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## **BAM 2019**

### **Building and sustaining high performance organisations in uncertain times: Challenges and opportunities**

#### **Development paper**

#### **Degree Apprenticeships**

#### **The importance of gaining meaningful engagement from both participants and employers in order to maximise the benefits of undertaking a Degree Apprenticeship in the UK.**

This development paper aims to explore the perspectives of participants following degree apprenticeships (DA) and their opinions relating to the influence of their employers on this experience. Degree apprenticeships combine university study and work-based learning to enable apprentices to gain a full bachelor's or master's degree whilst in full-time employment. Initial forecasts indicated a target of 3 million apprenticeships would be generated under the UK government's workplace levy (imposed on all UK organisations with a wage bill of more than £3 million) by 2020 (Woolcock 2018). Of these, one million are expected to be degree apprenticeships (Chartered Management Institute 2018).

Preliminary research highlights the experiences of degree apprenticeship participants in terms of the development of their professional identity. The findings indicated that participants' sense of professional identity developed positively through the work-based learning programme. However, feelings of professional frustration resulting from organisational issues such as lack of opportunity and support had a disproportionately negative impact on the participants sense of professional identity. These findings informed the development of the model below that can be used by academics, practitioners, employers and policy makers to inform good practice in the development and delivery of DA.

#### **Track 12: Knowledge and Learning**

**Word count: 1527**

# **The importance of gaining meaningful engagement from both participants and employers in order to maximise the benefits of undertaking a Degree Apprenticeship in the UK.**

## **Research aim**

This development paper aims to explore the perspectives of participants following degree apprenticeships (DA) and their opinions relating to the influence of their employers on this experience. DA are, by their very nature, work-based learning (WBL) programmes that offer learning whilst at work. WBL has been described as ‘what is learned by working – not reading about work or observing work, but actually undertaking work activities’ (Helyer 2010, p2). The purpose of this paper is to inform the development guidance for employers and participants (and HEI’s) to ensure all parties gain the maximum benefits from DA.

## **Research context**

On 12th March 2015 the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government announced, the roll-out of nine new industry designed Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 2015). The long-term aim was to start three million new apprenticeships by 2020 to be funded through a new workplace levy (imposed on all UK organisations with a wage bill of more than £3 million) from April 2016. Degree apprenticeships combine university study and work-based learning to enable apprentices to gain a full bachelor’s or master’s degree whilst in full-time employment. Initial forecasts indicated a target of 3 million apprenticeships would be generated under the workplace levy by 2020 (Woolcock 2018). Of these, one million are expected to be degree apprenticeships (Chartered Management Institute 2018).

The potential benefits to employers who engage with the Apprenticeship agenda have been stated by the professional body for human resource and people development - Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2018) as:

- Maintaining or improving future skills in the business
- Provided improvements in the goods and services they offer
- Contributed to staff morale

The Department of Business, Skills and Innovation (2015) presented a forecast of benefits for the apprentices relating to career prospects and earning potential. Forecast benefits do not address the more holistic impact that DA could have on participants’ personal development and the role the employers, participants and HEI play in this.

## **The Degree Apprenticeship Agenda**

The Degree Apprenticeship agenda can be linked to the need to address the skills gap within the UK, outlined within the Leitch Review of Skills Report in 2006, (Leitch 2006). The report’s findings showed that the skill levels within the UK were weak by international standards. This could have a long-term impact on the UK’s productivity and employment levels. In addition to recommendations relating to the overall improvement of skills through investment and partnership, there was also a drive to increase employer engagement and investment in skills, improve relationships between universities and employers and co-funding of workplace degrees with an increased focus on Level 5 and above skills. As 70% of the 2020 workforce will have already completed their compulsory education, any further

learning or training will need to take place within a working context (Leitch 2006). The issue of a skills deficit was further reinforced through the UK Commission for Employment and Skills Employer Skills survey 2015 (UK Commission for Employment and Skills 2015), in which it reported that some employers when faced with applicants who lack the requisite skills leave the post unfilled, whilst others choose to recruit someone with insufficient skills.

Another factor relating to the significance of DA in the current climate, relates to the importance of knowledge creation through work-based learning. A report commissioned in 2008 by the Higher Education Academy (Nixon *et al.* 2008) highlighted the impact of WBL, concluding that the benefits of WBL extend beyond enhancing an individual's skills and knowledge. Benefits to the employees were described as 'capability extending' in terms of attitudes and approaches to work as well as gaining wider appreciation of how they fit into the bigger picture and has led to increased confidence in their performance at work. These findings were strengthened by conclusions drawn from an impact study prepared by the Institute of Work Based Learning (Costley and Abukari 2010). Conclusions from this study indicate that the personal benefits of WBL included newfound confidence as well as opportunity to demonstrate their new insights. These findings link to feeling of empowerment on completion of a WBLP noted by Costley and Abukari (2015) that led to changed career aspirations.

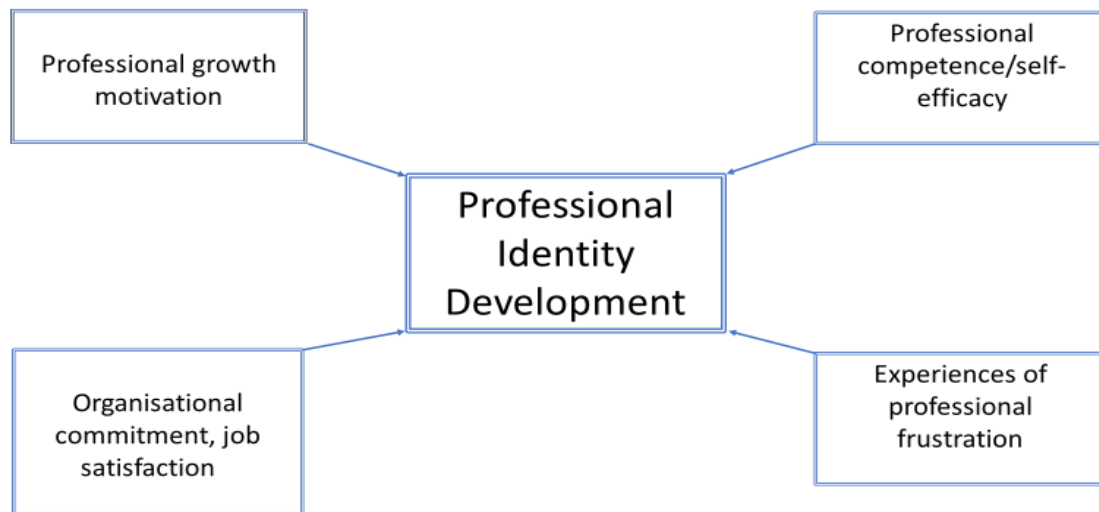
## **Research methods and methodology**

This research has been framed using a constructivist approach involving the collection of qualitative data. Research findings are drawn from an inductive thematic analysis of oral narrative reflections, generated through semi-structured interviews with participants sourced from a Chartered Management Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA) and a Certificate in Retail Management (CRM). The CMDA cohort completed their WBLP in 2018 and of the ten participants, six were interviewed. The CRM cohort consisted of 24 participants, three of which were interviewed.

The interviewed participants were self-selecting, following a request to the whole cohort to take part in the research.

## **The relevance of professional identity and its importance within the development of identity**

Preliminary findings highlight the experiences of degree apprenticeship participants in terms of the development of their professional identity. The following conceptual framework (Fig 1) was used in the study as a means of framing the research design and is based on the elements that contribute to an individual's professional identity (PI) within the context of a work-based learning programme. The framework includes boxes that represent, namely, professional growth motivation, professional competency/self-efficacy, organisational commitment/job satisfaction and professional frustration. These have been derived from the work on identity development by Canrinus, *et al.* (2012) and Puurala and Löfströme (2003).



Adapted from Puurula and Löfströme (2003) and Canrinus, *et al* (2012)

### Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The findings indicated that participants sense of professional identity developed positively through the work-based learning programme, however contributions made by the four elements to participants professional identity is not equal. Feelings of professional frustration resulting from organisational issues such as lack of opportunity and support had a disproportionately negative impact on the participants sense of professional identity.

#### Employer Influence

The role of the employer in maximising the benefits of undertaking a Degree Apprenticeship was identified as a significant factor for participants.

These findings informed the development of the model of good practice below (Fig.2), that can be used by academics, practitioners, employers and policy makers to inform good practice in the development and delivery of DA.



**Figure 2: Degree Apprenticeship Good Practice**

The size of the text boxes illustrates the relative contribution of the elements to participants' development of professional identity. In order of impact, these are, firstly experiences of professional frustration, professional competence/self-efficacy, commitment to the organisation, job satisfaction and finally professional growth motivation. The research indicates that experiences of professional frustration has a greater impact than the professional growth motivations of an individual to their development of professional identity. This links with the job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation, as experience of professional frustration can contribute to negative feelings towards the organisation. Professional competence/self-efficacy are in turn impacted by professional frustration.

The addition of external factors (i.e. the National Context, organisational factors and individual circumstances) that influence an individual's development of professional identity in both a positive and negative manner, was added to the conceptual framework to produce the model that will act as a tool for the development and delivery of DA. This is justified as external factors that are outside the control of those involved with DA, cannot be predicted yet could impact on the development of an individual's professional identity.

With the provision of DA in its infancy, the value of this development paper is in shaping future DA's using research carried out with a cohort of CMDA students. In addition to the contribution to knowledge around DA it also augments work-based learning literature.

### **Paper development**

This paper aims to utilise findings from preliminary research and to develop a research strategy within the degree apprenticeship community to establish areas of best practice. Further development of the paper in preparation for the conference will include the

formulation of specific area to be explored within the development presentation to develop the theoretical framework and contribution of the research.

Through the conference I will establish connections with HEI's to devise a research proposal to further research Degree Apprenticeships. The focus will be to examine the experiences of the apprentices and propose areas of best practice to maximise the role degree apprenticeships play in the development of apprentices.

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