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Identity formation and conflicting priorities of early career academics studying the Academic Professional Apprenticeship in England

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ABSTRACT

The Academic Professional Apprenticeship (APA) has emerged in recent years as a new avenue for early career academic staff to develop into their roles. While much of the content may be similar, as an apprenticeship, the requirements and structure of the APA differ from other routes for supporting early career academic staff such as a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. The purpose of this paper is to explore the conflicting priorities of early career academics studying the Academic Professional Apprenticeship and to consider how this programme of study has influenced their identity formation. This article discusses qualitative interviews with 11 apprentices nearing the end of their studies, about their identity and experiences. A flexible inductive framework approach was taken to analyse the data, with multiple coders deployed to increase the validity and reliability of the findings. Key findings suggest that the identity of the apprentice is a multifaceted one, with a reluctance to identify explicitly as an apprentice, often preferring the more discreet title of being a student or, simply, studying. Elements such as teaching pressures, intrusion into research productivity and historical perspectives of what an apprenticeship is, all contribute to the formation of personal identities.

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Apprenticeships; early career academics; academic work; identity

Introduction

As a sector of education, apprenticeship provision is an important and integral component of many developed countries education policies (Bravenboer 2019; Chankseliani, Keep, and Wilde 2017; Cleaver 2022; Wonthey 2019). This approach cements the relevance of work-integrated learning as a key strategic priority (Cleaver 2022; Gambin and Hogarth 2017), with a diversification of the

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conceptual perspective of what an apprenticeship is and its corresponding perceived status (Markowitsch and Wittig 2022).

Historically, the UK's record with effective workplace and apprenticeship training is mixed (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2010; Campbell, Thomson, and Pautz 2011; Keep 2005; P. Ryan 1998; P. Ryan and Unwin 2001). Many scholars suggest that ventures to embed apprenticeships into UK educational policy during the latter part of the 20th century, such as the 'Youth Training Scheme' and 'Modern Apprenticeships', were disappointing in nature and failed to address systemic issues within the sector, including equivocal employer positionality (Gleeson and Keep 2004; Keep 2005; P. Ryan 1998); poor success compared with other nations' programmes (Campbell, Thomson, and Pautz 2011; Steedman 2001); and ambiguous economic returns for those involved (McIntosh 2005).

Despite this previous folly, the appetite for apprenticeships and technical qualifications was again reinvigorated in the UK following the Leitch (2006). Although controversial and with many scholars widely critical of the report findings and recommendations (Horder 2015; Keep and Mayhew 2010; Keep, Mayhew, and Payne 2006; Payne 2008), a review of the challenges facing the UK economy was compiled and a skills gap identified which threatened economic productivity. Since this report, various incumbent governments have pursued a policy of increasing the number of apprentices across a multitude of subject areas and academic levels; evidence that there is a clear political desire to establish apprenticeship provision as an integral component of education policy in the UK. Even through economic downturns, global pandemics, and fiscal challenges, apprenticeships have been high on the political agenda (Dismore 2014), and various initiatives have been implemented to support the drive to enrol apprentices and encourage the sustainability and longevity of the provision.

The apprenticeship levy was established to fund apprenticeship provision (HM Revenue & Customs 2016) and generated over £3 billion in revenue in 2021–22 (Powell 2023b Powell 2023a). To date, apprenticeship providers have received preferential funding mechanisms from central government to resource the provision, in contrast to other post-16 qualifications and programmes (Illsley and Waller 2017). According to Schuss (2023), a targeted levy system (such as some in Europe) can be efficacious in enhancing training of employees and the supply of suitably qualified staff, by increasing the training activity of companies and firms. However, within the UK, previous iterations of apprenticeship policy ventures have been affected and held back by a lack of agency and ambition from employers (Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck 2012). This previous employer inertia surrounding apprenticeship engagement in the UK has been haphazardly addressed by this introduction of the levy, whereby organisations now have a more seismic influence and stake in apprenticeships (beyond just

potentially recruiting a few staff through this mechanism) due to them funding apprenticeships via this financial contribution.

The rationale behind a levy is that this concept of employer-based funding would facilitate a more industry-led apprenticeship system, necessitating training providers to meet the specific needs of employers thus ensuing effective training and outcomes (Gambin and Hogarth 2021). Although questionable in terms of any positive impact on quality and value for money of apprenticeships (M. Crawford-Lee and Moorwood 2019; Gambin and Hogarth 2021), this access to a potentially lucrative funding stream has incentivised the growth of apprenticeship provision with higher-level apprenticeships in particular experiencing substantial growth since their inception.

In 2022, higher apprenticeship numbers totalled 106,400, significantly up from the 19,800 in 2015 (Powell 2023b), fuelled by levy-payers seeking to replace other forms of existing training (P. P. Dickinson and Hogarth 2021). Gambin and Hogarth (2021) argue that this, could be attributed in part to employers sharing the cost of training, thus reducing the risk of limited or no return on their investment, due to most employers contributing to the levy. However, there may be a more ominous reason for this upsurge in higher apprenticeship starts. Any affinity for apprenticeships by employers is admirable and although it can be argued that existing staff development through the form of an apprenticeship is a valid pursuit by employers (Baker 2019; Humphries-Smith and Hunt 2017) through an expansive apprenticeship approach (Fuller and Unwin 2003), unfortunately, an unintended consequence of this employer stimulation is that many have 'gamed' the system with the desire of recovering their levy expenditure rather than the pursuit of advancing staffing skillsets (Gambin and Hogarth 2021). Here, finances are essentially clawed back through placing large numbers of employees onto apprenticeship programmes that are generic to all businesses, rather than in the spirit of enhancing and augmenting the business capability through enrolling recruits and existing staff on specific and purposeful apprenticeship programmes where there is an acute business need.

This phenomenon isn't new and pre-dates the current levy system, as apprenticeship policy has been historically vulnerable (Snell 1996), primarily due to the reluctance of governments to regulate employer behaviour (Fuller and Unwin 2009). This has led to employers exploiting the system to recruit cheap labour (Fuller and Unwin 2009) or to convert existing staff into apprentices where sometimes very little training and development occur, but has allowed financial benefits to flow to employers (Leonard, Fuller, and Unwin 2018; Wolter and Ryan 2011).

Employers are now an integral part of the construction of these qualifications and contribute to the creation of the apprenticeship standards through 'trail-blazer groups' (Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education n.d.; Powell 2023ba) which outline the key criteria by which an apprenticeship is managed,

governed and awarded. With degree apprenticeships at Level 7 (equivalent to a Master's degree) becoming increasingly common in the UK (Office for Students 2020), the Academic Professional Apprenticeship (APA) has been rolled out by a number of universities as a contemporary pathway by which to develop their early career academic staff – typically those within 5 years of first appointment (Bosanquet et al. 2017). In this situation, the university is both the employer and the education provider; which can be both advantageous and disadvantageous. The benefit to the university is not just the ability to develop their staff, but this route also provides an opportunity to draw down funds from their apprenticeship levy, which is mandatory for all employers with a pay bill of over £3 million (Department for Education 2019). However, universities need to be mindful that this potential financial benefit adds complications and the chance of ethical conflict due to operational complexities and challenges that can manifest when an institution is both the employer and education provider (Poole et al. 2023).

While much of the content may be similar to existing courses like Postgraduate Certificates in Higher Education, apprenticeships have mandatory requirements and structure making them more complex than the historical routes which supported early career academic staff development (O'Leary, Mudd, and King 2019). The APA apprenticeship is structured and delivered in a way aligned with all other apprenticeship standards in England. There are both 'on' and 'off' the job training components, with (at the time of data collection) a mandated 20% of an apprentice's working time allocated to off-the-job learning. This off-the-job training consists of a combination of elements, such as: taught sessions, personal study, working with a mentor and formative assessment activities. The on-the-job training component is discharged by the apprentice being supported by a workplace mentor to apply their skills and knowledge, in their professional practice. Formal, summative assessment occurs at the end of the apprenticeship period of (approximately) 2 years and is administered by an external organisation – AdvanceHE (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education 2018). This approach is dictated as per the government-approved APA standard (IfATE n.d.), therefore is generic to all providers and isn't by design of the university.

The delivery of the APA at the university in the scope of this study, relies on a combination of theoretical development and practical implementation, within the curriculum. Generic HE specific pedagogy and andragogy, combined with the holistic elements of theories of learning, curriculum design, evaluation and assurance, underpin the theoretical aspects of the apprenticeship. These scholarly principles and approaches are then applied in real-life settings, where the apprentices cultivate their skills and techniques through self-reflection and review by subject-specific mentors. Formative assessment is discharged through coursework-based tasks, as well as portfolio development incorporating various teaching observations and related preparation and evaluative tasks.

This development of practical teaching skills and strategies, to be able to demonstrate successful application in support of teaching and learning (via the predetermined core attributes of knowledge, skills, and behaviours), is what differentiates the APA from many Postgraduate Certificates in Higher Education. This difference is not only experientially focused for the apprentices but also comes with the logistical and auditable elements of off the job training, holding regular tutor reviews, and sourcing end point assessment. As such, the organisational burden on establishments and their staff, results in the APA having a very different feel than a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education programme (Stocks and Hunter 2020).

Apprentices on the APA programme are lecturers, teaching fellows or professional staff in academic-related roles, who face a distinctive set of challenges in engaging in their studies. As educational providers, with this governmental emphasis on apprenticeship provision, it is important to investigate the impact this provision has on those actors and stakeholders involved, to better understand the nature of the provision and thus reflect on and review practices to ensure that an efficacious learning experience can be delivered. Therefore, this research paper involves a qualitative exploration of the lived experiences of these apprentices with a particular focus on how they articulate their identity as apprentices, both professionally and in relation to their studies.

Existing contemporary research around apprenticeships has generally explored aspects such as: teaching and learning (Fuller et al. 2005); apprentice identity (Brockmann 2010); on-programme support (Spielhofer and Sims 2004); and image and credibility (L. Ryan and Lőrinc 2018). Much of this has investigated lower-level apprenticeships, where the apprentice gains a position and the successful completion of an apprenticeship framework or standard is a dependent factor in their continued employment. With degree apprenticeships still at a relatively fledgling stage, there has been limited research conducted in this field. What little research there is involving degree-level apprenticeships is focused towards more logistical and practical elements rather than the apprentices themselves, with researchers exploring areas such as: the value (Antcliff, Baines, and Gorb 2016) and sustainability of this level of apprenticeship (M. S. Crawford-Lee 2016); the challenges facing universities and employers (Mulkeen et al. 2019; Rowe, Perrin, and Wall 2016); and contention around the potential utilisation of accountability practices (Lambert 2016). Although S. Smith et al. (2021) suggest that apprentice's perspective of apprenticeships is a 'win-win' narrative in terms of the situational benefits of combining work and learning, there is a dearth of research regarding degree apprentices, their experiences on programmes and the impact on their identity. Given the level of commitment an apprenticeship requires and that as a mode of learning it is almost intrinsically designed to develop a sense of attachment or 'calling' to a field (Chan 2019), it may be expected this would be reflected in conceptions of their identity by academic professional apprentices.

The formation of academic identities is an area of frequent study, but with little consensus on the influence of a number of factors. Many studies focus on the influence of neoliberalism (Archer 2008); managerialism (Winter 2009); and performativity (Tülübaşı and Göktürk 2020) and how academics respond to such pressures as defining features of contemporary academic identity formation. Such arguments often centre around the fragile nature of academic identities (Knights and Clarke 2014) or the pressure which academics find themselves under to demonstrate their worth, usually demanding significant emotional resilience (Yang, Shu, and Yin 2022).

The polarisation of academic identity and how this is constructed during social interactions assists in the development of shared understandings regarding the purpose of the higher education and their specific role within it (Ylijoki and Ursin 2013), chiming with Clegg's (2008) view that identity is not fixed, but rather a projection of an individual's lived experience. Furthermore, elements such as intellectual freedom, stimulation, and altruistic drivers all shape what it means to be an academic, meaning it is difficult to pre-define academic identity (Rosewell and Ashwin 2019). This fluidity around perceptions of identity can be an important factor contributing to the understanding of defined roles within the workplace and also within the sector itself. The disciplinary background of academics is of course a significant factor in their identity formation, with colleagues from more professional backgrounds or in 'newer' areas of academia finding themselves with conflicting identities or rejecting more traditional labels (Dashper and Fletcher 2019).

Identity can therefore both be shaped by different standards of esteem in different disciplines and constructed socially through communities of academic practice (Jawitz 2009). Indeed, those academics with less rigidly defined disciplinary identities often find developing a coherent identity more challenging (Simula and Scott 2021). For new academics in particular, engaging in professional learning such as Postgraduate Certificates in Learning and Teaching may have a significant role in forming academic identity, particularly their dispositions to teaching (J. Smith 2010).

Contemporary literature suggests that it is common for early career academics to feel over-worked, and that this has implications for wellbeing (Bosanquet et al. 2017) as well as progression for example, through limited time for publication (McAlpine, Amundsen, and Turner 2014). With the time requirements of the APA being greater than existing development and qualification routes for early career academics, it is likely that these issues will be more pronounced too. A lack of time can also reduce the sense of self-efficacy which can impact on the confidence levels of early career academic staff (Dore and Richards 2022) and thus impact their identity and its formation. However, as Sutherland and Taylor (2011, 183) suggest, early career academics are a 'significant but ill-defined' group and existing research is somewhat limited

about the impact of programmes such as the APA (outside of its direct influence on teaching), can have on identity.

When discussing identity formation, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of identity and its formation, particularly for early career academics. Hollywood et al. (2020) suggest that interpersonal factors such as personality are just as significant as environment in determining success and development for early career academics. Monk and McKay (2017) draw similar conclusions when unpacking the various encounters and provocations which both challenge and shape identity for early career academics.

This paper seeks to explore this lived experience and offer insight into these elements for early career academics undertaking a Level 7 degree apprenticeship. It is primarily concerned with the different ways in which participants articulate their identity in relation to their career and their engagement with the APA. This apprenticeship is primarily aimed at providing training for early career academic staff who are new to higher education. As the target audience for this apprenticeship often comprises of already highly educated professionals, there is a unique set of challenges for them in engaging in their studies. These apprentices therefore may come with a clear professional identity either from academic or industry, which raises interesting questions about how their identity informs and is informed by their status as an apprentice.

Methodology

All participants in this study were selected from the Level 7 APA at a large, post-1992 UK university (that is, a UK university that was historically a polytechnic and then transitioned to university status following the 1992). The relevance of this cohort is that they are all early career academic staff, who are either new to the university or new to teaching roles. Encompassed within this, the cohort very often themselves deliver teaching on a broad range of apprenticeships within their subject areas. All new academic staff are expected to undertake professional development relating to teaching practice (if they do not already hold a recognised teaching qualification), with the APA being one option. All members of the cohort voluntarily enrolled onto the APA programme. Additionally, this sample is drawn from the first year that the APA was delivered at the university and as a new programme it has naturally faced challenges, both within the university and with wider government directives on apprenticeships.

Method

The study used semi-structured interviews which were conducted and recorded remotely using Google Meet. Interviews were synchronously managed and recorded via a real-time connection, with an online medium providing a flexible, time-efficient and affordable approach to conduct interviews (Lo

lacono, Symonds, and Brown 2016). The interviews took a naturalist approach which focused on the lived experiences and feelings of the participants (Gubrium et al. 2012). Using semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to be flexible during the discussions and explore topics based on the participants' engagement.

It is important to recognise the positionality of the researchers and the potential for multiple roles, responsibilities and identities to influence the study (Fenge et al. 2019; Shaw et al. 2020). As the research team consisted of a selection of lecturers who contribute to the apprenticeship being investigated, there were some potential ethical concerns with the collection and management of data. As insider researchers (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018) the team utilised this position to design the research approach and interview questions, ensuring that pertinent themes were explored, but also allowing the development of salient points that emerged naturally during the interview process (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018; Silverman 2013).

To reduce the potential for personal bias, the research team took a reflexive approach, acknowledging their possible influence and impact on the research environment (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). To ameliorate these concerns, a central Research Associate (from a pool of researchers with cross-institutional scope) offered an outsider's view during the research design, enabling a duality of approach through the combination of insider and outsider researchers. The Research Associate was not directly funded nor were any members of the research team directly funded to participate in this research, other than utilising their scholarly activity allowance within their individual workload plans.

With a view to lessening the impact of power dynamics during the recruitment of participants and data collection (Teye 2012), the Research Assistant was responsible for contacting prospective candidates and collecting the data. Due to the personal nature of the accounts provided, during the interviews some identifiable aspects were shared by the participants. To ensure that consent was still in place, the interviewer reminded the participant of their right to withdraw consent whenever they deemed that personally identifiable data had been shared, alongside reiterating their right to withdraw at the end of their interview.

Following each interview with the Research Associate, the recording was labelled with a numerical identifier and then sent to an external company who then transcribed the interviews anonymously. Upon their return to the Research Associate, random identifying pseudonyms were allocated to interviewees and the transcribed interviews were uploaded to the shared digital folder by the Research Associate to ensure that data remained confidential (Silverman 2013).

Table 1. Participants' roles, disciplines and gender.

Pseudonym	Role (self-described)	Faculty	Gender
Amir	Senior Teaching Fellow	Science and Health	M
Carol	Teaching Fellow	Science and Health	F
Khadija	Teaching Fellow	Humanities	F
Aaliyah	Careers Advisor	Central Services	F
Terry	Academic Development	Central Services	M
Emily	Senior Teaching Fellow	Business and Law	F
Brian	Lecturer	Creative and Cultural Industries	M
Rico	Teaching Fellow	Humanities	M
Shirley	Academic Skills Tutor	Business and Law	F
Sofia	Senior Lecturer	Technology	F
Elijah	Learning Support Tutor	Science and Health	M

Participant recruitment & sample

The participant population consisted of all apprenticeship members in their second year of studying the APA at this large, post-1992 UK university. These participants were chosen as they have more experience of being degree apprentices than first-years. Due to small cohort numbers, all eligible participants (31 individuals) were invited to take part in the study. Eleven participants took part in the interviews. Table 1 provides an overview of the research participants, their roles and the faculties in which they work. Whilst the pseudonyms reflect the gender of each participant, no other indicators of identity (e.g., ethnicity) should be inferred.

The APA draws its cohort from across the whole institution, as the apprentices are new members of academic staff with no prior teaching experience or

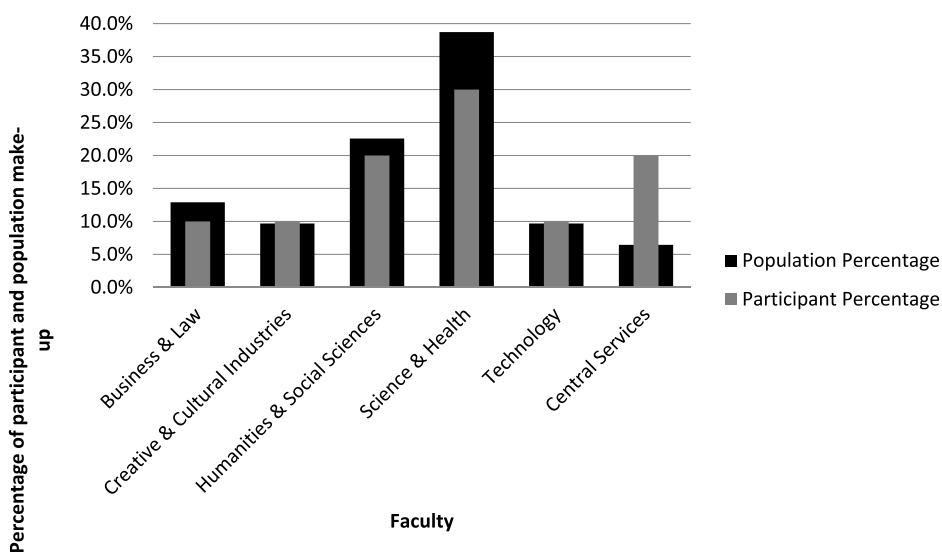


Figure 1. Faculty or department of participants (grey) and members of the wider APA population (black).

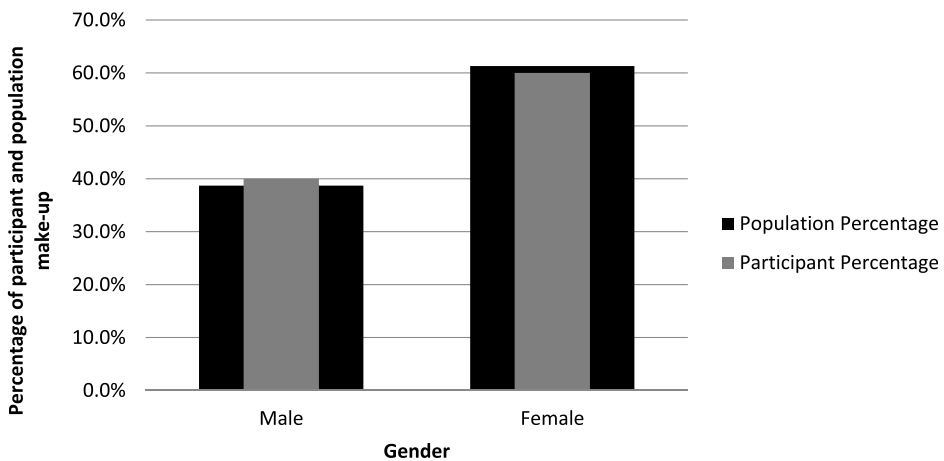


Figure 2. Gender of participants (grey) and wider APA population (black).

qualification. As seen in [Figure 1](#), the sample is broadly reflective of the wider cohort of the APA. The split by gender was representative of the cohort, as shown in [Figure 2](#).

Data analysis

A flexible inductive framework approach was applied to analyse the data (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2014). Following data familiarisation, a large number of initial codes were generated from the transcripts. Each interview was coded by two researchers and all codes were later merged to create a primary coding document. Using multiple coders in this way increases the validity and reliability of the codes generated (G. Ryan 1999). These initial primary codes were then developed further with links made to develop larger themes. [Table 2](#) provides a summary of the key themes attached to identity via the coding process, including the number of interviewees who aligned with each aspect. All quotations featured in the results section are indicative of the views held by the participants unless otherwise stated. Each of the themes which were referenced by the research participants is unpacked during the results and discussion sections.

Results

In analysing the data, several key themes emerged, as shown in [Table 2](#). The purpose of this paper relates to unpacking the themes around participant identity considering how participants use or relate to the labels of 'apprentice', 'student' and 'academic professional'. Alongside broader considerations relating to their individual roles and career aspirations.

Table 2. Summary of the key themes attached to identity.

Identity	Characteristics	No. of participants agreed	Challenges	No. of participants agreed	Benefits	No. of participants agreed
<i>Being an apprentice</i>	Vocational, practical and related to manual labour	4	Reluctance to adopt this label as it does not align with professional identity	7	Conceptualises learning through 'observing' and doing as part of educational development	1
<i>Being a student</i>	Associated with engaging with studies	11	Not embodied as identity- 'doing an apprenticeship'	7	Allows new academic staff to relate more effectively to their own apprentices	1
	Derives value in relation to professional identity	4	Reluctance to adopt this label as it does not align with professional identity Not embodied as identity- 'doing a masters'	6 10	Allows new academic staff to relate more effectively to their own students Student identity can help structure time and engagement – 'student mode'	3 5
<i>Being an academic</i>	Influenced by discipline, prior experience, workload, contract and job title.	11	Becoming a student a sign of arrested career development	3		
			Challenge to identity based on contractual status or job title	5	Usefulness in breadth of the term to capture range of career paths (including study) Contrasted with 'practitioner' to reflect professional experience	7 6

Being an apprentice

The continual re-construction of identity was observed in terms of participants' self-perceptions of individual 'role' identity, and the divulging of their identity to colleagues and also their students. Despite the fact the participants within this sample were fully aware that they had personally applied for an apprenticeship programme, there was a general reticence to specifically identify as an apprentice. This view resonated with several of the participants, with mention of undertaking an apprenticeship but avoidance of any formal distinction around *being* an apprentice. For some participants this phenomenon was simply a casual omission;

I always say I'm doing an apprenticeship, rather than I am an apprentice.

Aaliyah

And

I've talked about the fact I'm doing an apprenticeship but again, yeah, I've not really thought about why that might be, I've never actually used that [apprentice] to describe myself.

Rico

But for others it was a more deliberate decision;

I don't really feel like I am [an apprentice]. Yeah, it's not my main . . . the main thing I'm doing although I'm doing a bit of studying, you know, my main job is lecturing and I'm studying in order to help me become a better lecturer.

Brian

Although the apprentices in this instance are studying a higher-level apprenticeship, it is unsurprising that historical connotations and interpretations of the apprenticeship model inform their perceptions;

It's just like becoming a bricklayer, as an apprentice you go on site with the bricklayer and they sort of teach you how to do what they are doing and you start copying them and you end up building a wall as well. And it's the same thing here which is, I go along to the sessions as a student, but I then go and do some teaching with them in my training role setting, so that I'm learning from them.

Terry

Some of the reluctance to include the term apprentice may be born out of an attempt to limit any confusion caused when framing their apprenticeship study when conversing with others;

I call it my apprenticeship, but then, I also know, partly feel, do people actually know what the hell I'm talking about, do they realise you can do an apprenticeship in teaching?

Amir

This really epitomises the impetus for studying an apprenticeship by highlighting the practical ‘doing’ aspect which acts as a fulcrum for the development and generation of professional knowledge, skills and behaviours which are fundamental to apprenticeship provision. However, in this instance, even though the participant was enamoured with the synergy of an APA and the historical connotations of the practical nature of an apprenticeship, he was conscious that others might not make the connection due to relating an apprenticeship to a particular set of jobs.

The findings of the current study suggest that the influence of socially constructed experiences and perceptions of apprenticeships had a significant bearing on the reticence to identify as this entity. The historical connotations and ‘traditional’ perceptions around apprenticeships certainly influenced this stance, with nearly all the participants not wanting to necessarily be associated with, or classified in the same group as, more traditional apprentices – bricklayers, metal workers, etc, for example:

Because, yes, teaching is a practical skill and apprenticeships are for practical skills, but I think if you say to anyone, apprentice, in my mind it automatically goes to, like, blacksmiths and metal work and very physical jobs in that respect.

Amir

And;

What it is, probably, is just old fashioned, is that when I think of apprentices I think of young lads learning how to do plumbing or trainees.

Terry

Being a student

Although there was general hesitancy from participants to identify as an apprentice, the term ‘student’ was seen in a more favourable light. The majority of participants considered the student facet of their role being quite discreet, firmly placing their studies as part of their professional development. Within this, being identified as a student was not necessarily seen as important or particularly relevant;

So, I tend to not sort of say, I’m also a student. I kind of just say, I am a staff member but I’m also studying alongside.

Carol

And;

I suppose I think more of myself as a colleague who is continuing their professional development than as a, you know, uni student. I don’t really have that identity.

Emily

Meanwhile, other participants took the opportunity to be explicitly strategic in sharing information about their student identity and how it entwines with their professional or vocational identity;

If I started out with 'I'm a student', well, it's not the thing I'm doing most, you know, so, first and foremost, if I'm talking to people about my professional life, the job is the main one. I would like to create, for myself, a new story, but I will only be doing that according ... it will have to suit the audience.

Aaliyah

Many of the participants' comments were connected to their perception of age and career progression. It is important to bear in mind that many of the participants had a successful professional practice background prior to entering into academia, so teaching became the next chapter of their career, building on past successes;

I mean I don't know if it's an age thing, but I rarely use the word that I'm a student. I think I tend to say I'm doing a masters, or something like that. I feel sort of removed from my understanding of the world of a student, but not in a sort of a snobbish way, it's just not an association really.

Shirley

Similarly, age and perceptions of apprentices being 'young' was a conscious aspect of identify formation;

Some [subject-based occupation] do apprenticeships now and they're all like 17 or 18 and because I'm definitely not that age in my head I associate it with them I think, not there's anything wrong with it but I just ... I don't see myself as being young and, you know, just starting out.

Emily

In the case of one particular participant, the shift between gaining an academic position and concept of being identified as a student was not tolerated at all;

I think that's something I've taken a bit of an issue with it [sic]. And again I think it just boils down to it's taken me so long to get to a permanent academic position, and within weeks I was already asked to get a student card; and something in my mind went, no, sorry, no, it's taken too long to finally get here.

Sofia

However, for several participants, there was a clear intention to articulate their student identity and clarify any misunderstandings. This approach appeared to be hampered due to the complexity of their roles and the time taken to address multiple interpretations within the boundaries of casual conversations.

When I've said/used student, I've then used that term to describe what kind of student I am because ... and that often is required when people see ... you know what I'm saying, I'm not, like, old, but the point is I'm older and I say I'm a student, and there's a bit of confusion there and I have to say what kind of student I am ... I think sometimes apprentice means something else to them because they've heard stuff on the news and it's a different kind of apprenticeship, or it isn't.

Elijah

And;

I just say, I'm doing my postgraduate qualifications. I don't go into it because somebody who doesn't work in education doesn't really understand, it takes a bit of explanation.

Carol

Despite these issues, when sharing their identity with the students they came into contact with during their teaching duties, being seen as a student as well was very much viewed in a positive light possibly, due to the location of this study within a post-1992 university – who offer significantly more degree apprenticeships than the Russell Group (Lewis and Bolton 2024). The agency of this positionality may have been seen as a conduit to overcoming any perceived structural and cultural barriers (Behari-Leak 2017). As such, for some participants there were definitely benefits and positivity around sharing identity with their own learners, which appeared to be perceived as bolstering their status;

I tell my apprentice students I'm an apprentice, which always goes down well, because they go, you don't understand, and I go, excuse me. I say, I'm an apprentice.

Emily

One clear asset of the participants having a 'student' identity was the ability to empathise with the experience of the students they teach, which was deemed to be very beneficial;

... it's been amazingly good for empathising with the students.

Aaliyah

And;

... it helps me to empathise with the students because the students we teach in [subject area] are in pretty much the same boat, they're in a day job, they do the degree as part of that.

Rico

Being an academic professional

The APA was adopted by the university as part of its commitment to improve teaching practices across the institution, and as such, the only route available within the university was the 'teaching specialist' one. There was an assumption that the participants would be comfortable with their role expectations. In reality, job titles varied within the cohort, with some holding posts as teaching fellows (who have no expectation to conduct research activity) and others as lecturers (who have a dedicated workload allowance for additional scholarly [research] activity). This did seem to make a difference in their perceptions around identity and personal aspirations;

I think, I struggle as well, because I desperately want to be on a research contract, not a teaching fellow contract. And so, I feel like I'm . . . yeah, I feel a little bit odd about that, in terms of the opportunities that can bring.

Khadija

Interestingly, those who held lecturer posts appeared to prefer to identify as an academic;

I think academic is generally how I would describe myself.

Sofia

Perhaps surprisingly, there appeared to be little difference in identity based around academic discipline. In fact, very few participants explicitly mentioned their discipline in the context of any facet of their identity, with prior occupational experience or their particularly contractual status taking precedence. Building on this, participants with a significant professional background outside of the higher education setting, always viewed their professional qualifications and/or expertise as the dominant role.

I always see myself as a [professional title] first, then an academic.

Amir

One referred to themselves as a 'pracademic':

I think, coming from practice and that whole idea of being a 'pracademic'.

Khadija

Some comments from participants demonstrate their anxiety around their own identities, especially when framing their role within the university. Indeed, the comments around being a teacher and an apprentice encapsulate the potential areas for stress to occur and the desire for task fulfilment to occur. Results from this study indicate that the element of research was neglected in favour of APA commitments, teaching workload and other contractual obligations;

I'm supposed to have so much protected time to do my [discipline] research as a new starter so that I could get myself established with the group and things like that, but due to this APA they just scraped that off.

Sofia

And;

... not just teach, I wanted to be able to research.

Khadija

Teaching workload was a common theme mentioned by participants and had an impact (often negative) on their chances of undertaking other elements of their role seen as crucial to their career aspirations and professional identity;

So, workload for everyone went up and mine went exceptionally high, and I was, like, 150%, before my 20% of APA was added on to it.

Amir

And;

So, I can't say I was given Point 2 because with my teaching, as previous years, it's been well over 1. So, we ... there isn't any less teaching, if that makes sense. It kind of has to just sort of come in around ... you know, again your teaching kind of eats into your personal life, your weekends and evenings.

Brian

Therefore, results from the current study suggest that some elements integral to developing their academic identity, were hindered or completely prevented for apprentices – specifically their ability to undertake the research component.

Discussion

Perceptions of apprentices

The reluctance of participants in this study to identify as apprentices, is an intriguing finding. This hesitancy to identify as an apprentice may be due to a variety of factors, most notably the historical connotations of what an apprentice is and participants' own contextual situation in terms of previous career standings and age. This viewpoint may also be compounded given that interactions with disciplinary boundaries and experiences of the learning environment – in addition to prior socially constructed experiences – influences identity construction (Simula and Scott 2021). These factors, combined with personal desire to enable longer-term career development opportunities within a specific disciplinary context (Coomber 2019), shed light on why identifying as an apprentice is not a prevalent phenomenon for APA apprentices.

The attempt to delineate the work-based identity into separate identities is an interesting narrative and may be a direct result of the individual's experience, where the destabilisation of workplace esteem influences their preferences in relation to their identity. Ramarajan and Reid (2013) describe how personal and subjective preferences shape people's projections of themselves, which is influenced by the power relationship between themselves and their preferred occupation/organisation identities. This notion is manifested in the results of this study as participants see their primary identity as a professional when discussing their context with others, potentially due to the perceived hierarchy and power dynamic between student (apprentice) and staff member or academic (Symonds 2020). The professional self-esteem of APA apprentices seems to be affected by being labelled as an apprentice, especially when they feel that they have already invested significant time within their professional lives to get to a certain position. Quew-Jones (2024) suggests that not being seen as 'masters' is at the heart of this, whereby apprentices already established at an employer, actively refrain from using the term apprentice to avoid appearing inferior to others.

Balancing multiple identities

With APA apprentices much more comfortable with their profession, professional development and student informed identities, it seems they are equivocal in their identity positionality, thus reinforcing the work of Brockmann and Laurie (2016) who postulate that apprenticeship learner identity is 'highly context dependent' (236) and that academics have multiple nested identities (Borlaug, Maria Tellmann, and Vabø 2023). Similarly, Martin, Lord, and Warren-Smith (2020) offer the notion of 'juggling hats', whereby people switch identities to manage the different roles that they take on. It is clear from the findings of this research that this phenomenon is prevalent among APA apprentices, allowing them to meet various needs and when interacting with different stakeholders, supporting the notion of identity being a fluid dynamic (Clegg 2008; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013).

Validation of professional identity

Age and place in one's career appear to inform a sense of developmental divide, with participants feeling that they had reached a period where they had moved past the point of it being appropriate that they identify as an apprentice. This context dependence explains why the APA apprentices tended to identify as academics first, rather than apprentices due to their current career trajectories, and the emphasis and value placed on research and publications even above teaching performance, as there is a desire for acceptance by, and a sense of belonging with, peers within the higher education community, and a sense that

research output is central to this above all other dimensions (Kreber 2010). Comparable to the findings of Martin, Lord, and Warren-Smith (2020), the research participants suffered from self-doubt and uncertainty of their own authenticity within their job role. In many cases, the desire to be seen as an 'academic' as opposed to a teacher or apprentice was common and the need to be seen to engage in research endeavours reflects the status hierarchies which still exist within higher education (Isopahkala-Bouret 2015).

Moreover, Fitzmaurice (2013) implies that research is a key factor and central in developing an academic identity to ensure a fit to the establishment where they work, with Blackmore and Kandiko (2011) going further and suggesting that research outputs are a core component of an academic's motivation and prestige. Therefore, where professional identity within the higher education sector commonly rests on the notions of research and the credibility and acceptance within the community that this brings (Watermeyer and Tomlinson 2022), the results of this study demonstrate a real dichotomy that APA apprentices face whilst undertaking study alongside the demands of working and attempting to build a research portfolio.

Perceived agency of the apprenticeship

Despite the appearance of a level playing field for all members studying the apprenticeship, it is highly unlikely that the currency of gaining a degree apprenticeship certificate will address concerns around reduced potential of research output. It can therefore be suggested that as APA apprentices are often early career, and have a high teaching workload and desire to research and publish, having to undertake apprenticeship study during this early career period may limit their ability to undertake scholarly activity alongside their teaching, which is essential for an academic identity to be forged (Fitzmaurice 2013; Watermeyer and Tomlinson 2022).

The lack of time to undertake elements such as research and publication points to a dichotomy for early career academics as, potentially, the apprenticeship that the institution is insisting they undertake harms the formation of their identity and professional standing with colleagues and peers. This is particularly pertinent if considered within the context of the teaching-research nexus (Paulsson and Macheridis 2023). If, as Tight (2016) pontificates that within the sphere of higher education, research is inherently linked to teaching, and vice versa, it can be argued that a lack of research endeavours could harm the development of pedagogy and andragogy self-efficacy due to a potential lack of research informing teaching content and practice (McCune et al. 2023; Robertson 2007). This could result in further degradation of one's professional, academic identity. Therefore, where an apprentice is bereft of a tangible, positive link between research-based work aspirations and apprenticeship study, their identity will be compromised due to a perceived lack of recognition of

their endeavours by the organisation (Fabian et al. 2022). This may demonstrate why APA apprentices are reluctant to identify as apprentices when the foundations of doing so do not necessarily align with that of an academic identity (Rosewell and Ashwin 2019).

Conclusion

The APA provides a relatively new model for the training and development of early career academics; indeed, arguably Level 7 degree apprenticeships, in general, are still finding their feet in higher education. Perhaps, it is therefore unsurprising that the identity of apprentice is not one with significant currency among academic professional apprentices, particularly when conversing with their peers who are entrenched in more traditional higher educational delivery processes. As this model becomes more mature, we may expect greater identification with the apprentice label, suggesting further, ongoing research is needed.

It is worth bearing in mind that the APA Standard has two routes embedded within it: the teaching specialist and research specialist pathways. Currently, the teaching specialist route is the only pathway on offer within the university in scope for this study, which is a limitation for employers who are currently unable to offer their staff the research specialist route as an alternative development pathway. Indeed, it may well be that in the short term, the benefits of focusing on a singular route – in this instance, the teaching specialist pathway – may well be the most practical way forward for higher education providers to familiarise themselves with degree-level apprenticeship delivery. Although not solely focused on research (in the way that the research specialist pathway is), the teaching specialist route does require apprentices to demonstrate integration of subject-specific and pedagogic research and scholarship within their teaching practice, via the application of methods to support and measure changes, which forms part of their final End Point Assessment (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education 2018). Although it might not fully satisfy the requirements of those apprentices who have roles solely focused upon research, this route can provide a supportive introductory vehicle for those staff members with extensive industry or external professional experience, with an opportunity to consider research within a supportive framework which can be useful in their future careers.

If greater flexibility is provided around the specialist pathway on offer, this could allow better alignment with individual roles and support identity formation. However, based on the research in this study, employers would need to be mindful in ensuring that the selected pathway correlates with the individual future apprentice's preferred career pathway, as opposed to their immediate role. Indeed, one way of addressing this issue would be to consider ways in which the learners and employer could

have greater influence in the specialist pathway delivered, as opposed to the education provider setting the boundary for the delivery of the programme. In order for this to occur, a powerful commitment to the supply and demand of apprenticeships (Wolf, Jenkins, and Vignoles 2006) needs to be in place, allowing the views of all stakeholders to be heard. Orientation in navigating changes of this type requires a robust sense of institutional purpose (Chankseliani and James Relly 2015) one which may come further into play as the programme matures. Should this occur, it is likely that this will have an impact on early career staff, particularly for those 'accidental academics' (J. Dickinson, Fowler, and Lisa Griffiths 2022) who have taken non-traditional routes into careers in higher education teaching.

As highlighted at the beginning of this paper, the UK's record with effective apprenticeship provision is varied, and the current financial sustainability of the UK university sector is challenging (Office for Students 2024). Therefore, it may be that embracing employer-based funding models can be perceived as a positive opportunity moving forward, allowing universities to utilise their mandatorily spent levy funds. Given the stake that the levy-based model gives to employers, and the agency this brings through the coherent connection now apparent between funding, construction of apprenticeship standards and employers, it could be inferred that this model goes some way to addressing the historical issues evident with apprenticeships. Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that this model will endure. However, the findings of this paper suggest that there is still some way to go to ensure that value is offered to both employers and maybe more importantly, degree-level apprentices in terms of their identity and the agency that undertaking an apprenticeship programme brings.

As the degree apprenticeship model develops within higher education, it is feasible to expect the greater identification with the apprentice label will occur, suggesting that further, ongoing research is needed around the identity formation and conflicting priorities of early career academics.

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