet the needs of various stakeholders (apprentices, employers, and the broader community as a whole) by allowing learner participation to occur via multiple communities of practice (Bloch, Lave, and Wenger 1994) within a shared professional practice learning environment.

Despite the aforementioned healthy growth in people enrolling onto higher apprenticeships, achievement and retention data illustrates a somewhat pessimistic picture. Although pass rates are consistently above

97%, retention figures of between 60.2% and 55.3% since 2018 (Apprenticeships and Traineeships n.d.) mean that only around half of all higher level apprentices actually complete the qualification. With Level 7 degree apprenticeships being a relatively new phenomenon in UK higher education, there is a scarcity of directly relevant literature to draw on to potentially address this issue of such a high attrition rate of apprentices. Therefore, this study will investigate the lived experience of apprentices on two different Level 7 programmes – the Academic Professional Apprenticeship (APA) and the Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeship (SLDA) – to explore pertinent aspects which may prevent or hinder apprentices from being successful whilst undertaking their studies. The APA is a Level 7 apprenticeship which has emerged in recent years as a pathway for early-career university staff in teaching, research or learning support roles. The SLDA (delivered in the context of educational leadership and management) is also a Level 7 apprenticeship, but typically attracts more established professionals in leadership roles in education. As there is a sparsity of research comparing in-service and pre-service apprentices, a particular focus will be placed on any differences and similarities that emerge between these two groups. The limited research that does exist, suggests a significant difference in the learning experience between pre-service and in-service apprentices (Fabian et al. 2022), but whether this can be applied to a wider population is yet to be determined. Therefore, this research will investigate this aspect of apprenticeship provision by comparing two different cohorts, both engaged in Level 7 apprenticeships relating to education but at different career stages and with often different priorities and levels of experience. Particular attention will be placed on the emergent themes of how their working situation might affect their motivations to join a programme, their study habits and prioritisation of workload related to personal life, working life and study.

Lived experience

Dieumegard et al. (2021) expatiate that lived experience is an internal, ongoing process which is determined by the social and material interactions of which an individual is subject to, at any given time. This bespoke lived experience is constructed through interactions with different communities (work, friends, family, etc) and cultural paradigms (routines, values, techniques, etc), is primary and distinctive to the individual, and is their immediate and time-sensitive reality (Casey 2023; Dieumegard et al. 2021). Lived experience in the world of education is no different and will be determined via these interactions and constraints. Within the sphere of apprenticeships and the learning experience whilst on the programme, many factors including reason for enrolling; workload; working

relationships; study habits and resilience are all influential and prominent aspects, which are entwined in affecting an individual's lived experience. Indeed, recent research has suggested a dichotomy of perspectives from Level 7 degree apprentices in terms of how combining full-time work and apprenticeship study can affect a number of different factors, with a key challenge within the trinity of apprentice, employer and university, being the creation of an environment where the potentially conflicting priorities of study, work and home-life can exist in harmony (Poole et al. 2023).

Reasons to enrol

The rationale and opportunity for an apprentice to enrol onto a programme offers an interesting picture in terms of agency, power dynamic and motivation. Existing research suggests that employers often hold the key to enrolment onto higher level qualifications, in terms of informing a potential apprentice of the opportunity to undertake an apprenticeship and allowing/supporting them to matriculate on to a course (Thomas, Cox, and Gallagher 2012). This notion of power is taken further by Humphries-Smith and Hunt (2017) who postulate that employers hold authority over who can access apprenticeship opportunities, with them deciding upon which individuals can enrol on which particular apprenticeship, completely dependent on their bespoke business needs rather than any personal aspirations of their individual staff. This suggests that a conscription-based approach may be instigated by employers leading to questions regarding the motivational drivers and to the commitment to the course, from apprentices who have enrolled. However, in an environment where both employers and employees both value qualifications, there is a real desire from potential apprentices to enrol on programmes of higher level study and to undertake professional development that will not only allow them to gain industry recognised qualifications but to improve their working performance and career opportunities (Shaw and McAndrew 2008). This suggests that a counter position of voluntary enrolment may also be apparent for apprentices dependent on workplace relationships with the employer. Once enrolled, these workplace relationships can also have a significant impact on the lived experience and the learning experience for an apprentice, particularly in terms of workplace and workload support.

Working relationships and workload

Working and workplace relationships within the employer setting, can have an impact on the learning experience of apprentices dependent on the magnitude of support offered by management and/or colleagues (Fuller and Unwin 2010; Hughes and Saieva 2019; Jackson 2019; Poole et al.

2023). In their review of computing degree apprentices, Fabian et al. (2022) suggest a divergent set of perspectives regarding how apprentices managed work and study. Those that were supported by the employer and could utilise opportunities at work to amalgamate study and work ventures, had the most positive experience and this reinforced self-worth and consequently loyalty towards their employer. However, others who didn't perceive that support was readily available and/or as effective, or those whose workload was not managed to allow them to have allocated study time, saw a reduction in engagement with the apprenticeship. It could therefore be argued that relationships with an employer and colleagues within the workplace, could have an impact on the lived experience of education-based apprentices (Hughes and Saieva 2019; Poole et al. 2023). Relationships are predicated on interactions between individuals and groups, and many factors can contribute to the formation and maintenance of these bonds and associations, with research demonstrating how important these can be for staff within an educational environment. Resources available to a teacher (particularly a newly qualified one) such as support from colleagues and leaders have been shown to improve performance, self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Björk et al. 2019; Bywater and Mander 2018). Furthermore, these collegiate relationships improve teacher resilience due to a sense of belonging that comes from a communal network and therefore stronger peer-to-peer relationship (Versfeld, Graham, and Ebersöhn 2023). This all points to working relationships being important in ensuring a productive performance within the working environment for teachers and other educational staff. However, as previously mentioned, how this manifests itself in a teacher-apprentices context is yet to be explored, particularly in relation to both employed-workload management and study-workload management, and caution is needed in applying findings from other environments and situations.

Workload in education is a contentious issue and how general, day-to-day workload (without additional study responsibilities) impacts educators is an area of much debate. Much research has explored the notions of the workload of academics (Mula-Falcón and Caballero 2022); and workload and teacher resilience in the workplace, and in school settings (Cheng et al. 2022; Mansfield, Beltman, and Price 2014; Mansfield et al. 2012; Oldfield and Ainsworth 2022), but little research has explored teacher or educator experience when it comes to their own personal study and balancing a work–study relationship within an apprenticeship context. The essence of an apprenticeship is that there is synergy between workplace activity and scholarship, in the form of both on the job and off the job training (OTJT). A dictated 20% of working time is mandated as off the job training for all apprentices, however both Poole et al. (2023) and Bishop (2017) posit that in reality this is a challenging situation for employers and apprentices, and

often requires social and family time to be compromised to either facilitate the OTJT, or to complete workplace tasks that have been evicted from the working day to accommodate the OTJT. Moreover, their results concur with that of Rowe et al. (2023), indicating that as education-based employers do not have the capacity to absorb an apprentice's workload, work activities still take priority as the primary endeavour of the apprentice, often resulting in an increase in total workload (OTJT and workplace demands) for the apprentice. Although it can be argued that those working in education are consummate in juggling challenging workloads (van der Want, Schellings, and Mommers 2018), how education practitioners balance personal, apprenticeship study within an already demanding workload, needs rumination.

Workload and resilience

The attempt to balance work and study priorities can lead to a reduction in time spent within the context of family and personal life due to time needing to be allocated to study. This can have a detrimental impact on an individual. The potential to experience a negative emotional state and a lack of resilience needed to complete a programme of study are all prevalent when students attempt to combine a full-time career and study (Hovdhaugen 2013; Liyanagamage, Glavas, and Kodagoda 2019); which, within a degree apprenticeship context can be attributed to increased workload to accommodate studying, without the necessary reduction in workload capacity to incorporate off-the-job-training (Poole et al. 2023). Schwarze and Wosnitza (2018) debate the impact that traditional apprenticeship endeavours can have on resilience and the development of this attribute and amongst other inferences, they postulate that apprentice resilience is influenced by micro-level and meso-level factors such as the aforementioned workplace relationships, personal networks and the vocational learning environment. However, whether this can be applied to a UK-based, degree apprenticeship context is unclear.

Study habits

It is widely acknowledged that the learning strategies and study habits of university students have a marked impact on scholarly progress and academic achievement; with study habits adhering to a systematic approach, structure, and routine, essential for making progress at degree level (Clarke et al. 2021; Entwistle and Peterson 2004; Haarala-Muhonen et al. 2017; Parpala et al. 2010). However, is this applicable to apprenticeship study and the concept of applying contextual learning in a workplace, in addition to theoretical-based study? Limited research is available but what there is

offers insight that effective study habits are more ambiguous for degree-apprentices when compared to traditional university students. The coherence of study habits needed for success at traditional undergraduate studies is not necessarily forthcoming, due to competing priorities that need to be juggled, therefore an apprentice is not always completely in control of when, where and how they study (Poole et al. 2023). However, the individual agency of apprentices can shape their interaction with, and organisation of learning opportunities (Bishop 2017), therefore potentially, they are not completely passive or subordinate in the structuring of their studies. How this study habit discourse relates to pre-service and in-service apprentices, whether it is applicable and is there a potential differential between them, is yet to be explored or determined.

Methodology

Participant recruitment and sample

Participants were final year apprentices, studying at a large, post-92 UK university, from two different Level 7 cohorts: the APA and the SLDA. All of the APA participants in this study are pre-service early career teaching staff, who are either new to the university or new to teaching roles, and are undertaking the teaching-based pathway of the programme. The APA offers two routes to lead to completion: teaching-focused, which is aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework; or research-focused which is aligned with the VITAE Researcher Development Framework. Conversely, the SLDA cohort consists of in-service educational professionals with leadership responsibility, but working in various leadership roles, in numerous establishments and within differing educational sectors (predominately schools and colleges). For the APA cohort, the university is both the employer and the training provider, whereas for the SLDA cohort the university is only the training provider, with apprentices employed at different institutions. The relevance of these two cohorts was that they all have roles which are grounded in teaching and both cohorts are using the two-year apprenticeship programme as a vehicle to support their career progression albeit at differing points – the APA cohort are all early career teaching staff, who deliver education to students across a broad range of disciplinary areas studying at undergraduate or postgraduate levels, whereas the SLDA cohort are established teachers who have progressed to leadership roles at their schools and colleges. At the time of data collection, there was a mandatory requirement for all apprentices to have 20% of their working hours allocated to off the job training (OTJT) i.e. training time taken outside of the workplace that is directly related to the apprenticeship (which must be undertaken within normal contracted hours). The 20% OTJT requirement was reduced in August 2022 to a baseline

Table 1. APA participant overview and assigned pseudonym.

Pseudonym	Job title	Faculty	Gender
Amir	Senior Teaching Fellow	Faculty of Science	M
Carol	Teaching Fellow	Faculty of Science	F
Khadija	Senior Teaching Fellow	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	F
Aaliyah	Careers Adviser	Central Services	F
Terry	Educational Technologist	Central Services	M
Emily	Senior Teaching Fellow	Faculty of Business and Law	F
Brian	Lecturer	Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries	M
Rico	Senior Teaching Fellow	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	M
Shirley	Learning Support Tutor	Faculty of Science	F
Sofia	Senior Lecturer	Faculty of Technology	F
Elijah	Learning Support Tutor	Faculty of Science	M

requirement of 6 hours per week (Department for Education 2022). The full population of both cohorts (APA $n = 31$ and SLDA $n = 34$) were invited to participate in the interviews, with 11 taking part from the APA cohort and nine from the SLDA cohort (see Table 1). Both the academic course team and the course administrator sent invitations to the population which included a participant information sheet, detailing the nature of the research, the participants' right to withdrawal and anonymity, as well as instructions to contact the independent research associate, should they wish to participate. Data was collected from the cohort at two different points in time, to coincide with the final stages of their apprenticeship, prior to undertaking the final, summative, end-point assessment.

Method

To enable participants to share their personal narratives around their apprenticeship study in a naturalistic way (Gubrium et al. 2012) semi-structured interviews were deployed (Appendix A). This approach ensured that participants' interviews were aligned, whilst providing opportunities to expand on their personal experiences as required. Following literature review, broad themes informed the scope of the research questions, based on the journey that an apprentice takes – from initial interest in a programme, then during engagement with the programme, through to future career aspirations and ambitions. This allowed factors that previous apprenticeship research had suggested were areas of interest, to be explored and addressed but were open and indeterminant enough to allow new or previously unexplored themes (specific to Level 7 apprentices) to emerge. As the participants were working across multiple locations and were busy in their workplace roles, all interviews were conducted using Google Meet and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes.

The research team consisted of academics involved in the delivery of these programmes and so a research associate was recruited to manage the interviews, with a view to allowing participants to share their views and perspectives minimising the influence of the academic teaching team. That said, due

Table 2. SLDA participant overview and assigned pseudonym.

Pseudonym	Job Title	Education Sector	Gender
John	Deputy Head Teacher	Primary	M
Martha	Head Teacher	Primary	F
Remi	Deputy Head of Department	Higher Education	M
Gina	Director of Quality	Further Education	F
Alisha	Lead Global Engagement Officer	Higher Education	F
Youssef	Deputy Head Teacher	Primary	M
Arnold	Head of Faculty	Further Education	M
Vivian	Deputy Head Teacher	Primary	F
Sam	Work-based Learning Manager	Further Education	F

to the personal nature of the accounts provided, some identifiable aspects were shared by the participants during their interviews. In these cases, the interviewer reiterated the right to withdraw consent both on the occasion where this occurred and at the end of the interview. Following the interview, the recordings were anonymised using a numerical identifier and then transcribed by a professional transcription service. The returned transcriptions were then provided with a pseudonym by the research associate prior to analysis by the research team using NVivo. The pseudonyms (Table 2) were randomly generated and while they reflect the gender of the participant in question no other indicators of identity (e.g. ethnicity) should be inferred.

Data analysis

The research team took a flexible, inductive approach to analyse the interview data (Nowell et al. 2017), so a thematic approach was deployed (Guest, Macqueen, and Namey 2012; Thomas 2006). Following familiarisation with the interview transcripts, each member of the research team generated large numbers of initial codes from the transcripts. A second member of the research team also individually coded the same data. The holistic themes used within the interview plan, of motivation to enrol; study habits; employer support; and workload, shaped and guided the initial foray of data analysis, but subsequent and deeper themes emerged naturally from the data as the analysis evolved. Discussion amongst the research team then took place regarding the data coding in order to develop the primary codes. Once the primary codes had been developed, themes were then refined using the same cross-checking procedure. This process occurred throughout the entire data analysis, in order to increase the validity and reliability of the study findings (Ryan 1999). Once the themes were identified, relevant participant quotes were then selected which best represented the themes from the overall dataset.

Results and discussion

This section focuses on the key themes derived from the data analysis process, illuminating the lived experiences of apprentices in relation to enrolment, study habits, workload and prioritisation.

Enrolment

The enrolment contexts of the SLDA and APA apprentices differed significantly. The SLDA cohort all voluntarily enrolled onto the apprenticeship, often discovering the apprenticeship programme during their research into other potential Level 7 programmes of studies. For the APA cohort, the main reason for the majority to undertake an apprenticeship programme was due to the requirement to undertake a teaching qualification as a requisite of working as an academic at the establishment where they were employed. Within this APA sample, the majority of course members are contractually obligated to enrol on and complete the course. As a two-year course, the APA is accredited by Advance HE to award UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). The expectation is not specifically tied to the apprenticeship qualification but rather the requirement for new staff joiners at the institution to have attained UKPSF Descriptor Two at the end of a two-year period.

For the APA cohort, as expected, the majority of apprentices stated their main (or at least initial) motivation for joining the course as being related to this contractual expectation;

> 'To be brutally honest, I was told I had to do it. As a new member of staff to the university, and, if you like, to a permanent academic position, this is the first time that there was an opportunity to have some formal training in teaching, and so I was encouraged to do it, and I was very happy to sign up for it. So that was the motivation for coming onto this course'. Elijah (APA)

This suggests that the notion that employers determine apprenticeship study for their staff, is evident for higher level apprenticeships (Humphries-Smith and Hunt 2017; Thomas, Cox, and Gallagher 2012). However, responses from the SLDA cohort suggest their reasons for enrolling are the antithesis of the conscription narrative from the APA. Participants on the SLDA programme were all voluntarily enrolled onto the apprenticeship programme. As the apprentices were all in-service at the time of enrolment, the situation whereby a contract of employment being dependent on undertaking a professional qualification, was not apparent. Therefore, the suggestion of the employer holding the power dynamic cannot be applied in all instances.

The desire to advance professional or career-wise, was a significant driver in the decision to enrol onto the SLDA programme, concurring with the work of Smith et al. (2023) who suggest that adult apprentices enrol with the primary motivation of professional growth. Apprentices cited the potential for the apprenticeship to act as a conduit or catalyst for career development and progression, as the main reason for enrolling.

> ' . . . ultimately, for me, it's about progression, I want to take a step into SLT' Gina (SLDA)

How the apprenticeship would support these aspirations did differ between SLDA participants. Some suggested that having a Level 7 qualification itself would be a significant advantage in the job market.

> 'my Head and I recognised that I needed something extra to help me stand out.' Youssef (SLDA)

Youssef continued that, due to the nature of leadership roles in education, they require a certain level of qualification attainment to have agency in the recruitment process.

> 'I was very aware that headteacher adverts wanted either NPQH, which is the national professionally qualification for headship, I think, or a Master's, something like that. So, I knew I needed one of the two, so I, kind of, thought okay I need to look at this.' Youssef (SLDA)

Here the qualification itself would be a means to the end goal of achieving promotion or advancement. However, the learning undertaken and gained from the apprenticeship was also valued.

> 'I strongly believe that we learn by doing. Yes, it's important to have the theory and the knowledge and background behind why we do what we do but so many people can talk the talk but not walk the walk and that's really important for me. So it was just a great opportunity' Sam (SLDA)

This stance is echoed by some APA apprentices with Elijah stating:

> 'I think in the current job market it was, to my mind, absolutely essential that I should be motivating. . .really that I get the experience from these qualifications and these qualifications sorted.' Elijah (APA)

This suggests that the desire to obtain sector-relevant qualifications and develop an enhanced skill-set through the apprenticeship, are motivating factors in the enrolment for both groups and congruent with apprentices in a variety of sectors and at differing levels of qualification (Humphries-Smith and Hunt 2017; Shaw and McAndrew 2008). As both the APA and SLDA came with other recognised qualifications within the apprenticeship framework, it can be argued that these offer a more substantial preparation for the development of skills due to a closer interaction with disciplinary content

(Hordern 2015). However, the link to career also featured in a significantly different way for some. For other participants, the notion of precarity was evident and actually treated with scepticism about the extent to which there would be consequences for non-completion in spite of its contractual significance:

> 'It was the qualification, you know, to keep my job . . . ' Amir (APA)

Remi from the SLDA apprenticeship mirrors this perspective of self-preservation:

> 'this was at the time that we'd had all this restructuring and there'd been voluntary severance, and it was a lot of upheaval, and I thought, hmm, I'm not sure I like the look of all this. Maybe I need a few extra strings to the bow, so that was one reason behind it.' Remi (SLDA)

This aspect of job security and continuation resonates with research investigating apprenticeships in other sectors and at other levels (Smith et al. 2023). Smith et al. (2021) offer a narrative around the choice of undertaking an apprenticeship whereby a desire for apprentices to develop their skills and ultimately keep their jobs, were prevalent factors. This indicates that apprentices who study at Level 7 have similar motivational drivers to other apprentices when it comes to the underlying factors for enrolling.

These varying reasons for enrolling on both of the apprenticeships in scope suggest a disconnect between the motivational drivers within and between the cohorts; for some joining the apprenticeship was perceived as a reward, for others a forced expectation. Perhaps, career stages affect the motivational drivers of the different cohorts as to the reason for enrolling, with those on the APA early in their academic career within higher education (HE), whereas those on the SLDA apprenticeship are already well established within their leadership roles. Siklander and Impiö's (2019) posit that experts are defined by the desire to be challenged at a cognitive level, through problem solving, applying solutions and continuous professional learning, which also resonates in the lived experience of the apprentices. With school leader identities predicated on being people who 'control process and product' (Crow, Day, and Møller 2016, 7), it can be suggested that the desire to willingly engage with professional development is a determinant in demonstrating expertise in the pursuit of leading their school or educational establishment (Cruz-González, Domingo Segovia, and Lucena Rodriguez 2019). Şenol (2020) identifies the main benefits of development for educational leaders as being focused around knowledge, skills and competencies that have

contemporary relevance and currency. This stance resonates with the SLDA cohort:

> ‘ . . . personally I wanted the challenge. I need to be stretched all the time . . . ’ Alisha (SLDA)

And

> ‘I was interested in learning more so that if I had a job as the head teacher . . . I would have more to bring to the role and would understand, you know, the research behind it better.’ Martha SLDA

By having a Level 7 qualification as an indicator of magnitude of education, and the subsequent confidence and improved credibility that it exudes (Sturges, Simpson, and Altman 2003), graduates are more likely to aspire to the more senior positions and roles previously noted as a key driver of many who enrolled on the SLDA. However, for the APA participants, as many were early career academics, their willingness to study the apprenticeship programme may have been influenced by other career-based factors, with priorities such as developing a research portfolio that is critical in career advancement for HE academics (Matthews, Lodge, and Bosanquet 2014; Zacher et al. 2019) and for workplace motivation (Blackmore and Kandiko 2011), more of a prime concern:

> ‘my career progression is going to come through research and innovation’ Khadija (APA)

For early career academics on the APA, the narratives of development are quite different, with the initiation of their development driven by a formal expectation to gain a recognised teaching qualification which is often linked to funding bodies and league tables (Botham 2018) alongside the need to navigate institutional identity which is grounded and also restricted by the teaching and research culture in which they are working (Fabian et al. 2022). Matthews et al. (2014) emphasise the importance and uniqueness of research culture in universities and how this extends to teaching staff. Bridging the gap between teaching and research priorities is complex and contextual, with different disciplines and university priorities sitting on differing sides of this divide with contrasting approaches to it. What Matthews, Lodge, and Bosanquet (2014) affirmed is that research is seen as essential by early-career academics to ensure their success, and they plan their development accordingly, whereas this research background is not a requirement for leaders and managers in other educational sectors. More so, having a higher-level academic qualification was seen by the SLDA cohort as key to any future career progression. Results of this study confirm research conducted by Mulkeen et al. (2019), demonstrating that the

significance of an academic award was perceived by apprentices as more significant than the apprenticeship itself.

> 'Yeah, definitely . . . just having that MSc which is considered the gateway qualification' Gina (SLDA)

This differing polarity in the desire for an academic award and that of research-based endeavours related to career progression and sustainability could explain the differential in reasons for enrolling on to the apprenticeship programme between these two groups in this study.

Another major driver in apprentices enrolling onto the SLDA programme was the funding available for the programme. This increased desire of employers to enrol staff on apprenticeships may be due to the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in the UK (Gambin and Hogarth 2021), as within Europe it has been noted that employer appetite and interest for apprenticeship programmes has diminished where other relevant qualifications are available (Markowitsch and Wittig 2022). With no cost applicable to the apprentice and in many cases, the schools themselves, enthusiasm for the programme was heightened.

> 'I think it was the levy was a big draw yeah, if it was something I was going to have to self-fund, I probably wouldn't, and I at the time I didn't think I was capable' Youssef (SLDA)

This cost benefit was accentuated given some individuals' contextual situation.

> 'What with working full time, being a full-time single mum as well I couldn't afford to do a master's degree. And then obviously when this degree apprenticeship came up it seemed like the perfect opportunity really to get a master's degree and not have to pay for it.' Alisha (SLDA)

With some apprentices actually making the choice to move away from other industry recognised qualifications in favour of the apprenticeship.

> 'Originally my head had suggested I did one of the NPQSL courses, but the funding wasn't available for those courses in [NAME], but they managed to find out that the apprenticeship funding was available for the masters.' John (SLDA)

This too was an attractive and positive proposition for those on the APA programme:

> 'And along came this opportunity, fully funded, and it actually is teacher training effectively' Elijah (APA)

The fiscal benefits of enrolling onto an apprenticeship are often a significant factor (Thomas, Cox, and Gallagher 2012). The findings of this study indicate the notion of a 'win-win' (Smith et al. 2021), with regard to qualification fees being paid and earning a salary whilst on the apprenticeship, being prevalent within both cohorts.

In summary, it is evident that the perceived benefit to career progression and the cost-effectiveness of undertaking a SLDA apprenticeship, are key determinants in the desire of education-based leaders to undertake the apprenticeship programme. Whereas APA apprentices enrol via a conscription-based process, with a job continuation focusing a driving factor, perhaps to the detriment of their research-based endeavours.

Study habits

A mixed picture is evident for both cohorts in terms of coherence of study opportunities. The results of this study indicate that there seems to be a parity of experience regardless of whether apprentices are in-service or pre-service, with regard to study habits. Both cohorts exhibit equivocal behaviours in terms of how they are able to organise and structure their studies. This chimes with previous research which suggests that the learning experience is not necessarily solely influenced by employment conditions but is a product of multiple factors including the apprentice's own agency and 'co-participation' with the organisations involved in the apprenticeship (Bishop 2017). Both cohorts offered examples of being able to access the 20% off-the-job training time with regular clarity and structure:

> 'I have every Friday, and that's like my standard hours. But, yeah, having the Fridays as well is tremendously helpful. Rather than having the 20 per cent split between here, there and everywhere actually having a Friday, a full day, that I can focus on my studies is great.' Alisha (SLDA)

And

> 'Okay, so, what I did was I would have every Wednesday afternoon because that's when we would have the taught sessions, and then even if there weren't taught sessions I would do that. . .keep doing that . . .it's been really good . . . ' Sofia (APA)

Conversely, there were multiple examples of an unstructured approach to the regularity of study:

> 'I do that in spurts, so when I get into a spurt I did loads of it and it really, you know, quite liked it because it was that, kind of, that blended learning distance type thing. So, you do it when you need to do it'. Amir (APA)

Given the full-time demands of working in education, the potential to actually be released for a full day is limited. This can be indicative of the nature of working in the education sector and the 'intense' and 'responsive' nature of the job. However, those on the SLDA apprenticeship did exhibit more of a potential to have regularity in their study. Findings suggest that this could be due to the fact that they are in-service and have established

working practices which allow them to incorporate studying more easily into their schedules. Perhaps facilitating this, some of the educational establishments where the SLDA apprentices come from have scheduled periods of relief from teaching and managing (PPA or CPD time, etc.) as existing practice, therefore the opportunity to utilise these time periods for study can be factored in for them.

> 'Yeah, I try and do Wednesday afternoons because that's our normal sort of CPD slot at college, so if we have any training or a meeting, as a general rule, we always keep Wednesday afternoons free' Gina (SLDA)

And

> 'I'm quite lucky, because I'm a team leader I get a day out every week. So, half of my day is spent doing work for university, but then I also have some time at home which I dedicate just to doing university work.' Vivian (SLDA)

This is not necessarily the case for pre-service APA apprentices as they are still in the process of establishing themselves as practitioners in a new institution.

> 'It had to be here, there and everywhere, there's absolutely no opportunity to fully book a day off.' Sofia (APA)

A further compounding factor for both sets of apprentices was the turbulence of the academic year. The ebb and flow of academic delivery has meant that some apprentices have experienced a fluid dynamic in terms of organising their studies. This is common across both APA and SLDA apprentices:

> 'Periods of it's all been about the day job, if I'm honest, some weeks I'm not even really been able to log onto my student account or look at the student modules on Moodle [Virtual Learning Environment] at all, it's all just been compartmentalising with the work. But then there's other periods when I've almost put the day job to one side and just cracked on with doing it. Probably conflicting is the wrong word to use but actually balancing the two neatly has been a bit of a challenge.' Rico (APA)

And

> '[Regular Friday apprenticeship work slot was booked in diary] But it hasn't quite worked out because things would creep in, so it'd be like, oh [name], can we just meet in the morning of your Friday, and it's like okay, or then, something else has to happen. And that's where that time just got eaten up and then it wasn't seen as sacrosanct, where it was like totally protected, it was seen as oh, it doesn't really matter because other things are going to take priority.' Youssef (SLDA)

Given the various strategies to studying exhibited, it can be suggested that a singular prescribed approach to studying is not possible for both pre and in-service higher-level apprentices. Moreover, approaches to learning are dependent on individuals and their contextual situation

with personal styles and approaches utilised, which are sometimes dictated by other external work-life pressures and commitments. It is evident that the possibility to have a structured learning environment, essential for 'deeper learning' (Parpala et al. 2010) is not a reality for in-service or pre-service apprentices. It appears that as apprentices from both cohorts experience elements of a restricted approach (Fuller and Unwin 2003), their potential for deeper-level learning is hindered. Therefore, it could be proposed that as deeper level learning is integral to traditional degree level success, this lack of opportunity for apprentices to have structured learning within an expansive learning experience, could be a contributing factor to the national dropout rate. However, further research would be needed to determine a direct correlation (or not) between study habits/opportunity for deeper-level learning approaches, and the retention of Level 7 apprentices. Although previous research around the academic achievement of traditional degree level students suggests a deep approach to learning facilitates more efficacious results (Lardy, Bressoux, and De Clercq 2022), as apprentices are already exposed to continuous learning through the on the job training element within the workplace and are already practicing the aspects that they are applying, this may compensate for the absence of rigorously structured theoretical learning opportunities, as long as value between what is learnt and how it can be applied to the workplace is evident (Sauli, Wenger, and Berger 2021). Interestingly, it may be that the structured learning within the taught elements of the apprenticeship and then application in real-life situations atones for any lack of independent, theoretical study structure, where progressive structured activity (in the apprenticeship context, where theoretical classroom learning is then applied in practical situations) is a more pertinent factor in achievement (Hospel and Galand 2016). Again, however, further research would be needed before any inferences could be drawn.

Workload and prioritisation

The tone and approach to workload, prioritising, and choosing study/work over personal life is notably different when comparing the SLDA to the APA cohort. The SLDA participants are experienced teachers who are used to the often uneven work/life balance in the profession (van der Want, Schellings, and Mommers 2018), and their comments demonstrate a more neutral attitude towards studying in their personal time which accepts that this is 'just what is needed'.

> 'It's one of those jobs where you do tend to check your emails in the evening anyway . . . having a healthy work-life balance and being a head teacher, they don't really go in the same, they don't go in the same box, I'm afraid' Martha (SLDA)

As resilience is primarily a psychological factor which enables individuals to adapt to challenges (Trigueros et al. 2020), this acceptance of the situation and a desire to persevere, demonstrates an existing level of resilience in the SLDA cohort. The SLDA participants chose the course because they wanted to study and develop their leadership skill-set, and the self-efficacy demonstrated drives their motivations, resilience and successful outcomes (Smith, Fisher, and Ramprogus 2022). They also noted their enjoyment of the course which further increased this commitment to succeed, and provided them with a chance to spend time on something directly for themselves.

> 'I've always enjoyed studying, wanted to go on to do some more study . . . it's actually for career progression as well' Arnold (SLDA)

And

> 'I also really enjoy it. So if I just did what was just needed, yes, I could probably get away with the Friday and some evenings but actually, I really like it, I want to do well, I want good grades and I want to learn and progress myself so, you know, I'm maybe my own worst enemy with my expectations because I want to do really well' Sam (SLDA)

SLDA participants viewed the course as valuable to their development and as an opportunity to engage with and reflect on their subject matter in a new way, and were quickly able to apply their learning to their work and teaching, taking immediate value from the course (Sauli, Wenger, and Berger 2021).

> 'What I'm learning in my master's study is feeding how I'm behaving at work a bit more as I'm learning more. I definitely feel that I've learnt lessons I've been able to apply' Gina (SLDA)

What is evident is that SLDAs highlight their ability to apply the learning in practice much more readily than their APA counterparts. As structures suggested by Schwarze and Wosnitza (2018) that are crucial to resilience and resilient working practices (existing network of work colleagues, etc.) are more stable and established for SLDA, it could be argued that their capacity to organise and navigate independent study is stronger. Whereas pre-service APA apprentices do not have those networks – identified by Bywater and Mander (2018) as crucial in the support of academics new to higher education teaching – readily available as they are new to the role and to the employer, and need to allocate time and resource to developing them alongside their study.

> 'And my main problem this year was that I was . . . I . . . this . . . it was unknown that I was going to be rolling out two brand new modules for our department that was given and then somebody forgot about a third module and that was put on me about a month before the students started, and it's a 24 week module as well. So, I've created 48 weeks of new teaching materials this year. So, I haven't had that much time to do the kind of off the job training as much this academic year.' Emily (APA)

> 'I would like it to be held in higher regard and to be thought of positively and proactively and for myself as a degree apprentice to be given or to have a support in clearly marking out my time for learning and continued professional development activities, off the job training and things, that would be really good.' Brian (APA)

Therefore, it can be recommended that for pre-service apprentices, establishing working patterns and relationships is key in the early stages of work and the apprenticeship, to support the facilitation of successful Level 7 apprenticeship study. This development of working relationships is particularly pertinent to the pre-service apprentices as a sense of belonging within a group, promotes resilience towards the day-to-day working challenges regularly experienced by educators (Versfeld, Graham, and Ebersöhn 2023). There is no doubt that the intensity of an academic role can affect career development, not least of all in terms of job satisfaction with challenges such as workload, bureaucracy and time pressure being shown to decrease satisfaction in the first few years of academic careers (Mula-Falcón and Caballero 2022), but having resilience and surviving such stresses can also increase this satisfaction and improve confidence (Hollywood et al. 2020; Rowe et al. 2023). Brewer et al. (2019) have identified that resilience is a dynamic process which requires positive adaptation skills when faced with adversity or challenge. As such, it is incumbent upon education providers to assist learners within this dual vocational system (university study and workplace learning) by embedding elements within the curricula which support the development of emotional resilience skills.

To mitigate the issue of an overburdensome workload, apprenticeship programmes offer protected time in which to undertake their studies. This off-the-job training time should occur within contracted hours although, trying to negotiate protected time for study can, in itself, cause conflicts impacting upon work–life balance (Poole et al. 2023). Indeed, the failure of early career academics to use formal work/life balance policies is partially explained by the presence of workplace cultures that reward demonstrations of commitment to work roles (Cannizzo, Mauri, and Osbaldiston 2019). The SLDA participants also seemingly found it easier to manage their time than their APA peers. This is potentially due to the SLDA students being incumbent in established roles where they have developed a routine and are familiar with their work, compared to APA apprentices who are becoming familiar with their new institutions and/or roles, as well as putting their teaching

into practice for the first time (Björk et al. 2019). Despite the fact that the SLDA cohort is already likely to have experienced this phenomenon and found strategies to overcome these issues as they navigated their early-career development, they will nonetheless continue to be exposed to the challenges of managing their workload and work–life balance. Indeed, both cohorts will engage in work-based activities which have a combination of both high levels of autonomy and constraints in the form of bureaucracy and targets, alongside professional commitment to their workplaces, which need to be managed effectively (Fabian et al. 2022; Smith, Fisher, and Ramprogus 2022). As with the APA students, the SLDA participants almost always prioritised their work over their studies. Participants noted that this is because they are responsible for the children in their school; that their work directly affects these school children, colleagues, and the operation of the school; and that there will not be anyone to pick up any work they stop doing due to their course.

> 'My main priority at all times is my students. You know, as far as I'm concerned, that's why I'm here' Remi (SLDA)

And

> 'I've got an absolute deadline that that has to be met because that's children's education' Vivian (SLDA)

Despite the practical requirements for prioritisation, participants acknowledged that the apprenticeship was important to them, suggesting that not prioritising it was due to need rather than want. On the occasions that studying had to be prioritised, this was typically for a short block of time, usually when a deadline was approaching, or at weekends and school holidays to the detriment of their personal life. This approach to off-the-job training is contrary to the expectations of apprenticeships (Fabian et al. 2022) and could also cause issues with meeting the funding requirements of the course (Powell 2023a).

> 'I just do the Masters stuff on Saturday mornings, where possible, to be quite honest. . .I get to the holiday and it's not a holiday 'cause I've got work to do' Arnold (SLDA)

And

> 'So I have done some on weekends, evenings, the extended days, I mean, practically in terms of the hours, it was outside of work time, but it suited me for that's when my energy was good, so I didn't mind for that,' Aaliyah (APA)

Whilst participants acknowledged that this did not meet off-the-job training requirements, there was a general attitude of acceptance that this was necessary to complete the apprenticeship.

> 'I'd have one day a month and then the rest of it would be weekends, evenings, school holidays . . . .which is fine, but it just isn't quite how the off the job training should work.' Youssef (SLDA)

Participants spoke more about their responsibility for managing their time in order to complete their work than frustration about their workload, which is reflective of existing approaches for experienced students undertaking degree apprenticeships (Jones and Brook 2019).

> 'I see it as entirely my responsibility to devote the time that I need' Arnold (SLDA)

And

> 'It's compartmentalising, trying to set out, right, on this day, at these hours, that's what I do. So, it's just imposing that sort of discipline' Remi (SLDA)

This approach to apprentices' learning does match Fabian et al. (2022) categorisation of 'busy professionals', which are defined as those who primarily identify as working professionals, prioritise their employment over studying, work in their own time instead of using the 20% off-the-job training allocation, and take personal responsibility for their development. Therefore, it can be implied that both in-service and pre-service Level 7 apprentices prioritise work over study during their standard working hours, and incorporate their learning into other junctures. Employers and providers should be mindful of this approach and put interventions in place to mitigate the chances of burnout (Creed et al. 2022).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a key concern for students (Studentminds.org 2022), it still provides important situational context for the participants of this study who were affected by it. The participants in the SLDA particularly felt the legacy effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their workload (McDonough and Lemon 2022). Whilst this was also echoed across the APA cohort, the APA cohort included professional services staff who, whilst still busy, typically did not have to adjust teaching delivery and resources in the same way that the SLDA students had to, as they are often in senior leadership roles and also needed to coordinate crisis management across the school whilst following and adhering to regularly changing government guidelines (Bradbury et al. 2022).

> 'Then there's a global pandemic, and all bets are off, you know, the whole thing just went totally pear shaped . . . .there was so much to organise, that it would have been really difficult to have been a head teacher in a pandemic, that would have been enough. Doing a Master's at the same time is just ridiculous, just ridiculous really, yeah.' Martha (SLDA)

And

> 'I'm fairly certain my workload had doubled as a result of COVID . . . it's just more stuff coming in that needs sorting out . . . getting used to different sorts of platforms

> and different methods of delivery and loads more queries from the students about online learning. So, the workload went up a fair bit, and it's pretty high anyway' Remi (SLDA)

All of the information above points to a treacherous journey for apprentices to navigate to be successful in their studies. To facilitate this success, apprentices demonstrated personal characteristics – such as: the qualities of commitment, perseverance and self-efficacy (Tilford 2017) – synonymous with resilience in undertaking vocational-based study (Schmid and Haukedal 2022), and despite the challenging conditions of undertaking Level 7 study whilst working full time in the educational sector, apprentices were able to be resilient to the multitude of external pressures and completed their studies. It can therefore be suggested that HE providers of Level 7 degree apprenticeships should frame their educational support and professional services in a focussed way towards developing and cultivating qualities of resilience within apprentices (Allan, McKenna, and Dominey 2014). Given the interplay between wellbeing and resilience (Armitage et al. 2012), by targeting support dependent on apprentices' motivations to enrol on a programme and extent of current workplace familiarity and network, this would help apprentices cope with workload and prioritisation challenges that they will experience during their studies. In addition, the results of this study resonate with other research inferring that resilience, as a quality and attribute, is developed and enhanced whilst studying a Level 7 apprenticeship (Smith, Fisher, and Ramprogus 2022). Therefore, employers and HEIs could potentially use this to market the programme to potential apprentices in regard to the 'soft skills' that participants will develop during their studies, aligning with the expansive approach identified by Fuller and Unwin (2003) that illuminates the wider culture perspectives and deep learning that apprenticeships can foster.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to explore the lived experiences of two different cohorts studying Level 7 degree apprenticeship programmes, with key differences observed both within and between cohorts. It is evident that, regardless of being in-service or pre-service, individualised study-habits are exhibited by apprentices and no singular method or model is utilised by all apprentices within the scope of this study, or by either discrete group. Those apprentices who were in-service prior to the start of their apprenticeship programme, did seem to have a better potential for more structure to their off-the-job training time in terms of regular blocks of study. This was attributed to the fact that they are entrenched in their working environment and have established working patterns which allow

the more effective incorporation of structured study time. Whereas in-service apprentices being less substantiated in the new working environment, had less of an opportunity to generate segments of time to study due to still finding their way in a new role and employer. Employers and HE providers should factor this into their working practices with apprentices, to ensure that appropriate support can be differentiated between the groups, depending on their situation. Throughout apprenticeship course delivery, the balance of on-the-job (workplace) training and off-the-job (university led) training means that coherence between employer and education provider is paramount to ensure that the apprenticeship is effective in meeting the needs of both the employer and apprentice (Minton and Lowe 2019). Parallels can be drawn from Fuller and Unwin's (2003) expansive/restrictive model in that pre-service apprentices in this context could be characterised as experiencing a restrictive approach as many similarities can be observed; such as there is no real tradition of apprenticeships in the field of academic professionals, the institution (inclusive of line managers) have an ambivalent perspective of the apprenticeship and view it as a means to an end in terms of the organisational need for qualified practitioners for Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) assessments (Office for Students n.d.), as determined by the contract of employment. The in-service apprentices also demonstrate elements of a restrictive lived experience in the form of limited and constricted opportunities to access OTJT time and the potential to reify concepts and theories explored during the learning experience.

What is emergent from this study is the support that networks offer considerably impacts the ability of an apprentice to focus on their studies. Pre-service apprentices are in a much more precarious position as they will be establishing relationships and networks whilst simultaneously undertaking apprenticeship study. Particular note should therefore be taken by employers in this context to actively support apprentices in the absence of networks, or in building effective ones in the early stages of working. Facilitating more robust networks and working patterns within the apprentices working environment, would be a catalyst for apprentices to become more resilient to external pressures and increase the chance of successfully completing the programme and reduce the potential for burnout. Additionally, by establishing more robust ways to balance on and off-the-job training for apprentices, there is an opportunity to address the falling achievement and retention rates (Apprenticeships and Traineeships, n.d.) which are currently linked to higher level apprenticeship provision.

The rationale to enrol on the programme was distinctly different for both cohorts. In-service SLDA apprentices voluntarily joined the programme, motivated by career aspirations, professional development and financial drivers, whereas pre-service APA apprentices enrolled as a matter of contractual obligation. This differential builds on existing literature reinforcing

that agency and power dynamic, based on individual contexts, influences the ability or potential to enrol on a Level 7 apprenticeship programme, with the results of this study indicating that pre-service apprentices are more likely to be enrolled onto an apprenticeship for the benefit of the employer, whereas in-service apprentices hold more agency in terms of deciding whether to enrol on to an apprenticeship programme, or not. If conscripted onto an apprenticeship, apprentices exhibit lower levels of enthusiasm for the programme if it does not align with their personal needs for self-development and career progression. This contention is particularly evident in APA apprentices whose view of what is needed for their personal career progression (research and scholarly activity) is at odds with that of the apprenticeship itself (teaching practitioner development). How apprentices engage with the labour of study and their affinity for the programme may well be influenced by their enrolment choice. Those that enrolled voluntarily exhibited a more positive attitude towards study and an acceptance of the need to sacrifice work–life balance to successfully undertake the programme. Despite this, all participants prioritised their work over both their own study and their personal life. This adherence to work over personal endeavours should be a consideration by employers and HEIs. They both should have an obligation to address this phenomenon and put interventions and support in place to mitigate any negative effects that this may elicit in terms of personal mental health and well-being, but also operational effectiveness.

Abbreviations

APA	Academic Professional Apprenticeship
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
NPQH	National Professional Qualification for Headship
OTJT	Off-the-job Training
PPA	Planning, Preparation and Assessment
SLDA	Senior Leaders Degree Apprenticeship
SLT	Senior Leadership Team

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