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'Invested' partnerships as key to high quality apprenticeship programmes as evidenced in on and off the job training

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ABSTRACT

In England, a new model of apprenticeship was initiated in whose stated intention was to 'put employers in the driving seat'. Regulation of the new model was focused on the mandatory 20% of apprentices' work time allocated to off-the-job training offered by colleges and other training providers. Based on case studies of employers and training providers across a range of industry sectors, this paper brings together data from two projects researching the on-the-job and off-the-job training elements of the new model. Three contrasting modes of apprenticeship emerged: developing apprentices to become experts in an industry-wide community of practice; apprenticeship as staff development; and apprenticeship as income stream. These resulted from different forms of employer-provider collaboration, enabled through a marketized landscape of training providers, and flexibility in regulations that requires very little of employers. Utilising Fuller and Unwin's work on expansive and restrictive environments, we found that that the new model supports a range of apprenticeships some being excellent but also others that are not worthy of the me. The paper concludes that quality apprenticeships tended to be in traditional industries and relied on strong partnerships between employers and training providers that worked against the grain of competitive market relations.

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Introduction

The reboot of apprenticeships in England from October (Department for Business Innovation and Skills BIS 2013) evidences a government intention to address the country's perceived deficit in intermediate level skills when compared to other OECD countries (see Gospel 1997; OECD 2013). As part of this, the previous architecture of apprenticeship training programmes has been refined with a move from 'frameworks to 'standards' developed by groups of employers, as part of an attempt to enhance a historical lack of employer engagement, a move that Hodgson, Spours, and Smith (2017, 655) call a 'paradigm break'. As an incentive to engage with the new programmes, policy documents trumpeted employers were being put 'in the driving seat' (DfE 2016, 1) as regards content, design and the focus of new standards to replace an older architecture of frameworks. This involved groups of so-called 'trailblazer' employers (largely from corporate backgrounds) producing sets of standards along with the introduction of new 'end point' assessments (Newton et al. 2015). In addition, alongside a hugely ambitious – though later abandoned – recruitment target of 3 million 'starts' by (Department for Business Innovation and Skills BIS 2015), new financial arrangements for

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the apprenticeships were introduced – specifically, in 2017, the introduction of a levy from larger employers.

The new apprenticeship programmes were articulated in policy documents as having three stakeholders with different roles. While the government role was seen as being to ‘set the principles and criteria for Apprenticeships to ensure they are rigorous and responsive’,

the apprentice’s role is to work hard in their pursuit of the Apprenticeship standard and the employer’s role is to drive the system, ensuring that Apprenticeships deliver the skills required to meet their needs and the needs of the future economy”. (BIS 2013, 10)

This positioning of employers is evidence of a government commitment to a marketised system ‘driven’ by demand. Of particular relevance to this article, this row conceptualisation of key roles with employers centre stage relies heavily on the unacknowledged but essential input of Further Education (FE) colleges and other training providers (whose provision is heavily regulated, see Smith and Duckworth 2022, 18–26, O’leary and Smith 2012, 438–440) as responsible for the Off-the-Job training element (OffJT) of apprenticeships.

In this article, we argue that the paradigm has in fact shifted very little. Neither the policy rhetoric around employers ‘in the driving seat’, the incentivisation of employer engagement through involvement in standards nor the levy have radically affected employers’ attitudes to apprenticeships. In what follows we argue that a more balanced view of the stakeholders involved in apprenticeship programmes is necessary – one that, alongside apprentices, employers and the government, includes FE colleges and private training providers – is vital to understanding the different interests, forces and factors that shape the way apprenticeships play out. We draw on research that specifically focused on the quality of on-the-job (OnJT) and off-the-job training (OffJT) elements in apprenticeship to show how little has changed since Fuller and Unwin’s (2003) work on expansive and restrictive apprenticeships, and how employers still, by and large, are using apprenticeships first and foremost to address their specific business needs. From this we identify three modes of apprenticeship, of which only one fulfils traditionally understood requirements of an apprenticeship and conclude that the role of provider–employer partnerships is fundamental in supporting quality.

In this article, we argue that the paradigm has in fact shifted very little. Neither the policy rhetoric around employers ‘in the driving seat’, the incentivisation of employer engagement through involvement in standards nor the levy have radically affected employers’ attitudes to apprenticeships. In what follows we argue that a more balanced view of the stakeholders involved in apprenticeship programmes is necessary – one that, alongside apprentices, employers and the government, includes FE colleges and private training providers – is vital to understanding the different interests, forces and factors that shape the way apprenticeships play out. We draw on research that specifically focused on the quality of on-the-job (OnJT) and off-the-job training (OffJT) elements in apprenticeship to show how little has changed since Fuller and Unwin’s (2003) work on expansive and restrictive apprenticeships, and how employers still, by and large, are using apprenticeships first and foremost to address their specific business needs. From this we identify three modes of apprenticeship, of which only one fulfils traditionally understood requirements of an apprenticeship and conclude that the role of provider – employer partnerships is fundamental in supporting quality.

The context of the apprenticeship reforms

Prior to the reforms initiated in 2013, flexibility in regulations meant that apprenticeships in England could be completed in as little as six weeks (Pullen and Clifton 2016: 9) and without any significant knowledge element (or indeed, any element of learning) (Brockmann et al., 2010). A historical lack of employer engagement resulted in a supply-side system (Keep 2008), with training providers tasked with securing apprenticeships with employers and delivering qualifications that the latter argued did not reflect their needs (Wolf 2011). This resulted in a string of reforms that had two main aims:

enhancement of employer engagement by making apprenticeship 'demand-led', and improvement of the quality of training.

The new model of apprenticeship was conceived and launched during a decade in which the dominance of neoliberal political economy, while under threat as a consequence of the financial crisis of 2008/9, was still the main lens through which education and training policy was being viewed. *English Apprenticeships: Our Vision* (BIS 2015) positioned the reforms as 'the flagship programme for delivering the skills that employers need' (2015: 35), presenting them as a medium-term investment, founded on the cost of apprenticeship training 'pay(ing) for itself within one or two years of completion, through the increased productivity of the former apprentice' (BIS 2015: 3). Involvement of employers in the new model of apprenticeships, notably the development by groups of employers ('trailblazers') of the knowledge, skills and behaviours that make up the new standards, was presented as a key feature.

The inception of the new apprenticeship model can be seen in the government's implementation plan: *The Future of Apprenticeships in England* which acted on the Richard Review of (BIS 2013). It sought to address the Review's criticisms of the complexity of the existing networks of stakeholders underpinning apprenticeships, translating its vision into an interaction between only three stakeholders: employers, apprentices and government. While the Sainsbury Review of acknowledged a 2016 wider range of stakeholders by including colleges and training providers (IPTE : 16), there is in our view still an under-estimation of the importance of partnership in the coordination of OnJT and in sharing accountability for the quality of the programme overall.

At the heart of the new model remains a particular understanding of an 'apprenticeship market' (Hodgson et al 2017) with the government retaining a controlling and regulatory oversight; it was a provider-led initiative designed to be responsive to employer demand. In addition, the new model relies for the OffJT element on a well-established, market-orientated and funding-driven system (the funding being dependent on documented outcomes) in which colleges and other publicly funded training providers are utilised through a competitive market 'to maximise choice and lower costs' (Fortwengel et al 2021: 87). Overall, it would be surprising if these structural features did not shape the quality of the apprenticeships that result. This section will explore the positionality of employers and training providers as key actors in the implementation of the new apprenticeships.

j) Employers 'in the driving seat'?

As noted, the new model of apprenticeships was launched in a context with 'complex and historic reasons for endemically weak employer engagement' (Frearson 2016, 8). The policy documents that heralded the new apprenticeships echo those under the Modern Apprenticeships of that was 'explicitly intended to be "employer-led" with little involvement of unions or colleges in content and administration' (Fortwengel, Gospel, and Toner 2021, 80) although the intention did not materialise, and a lack of employer demand meant it ended up as a centralised and 'state-led' initiative (Keep 2006). This is despite a repeated policy emphasis designed to enhance employer engagement.

That employer involvement is a rhetorical cornerstone of the new programmes is seen in the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) Quality Statement stating that apprenticeships must constitute:

'a challenging and stretching training and learning programme **developed and delivered with the active involvement of the employer(s)**, which uses a range of effective on and off the job training methods' (IfATE 2018, emphasis added)

However, as we argue in this paper, the rhetoric is rarely borne out by practice and then is strongly reliant on the *type of partnership* that is co-produced by the different stakeholders.

ii) The centrality of training providers

The government's omission of colleges and training providers from the list of stakeholders in apprenticeship programmes is significant, as they shoulder the burden of accountability within the new regulatory framework (Cui and Smith 2020). Indeed, as Kuczera and Field (2018) and (Field 2018) point out, employers in England have historically had limited involvement, with apprenticeship being 'driven' by funded training, and responsibility lying with third-party training providers.

A body of research in further education illustrates how the marketisation of the further education sector (see Smith and O'leary 2013; Smith and Duckworth 2019), combined with a regular policy churn (Keep 2006), has consolidated a situation in which the provision of courses and training programmes is funding-driven, incentivising providers to recruit to secure income and to adopt performative strategies that serve institutional ends rather than the interests of students.

Alongside the emphasis on employer engagement, the other focus in the reforms has been on improving the quality of apprenticeships. In view of the preference for voluntarism in England, it is perhaps unsurprising that this has been done solely through strengthening the OffJT element – which is the responsibility of the training provider rather than the employer.

In apprenticeship in England, only the OffJT component is funded and regulated. According to regulations introduced in , OffJT must now constitute a minimum of 20% of apprentices' work time and take place *during working hours*. The 20% rule is a result of the poor and widespread practice of recruiting apprentices whilst providing little or no training that occurred under the previous regulations (2012). Notably, there is nothing in the regulations in relation to employer responsibility for the apprenticeship in general and for OnJT in particular. The key document here is the Commitment Statement (Education and Skills Funding Agency ESFA 2019), which lists the responsibilities of the provider and the employer in a checklist format. Notably, however, it is the training provider's responsibility alone to ensure that the mandatory requirements for funding are fulfilled, including the provision of OffJT, while ensuring 'the quality of delivery through regular observations of teaching and learning' (ibid). The responsibility of the employer is limited to ensuring the conditions necessary for the apprenticeship can be achieved, such as allowing the apprentice to complete their off-the-job training during working hours (although, as we shall see, providers have become adept at finding ways around this). Whilst there is clearly an emphasis on the desirability on the part of government for comprehensive on- (and off-the-job) training, there is no obligation on the employer to meet their responsibilities for the former. This contrasts with apprenticeships in Germany where OffJT is carefully connected up to OnJT through a training plan, a timeframe and a requirement for an allocation of time to reinforce that learning in the workplace (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2011, Richmond and Simons, 2016).

iii) New Model, old problems

The repeated reissuing of guidance on the interpretation of current regulations (Department for Education 2017, 2019) suggests a piecemeal approach to OffJT regulation in response to wide-ranging variations in the understanding of what constitutes OffJT and of apprenticeship more widely. In addition, the fall in apprenticeship starts between 2016/17 and 2017/18 of 24% (Burke 2018) that coincided with the introduction of the levy suggests disinterest on the part of employers. Powell and Foley (2020, 7) suggest possible reasons for this decline including: the complexity and inflexibility of administering apprenticeships, requiring non-levy payers (including SMEs) to pay 10% of apprenticeship costs (subsequently dropped to 5%) and, relevant to this research, the 20% OffJT commitment i.e. that many employers adjudged 20% to be too great a proportion of apprentices' working week. From this evidence it seems then that while the government claims to have gifted employers 'a central decision-making role in the development of apprenticeships' there is little evidence that they are 'leading by showing a commitment' (Frearson 2016, 2).

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Expansive and restrictive participation

Underpinned by Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal work on communities of practice, the perceived benefits of 'situated' learning have been a central driver in the increased prevalence of apprenticeships in many industrialised countries (see e.g. Evans et al. 2006).

According to Lave and Wenger's (1991), learning occurs through participation in a community of practitioners. The emphasis here is on the *gradual process of learning as becoming*. Through 'legitimate peripheral participation' newcomers engage in activities in the social, cultural and physical aspects of the community, gradually moving from 'novice to expert'. In doing so, they not only learn the necessary skills but also start to embody the social and cultural values, thus participating in a shared practice and identity.

The community of practice model underpins (2003) influential expansive-restrictive continuum, which serves as a framework for evaluating the nature of participation in (and thus the quality of)

apprenticeship. Based on case studies of employers, the authors highlight the variability in provision, which they see as contingent on contrasting aims behind them offering apprenticeships. While some employers may seek to develop young people into 'rounded experts', others may want their staff to become fully-nailed workers in the shortest possible time (ibid.: 416).

The paper illustrates the importance of comprehensive provision for learner development. Thus, expansive apprenticeships are founded on apprentices as full members of an occupational community, gradually transitioning to productive workers based on planned learning opportunities in different communities inside and outside the workplace. By contrast, within restrictive apprenticeships, individuals are considered productive workers rather than learners, with a focus on developing narrow skill sets for limited job roles.

Fuller and Unwin's framework acknowledges the importance of institutional arrangements, the opportunity to participate in different communities of practice, and a 'holistic approach' that involves both employers and training providers.

In this study, we used Fuller and Unwin's continuum (Figure 1) as a basis for our analysis of how the new regulatory framework was impacting on the quality of apprenticeships as evidenced in the OnJT and OffJT elements.

Research methodology

Between September and August 2018, two research teams conducted separate independent studies (Brockmann and Laurie 2020; Cui and Smith 2020) into the quality of the OnJT and OffJT elements of apprenticeships in different parts of England. The data underpinning the research originates mainly from semi-structured interviews (Palaiologou, Needham, and Male 2016), observational notes taken during the research visits and some supplementary documents provided by the participants. The studies aimed to explore the understandings of training providers and employers of apprenticeships and their experiences of putting together and delivering successful apprenticeship programmes.

The case study approach allowed us to connect how things happen in a specific context, with why they happen – which may be dependent on a range of external factors (Anderson et al. 2005), the focus being on elucidating how people make sense of their situated experiences. This methodological approach connects well with the contextual dimensions of apprenticeship (Fuller and Unwin 2003) already mentioned.

The OffJT research comprised case studies of two private training providers (16 interviews including of managers, curriculum planners, employer liaison officers, employers and apprentices) and then 14 supplementary interviews with a range of private training providers, colleges, employers and local authority representatives (30 interviews in all). In total, the research spanned 18 different organisations. The first research question was:

How do training providers put together and deliver on and off-the-job-training as part of high-quality apprenticeship programmes?

The OffJT cases were of Advanced Technical Training: ATT – a hi-tech engineering arm training provider set up by a parent company and Realtime Training: a national provider delivering thousands of apprenticeships nationally as well as a range of study programmes and work-related training in areas such as IT, Health and Social Care and Early Years provision.¹ Semi-structured interviews took place on the training providers' premises with staff, apprentices and employers, with some follow up telephone interviews with apprentices.

In addition to interviews, we gathered data about the size of the organisations involved, typical numbers per cohort and teaching group, the structure and curriculum of OffJT, the OffJT learning environment, the organisation's relationships with employers and any other stakeholders, the influence of the employer in relation to the curriculum content and delivery and the influence of the frameworks/standards in shaping the training.

Supplementary interviews in the OffJT study aimed to get a sense of whether the case study data had resonance more widely across the region. The sample was broadened to include additional private training providers and further education colleges across the region. In addition, an interview was carried out with the apprenticeships manager of the regional combined authority.

The OnJT study adopted a multiple case study approach to address the Research Question:

What is the extent, content and ture of the on-the-job training received by apprentices at Levels 2 and 3, compared with entry-level employees going for the same job?

In view of the well-documented variation in the quality of apprenticeships (notably in terms of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' sectors (Fuller and Unwin 2017)), cases were selected across five sectors: Engineering, Construction, Digital, Retail, and Social Care. Two cases (one large employer and one SME) were chosen per sector (ten employers in total).

For each case study, we conducted semi-structured individual and group interviews with a range of staff with responsibility for apprenticeships (including managers, trainers and supervisors) as well as with apprentices. The interviews were designed to examine the actual practice of workplace training, including the constraints employers might face, paying attention to the individual perspectives of managers and trainers involved. We also wanted to include the experiences of apprentices, offering an additional layer of analysis. A total of 21 interviews with 38 participants were conducted.

The case study research was preceded by interviews with tional and sector-level stakeholder bodies (a total of 13), aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of regulation and insight into the perspectives of different stakeholders.

Both studies were subject to a rigorous ethical approval process at our respective universities, which included obtaining the informed consent of all our participants before conducting interviews (Ethics approval number: 47024 [Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Southampton] and [Health, Education & Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee, Birmingham City University]).

In both studies, as we interviewed, our understanding of the complexity of the field of study increased and we were able to interpret and begin building our analysis in response to the research questions. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was conducted, using an analytical framework guided by the research questions and including the criteria of Fuller & Unwin' Expansive-Restrictive Continuum (see Figure 1). The wealth of research data from the different arms of the project were drawn together in order to identify common and unifying themes. A discussion within the research team resulted in a number of themes and sub-themes related to expansive and restrictive environments.

In a context in which, despite policy rhetoric, most employers do not see themselves as being 'in the driving seat', this paper focuses on the quality of the OffJT and OnJT components across different apprenticeship programmes. We see a spectrum of quality as resulting from a context in which the OnJT element (for which employers are responsible) is unregulated interacts with the 'marketised' hyper-regulation of OffJT (for which providers are responsible and accountable) engendering different constellations of employer/provider involvement.

Findings and Analysis

The case study approach allowed for the identification of common factors influencing how apprenticeship training programmes were playing out in distinctive contexts. In this section we will focus on data from both studies to illustrate how the apprenticeship programmes in the research fell into one of three categories according to how they articulated the OnJT and OffJT elements of the training programmes.

The findings revealed apprenticeships located at different points along the expansive-restrictive continuum. Specifically, employers used programmes to different ends to suit their business models. We identified three different approaches in particular: developing apprentices to become experts in

an industry-wide community of practice (meeting long-term interests of the organisation, the apprentice and the wider community); apprenticeship as staff development (meeting long-term interests of the employer and, to some extent, the apprentice); and the performative apprenticeship (meeting regulatory and bureaucratic requirements and short-term business needs, but rarely moving beyond an exploitative relationship with apprentices). We argue that these diverse approaches are contingent on different constellations of the employer-provider partnership and the lack of employer regulation.

Developing apprentices to become experts in an industry-wide community of practice

On-the-job training

Underpinned by strong partnerships with providers and other stakeholders, employers in the Construction, Engineering and IT sectors took a central role in providing comprehensive training that went far beyond what was required by the programmes. These employers relied on apprenticeships to develop the future workforce, commonly in the face of existing or looming skill shortages. It was apparent that invested employers focused on industry needs as a whole, as illustrated by the following quote from the Engineering SME:

Every dealer you talk to they will say they cannot get technicians ... I've always had somebody on Level 1, 2 and 3 and when Level 3 finishes I'll put another one on Level 1 because that is our future [...] The only way we're going to get technicians is to train them ourselves. (Manager, Engineering SME)

Employers in this group took apprentices on after graduating. The manager of the IT SME was keen to distance himself from 'rogue' employers:

The whole purpose of the apprenticeship programme was to develop the future full-time employees that are able to thrive in our environment [...] Every single apprentice that comes through our door is brought on with a view to being able to have a full-time role at the end of the exercise [...] I don't want us to get to the point where we're just chucking a load of cheap labour into the business and chewing them up and spitting them out. I don't think that's good (Manager, IT SME)

Crucially, apprenticeships were based on a close collaboration with training providers and the careful alignment of the on- and off-the-job elements, commonly supported by in-house training plans:

Usually through the college we are given their subject matter for the term or the year, so what we try to do is base what they are doing [on site] around what they are doing on their day release at college. If they are looking at brickwork for example, I will make sure that [the apprentice] is helping on the brickwork package ... (Manager, Large Construction Employer)

Reflecting the strong partnership with multiple stakeholders, day-release at a college was commonly supplemented by additional OffJT. In other ways too, these apprenticeships reflected the expansive model as described by Fuller and Unwin's (2003), with OnJT centring on the careful initiation into what were complex skill areas, through mentoring and shadowing throughout the duration of the apprenticeship (indeed, the apprenticeships provided by these employers addressed all the criteria of the 'expansive model' in [Figure 1](#)).

... they would spend [their time on site] when they are with their line manager basically shadowing them, so everything that they are doing on site they are observing, they are learning ... and at the same time they are referring back to their training plan to make sure that they are completing all the elements that will one day make them a fully-fledged site manager or surveyor. (Manager, Construction SME)

Notably, occupational competence and becoming a full member of the community of practice weighed far greater than concerns about productivity. Working alongside a senior worker, apprentices were exposed to activities across businesses to ensure an understanding of the organisation as a whole:

... we will try and make sure that during the course of those two years, we have ticked each box. But, generally in terms of general learning, it is trying to make him be part of the team, so he is being seen as a valuable team member ... being involved in all elements throughout the day-to-day running of the site. (Manager, Large Construction Employer)

Clearly, in these organisations, apprentices held the dual status of learner and employee (Fuller and Unwin 2003) and were not expected to contribute fully to company productivity during the course of the apprenticeship. Finally, whilst valuing the apprenticeship as a useful programme, employers in this group insisted that they had always provided this level of training, regardless of any formal requirements or specifications:

... the [apprenticeship] is an enabler for what we want to achieve ... [however] for us as an organisation, the way that we manage our side of it has largely been the same from day one. We still look at this primarily as meant in, like, an old-school apprenticeship, yes there is a standard that was around it and there are various governing bodies and stuff, but we're actually ... we approached it as more traditional. (Manager, IT SME)

Off-the-job training

Echoing the different approaches in relation to OnJT, the training provider cases offered contrasting models of OffJT. As the training arm of a parent company, ATT offered a foundational two-year model that was structured to train apprentices in occupational knowledge and skills, but also to initiate newcomers into the community of practice of the industry, with all its rules and history, in line with Fuller and Unwin's (2003) expansive model (see Figure 1). As a satellite of a large nearby company, the 'partnership' relation between training provider and employer was of a qualitatively different type. For example, communication in this case would be unlikely to be a problem; in addition, the CEO of ATT acknowledged their training programme was 'fundamentally different to what's already in the system' and this difference resided chiefly in the high level of investment in the OffJT by the parent company (and government). ATT's OffJT was informed by values orientated i) towards meeting the needs for future development in the parent company, but also, ii) by a sense of the direction of travel in technical engineering itself. This second aspect was informed by a knowledge of the industry but also an engagement with its imagined futures.

I think engineering technicians of the future need to have a broader set of skills... so we talk about industry 4.0.
(ATT CEO)

This passage evidences a commitment to servicing needs that are external to the company; here, broadly conceived of as 'Industry 4.0'. This connects the purpose of OffJT to the expansive end of Fuller and Unwin's (2003) continuum, in the sense that 'learners are treated as members of an occupational community' (Figure 1) of forward-looking engineers, and OffJT is there to support and facilitate that.

ATT's apprentices entered employment placement (at the parent company and in other neighbouring hi-tech companies) after two years of 'foundational' training and completed two years later. This front-loaded training addressed the issue of 'workplace-readiness'² that originates in employers' concerns that involvement in an apprenticeship programme does not impact negatively on productivity.

In terms of engineering, [employers] like to have people with the skills prior to them actually being in the workplace When they do hit the ground, they will hit the ground running ... (ATT Curriculum Manager)

On completion of the programme, ATT's parent company had first pick from each cohort. The amount of time given over to the OffJT, the length of the apprenticeship itself, but also employers' calculations around productivity/loss – all link to time and the investment cushion that allowed for more of it on ATT's OffJT. An employer – with two ATT apprentices and one following a traditional route via another provider – commented on how knowing the fundamentals before arriving in the

workplace was vital in his company because of the pace of the project-based work that they specialise in:

It is a nightmare ... it's such a fast pace ... You know, we've got a machinist ... trying to get jobs out the door that are under pressure. So for them to take a step back and train somebody up from scratch is ... quite hard to do. At least with the ATT guys they know the fundamentals so we have been able to stick them on a machine with somebody saying: Right, can you give them direction and let them set the machines and get them going?

ATT's OffJT depended on a mutually supportive and expansive partnership relationship with its parent company. The productivity question was not simply about off-setting the wage paid to an employed apprentice; it was also about the time taken by existing staff who needed to mentor that individual. Orientated towards meeting long-term skills development needs and enjoying significant additional government funding, ATT had earned a reputation for supplying 'high quality' apprentices for a regional community of hi-tech engineering firms. The high level of front-loaded investment in this model suggests that without ATT, these firms would not have been involved in taking on apprentices at all. To that extent, the ATT model provides insight into a 'gold standard' approach to OffJT, although the CEO admitted that the model had yet to achieve financial sustainability. We also found other examples of apprenticeship in this category that used the more traditional day release approach to OffJT and that were characterised by a strong partnership between the employer and the training provider. In these cases, as with ATT, in important ways the employer/training provider partnership extended beyond the institution.

Apprenticeship as staff development

By contrast, the retail and social care apprenticeships in our study were based on employer-provider relationships where the responsibility for training rested with the latter, resulting in far more restrictive apprenticeships (Fuller and Unwin 2003). Employers had little involvement overall and there was little or no workplace training for apprentices. Remarkably, the apprenticeship was understood to refer only to the OffJT component (and separate from the 'day job') which in most cases was the sole responsibility of the training provider.

... both of my guys work four days a week and the other day it's purely about their apprentice work (Store Manager, Retailer)

... we agree to spend so much time on the apprenticeship, and we tend to do it on a weekly basis ... (Manager, Home Care Provider SME)

Similar to employers in the previous group, these organisations were invested in developing their workforce. However, they used the apprenticeship programmes as a form of staff development that had little to do with the expansive model of apprenticeship.

For example, in retail, apprentices were mostly 'conversions' (Fuller and Unwin 2009, 411), i.e. they had been employees prior to starting the apprenticeship. Most had recently been promoted to team leaders, and the apprenticeship was aimed at giving them a more rounded occupational background. At the same time, the apprentices were first and foremost employees rather than learners (see Figure 1), who were not in need of any support on the shopfloor:

... they're on a normal full contract with a full salary and therefore they operate in those four days as a full employee. The difference is that they've got the opportunity of having that learning on the fifth day (Apprenticeship Manager, Retailer)Na

In retail as in social care, OnJT for newly recruited apprentices amounted to little more than the induction programme for all new entry-level staff. Thus, the balance was heavily skewed towards the training provider and the OffJT component. In both retail and social care, the OffJT consisted of

Expansive	Restrictive
Apprentice develops occupational expertise to standard recognised by the occupational field.	Apprentice develops skills for a limited job role without improving on their existing level of competence.
Employer and provider understand that apprenticeship is a platform for career progression.	Apprenticeship does not build the capacity to progress beyond present job role.
Individual has dual status as learner and employee: explicit recognition of, and support for individual as learner.	Status as employee dominates: limited recognition of, and support for, individual as learner
Individual makes a gradual transition to productive worker and is stretched to develop expertise in their occupational field.	Fast transition to productive worker with limited knowledge of the occupational field.
Individual is treated as a member of an occupational community with access to the community's rules, history, occupational knowledge and practical expertise.	Individual treated as extra pair of hands who only needs access to limited knowledge and skills to perform job.
Individual participates in different communities of practice inside and outside the workplace.	Training restricted to narrowly defined job role and workstation.
Individual's work tasks and training closely mapped against recognised occupational standards and assessment requirements to ensure they become fully competent.	Weak relationship between workplace tasks, occupational standards and assessment requirements.
Off-the-job training includes time for reflection and stretches individual to reach their full potential.	Supporting individual to fulfil their potential is not seen as a priority
Named individual acts as dedicated support to apprentices	No dedicated individual; ad-hoc support
Individual's progress closely monitored and involves regular feedback from a range of employer and provider personnel who take a holistic approach.	Individual's progress monitored for job performance with limited developmental feedback.

Figure 1. The expansive-restrictive continuum (adapted from Fuller and Unwin 2003, 411; Fuller and Unwin 2017, 33).

a number of modules or units, with content delivered through a series of online workbooks, and monthly or bi-monthly visits by the provider to review the apprentice's progress. At the same time, the employers' involvement did not go much beyond line-managing the apprentices:

... the trainer goes in to see how they've got on with their eLearning and observes them in work and does the eLearning and coaching with them in their store [...] [the store manager's] responsibility is to make sure that they get their learning hours so they're planned in ... (Apprenticeship Manager, tional Retailer)Na

... we went through all sorts of paperwork with [the training provider] because obviously it's [the training provider] that do the apprenticeship ... (Apprentice, Regional Retailer)

Thus, in these sectors, the understanding of apprenticeship differed markedly from that dominant within Engineering, Construction and IT. The major concern here was with productivity and with apprentices transitioning to productive workers in the shortest possible time, reflective of Fuller and Unwin's (2003) restrictive model. Whilst managers from both retail employers indicated apprentices

were encouraged to seek out learning opportunities for themselves, such as shadowing a senior worker, they also conceded that this was not normally an option due to workplace pressures. Retail managers suggested that apprentices always faced the risk of 'being dragged into normal work' on the day that should be dedicated to OffJT:

... the off-the-job training time is a challenge for us. As I think it is in most sectors but it's particularly tough [in retail]. And we have to be quite creative with looking at opportunities. (Learning & Development Manager, Regional Retailer)

These employers approached apprenticeship as offering additional training for staff in the long-term interests of the company. The approach was enabled through a partnership in which the training provider took complete responsibility for adherence to apprenticeship regulations, there being minimal employer involvement and with minimal impact on productivity. Interestingly, these employers positioned themselves as strongly supportive of apprenticeship. For their part, and despite the pressures, apprentices appreciated the support and the opportunities thus provided to them. What is clear, however, is that underlying this approach was an understanding of apprenticeship that was in stark contrast to that underpinning the expansive model, which, as we saw, was based on extensive on-the-job training provided by the employer, with the apprentices deemed to be primarily learners, who would be mentored throughout the duration of the apprenticeship.

Performative apprenticeships

In the second OffJT training provider case study (Realtime Training), the quality of the OffJT was also contingent on a shared understanding on the part of employers and provider but in contrast with the first case study of a Level 3 programme, the Realtime apprenticeships were at Level 2 in the field of nursery nursing. Also, for Realtime, providing OffJT for apprentices was the major source of income. Consequently, Realtime employed a sales team to 'recruit' employers. While this kind of brokerage might be founded upon partnership, it also creates the conditions for a transactional relationship between training provider and employer that could be exploitative of the apprentice herself – a scenario that emerged elsewhere in the study.

The loss of productivity concern touched on above was more significant for Realtime whose model was to provide OffJT on a weekly basis. This often involved the Sales team 'talking down' the impact of the 20% rule. The Realtime manager explained:

I'm not so sure that everybody is getting the 20% off the job. We're having to try and be inventive ... in how we're doing it. We're having to literally try and get (the learner) to record if they do something for 10 minutes because it needs to add up ... So in theory when you work it out it works out at about one day's training per week.

Striking in this passage is how accountability (that is linked to Realtime's funding) is pushed down onto the apprentice. Arguably though, Realtime has little option if the employer refuses to adhere to the 20% rule. While some of their employers were sympathetic to this requirement and viewed the OffJT as beneficial for their apprentices, interviews with the Realtime teachers revealed that few training 'visits' lasted more than an hour and a half a week. A Realtime OffJT teacher outlined some of the issues she had faced:

I have also got nurseries that will make them work their hours over four days and have a day off in the week which is fine ... But then ... they make them come in on their day off. So ... that learner that week for example will work five days ... that poor learner is not getting paid for that day.

This case was therefore clearly on the restrictive end of Fuller and Unwin's (2003) framework, with apprentices' access to training and to different communities of practice extremely limited, whilst 'supporting them to fulfil their potential' was most likely not a concern for their employers.

The exploitative ture of the apprentice – employer relationship is what stands out in this, highlighting a social justice dimension to apprenticeships that becomes significant where shared expansive aspects of the partnership are weak. The passage suggests that OffJT is being deliberately

pushed to the edges of working time – therefore falling outside the government definition. The same teacher explained another pragmatic way of offering OffJT:

Sometimes, I have to do it remotely over the phone. So I usually send them the power point, book it in a time they are at home so it would be an evening. They have done a full day's work ... and (I) go through what I would do with them on a one to one...

What this shows is Realtime Training adapting OffJT to suit a time-poor environment while 'creatively' meeting DfE regulations. This performative response contrasts hugely with the quality, depth and care that the apprentices enjoy in the first 'expansive' type of apprenticeship that we have identified. Arguably, the contrast is rooted in the extent to which the relationship between different stakeholders is a short-term transaction rather being a partnership founded on broader values and an ethic of care towards the key stakeholder: the apprentice.

There was strong evidence in the OffJT case studies and the supplementary interviews of a common understanding that the level of employers' investment was crucial to the quality of the OffJT. In addition, the relationship between the stakeholders was particularly important to understand the constraints and challenges that impacted on the quality of OffJT.

Douglas, CEO of a small training provider, commented on employers seeking ways round delivering the 20% minimum OffJT:

Particularly this 20% off the job; [employers] are trying to find loopholes ... So, some will go out to site and sit with them on site and say that is off-the-job because they are not doing work stuff. But it is not really in the spirit of it. It is gaming the system really. They should be off site doing a substantial training programme or a substantial qualification.

In a college, one apprenticeship manager we interviewed, acknowledged the disincentive for employers to engage due to the 20% rule and the exploitative versions of apprenticeship that were widespread as a result:

Don't think of it as 20% off the job, think of it as 100% training programme of which 20% is at college'. That's the mindset change we need. (College Apprenticeship Manager)

This definition originates in a historically embedded understanding of apprenticeships in established industries where employers have not had to be persuaded or incentivised to get involved. But this kind of understanding and commitment was the exception across both studies. The absence of employer demand was highlighted in our interview with an apprenticeship manager for the regional authority, who suggested that SMEs needed support to recognise the benefits of apprenticeship in developing their companies. To meet this need, the local authority had taken on a role as 'honest broker' – to enable engagement and take-up of SMEs:

It's about finding the right training programme and succession planning in their business. They're not all on board with it. But you've got to start having the dialogue. (L.A. Apprenticeship Manager)

Overall, the data provided evidence that the marketised context together with the constriction of college budgets had created conditions in which apprenticeships offered providers an opportunity to draw down funds in a way that often did not prioritise the interests of apprentices themselves. Partnership by itself was no guarantee of quality. The finessing of regulations by IFATE around definitions of OffJT were off-putting for employers: bureaucratic hurdles to be managed by providers in a restrictive model of partnership driven by funding. In such circumstances, the micro-prescription and definition of OffJT and the 'incentivisation' of conduct were no substitute for the values-based orientation of invested partnerships drawing on historically embedded understandings.

Discussion and conclusion

The importance of the employer-training provider partnership in apprenticeship has of course been highlighted in previous research and in international contexts (Callan and Ashworth 2019; Huddleston and Laczik 2019; Fuller and Unwin 2019).

Our findings suggest that, underpinned by different constellations of partnership enabled through marketisation, apprenticeship in England allows for considerable flexibility in approach according to employer need. In respect of a lack of regulation, employers could be characterised as being 'in the driving seat' but otherwise, the policy rhetoric around employer engagement is aspirational at best.

In our study, all the programmes researched depended on partnership of some kind between employers and training providers. Successful apprenticeships tended to be co-produced in expansive partnerships that were long-established between stakeholders who shared a common (historically rooted) understanding of apprenticeship. Employers in this group insisted that they had always provided this level of training, regardless of any formal requirements or specifications. Whilst they valued the structure offered by the programmes, these employers provided apprenticeships that extended far beyond official requirements. The focus was on the development of rounded individuals who would become full members of an existing but evolving community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). At the other, restrictive end of the continuum was a debased mode of partnership that centred on a commercial exchange between employer and provider, resulting in exploitative apprenticeships. Somewhere in the middle, there were employers in new subject areas who had no touchstone on which to base their offer, and who believed they were providing a worthwhile apprenticeship that was however little more than CPD. Notably, in all cases, employers were able to use apprenticeship in a way that suited their particular business needs. To that extent, our research showed that there has been very little progress in realising the full potential of apprenticeship training programmes since Fuller and Unwin devised the expansive/restrictive framework (2003).

As we saw earlier, the policy rhetoric is very much about quality apprenticeships composed of extensive off- and on-the-job training with active employer involvement (e.g. IfATE, 2018). However, the incentivisation of employers to engage appears to depend on the administrative burden resting entirely on providers and this enables apprenticeships along a broad spectrum including those not worthy of the name. The fact that some employers in the study were able to abide by regulations pragmatically without fear of any regulatory oversight must be a matter of concern while the performative practices of providers can be accounted for by them being habituated for more than two decades to a funding-driven 'marketised' further education polycscape.

As our data illustrates, the tight regulation governing providers, whose income relies on recruiting employers, leads to scenarios within which providers commonly 'sell' apprenticeships on the basis that they will not impact on productivity or demand significant employer involvement. In that sense, levy as a form of incentivisation seems not to be working as intended, stimulating a range of pragmatic responses corresponding to the three contrasting modes we have identified.

What seems clear is that an expansive understanding, one where apprenticeship is so much more than the sum of its parts, cannot be prescribed or regulated for. It is instead deeply rooted in the traditions of established 'trades' underpinned by a shared understanding that extends beyond institutions to civic organisations (as further education colleges once were). Key among our findings is that apprenticeship policy is founded on rhetoric and a set of practices and technologies that represent apprenticeships discursively in a specific way, but that ignore: i) important stories related to the negative impact of the marketised environment and ii) historical and collective understandings of apprenticeship that bring value to the 'brand'.

While government policy is at pains to incentivise employers' involvement – one aspect of which appears to be shielding them from any regulation or accountability – providers are so squeezed for funding that some are prepared to run provision adapting to varying levels of employer

involvement. The three modes of apprenticeship we identified suggest that the success of apprenticeships depends on employers and providers co-producing a partnership through which an appropriate balance is negotiated between the in-work training and OffJT. This kind of co-production cannot easily be contrived by central government edict. Currently, the intra-action between providers and employers who are both incentivised to access apprenticeship programme monies, is a more powerful shaper of the quality of apprenticeships than any guidance or statutory requirements issued by IFATE or the DfE (e.g. DfE 2017a, 2017b; ESFA 2019; NAS 2019a, 2019b) – unless there is tighter regulation of what an apprenticeship should be and on employer involvement in delivery. Getting the balance right may be increasingly important in the training environment in England in which the number of vocational qualifications and awards is currently being reduced.

Notes

1. All mes of individuals and institutions are pseudonymous.
2. Unlike 'work-ready', this phrase seeks to emphasise the importance of individual workplace contexts.

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