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Between Inclusion and Precarity: Identity Construction among Contingent Staff in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of staff working under sessional, part-time, or fixed-term arrangements (referred to as contingent staff), focusing on how they perceive and construct their professional identity within UK higher education. A qualitative, interpretivist comparative case study design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews enabled a detailed exploration of the lived experiences of 11 contingent staff members. Thematic analysis was applied to examine and compare identity and practice across two institutional settings, identifying both commonalities and differences. Participants identified a range of important issues across the two institutions, including professional identity, perceived value, interpersonal dynamics within teams, role ambiguity, and feelings of inclusion in the wider academic environment. The findings also suggest that traditional distinctions between educational roles—such as educator, facilitator, coach, mentor, and pastoral supporter—are becoming less clear, indicating a blending of pedagogical and holistic approaches. This research contributes to the limited literature on pedagogical identity and practice among contingent staff in UK higher education. Unlike prior studies that often focus on mentoring or apprenticeship outcomes in general terms, this work centers specifically on how contingent educators perceive and experience their professional identities. The comparative case study approach strengthens the contribution by enabling a nuanced comparison across two higher education institutions.

Keywords: Contingent staff, Degree apprenticeship, Sessional employment, Identity perceptions

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Introduction

The successful delivery of apprenticeship programs relies on a wider support system beyond standard classroom teaching, frequently provided by contingent staff. This study draws on the perspectives of contingent staff involved in degree apprenticeships (hereafter, contingent staff) across two UK higher education institutions to investigate how identity influences their practice. It distills key insights from their experiences to inform practical implications.

Literature review

Identity is not fixed but is continually reshaped through ongoing processes of self-reflection, interaction with others, and organizational affiliation [1]. Elements such as commitment, loyalty, group relationships, collaboration, and motivation are central to this process [2]. Identity is also sensitive to external shifts, including policy changes [3, 4]. It may be social (e.g., nationality or gender), role-based (e.g., lecturer, mentor, coach), or occupational in nature [5]. It can be either self-ascribed or externally imposed [1]. Academic identity differs across contexts but is generally shaped by shared understandings of the roles of academics and higher education institutions [6].



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Over recent decades, the increasing market-driven and corporate orientation of higher education has led many academics to reconsider their professional identities [7]. The expansion of degree apprenticeships has introduced additional layers of responsibility, regulation, and scrutiny. These conditions often require staff to renegotiate their professional selves within more tightly controlled environments [8]. Apprenticeship delivery also requires academics to go beyond traditional teaching duties, adapting their practice to integrate academic expectations with workplace realities, employers, and professional standards [9]. This can contribute to feelings of uncertainty, overload, diminished autonomy, and perceived inadequacy in required competencies [4, 9].

At the same time, the reconfiguration of academic identity coincides with growing reliance on contingent labor. Such employment offers flexibility and access to industry experience but is frequently associated with insecure working conditions. In the UK, approximately 33% of academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts in 2021, with many others working through hourly-paid or casual “atypical” arrangements [10].

While these forms of employment can provide flexibility and access to specialist expertise, they are also commonly associated with precarious working conditions, including insecure contracts, limited engagement with professional development, reduced access to basic facilities such as dedicated office space, and perceptions of being less valued than permanently employed academic colleagues [11-14]. Concerns have also been raised about whether reliance on contingent staff may affect student experience quality and academic outcomes [15]. However, although permanent academics may concentrate more heavily on research productivity and publication expectations, contingent staff often demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting learners, frequently going beyond formal expectations despite constrained time and resources [16, 17].

A significant proportion of contingent staff are only paid for teaching contact hours, with preparation, marking, and wider student support often unpaid. In contrast, permanent academic staff benefits from stable, continuing contracts that support career progression and institutional attachment, whereas contingent staff typically work under short-term arrangements with uncertain renewal and limited notice periods [18, 19]. Permanent academics are also more likely to be embedded in institutional governance structures, contributing to decision-making, policy formation, and strategic planning. By comparison, contingent staff are frequently positioned outside these processes, which can generate feelings of exclusion and limited influence over institutional direction [20]. Consequently, their contributions and perspectives may be regarded as less authoritative than those of colleagues on permanent contracts [21].

Commonly reported experiences among contingent staff also include marginalization, isolation, and a sense of diminished worth [22]. Feelings of illegitimacy can influence how individuals present their professional identity, with some reluctant to disclose their employment status to students due to concerns about being perceived as less credible or competent [13, 19], alongside perceptions that permanent staff are more readily respected [14]. Being excluded from institutional communication channels and meetings can further restrict their ability to respond confidently to student questions, sometimes leaving them feeling professionally undermined or exposed as uninformed in front of learners [13]. These pressures may lead contingent staff to adjust their behavior to align with institutional expectations and secure ongoing employment, even when this conflicts with personal values [21]. Strengthening the inclusion of sessional staff within academic teams is therefore important, as it can enhance their sense of belonging and recognition while also benefiting the student experience [17, 23].

The shifting nature of academic identity, shaped by both external structural change and internal institutional pressures, highlights the need to understand better how contingent degree apprenticeship tutors and mentors experience their roles. In response, the following research aims are proposed:

1. To explore how contingent staff construct and negotiate professional identity within university contexts.
2. To examine how perceived academic identity shapes mentoring approaches, teaching practices, and interpersonal relationships among contingently employed degree apprenticeship staff.
3. To identify institutional and contextual factors within UK higher education that influence identity formation in contingent degree apprenticeship tutors and mentors.

Materials and Methods

Because the study focused on lived experience and subjective meaning-making shaped by identity, it was grounded in a constructivist ontological position, recognizing that individuals actively create interpretations of their social reality [24]. Accordingly, an interpretivist epistemological approach was adopted, emphasizing context and experience as central to understanding social phenomena [25].

A comparative case study design was used across two UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to enable a detailed exploration of how contingent staff experience degree apprenticeship delivery in different organizational contexts. The aim was to identify both converging and diverging influences on identity and practice across the two settings. This approach was selected to capture complexity and contextual variation, addressing explanatory “how” and “why” questions related to social processes and professional relationships [26]. In total, 11 interviews were conducted: six at HEI1 and five at HEI2. Contextual details for each institution are provided in the Supplementary file.

This comparative design enabled a detailed cross-institutional analysis of contingent staff experiences, offering insight into how context shapes identity and mentoring practice. By examining both institutions, the study highlights both shared patterns and distinctive influences, contributing to a broader understanding of how support roles function within degree apprenticeship provision.

The research was carried out between December 2023 and March 2024. Participants were employed on fixed-term, sessional, or part-time contracts in roles supporting degree apprenticeship programs across two UK HEIs. Data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 11 contingent staff, selected purposively. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and followed a consistent set of guiding questions across both institutional samples.

Data collection

All contingent staff engaged in the relevant degree apprenticeship programs were invited to participate in the study. At both institutions, participation requests were distributed by email, outlining the study's aims and clarifying that involvement was entirely voluntary and would have no impact on employment status. Consent documentation was included within the interview invitation materials, and consent was inferred when participants voluntarily arranged a virtual interview. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned identifiers such as HEI1 P1, HEI1 P2, HEI2 P1, HEI2 P2, and so on.

Ethical considerations

Confidentiality was upheld throughout the research process, and all participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Particular attention was paid to the use of electronic consent forms and recorded verbal consent to ensure compliance with ethical standards for online research environments [27]. Ethical approval was obtained in line with the governance procedures of each participating institution.

Data analysis

Consistent with the methodological framework, thematic analysis was conducted to explore patterns within the transcribed interview data. The analysis followed [28] six-phase procedure in a structured and iterative manner. Reflexivity was intentionally maintained throughout the process, with the researcher acknowledging their interpretive role in shaping the analysis [29].

The initial stage involved familiarisation with the dataset, during which the research team immersed themselves in the transcripts, repeatedly reviewing the material and recording early impressions. These notes focused on participants' accounts of experience and how these related to identity construction [28].

Following this, the data were systematically coded by hand. An inductive coding strategy was applied, guided by the research questions while allowing codes to emerge from the data itself [30]. The resulting codes were then organized into preliminary themes by clustering related coded segments [28]. During this iterative phase, the researchers continuously moved back and forth between raw data, codes, and emerging thematic structures to ensure accuracy and coherence. Themes lacking sufficient supporting evidence were removed, while others were refined, merged, or restructured through collaborative discussion within the research team.

The trustworthiness of the findings was assessed through multiple criteria. Credibility was examined by comparing thematic interpretations across both institutions, with the research team reviewing and validating analytical interpretations. Dependability was ensured by creating a detailed audit trail documenting all stages and modifications throughout the thematic analysis process. This also contributed to confirmability by providing a transparent record of analytical decisions, thereby reducing the potential influence of researcher bias and enhancing accountability [31].

Overall, this structured process ensured that, despite data being collected across multiple sites using a case study approach, the findings could be coherently synthesized, meaningfully compared with existing literature, and used as a foundation for discussion. The remainder of this paper is based on the finalized and refined dataset.

Results and Discussion

Higher education institution 1

Identity and value

All participants brought significant prior experience as consultants, tutors, coaches, or mentors, along with the qualifications needed for their roles. Despite this, in HEI1, they are officially titled "Degree Apprentice Facilitators", which led some to feel unclear about how their position is understood or positioned within the institution. Most participants stressed that job titles play an important role in shaping how responsibilities are interpreted, both by individuals and by teams. The findings suggest that role naming can strongly influence how contingent staff's contributions are valued across higher education contexts. Job titles also shaped how participants made sense of what their work actually involved:

It often requires a clearer explanation depending on who you're talking to [HEI1 P2].

There's a tendency to reduce it to box-ticking compliance, with little recognition of any wider contribution [HEI1 P 6].

People outside the role don't really grasp what the work actually entails [HEI1 P4].

The data also indicate that, regardless of formal job descriptions, the way the role is carried out shifts according to individual apprentice needs.

It really depends on the apprentice, some of them you're just getting them through it ... ticking the boxes, whereas others, it's more you're actually doing that coaching, helping them reflect a bit more on their role and how they're developing as a leader [HEI1 P1].

Identity and perceived value were also shaped through everyday engagement with learners. Most participants reported that apprentices generally recognized their contribution. They highlighted that learners often appreciated the extra time and individual attention provided, suggesting that contingent staff were seen as offering added value. However, this was not consistent across all accounts.

Many apprentices seem to appreciate having dedicated time focused on their development [HEI1 P6].

When extra support is given, it helps apprentices feel more supported and strengthens the working relationship [HEI1 P5].

I don't think apprentices always realize how much behind-the-scenes effort goes into supporting their learning journey [HEI1 P3].

Overall, participants' sense of identity and professional value were also influenced—and at times constrained—by institutional compliance requirements linked to ESFA and Ofsted frameworks. These regulatory structures were seen as complicating day-to-day interactions and shaping how roles are understood and enacted within the organization.

Compliance and coaching

Within HEI1, contingent roles were originally introduced to meet ESFA and Ofsted requirements regarding meeting frequency, quality assurance, and documentation standards. As institutional familiarity with these external frameworks has grown, the expectations attached to the role have become increasingly granular and tightly monitored. Participants suggested that this has blurred the role's original purpose, with several describing the current system as overly constrained and rule-driven.

For me, mentoring should be a genuine two-way exchange where dialogue develops naturally, but instead it feels overly structured and controlled [HEI1 P1].

I'm more comfortable with flexibility, but here you're pushed into being extremely detail-focused, and the strict rules make it harder to work in a way that feels authentic [HEI1 P4].

The prescribed format doesn't align with the reality of conversations with apprentices or with what they actually need. The template restricts me, limits natural discussion, and reduces space for more creative engagement [HEI1 P5].

Not all participants experienced these constraints in the same way. Some described strategies for working within the framework while still maintaining a more adaptive approach.

I follow the required structure while also including what I think is relevant. Even though there are set questions, I don't always ask them word-for-word—I integrate them into the discussion so it feels more like a conversation [HEI1 P5].

Participants consistently described their role as requiring relationship-building, flexibility, and tailored support for learners. However, they also highlighted that contingent arrangements often involve significant additional effort beyond contractual expectations, with much of this work neither formally recognized nor compensated.

Sometimes conversations happen privately because formal meetings include managers. I end up having follow-up discussions separately because I've built trust and invested my own time [HEI1 P1].

Supporting apprentices in this way isn't officially required, but it makes them feel more supported and improves the relationship. I don't have to do it, but I choose to because it matters to them and to me [HEI1 P5].

This ongoing tension between institutional compliance requirements and relational mentoring practices also shaped how participants experienced belonging within both their immediate teams and the wider academic environment.

Team identity

Perceptions of being valued were closely linked to how participants understood their position within both the apprenticeship support structure and the broader academic setting. In general, participants described a supportive peer environment in which they could seek assistance when needed and collaborate informally with colleagues.

Whenever I've needed support, there's always been someone available to help out [HEI1 P4].

However, participants also noted that interactions with the wider academic team were often procedural rather than collaborative, limiting opportunities for shared problem-solving and deeper integration.

meetings tend to focus on instructions and processes rather than on open discussion of challenges or opportunities for improvement [HEI1 P4].

It would help if we could talk through issues together, because others often face the same problems, and we could jointly think through solutions rather than work in isolation [HEI1 P1].

In addition, participants highlighted challenges in communication between the apprenticeship support team and academic staff. This disconnect was seen as reducing coordination and limiting effective collaboration, with potential consequences for the learner experience.

There feels like a clear divide. I tried emailing for clarification, but didn't get a response, which makes you wonder whether it's because you're not considered part of the academic core or simply because staff are too busy [HEI1 P5]. It feels like you have to build individual connections one at a time, demonstrating both subject understanding and knowledge of apprenticeship requirements and processes [HEI1 P6].

Participants also described a recurring pattern in which their input was invited during planning stages but rarely translated into visible change. While feedback was acknowledged, it was often not reflected in practice, leading to a perception that their influence on decision-making was limited.

I've made suggestions for improvement, and while people say they appreciate the input, it doesn't seem to lead to any actual changes in practice [HEI1 P1].

Finally, participants expressed a strong desire for greater inclusion and communication across institutional structures. They felt that a deeper understanding of organizational processes would enhance their ability to support learners effectively and improve recognition of their contribution. At the same time, many reported feeling disconnected from wider institutional developments and excluded from information that shaped their roles.

It would really help if there were more connections between the academic and mentor teams, especially regarding awareness of what is happening in teaching sessions and how reflection on standards is being developed. HEI1 P3 It would be beneficial to have a broader overview of what is happening across the institution and how different parts of the business school strategy fit together [HEI1 P4].

Higher education institution 2

Experiencing and managing identity tension

The interview analysis indicated two closely connected themes: participants from HEI2 reported experiencing what can be described as "identity tension". However, this tension was generally near the surface of awareness, meaning participants recognized it and actively attempted to manage it in their day-to-day practice. The main source of this tension was consistently linked to the widening scope of the role and the need to navigate an increasingly complex set of boundaries and professional relationships. A further contributing factor was the absence of an additional institutional role designed to mediate or support the mentoring dimension of the work:

I think the [tutor] roles were very different. Potentially, it could have really enriched the learner's experience and their ability to integrate the work they were doing on the program and to demonstrate it in the workplace. I don't think, on the whole, that happened very much [HEI2 P1].

The same participant described a case where an apprentice was struggling academically, and the tutor attempted to raise concerns with the workplace mentor. However, this was not well received:

The mentor completely shut it down and refused to engage with the issue. I understood it came from wanting to protect the learner, but it actually worked against them. This is the challenge when workplace mentors are involved.

This example highlighted a misalignment between roles and reflected a clearly recognized tension in balancing responsibilities across different stakeholders at HEI2.

There was also variation in how participants understood and managed these tensions. Some clearly distinguished between roles, framing them within a collaborative but clearly separated structure:

The workplace mentor is mainly responsible for helping the learner build their portfolio, create opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and behaviors, and focus on practical application. In contrast, the tutor role is more academically oriented. I see it as a three-way relationship, but not one in which I should intervene directly between the mentor and the learner [HEI2 P5].

It is quite a complex position being a tutor on an apprenticeship program, as multiple governance structures shape the relationship. There are also clear boundaries, particularly when supporting academic writing and assessment, which requires a disciplined approach [HEI2 P3].

The complexity of identity was also shaped by the fact that these tensions were not experienced solely by staff but also influenced by learners and group dynamics. Participants generally shared a relatively consistent understanding of mentoring, which they saw as related to but separate from their tutor responsibilities:

I don't really see mentoring as part of my role as a tutor in the apprenticeship program. If I were acting as a mentor, I would do so through a specific agreement with an individual learner. I am interested in how that mentoring relationship works

alongside my role. Still, I haven't formally agreed to be a mentor or a coach, even though I may use coaching techniques when supporting learners [HEI2 P3].

I separate mentoring from tutoring. Mentoring is more about preparing learners to access workplace opportunities and develop into senior leadership roles. The tutor role involves holding all of that together, though tutors can sometimes drift into mentoring behaviors [HEI2 P4].

The role of mediator

All participants at HEI2 described their role as involving some form of mediation, whether between themselves and learners, between learners and employers, or between institutional and regulatory requirements governing the apprenticeship. This was often seen as an unavoidable aspect of the role:

You can't really separate the apprenticeship from the learner's work history and broader life context; everything is interconnected [HEI2 P2]

At the same time, mediation was also understood as something distinctive to apprenticeship delivery:

I often found myself acting as a buffer, helping to reduce learner anxiety and reassuring them that they were already meeting most expectations. A large part of my role was about smoothing things over. There were also two levels of mediation: one embedded in the apprenticeship structure itself, and another involving navigating university systems and external apprenticeship requirements [HEI2 P1].

Bounded holism

The idea of bounded holism—referring in this study to the extent of integrated support that tutors can offer learners within a broad yet defined scope—emerged as a key theme. Although the role was designed with holistic intent, participants demonstrated strong awareness of the distinctions and subtleties embedded within it, particularly when comparing traditional academic tutoring or personal tutoring, elements of coaching (including academic skill development and situated leadership practice), and mentoring within the apprenticeship context:

...what I find really engaging about this role is the way it blends different functions: it's not purely academic teaching; it involves tutoring, coaching, pastoral support, and general learner guidance. It feels like a complete, blended role. [HEI2 P3]. It's this really integrated approach to developing leadership skills through sustained engagement with learners ... it feels very rounded and meaningful ... supporting students across modules, dissertations and the whole journey gives it a sense of completion [HEI2 P2].

I see the apprenticeship tutor role as doing a bit of everything ... I don't think it's helpful to put strict labels on it ... in practice, we are expected to be flexible and multi-functional. I'm comfortable with that lack of fixed definition [HEI2 P2].

However, this was not without underlying complexity:

It becomes quite interesting because we also have the workplace mentor role alongside this, and I think that raises questions about where coaching ends and mentoring begins ... and I'm not entirely convinced that tutors are always fully prepared for that distinction [HEI2 P4].

Overall, while participants generally valued this integrated and holistic approach and viewed it positively, the data also revealed a clear awareness of its constituent parts and the tensions that can arise within them. One of the most notable reflections from the interviews captured this complexity particularly well:

I don't really subscribe to the idea of a single, fixed identity. I've written before about what I call a 'parliament of selves', where different aspects of identity coexist and become more prominent in different contexts. I believe people operate through multiple identities, so whether we call it mentoring or tutoring isn't the key issue—it's that these roles are genuinely different in practice [HEI2 P2].

Using a comparative case study approach, the empirical work revealed both convergences and divergences across the two sites. In HEI2, findings suggested that staff who had previously experienced earlier versions of the taught program were required to deliberately dismantle and then reassemble their professional identity, operating within familiar contexts but in significantly altered ways [32]. This process was less evident among newer staff to the program, who appeared more readily accepting of the integrated and holistic nature of the role.

At HEI1, this dynamic was less prominent overall; however, it still surfaced in participants' accounts of feeling marginalized from discussions about program development or procedural change. This was particularly evident among those employed on sessional contracts rather than fixed-term arrangements, where frustration was more explicitly expressed. These experiences resonate with [33], who argue that holding multiple identities can generate internal conflict and requires sustained emotional labor. This may reflect an identity transition process as described by [34].

Although terminology varied between the two institutions, both groups of participants reported an ongoing tension between their identities as tutors, coaches, and mentors and their designated role as "apprentice mentor". This tension was evident in expectations around relationship formation and contractual engagement typical of mentoring arrangements [35], as well as in the requirement to interact with multiple stakeholders and comply with formal apprenticeship regulations and institutional

processes. While all participants experienced some degree of role tension, a number actively managed it by aligning their practice with their primary professional identity, reflecting a conscious, intentional process. This somewhat diverges from [21], who found that contingent staff often report limited autonomy over both their role and methods of delivery. However, as [7] notes, responses to identity disruption exist along a continuum, which aligns with the importance of adopting a reflective stance within leadership development contexts [36].

This connects directly to the notion of holism, in which educators inevitably bring their full professional and personal selves into developmental interactions, rather than separating roles such as assessor, facilitator, or pastoral supporter. Participants across both institutions engaged in all of these dimensions to varying degrees, either formally through structured roles or informally through additional individual learner support. In this context, the concept of a “parliament of selves” (as described by a HEI2 participant) becomes particularly relevant. The position occupied by apprenticeship mentors can be understood as a liminal space, characterized by temporally bounded, partial engagement within the wider learning journey. In this sense, staff operate at the edges of the leadership development process. While this positioning can enable a meaningful developmental contribution, it also introduces relational tensions when expectations between parties diverge or become misaligned.

Across both institutions, contingent staff reported undertaking additional, often informal, work to strengthen relationships and enhance apprentice support. At the same time, participants described having only limited visibility of broader institutional processes affecting program delivery. This lack of transparency constrained their capacity to support apprentices, particularly given their mediating role. It also contributed to feelings of isolation and concerns about whether they were delivering the highest possible standard of support [14]. The development of trust-based relationships is widely recognized as essential for supporting positive learner outcomes and career progression [37].

Accordingly, regardless of contractual arrangements, it appears important that mentors, tutors, facilitators, and academic staff are integrated into a cohesive team rather than excluded from communication, training, or meetings. This may require first establishing a shared understanding of the team’s identity, purpose, and what constitutes effective holistic apprenticeship support, as well as how these aims align with broader organizational goals [38, 39]. Such clarity could enhance both individual and collective sensemaking regarding apprenticeship delivery.

Conclusion

This research offered insights into a developing area in which academic staff must navigate complex boundaries while delivering apprenticeship programs within UK HEIs. This process involves adopting new roles while simultaneously reshaping established ones. Across both institutions, contingent staff expressed a strong commitment to supporting learners; however, they frequently reported that this support was provided through additional, unpaid effort. Participants also described experiences of isolation, exclusion, and constraint, alongside a sense of differentiation from conventional academic tutoring and from standard coaching and mentoring roles. While contractual arrangements and job titles may not appear to determine these experiences directly, the findings suggest they nevertheless exert an influence.

A key conclusion emerging from this study relates to supervision. Supervision plays a crucial role in supporting the development of coaches and mentors [40]. It should provide a mechanism for promptly escalating difficulties and enhancing practice and confidence, particularly among those with limited experience in apprenticeship mentoring. However, the effectiveness of supervision depends on the presence of psychological safety [41], where contingent staff do not feel fully integrated within their immediate or wider academic teams, such safety may be weakened or difficult to establish.

Tensions and challenges associated with contingent employment must therefore be actively addressed. As noted by [9], it is not the apprenticeship model itself that generates tension, but rather the ways expectations and regulatory requirements are interpreted and enacted. Higher education institutions may therefore need to reflect on how to balance academic autonomy, professional judgment, and coaching or mentoring approaches with compliance requirements regarding documentation standards and timing.

In conclusion, this study identified identity and perceived value, perceptions of teamwork, clarity, and role design, and feelings of inclusion within broader academic communities as central themes. As government policy on apprenticeships and institutional responses within UK higher education continue to evolve, established assumptions about teaching and learning are being challenged. This is leading to increasingly blurred boundaries among educators, facilitators, coaches, mentors, and pastoral roles within holistic educational practice. How these roles are defined, structured, and recognized is of considerable importance to policymakers, employers, and higher education institutions, and remains an important area for ongoing research.

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