Enhancing the degree apprenticeship curriculum through work-based manager and mentor intervention

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Abstract

Purpose – Educational policy instruments such as apprenticeship levy and forthcoming lifetime skills guarantee are creating unprecedented opportunities for rapid growth in a range of work-based learning (WBL) programmes, requiring increasingly complex levels of collaboration between providers and employers. Apprenticeships require providers to assume responsibility in ensuring apprentices' work-based managers and mentors (WBMMs) are equipped to provide effective support to individuals as they learn 'on the job'. After six years of higher education institution (HEI) apprenticeship curriculum delivery, there is opportunity to examine existing WBMM practice to inform the design, content and delivery of a shared knowledge base via a practical interactive toolkit. By developing clearer understanding of WBMMs' experiences, expectations and challenges, the study aims to reduce potential gaps in knowledge and skills and encourage more effective collaboration between employers and providers to better support apprentices as they progress through WBL programmes.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper discusses evolution of higher level and degree apprenticeships, explores guidance for WBMMs and investigates the influence of expectations and motivations of WBMMS. Theoretical and conceptual foundations relating to WBL programme delivery and WBMM role are analysed and discussed. Qualitative data drawn from semi-structured surveys are analysed thematically to investigate common patterns, clarify understanding and identify development areas to inform future university provider and employer practice.

Findings – The findings suggest a number of themes to improve apprentice management; further clarity of WBMMs role, greater involvement of WBMM's for negotiated learning, unplanned experiences do add value and scope for richer mentoring dialogues. WBL value for WBMMs is broader than expected, incorporating apprentice performance and output improvements, and solving complex problems.

Research limitations/implications – The research is drawn from an established university with five years of experience. However, the context in which programmes are delivered significantly varies according to providers and employers. This means factors other than those highlighted in this paper may continue to emerge as the research in this field develops.

Practical implications – The practical implications from findings can be used to cultivate stronger collaboration, providing a foundation of knowledge intended to provoke further dialogue regarding content for an interactive toolkit. The findings signal the need for further resources, a review of the restrictions associated with levy funding for co-creation of a more effective national apprenticeship framework.

Originality/value – This paper builds on a limited body of research examining employers' perspectives of apprenticeship management. Degree apprenticeships have attracted limited scholarly attention over six years since their inception (Bowman, 2022) resulting in a significant paucity of research that focuses upon employer

role. This study addresses this void by exploring WBMMs experiences, requirements and expectations, revealing new insights for providers of WBL, employers and individuals employed as WBMMs.

Introduction

The introduction of higher level apprenticeships by the UK Government in 2014 sought to offer greater opportunity for employers to contribute to curricula, recognising that employers and universities need to work together (BIS, 2016). Six years later, employer-led programmes are vaunted as a critical success factor for higher education institutions (HEIs), employers and wider society, underpinned by empowering relationships (Daley *et al.*, 2016) potentially overcoming the "employer-university" divide. At practice level, this includes ongoing support from employers to co-create curricula with providers, by capturing positive lessons from academic learning and translating them into the workplace (Irons, 2017). Policy instruments have continued to build upon this promising start, with the burgeoning "Help to Grow" programme and forthcoming lifetime skills guarantee likely to create additional opportunities for a diverse range of collaborative approaches and work-based learning (WBL) delivery models for management development (DfE, 2021). Funding across England has been available since 2017 via the apprenticeship levy, charged at 0.5% to all organisations with a payroll exceeding £3m per year. Employers may only access their contribution by engaging with apprenticeships from levels 3 to 7.

Employers value the opportunity to engage with degree apprenticeship programmes (Universities UK, 2019) attracting high calibre learners, developing knowledge and skills needed by managers in a rapidly changing economy. Apprentices spend 80% of their time completing work activities, synthesising and applying what they are learning through taught aspects of the programme to the workplace. Employers are required to appoint work-based managers and mentors (WBMMs), forming key stakeholders of apprenticeship programmes through an implicit expectation of ownership and engagement demonstrated by facilitating their apprentices through their journey. Mentors are expected to remain separate entities from line managers (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, 2022), yet evidence suggests widespread amalgamation of fundamentally very different roles of management, mentoring and coaching, risking complexity and disruption (Roberts *et al.*, 2019). WBMMs are expected to have capability and capacity to manage apprentices and support the curriculum by facilitating access to authentic learning at work, a highly complex and ambiguous role which is at odds with the prevailing view of under qualification amongst UK managers (CMI, 2021). Inadequate support could compromise long-term sustainability of apprenticeships and national agenda to widen social mobility through HE (Lester, 2016).

There are few published studies which explore and inform the complexities of heterogeneous and disparate support beyond the confines of the provider. Guidance for universities to support WBMMs therefore remains limited, focused upon internalised responsibilities of providers (QAA, 2019) juxtaposed with externalised guidance concerning the employers' role in raising standards (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education 2022). Yet, there is no explicit instruction or text indicating how WBMMs should support these initiatives, nor is there adequate attention paid to strategies to improve the impact of WBL. Furthermore, there is scant reference to who should fund development and appraisal of WBMM practice through design and implementation of appropriate training and resourcing.

Despite challenges there has been accumulation of rich experience gained since 2015, comprising a body of knowledge which is now generating valuable insights for providers.

Hitherto, strategic partnerships have informed dialogue and discovery at the macro level, driven by funding, business engagement and broader curriculum rather than emerging miniature activities and relationships between WBMM and apprentice (Hughes and Saiva, 2019). Pedagogic research lends itself to an examination of homogenous activities which might loosely associate with WBMM responsibilities including portfolio of evidence (Schedlitzki, 2019), evaluation of WBL tools (Garnett, 2020) and reflective dialogue (Konstantinou and Miller, 2020; Rowe *et al.*, 2020). Minton and Hadfield (2014) expose risks of disjointed apprenticeship programmes, endorsing apprentice engagement with WBMMs to make the most of learning opportunities at work, but practically it has not been possible to review and publish findings about applied aspects of the role until recently. The notion of ongoing curriculum collaboration supported by effective delivery of WBMM training and guidance remains sporadic and detached from both providers and a wider community of WBMMs (UUK, 2019; Bowman, 2022). It is this specific aspect our research seeks to address, building upon work of Roberts *et al.* (2019) to provide further insights into the role and social practice of WBMMs.

Our research is framed within the nascent body of higher level apprenticeship literature providing deeper understanding of experiences, expectations and challenges of management degree WBMMs across the South of England, by exploring the extent to which they can realistically support authentic and immersive learning and achieve optimum outcomes for apprentices and the wider organisation. Our study considers whether an accessible and interactive toolkit intervention could inform and advance working relationships between providers, employers and their WBMMs, encouraging shared best practice and further co-creation of curricula. The work exposes challenges and tensions associated with apprenticeship delivery and demonstrates a critical need to embed support structures for WBMMs who form an integral part of apprenticeships but logistically remain at "arms' length" from providers. Despite a growing body of literature, associated complex and thorny issues remain largely unexplored to date (Bowman, 2022). Specifically, the empirical findings uncover a range of disparate activities leading to inconsistent experiences for apprentices, including pockets of excellent practice which may be used to inform a range of future interventions and support structures.

This paper is divided into four sections. First, a literature review explores the role of apprenticeship management. Methodological considerations are subsequently outlined before the findings are showcased. The discussion follows, including an outline of the implications of the paper's findings for practitioners and policymakers. Finally, an initial discussion of intervention recommendations is provided as well as the paper's limitations.

Literature review
Explicit expectation of WBMM role
Degree apprenticeship literature across professions focuses mainly on pedagogy, from a provider perspective rather than employer. Although sparse in the field of management due to its brief history, there is evidence to suggest apprenticeship programmes are more likely to succeed if programmes are supported by employers as co-designers, particularly as most apprentices' learning derives from practical application in the workplace (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020). At a strategic level, advantages for employer collaboration have been identified including increased workforce capability and developing talent, yet the paucity of research makes it difficult to discern the extent to which this incentive applies at micro level, and specifically the role of the WBMM which is where the responsibility for the practical application of learning lies (UKK, 2019; Bowman, 2022).

Design of apprenticeship programmes seeks to engender knowledge, skills and behaviours, theoretically gained via provider input and practically applied through

workplace opportunities. Such development is guided by the trailblazer informed professional standard and assessment plan, ideally leading to work integration (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020). Here, the assessment plan outlines explicitly that WBMMs should be "supported via the guide provided by the line manager's employer in conjunction with the HEI" (CMDA, p. 7). This concept implies employers have mutual responsibility to contribute to enhancing curriculum supporting WBMMs to adopt new workplace approaches to support learning (Rowe *et al.*, 2020), yet early research suggests many are beset by pre-course concerns amidst an ongoing air of mystery over the exact nature of their roles and responsibilities (Hughes and Saieva, 2019).

Concerns are substantiated by a plethora of duties and confusing terminology including "20% off the job" learning time and perpetually unhelpful distinction between "academic learning" and "on the job delivery" (BIS, 2016), rather than adopting more practical description of "integrated learning" (QAA, 2019). Likewise, tripartite reviews form an integral part of WBMM's remit, described as valuable processes (Dalrymple *et al.*, 2014) which presents an opportunity for "open and frank discussion" with apprentice and provider on a quarterly basis about progress and achievement (Hughes and Saieva, 2019, p. 8). Yet, there is still no real consensus regarding their benefits in HE (Minton and Lowe, 2019). Similarly, it remains unclear as to whether the dialogue creates any value for WBMMs, at worst replicating similar processes and attracting similar criticisms as performance appraisals (Grint, 1993).

The extended nature of programmes continues to exacerbate the enormity of WBMMs' task, requiring sustained enablement of apprentices' applied learning of skills, knowledge and behaviours on an ongoing basis, outlined in the Chartered Management Assessment plan implying that WBMMs command a clear understanding of professional standards and degree curriculum comprising modules and a synoptic project to support the apprentice with workplace application and construction of knowledge in the workplace. The prevailing expectation infers that WBMMs proactively identify authentic learning opportunities, steering and contextualising workplace projects in conjunction with effective academic facilitation to generate valuable learning for both parties, potentially resulting in significant benefits for the wider organisation (Rowe *et al.*, 2017).

Implicit expectation of WBMM role
WBMM is a complex role requiring coaching and mentoring experience, regardless of whether there is a dual role combining line manager and learning mentor, or where these roles co-exist as two individuals (Roberts *et al.*, 2019). WBMMs are expected to deploy coaching skills to drive tasks to facilitate utilisation of knowledge and mentoring skills to support behavioural and professional development. Currently, there are no sector standardised practices or formalised training programmes for WBMMs or access to recommended coaching tools which raises questions of consistency and quality in practice. Expectations that organisations, learners and providers have of WBMMs can vary depending on a range of variables and conditions, including the working environment, resources and the apprenticeship standard itself, giving rise to a bewildering list of implied duties.

There is a reliance on WBMMs to match initial needs to learning through work, supporting growth of apprentice autonomy and identity construction (Clarke *et al.*, 2009). In practice, workplace learning increases when apprentices' self-efficacy improves, potentially due to alignment to increased initiative and persistence (Eden, 1992). There is an expectation WBMMs facilitate apprentices' learning through guided review and reflection on experiences (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Kolb, 1984). The apprentice constructs meaning from reconciliation between new and previous knowledge and experience potentially resulting in changes of beliefs and behaviours that become the "norm" for their profession. It is the WBMM that could positively influence performance outcomes, which includes verbal persuasion, vicarious experience and physiological feedback, particularly with more

inexperienced apprentices who are found to become more successful if guided by experienced professionals (Milton and Lowe, 2019).

WBMMs require time to support development by encouraging apprentices to be critical of themselves and to challenge current practice in an environment without undue resistance or criticism. Ideally apprentices become "braver" by sharing their tacit knowledge or "tacit-knowing" (Brook and Corbridge, 2016) initially with peers, through action learning sets (Quew-Jones and Brook, 2019) and subsequently with their WBMM. This knowledge exchange enhances work-based practice, empowering the apprentice as envisioned by Antcliff *et al.* (2016). Drawing on the findings of Roberts *et al.* (2019) it is apparent there is insufficient research examining the breadth and depth of WBMM remits, therefore it is difficult for providers and organisations to fully appreciate the role's implicit multiple realities, and subsequently establish further guidelines to steer apprentice skill development through vicarious experiences.

WBMM motivation to manage

Atkins (2016) highlights differences between WBL and work-integrated learning (WIL) in the context of apprenticeships. Boud and Solomon (2001) suggest WBL instigates collaboration between universities and employers to create new workplace learning opportunities, whereas Lester (2016, p. 8) suggests WIL is "practice learning in the workplace, through models where the student is employed but follows a structured academic programme". The QAA (2019) emphasises the importance of integration, and accentuating the workplace is considered by HEIs as an equally important source of learning. As such, it appears apprenticeships are founded on the premise that WBMMs are sufficiently motivated, committed and empowered to inform overall success of the development of their apprentice, yet may be practically thwarted by Boud and Rooney's (2015) belief that work takes central priority, with learning and learner experience viewed as a secondary endeavour.

Despite the benefits of workplace support, inconsistencies in WBMM motivation and ownership are apparent, resulting in varied experiences even within the same organisation (McKnight *et al.*, 2019). The context and culture of the workplace may drive attitudes concerning apprenticeships as well as the level of support from senior executive teams and further complexities arise where established relationships become destabilised due to frequent staff changes (Billet, 2016). Roberts *et al.* (2019) highlight the value attached to cohesive relationships between apprentice and WBMM, but Quew-Jones (2022) suggests there may be some merit in the notion of flexibility and interchangeability to support the developmental needs of the apprentice as they progress.

A fundamental understanding of each contributory component and its underpinning best practice for success is required to further engender "buy-in" (Minton and Lowe, 2019), specifically to inform appropriate support structures, resourcing and training which implicitly link to optimal organisational project completions, staff development opportunities, self-fulfilment, career progression and retention. Support mechanisms and case studies exemplifying such benefits may serve to reassure the "busy manager" and reduce anxieties about the commitment required to facilitate apprenticeships (Mulkeen *et al.*, 2017). Yet, there is little published research examining organisational cost to benefit aspects of such programmes beyond crude rubrics attached to levy contributions. Therefore, whilst "learning organisations" believe that strategic fit of apprenticeships may be supported by progressive leaders who are likely to value and invest in the wider infrastructure, potential for negative experiences at the "coal face" appear to be wide-ranging. Emerging themes expose WBMM concerns including losing staff for a day (Minton and Lowe, 2019); investing in staff who subsequently leave (Hughes and Saieva, 2019); unrealistic supervision time allocation (Mulkeen *et al.*, 2017); mentoring burden juxtaposed with cost cutting measures (Higgs, 2021) and public sector resource constraints (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020).

These emergent themes, fuelled by inadequate resourcing and infrastructure illuminate an infinitesimal aspect of the breadth of challenges presented by a diverse range of participants and host organisations, impacting WBMMs, apprentices, departments and teams. There is an expectation that providers and employers work together to ensure relevance and consistency of the overall programme, ensure effective learner support, and integrate the workplace and education environment (Lester, 2016). Yet, the diversity of tensions explored appears to confront any notion of genuine parity in supportive strategies, signalling the absence of underpinning frameworks, and specifically collaboration through a shared vision, common purpose and commitment to apprenticeship learning. Furthering this embryonic body of knowledge, the study explores experiences, expectations and challenges faced by WBMMs to develop practical interventions and a portfolio of best practices to facilitate collaborative and supportive learning environments. It is anticipated that this research will stimulate broader dialogue in terms of practical activities which providers can subsequently develop to attract and sustain a national professional network of WBMMs, consequently promoting greater consistency in support mechanisms and interventions for apprentice learning at work.

Methodology

Design/methodology/approach
Adopting an inductive, phenomenological methodology and qualitative approach, data were gathered through a semi-structured electronic survey to explore views of WBMMs responsible for supporting learners enrolled on a HEI management degree apprenticeship programme in the South of England.

Design
This study explores lived experiences of WBMMs as they engage managers and aspiring managers through an apprenticeship to develop leadership and management competencies. The research design draws upon an interpretive and constructivist epistemology to generate socially constructed data developed from analysis of meaning and understanding through semi-structured questionnaires (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). The interpretivist paradigm recognises the indivisible connection between the reality and researcher, and epistemologically that the construction of knowledge is shaped through one's own conceptions (Tolley *et al.*, 2016).

A qualitative case study approach enabled a holistic exploration of complex inter-relationships between individuals and across varying contexts, recognising the effect of multiple perspectives and social construction of events upon individual interpretation and feelings (Yin, 2018). The researchers' ability to maintain integrity and truth to ensure construction of meaningful and valid reality is recognised, in addition to the consideration of appropriate case boundaries, here comprising organisational context, respondent profiles and pedagogical practice associated with the programme (Yin, 2018). Inductive reasoning supports formation of emergent theory and diminishes the contextual boundaries "in which actors and issues can be considered" (Stokes and Wall, 2017, p. 142). The research focuses upon a management degree apprenticeship programme case study to draw upon "rich and textured evidence", creating a detailed picture by exploring phenomena within 'real-world' contexts (Cameron and Price, 2009).

Data collection
A semi-structured survey was developed, containing questions orientated toward key research concepts uncovered within the literature review to explore WBMMs' attitudes,

beliefs and interpretations (Stokes and Wall, 2017). The survey comprised six open questions to enable participants to relate their lived experiences by eliciting respondent views concerning: their understanding of WBL; the value of WBL; the quality of support given; and challenges and recommendations for improving future practice (Bell *et al.*, 2018; Bansal *et al.*, 2018). The electronic questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics and piloted via 5 non-programme affiliated respondents prior to wider distribution to augment reliability, quality and validity of data collected (Jankowicz, 2013; Stokes and Wall, 2017). Participants were contacted via email to introduce and explain relevance, purpose and ethicality of the research, along with an electronic link to enable participants to access the questionnaire easily and anonymously (Jankowicz, 2013).

Sample
Given that the nature of the investigation comprised an exploratory inductive approach, focused upon collection and interpretation of qualitative data, the researchers drew on a non-probability exhaustive sample technique for a population sample of 71 WBMMs from the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship responsible for supporting apprentices. The participants were employed by a range of organisations from a variety of sectors across the South of England whilst supporting an innovative degree apprenticeship programme delivered by a local HEI, consisting of 3 cohorts and 71 apprentices.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured survey responses in December 2021 eliciting a response rate of 15 (21%). Rich case study material was generated by exploring perceptions and views of a diverse range of WBMMs as some of the programme's key stakeholders (Gehman *et al.*, 2018). The semi-structured survey allowed respondents time and space to reflect upon and fully answer questions posed and provided the flexibility required for participants to relate their own story and experience of their role, specifically in terms of the extent to which they have engaged with: apprentices as they learn; the content, structure and pedagogy of the programme itself; and university procedures and support systems. The researchers adopted this broad approach to enable an effective and robust exploration of the topic complexities, strengthening the richness of data collected (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Responses were collated and analysed, facilitating a clearer insight into the lived experiences of WBMM participants (Bansal *et al.*, 2018).

Data analysis
Data from the survey were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic approach supported by NVivo 12 software to explore key themes. As the data were drawn from participants from different roles, contexts, experiences and perceptions, the researchers adopted a variable-oriented approach by applying Braun and Clark's (2006) rigorous yet flexible framework to facilitate a progressive "iterative and reflective process" (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017, p. 4).

First, the researchers undertook repeated readings of the data to reinforce reliability, shuttling back and forth to holistically explore themes across individual questionnaires, beginning to transcribe and note initial ideas. Each data set was then coded inductively to identify recurring themes and patterns (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Emerging ideas simultaneously informed "conceptual memoing" to begin theorising data whilst coding (Glaser and Strauss, 2017, p. 83). The codes were collated into common themes leading to development of descriptive codes, subsequently augmented by underpinning interpretive and pattern codes. Descriptive codes were reviewed and refined to allow clustering and cross-referencing of themes to effectively incorporate differing perspectives of WBMMs, exposing layers of detail across the entire data set, informing an early thematic map of analysis (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Definitions for each theme, category and code were cross-checked by

inspecting categories and their contents to ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 2002). This recursive approach enabled traverse between phases of reviewing data, coding and early findings enabling a comprehensive and immersive exploration which identified themes and patterns across the cases, generating comprehensive insights beyond mere description (Bansal *et al.*, 2018). The researchers mitigated potential issues of bias throughout data collection and analysis stages of the process by individually cross-checking analyses and making sense of the interpretations made (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). A report was created from the findings, offering illustrative examples and quotes, intended to raise aspectual awareness of this form of WBL to inform future practice.

Ethical considerations
Ethical approval conformed to the primary researcher's institutional protocol which is founded upon the Chartered Association of Business School's (2015) principles of research.

Findings and discussion
Examining both previous literature and research data themes emerge which offer a deeper understanding of current apprenticeship management practice, provoking discussion at both a practical and academic level.

Concept of WBL
When asked about their understanding of WBL (Q1), all WBMM respondents agreed its primary aim facilitated opportunities to apply learning to work. Respondents highlight: *"learning the theory and then putting it into practice with a scenario at work to finish learning on the subject,"* Q1, P3; *"using the company you work for and the staff to further develop your skills by applying the new degree skills to issues in the workplace."* Q1, P6. This understanding offers a strong foundation for apprentices to learn experientially through facilitation to practice new skills and knowledge. In terms of best practice, it is essential that all WBMMs have grasped the concept of WBL at an early stage, proposed at induction by Roberts *et al.* (2019).

For some WBMMs learning seems to be viewed as disconnected between theory (university led) and practice (workplace opportunity) described as discrete activities by two respondents: *"the apprentice does have the opportunity to put their learning into practice within a work-based environment - splitting their learning from study and practical."* Q1, P4; *"learning that is carried out in the workplace and is practical, rather than theory"* Q1, P4. Analysis reveals potential inconsistencies in levels of learning expectations; ranging from a binary approach of formal and informal learning to one of integration. This led to differences in apprentices' experiences, potentially mitigated by WBMM training or shared examples of strengthened connections, enlivening Lester's (2016) vision of genuine work informed learning.

Analysis suggests expectations of learning from planned experiences in the workplace seem to occur with "the doing" rather than reflection (Kolb, 1984). Despite clear links between assessment and development of skills, knowledge and behaviours one respondent refers to *"opportunity to develop soft skills-leadership, communication, teamwork and self-confidence earlier and faster in the workplace."* Q2, P1 revealing a potential gap between workplace facilitation and the programme. An explicit connection between knowledge, skills and behaviours and module content is essential best practice, which in turn requires a degree of translation for WBMMs to interpret their role of effective facilitation. Nonetheless, translation of practice into the workplace as a concept was strongly supported *"equates to real life which is much more important"* Q1, P3; *"offers examples in the everyday working environment and*

linking to relevant projects at the time", Q1, P8. Therefore, WBMMs have an appetite for involvement with negotiated learning in the workplace with one respondent suggesting *"allowing a challenge in a safe environment" Q3, P6.* The findings reveal a sound conceptual understanding of WBL, however, recurring themes of discrete workplace and provider activities weaken notions of collaborative curricula in practice. Connection to programme outcomes for professional skills and behaviours as an assessed part of the CMDA standards appear weak, yet arguably raises questions about the extent to which WBMMs should further align to a more integral mentoring role. If apprentices are more closely supported in the workplace through regular assessment-relevant dialogue and reflection, the benefits of strengthened facilitator critical reflection and inquiry skills through Bowman's (2022) suggestion of a learning transfer toolkit appear logical. Building upon work of Schedlitzki (2019) and Rowe *et al.* (2020), findings suggest improvements in apprentices' behavioural learning may follow if WBMMs are equipped to create optimum conditions for meaningful reflective dialogue and journaling, specifically confidence to examine and challenge customary organisational practice.

Value of the apprenticeship
From WBMM perspective, the apprenticeship offers many positive outcomes for apprentices, team (Q2) and organisation (Q3) with far reaching impact, aligning with the work of Garnett (2020). There was a strong view that apprentices' engagement within the workplace has increased, exemplified by a number of comments including *"If selected correctly, a hungry to succeed apprentice who is keen to grow and add value." Q2, P7; "Hunger to learn and progress" Q2, P4.* The associated organisational benefits are evident from both planned activities and unplanned experiences, leveraging time spent upon work-based problems; *"timetabled into the delivery of the project", Q3, P7; "space to create new processes and look at continued improvement", Q3, P3.* Here, planned experiences seemed to provide affirmation of apprentices' achievement, adding value by overcoming problems and becoming knowledge producers, aligning with the views of Boud and Rooney (2015).

Analysis also highlights the value of unplanned experience through apprentices' conduit of knowledge in importing and exporting examples of emerging practice between the programme, peers and workplace, exemplified by one respondent: *"Fresh approach to what we do day-to-day with new ideas and fresh eyes." Q2, P4.* Incidences of deeper inquiry and exploration of organisational practice is evident, illustrated by comments: *"More willingness to challenge "how it's always been done", the status quo when not having previous experience" Q3, P1; "a newer generation of thinking". Q3, P4.* Here, apprentices are developing confidence to ask questions and generate insightful dialogue, reinforced by supportive organisational learning culture characteristics described by Billett (2016) as engendering reflexive capabilities and safe forums for difficult conversations.

The analysis reveals evidence of growing confidence extending further in practice, noted by one WBMM who suggests their apprentice is *"more than capable of doing my role in my absence"* attributing this to *"the WBL they have done around certain topics - especially when dealing with managing and motivating their staff group." Q3, P3.* Here, capability to take the lead illuminates the notion of fresh perspectives but also illustrates benefits of increased productivity in terms of work completion that WBMMs may never have had time to invest in. The data suggest a genuine empowerment of apprentices fulfilling Antcliff *et al.*'s (2016) early vision for graduate employees, generating enhanced motivation to engage more broadly, highlighted by one WBMM *"studying is motivational to the apprentice and engages them far more in the activities and performance of the organisation." Q2, P3.* The data reveal apprentices' desire to drive independent learning, finding congruence with the work of Billett (2016) and confirming WBMMs' active participation in Atkins' (2016) definition of WIL. Yet, whilst the value to the organisation is recognised, there is no formal record of success beyond

academic and workplace progress reviews between learner and organisation, suggesting that full integration between workplace and institution recommended by Lester (2016) and contribution to intellectual and structural capital endorsed by Garnett (2020) are not always entirely explicit. In extending Roberts *et al.*'s (2019) principles for practice, such transformational activities require capture as best practice examples to share with existing and new managers and other stakeholders.

The data suggest apprentices have developed a rounded knowledge of different facets within their organisations evidenced by an ability to *"work at more varied tasks and across the wider team" Q2, P4*. There was an implied increase in the level of business awareness and soft skills aligned to those within the assessment plan *"to drive change in the business" Q2 P7*. This impact may have been influenced by growing confidence and experience of the apprentice as they progress becoming comfortable to share "tacit-knowing" (Brook and Corbridge, 2016). Surprisingly, unlike research from Roberts *et al.* (2019), there was no mention of the fulfilment of the role as part of their own development. This finding raises questions as to whether there should be more direct benefits for WBMMs. Here, further training, qualifications and opportunities to showcase apprentice success via internal and external awards seem likely interventions to foster good will and encourage exemplary practice in colleagues and more specifically, other WBMMs across the sector.

Support and challenges for WBMMs
Analysis reveals the prevailing theme of time, dominating much of the commentary from both WBMM and apprentice perspective *"not enough time for them to explain everything they are doing." Q5, P5; "Time, time, time! We don't have time to do our normal day job, constantly fire fighting" Q3, P3; "Work pressures impacting the agreement to give the student non-working time", Q3 P6; "to consistently allocate 20% of work time is a big ask when an organisation is time dependent" Q3, P7*. An unexpected finding was defending the apprentices' time. One respondent was required *"to deflect those who don't understand the process and why the business is supporting the apprentice given time to complete his work where he is uninterrupted" Q5 P6*. These findings concur with previous literature that highlights difficulties due to resources available to WBMMs, exemplifying Boud and Rooney's (2015) view that work always takes priority over applied learning. There is no consistency in meeting frequency or format, varying from monthly, fortnightly or weekly, taking place remotely or in person and there is no reference to tripartite review at all. The dislocated range of approaches may stem from individual WBMM management style, organisational or provider buy-in or perceived capability of the apprentice, all of which present potential problems for provider, apprentice and organisation. The empowerment of the WBMM apprentice relationship is embedded within the concept of apprenticeships yet such an approach reduces parity and risks over-reliance upon apprentice autonomy and resilience, specifically where there is inadequate resource, training or commitment evident. Despite warnings raised by Roberts *et al.* (2019) concerning a lack of information as an impregnable barrier to apprenticeship management, it is particularly concerning to note that under supported, time-poor WBMMs remain reliant upon previous ad hoc experience, in part resulting from on-going challenges associated with the quantity, quality and timing of provider information.

The data suggest that the purpose for WBMM apprentice meetings appears to be task-oriented including *"ensure they are undertaking real tasks that apply knowledge and add value to business" Q4, P1; "discuss projects and how this could link into practice" Q4, P4*. These positive discussions evidence the tackling of real-life work-based problems, adding value by making stronger connections in the context of their own workplace. However, richer mentoring style dialogue is less apparent, for example *"getting them to explain the impact it has on the workplace", Q4, P5; "motivating the apprentice through the lockdown . . ..supporting*

my apprentice to cope with some of the other negative attitudes of a minority of apprentices" Q5, P2. For WBMM it signifies the breadth of complexities of their role exposed by Robert *et al.* (2019), specifically the requirement to adapt from task driven manager towards a hybrid coaching and mentoring role. In recognising these challenges, four respondents created wider apprentice support by drawing upon others in the business to share their experiences, exposing the apprentice to wider networks, forums, meetings and experiences, instrumental in Bandura's (1977) concept of social learning.

Conclusion

Our research exposes a range of opportunities to share best practice, but also reveals tensions over "learning responsibilities" and ownership. Whilst more experienced WBMMs have clearly well-developed competencies enabling them to ensure learning fits with real workplace experiences, lesser supported WBMMs may not have required degree of knowledge or confidence, or do not see apprentice learning as their responsibility. The extent to which poor support might affect apprentices learning from unplanned or informal learning experiences, reflection on impact and progress towards professional standards remains unclear. The apparently wide-ranging and inconsistent approach to supporting apprentices at work is difficult for stakeholders to locate, requiring a far greater degree of alliance between providers, employers and WBMMs in designing strategies and tactics to develop WBMM competencies and practice in supporting apprentices through higher and degree apprenticeships. Effective apprenticeship collaboration requires a renewed evaluation of how providers and employers can support WBMMs operating at the "coal face" of the apprentices' learning.

The value of the apprenticeship from the WBMMs perspective uncovered here is broader than existing research suggests, widening the extant body of knowledge (e.g. Antcliff *et al.,* 2016; Roberts *et al.,* 2019) in looking at the challenges for employee stakeholder collaboration as it specifically addresses WBMMs perspective. Benefits highlighted in existing literature draw upon planned experience in solving genuine work-based problems which contribute to workplace processes but also provide the apprentice with confirmation of ability. The research presented here reaches further in identifying benefits of unplanned experiences for the organisation. Given the experience gained since the inception of higher and degree apprenticeships, there is a wealth of tacit apprenticeship management knowledge and practice that could be captured to inform and improve support for all WBMMs whatever their current experience of apprenticeship management, in turn providing consistency and parity for apprentices. It also serves to strengthen authentic dialogue between multiple employers and providers, forming an opportunity to highlight real business challenges and showcase successes to inform curricula.

Our analysis of current WBMM perceptions and requirements builds upon nascent research in this sphere, particularly Roberts *et al.* (2019) and underpins envisioning of a new hybrid coach/mentor role for the negotiation of learning through tasks whilst stretching apprentices to reach challenging skills and behavioural standards. The findings have been further distilled to contribute toward a conceptual model to inform our vision of an interactive toolkit comprising a wealth of co-created resources (Figure 1). The toolkit offers a foundation level of programme knowledge, advice and guidance at different stages of the journey as well as opportunity to delve deeper for examples, supportive discussion forums and accredited training courses to offer tangible support structures and rewards to WBMMs beyond just fulfilment of apprentice development. In developing our toolkit for consideration and collaboration we believe this model offers the foundation required for providers to review and strengthen crucial relationships within and across communities of employers, providers and individuals for optimum apprenticeship practice. However, if both WBMMs and
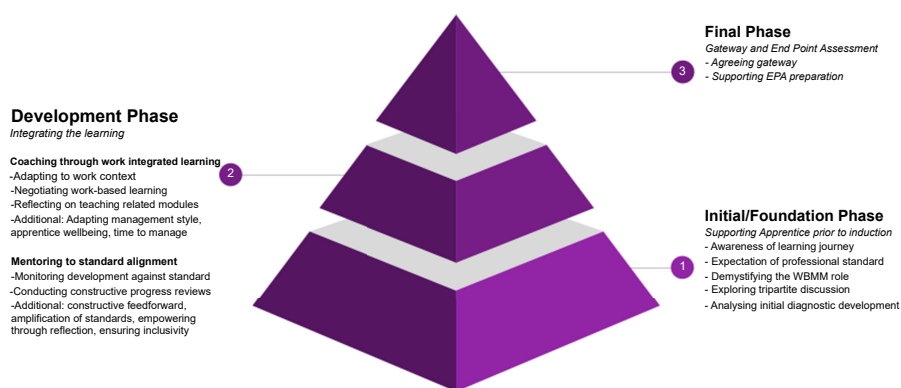
Figure 1.
WBMM toolkit

university representatives are compromised by time and resource, it remains increasingly challenging to fulfil the key component of ongoing dialogue (Antcliff *et al.*, 2016) or build lasting and trustworthy relationships.

Limitations and future directions

Our research raises important insights for stakeholders and providers involved in design and delivery of apprenticeships. Practically, a need for increasing levels of support for WBMMs so the full learning impact of programmes can be harnessed. This involves further resource implications and requires a genuine desire to co-create a more effective apprenticeship framework. A solution is reviewing restrictions associated with levy funding to enable providers and employers to better support apprentice learning at work.

We recognise limitations to this study due to its exploratory nature. It is not intended to provide a generalised detailed analysis of WBMMs from such a small and localised sample but rich and descriptive insights from WBMMs' perspective to provoke new ideas and underpin dialogue, particularly in co-creation of the toolkit. It recognises that the research elicited a greater response from more experienced WBMMs, therefore findings are less representative of views from recently recruited WBMMs.

Future studies might incorporate views of apprentices and managers who are less experienced in apprenticeship management, from different sectors and organisation size, and in conjunction with views of providers. Research to explore the current value of tripartite reviews is also recommended.

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