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Mentorship Dynamics in Degree Apprenticeships: Evidence from Construction Work-Based Learning in England

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Abstract

Degree apprenticeships are increasingly embedded within higher education systems; however, in England, concerns have been emerging regarding apprentice completion rates. Although multiple influences may affect these outcomes, the nature of the support systems surrounding apprentices throughout their programs is a central factor. This study explores the support dynamics between construction degree apprentices and their work-based mentors, drawing on the lived experiences of both parties. A qualitative cross-sectional research design was adopted. Data were collected through three focus groups involving Level 6 apprentices enrolled at a higher education institution and their corresponding work-based mentors in England. The dataset was analyzed inductively using NVivo 12 software to develop codes and extract key thematic patterns. The mentor–apprentice relationship emerges as a critical determinant of success within degree apprenticeship programs. Analysis revealed three dominant themes: understanding of the apprenticeship framework, the nature of support systems, and the employer–provider interface. This research makes a novel contribution by addressing an underexplored gap in the literature on higher-level apprentices and their workplace mentors. It draws on newly generated primary data, identifies persistent challenges, and develops practical implications for improvement. The findings also have relevance for the English apprenticeship system and for other contexts considering similar models of implementation or adaptation.

Keywords: Work-based learning, Mentoring, Construction degree apprenticeship, Apprentice performance

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Introduction

The widening global skills gap, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, has led many nations to reconsider the organization of education and work-integrated learning. Within the United Kingdom, degree apprenticeships are most fully developed in England, while Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales operate distinct alternative frameworks. There is growing international evidence that countries and corporations are adopting or adapting comparable work-based learning models, which, in turn, are reshaping higher education (HE) provision [1, 2].

In recent years, the higher education and vocational training landscape in England has undergone substantial restructuring [3], accompanied by a marked expansion in interest and investment in degree apprenticeships. A major shift occurred in 2014 with the transition from apprenticeship frameworks to apprenticeship standards, introduced as part of wider reforms intended to improve training quality. This change incorporated end-point assessment (EPA) requirements and the demonstration of defined knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSBs), ensuring apprentices achieve occupational competence upon completion.

From 2017, the rollout of new standards began in earnest, while older frameworks were progressively withdrawn. By July 2020, all new apprenticeship commencements were required to follow standards, with frameworks fully closed to new entrants. A further significant policy development was the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 [3, 4], a tax mechanism applied to large employers to increase investment in high-quality skills training and workforce development.

Overall, the introduction of apprenticeship standards was intended to reposition apprenticeships as more closely aligned with employer needs, with an emphasis on quality assurance and industry relevance. Although degree apprenticeship (DA) routes, supported by employer investment, are often promoted as an accessible vocational pathway to a university qualification, concerns have been increasingly raised about relatively low completion rates at the end-point assessment (EPA) stage [5]. This issue has prompted closer scrutiny of the factors driving these outcomes, including the experiences and challenges faced by apprentices, employers, and educational providers [6]. Consequently, gaining a deeper understanding of the support systems available to apprentices during program delivery and EPA preparation has become essential.

Existing research has consistently indicated that mentoring plays a significant role in enhancing learner engagement, improving academic outcomes, and increasing satisfaction across both traditional educational settings and apprenticeship-based routes [7, 8]. Despite this, evidence, such as that provided by the [6], indicates that insufficient employer involvement and support are a key factor contributing to apprentice withdrawal. Although the importance of mentors in supporting both the personal and professional growth of apprentices is widely acknowledged [8-10], there remains a relatively limited evidence base that captures the lived experiences of both mentors and apprentices within apprenticeship contexts.

This research addresses this gap by focusing on mentor–apprentice relationships in degree apprenticeship programs, specifically in the construction sector. It examines how mentors interpret their roles, the nature of their involvement, and the organizational structures that influence apprenticeship success. A further analytical distinction is made between apprentices who have completed the EPA and those who have not yet reached that stage. The EPA represents the final formal assessment of an apprenticeship and is therefore central to determining successful completion. However, there is limited understanding of how mentoring prepares apprentices for the EPA, or of how its absence may affect those who do not complete it. This distinction is important for capturing the differing support requirements across progression stages.

Although the findings can be situated within the broader literature, the study is intended to inform the development of more effective mentoring approaches and to emphasize the need for ongoing improvement. Its implications extend beyond construction, offering relevance to other industries and international apprenticeship systems.

Global perspective on degree apprenticeships

Comparable challenges are evident internationally, including in Canada, where apprenticeship participation and completion rates remain problematic. [11] note that despite ongoing shortages in skilled trades, completion rates are approximately 32%, compared with around 50% in Germany. Although there is general agreement among policymakers, employers, unions, and the wider public on the need to strengthen apprenticeship systems, sustained improvement is often hindered by persistent structural barriers. These include uneven regional provision, administrative complexity, funding constraints, and entrenched social perceptions that prioritize academic routes over vocational education.

Across different national contexts, apprenticeship systems vary significantly depending on cultural, economic, and educational frameworks. Nevertheless, mentoring is consistently recognized as a foundational element in effective apprenticeship design. International models such as Germany's dual education system [2] and Australia's competency-based apprenticeship structure [1] provide useful comparative perspectives. These systems demonstrate the value of tightly integrating workplace experience with formal learning, offering a benchmark for critically assessing England's degree apprenticeship model.

Apprentice support and the role of the mentor

This literature review draws on peer-reviewed academic publications, government documents, and industry reports published in the United Kingdom since the introduction of apprenticeship standards in 2014. The review focused on search terms such as "degree apprenticeships", "mentorship", "work-based learning", and "apprenticeship completion rates". By restricting the scope to post-reform literature—particularly work reflecting the introduction of the end-point assessment (EPA)—the study seeks to capture how the mentor role has evolved under the current apprenticeship standards. This ensures that the analysis is aligned with the contemporary apprenticeship environment in England and its associated mentoring practices.

[12] expansive–restrictive framework of workplace learning is particularly relevant, as it highlights the significance of organizational culture in shaping apprentice learning experiences. Their model suggests that expansive environments—characterized by inclusivity, active participation, and structured development opportunities—lead to more positive apprentice outcomes. In contrast, restrictive environments limit access to learning opportunities and may contribute to reduced completion rates. This conceptualization provides a useful framework for understanding how mentors may influence or counteract the effects of workplace culture within current degree apprenticeship contexts.

[9] argues that degree apprenticeship support systems should be intentionally structured to enable apprentices to complete their programs, offering consistent guidance, resources, and developmental support throughout the learning journey. This requires coordinated engagement between employers, higher education providers, and apprentices themselves [9]. Within this structure, employers have a particularly important role, often appointing a mentor or workplace supervisor to support apprentices in applying academic knowledge to practical tasks and integrating learning into real work environments. Such support structures also need to remain adaptable to individual apprentice needs, contextual workplace conditions, and sector-specific requirements [2].

[13], examining the early development of degree apprenticeship provision in UK universities, found that both apprentices and employers encountered difficulties when engaging with work-based learning for the first time. Their findings indicate a clear need for structured support not only for apprentices but also for workplace mentors. Employers further highlighted that higher education institutions should clarify expectations regarding the mentor role—an issue also identified by [14], who reported that mentors often lacked both confidence and sufficient understanding when undertaking their responsibilities. [13] also emphasized the need for further research incorporating apprentice perspectives, particularly regarding progression patterns and attrition rates.

[15] explored employer-related challenges in managing degree apprentices in workplace settings. Their findings highlight concerns regarding the amount of off-the-job training time required and the practical delivery of meaningful work-based learning. Similarly, [16] identified gaps in structured mentoring within organizations and inconsistencies in employer support. Based on semi-structured interviews with four employers, they emphasized the importance of a strong, effective relationship between employers and educational providers to ensure appropriate mentorship and apprenticeship management.

[17] conducted a qualitative longitudinal study involving computing degree apprentices in Scotland. Their findings show that apprentices value clear connections between academic study and daily work tasks, as well as proactive employer engagement, flexibility, and active mentor involvement. [8] similarly observed that mentoring support is often constrained by mentors' limited awareness of program requirements and role expectations. However, this may partly reflect the early developmental stage of apprenticeship implementation. [18] identified comparable issues, noting that both levy-paying and non-levy-paying employers experienced barriers to effective engagement. They also found that the academic degree component was often perceived as separate from the EPA. During program delivery, the EPA was not yet a primary concern for apprentices or employers.

Apprenticeship outcomes and strategies

There remains a notable lack of industry-level reports in the UK that systematically address low apprenticeship completion rates and their underlying causes. One of the most comprehensive contributions in this area is the Apprenticeship Outcomes and Destinations Report produced by the [6], which examines the challenges influencing apprentice retention and completion. The report seeks to understand why apprentices withdraw from programs, the reasons behind such decisions, and what forms of support might have encouraged completion. It also provides one of the first comparative analyses of apprentices who complete their programs and those who withdraw.

The report estimates that approximately 48% of apprentices withdraw from their programs and highlights both the benefits of completing a program and the importance of support mechanisms. However, it also notes the limited representation of degree apprentices within the dataset and an even smaller focus on construction apprenticeships.

Findings suggest that many apprentices feel insufficiently informed and experience inadequate support from both employers and training providers. The Apprenticeship Evaluation Employers Report similarly emphasizes the need to improve understanding of apprenticeship structures, particularly regarding the EPA [19]. Although mentoring is widely recognized as a core element of apprenticeship systems, the existing literature has primarily focused on provider and employer perspectives, with limited attention to the mentor–apprentice relationship itself. More specifically, there is a shortage of studies examining mentor experiences, challenges, and motivations within degree apprenticeship contexts.

However, evidence from the National Health Service (NHS) provides a useful organizational case study of effective apprenticeship utilization within a large public-sector employer [20]. This report highlights the importance of structured organizational systems and well-developed mentoring arrangements in achieving high completion rates. Key lessons from the NHS model include structured mentor training and clearly defined role expectations, which may offer valuable insights for improving mentorship practices within construction degree apprenticeships.

Materials and Methods

Research approach

This study is grounded in a qualitative research design [21], selected to gain an in-depth understanding of how degree apprentices and their workplace mentors interpret and experience mentoring relationships. Data were collected through focus

groups, chosen for their capacity to generate dynamic interaction between participants and produce richer insights than one-to-one interviews [22, 23]. The collective setting also enabled participants to build on or challenge each other's perspectives, revealing both shared patterns and individual differences in experience.

Although focus groups can raise concerns about researcher interpretation and subjectivity [24], they are particularly suitable for examining socially embedded and relational processes, such as mentoring, in apprenticeship contexts. To ensure analytical robustness, the study followed a clearly defined and systematic approach to both data generation and analysis [25].

Data sample and collection

The sampling strategy included both apprentices and their assigned workplace mentors, reflecting the study's focus on relational dynamics between the two groups. Participants were recruited from Level 6 construction-related degree apprenticeship programs. Inclusion criteria required sufficient experience to meaningfully reflect on mentoring and program support structures [21]. Apprentices were eligible only if they had completed at least 2 years of their program, while mentors were required to have at least 2 years of mentoring experience. The sample included individuals from both Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and larger organizations to capture variation in organizational environments and mentoring practices.

To reflect the significance of the end-point assessment (EPA) within apprenticeship progression, participants were allocated into three separate focus groups:

1. Apprentices approaching completion of their EPA (pre-EPA group).
2. Apprentices who had recently completed the EPA (post-EPA group).
3. Workplace mentors with active responsibility for supporting apprentices.

This structure enabled comparison across different stages of the apprenticeship journey, particularly in relation to the EPA milestone. All focus groups were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, enabling participation from geographically dispersed locations and supporting efficient recording and transcription [26].

[27] suggest that between three and six focus groups are typically sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, capturing the majority of relevant themes. In line with this guidance, three focus groups were conducted, each lasting approximately one hour. The sessions were led by the principal researcher, who has over ten years of experience in apprenticeship delivery and assessment, including EPA-related coaching.

Recordings were transcribed using automated transcription software and then manually checked for accuracy. This two-stage process helped ensure data integrity while also allowing the researcher to become familiar with the dataset early [25].

The focus group guide was developed to address gaps identified in the literature, particularly those related to mentorship quality and support structures [6]. Questions were intentionally broad to encourage participants to describe their experiences in their own terms:

1. What expectations or understanding did you have of apprenticeship requirements and the EPA at the start of your program?
2. In what ways, if any, does the construction sector influence the mentoring relationship between apprentices and mentors?
3. What types of additional support or resources would improve mentors' ability to support apprentices through to completion?

While these questions formed the core of each session, follow-up prompts were used as needed to encourage elaboration. For example, participants were asked, "Can you explain a situation where this affected your experience?" to deepen their responses.

To enhance confirmability, the interview schedule was reviewed by two independent researchers, one of whom was external to the institution and had no prior involvement with participants. This ensured clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research aims. Although a formal pilot study was not conducted, feedback from these reviewers led to minor refinements of the questions. **Table 1** provides details of apprentice participants, identified by focus group (FG), role (A for Apprentice, M for Mentor), and participant number.

Table 1. Focus group participants.

Focus group no	ID number	Participant role	Position in the company
FG1	FG1 A1	Apprentice	L6 Design Construction Manager
	FG1 A2	Apprentice	L6 Quantity Surveyor
	FG1 A3	Apprentice	L6 Quantity Surveyor
	FG1 A4	Apprentice	L6 Quantity Surveyor
	FG1 A5	Apprentice	L6 Design Construction Manager
FG2	FG2 A1	Apprentice	L6 Site Manager
	FG2 A2	Apprentice	L6 Site Manager
	FG2 A3	Apprentice	L6 Site Manager

	FG2 A4	Apprentice	L6 Site Manager
FG3	FG3 M1	Mentor	Learning and Development Advisor
	FG3 M2	Mentor	Project Manager
	FG3 M3	Mentor	Technical Director
	FG3 M4	Mentor	Project Manager
	FG3 M5	Mentor	Project Manager

Source(s): Authors' own work

Thematic analysis process

Following completion of data collection, analysis was carried out by the principal researcher and independently reviewed by a second researcher to ensure consistency and dependability. The analytical process followed the six-phase framework of [25], which structures thematic analysis through a systematic progression from familiarisation with the data to final theme development.

Transcription and coding

In phase 1, all interviews were transcribed in full, with accuracy verified against the original recordings, and all identifying information removed to ensure participant anonymity. The transcripts were then repeatedly reviewed to enable immersion in the dataset and to support the identification of recurring concepts and preliminary patterns.

The data were subsequently imported into NVivo 12, a qualitative analysis software package used to support the organization, management, and systematic examination of textual data, marking the transition into phase 2. An inductive coding strategy was applied, in which meaningful segments of text were labeled directly from the data without pre-set categories. As coding progressed, an initial set of descriptive codes was developed, forming the foundation for later analytical stages.

Defining themes

Phases 3 to 5 focused on moving from descriptive coding towards interpretive pattern development. Initial codes were examined collectively to identify similarities, relationships, and repeated meanings, which were then clustered into higher-order categories. These categories were further refined into overarching themes and, where necessary, subdivided into more specific sub-themes.

Throughout this iterative process, themes were continuously reviewed and adjusted. Some were merged due to conceptual overlap, others were broken down to improve analytical clarity, and some were removed when insufficiently supported by the dataset. Once a stable thematic structure had been established and all codes fully allocated, phase 6 involved producing a written account of the findings. This stage included integrating direct participant extracts to demonstrate and substantiate each theme, ensuring transparency in interpretation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval for the study was secured before data collection. Participants were fully informed about the aims, procedures, and nature of the research, and written consent was obtained. Participation was entirely voluntary, with individuals made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Results and Discussion

The final thematic structure and associated coding framework are presented in **Table 2**. Codes are organized hierarchically to demonstrate their relationship to the overarching themes.

Table 2. Theme and code structure word

Theme	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Files	References
1. Understanding of the apprenticeship system	1.1 Apprentice awareness	1.1.1 Apprentice expectations of mentor role		3	113
		1.1.2 Apprentice taking guidance role over mentor			
		1.1.3 Apprentice has a limited understanding of the process			
		1.1.4 Lack of understanding of the KSB connection to the role			
	1.2 Mentor awareness	1.2.1 Mentors unclear on KSB requirements			

		1.2.2 Mentors' limited understanding of apprentice requirements	1.2.2.1 Within the construction sector		
		1.2.3 Mentors unclear on EPA requirements	1.2.3.1 End-point assessment process		
		1.2.4 Mentors lack understanding of off-the-job learning			
	1.3 Organizational awareness	1.3.1 Company's limited understanding of apprenticeship systems			
		1.3.2 Organization new to apprenticeships			
		1.3.3 Complexity in understanding full requirements			
		1.3.4 Misalignment between job role and apprenticeship structure			
		1.3.5 Qualification misalignment issues			
		1.3.6 Questionable relevance of qualification to job role			
		1.3.7 Lack of awareness of the apprenticeship system			
		1.3.8 Wider organization unaware of apprenticeship activity			
2. Support systems	2.1 Progression experience	2.1.1 Greater apprentice autonomy and responsibility		3	105
		2.1.2 Restricted or slow progression for apprentices			
	2.2 Communication processes	2.2.1 Improved communication is needed from the university			
		2.2.2 Positive mentor–apprentice communication relationship			
		2.2.3 Need for stronger organizational communication			
	2.3 Mentoring structure	2.3.1 Inconsistent organizational mentoring approach	2.3.1.1 Variation in company practices		
			2.3.1.2 Limited mentor availability		
			2.3.1.3 Time constraints for mentoring		
		2.3.2 Mentoring framework	2.3.2.1 Uneven mentoring within the same organization		
			2.3.2.2 Insufficient mentoring provision		
			2.3.2.3 Inappropriate mentor assignment		
			2.3.2.4 Broader organizational apprenticeship structure		
3. Employer–provider interaction	3.1 Guidance and coaching of the process			3	50

Source(s): Authors' own work

Theme 1: Knowledge of the apprenticeship process

Findings under this theme emphasize the importance of strengthening organizational support for mentors by clarifying responsibilities, improving communication systems, and providing structured training. Addressing these gaps is essential to overcoming persistent deficits in understanding that negatively affect both mentors and apprentices, with relevance that may extend beyond the construction sector and the English apprenticeship system.

Across all focus groups, participants reported limited understanding of key elements of the apprenticeship structure. Apprentices frequently described situations in which mentors lacked sufficient knowledge of program requirements. One participant explained, "It was very much having to learn ourselves and then teach that back to our mentors" [FG1 A2], while another stated, "I was mentoring my mentor" [FG1 A3]. These accounts indicate an inverted learning dynamic in some cases, where apprentices were required to guide their own mentors. A further participant noted, "They don't know or have an idea

what KSBs are and how you can actually meet them" [FG1 A5], highlighting uncertainty around knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSBs).

Despite these concerns, apprentices also recognized that many mentors were operating in unfamiliar territory. One participant observed, "My mentor was quite upfront and said this was the first time he'd ever had to mentor an apprentice" [FG1 A3]. This perspective was echoed by mentors, who expressed uncertainty about their roles and a need for clearer institutional guidance. One mentor stated, "It's 30 years since I was in education … I'd like to better understand KSBs, the end point assessment (EPA), and what should be included to critically challenge the apprentice's work" [FG3 M3].

The data also suggest that employers face difficulties in managing the mentoring process effectively. Participants highlighted limited organizational guidance and a lack of structured support for mentoring responsibilities. One mentor commented, "Maybe that's part of the issue – the mentors aren't understanding. It's all put on the apprentice to understand and inform their mentors" [FG3 M5]. Similarly, an apprentice remarked, "They understood the degree, but when it came to the apprenticeship, no" [FG2 A4], reinforcing perceptions of fragmented understanding between academic and apprenticeship components.

These findings align with previous research by [8] and [15], which identified similar shortcomings in mentor preparedness and program understanding. Despite policy reforms intended to strengthen mentorship within apprenticeships, gaps in knowledge and support remain evident. In practice, both apprentices and mentors appear to struggle to interpret apprenticeship requirements, particularly regarding KSBs and their application to the EPA. As [8] suggest, the persistence of these challenges underscores the need for clearer organizational frameworks and improved guidance mechanisms. In addition, [28] and [14] similarly identified difficulties in engaging mentors and managerial stakeholders effectively in apprenticeship delivery.

Theme 2: Support structure

The findings indicate that the organizational systems underpinning apprenticeship delivery are often inconsistent and poorly integrated, particularly in terms of progression clarity, communication flow, and overall support coherence. Many apprentices described uncertainty regarding how their development was structured over time, especially in gaining sufficient practical exposure. One participant reflected on delayed progression, noting, "I have only recently been allocated my first site, even though I am already two years into the program" [FG1 A4]. Others expressed a sense that while full hand-holding was not expected, opportunities for broader exposure were still insufficient: "I do not expect to be guided through everything step by step, but there should still be enough exposure to complete portfolio requirements properly" [FG1 A3].

Concerns also emerged regarding the quality and meaningfulness of mentoring interactions. Apprentices frequently questioned whether mentoring was functioning as intended or simply meeting formal requirements. One participant raised concerns about responsibility and oversight, stating, "… there should be more responsibility on their side, like whether mentoring meetings are actually happening as required and whether proper support is being provided" [FG1 A4]. Another described mentoring as procedural and lacking depth: "We do have mentoring sessions, but honestly it feels like something we just tick off rather than something that actually helps much" [FG2 A2].

A recurring issue across discussions was time constraints, which significantly limited the effectiveness of mentoring relationships. Mentors acknowledged that workload pressures reduced the quality of engagement they could offer. One mentor explained, "At the moment I am responsible for mentoring three apprentices, which becomes quite demanding, particularly with quarterly reporting requirements" [FG3 M3]. This lack of availability was reflected in apprentice experiences, with one stating, "Sometimes I only get a short conversation, maybe 10 or 30 minutes, and then we try to catch up quickly. After that, there is no contact for months because they are too occupied" [FG1 A4].

Mentor seniority also appeared to influence the nature of support provided. Some participants suggested that more senior staff tended to offer less detailed, hands-on guidance. One mentor observed, "When someone is very senior, they often tend to guide you towards what they think you need rather than engaging in detailed support or coaching" [FG3 M3]. This was accompanied by a broader acknowledgment of internal limitations within organizations, with another mentor stating, "There is definitely room for improvement in how we manage this internally" [FG3 M1].

Across all groups, participants consistently called for more structured and standardized support systems. Apprentices in particular highlighted inconsistency in delivery, with one commenting, "The approach varies too much, there is no clear structure, and consistency is really what is needed" [FG1 A4]. Similarly, a mentor suggested clearer guidance frameworks, noting, "It would be helpful to have something structured, even a basic yearly plan or guide to follow" [FG3 M5].

While some positive experiences were reported, they were not evenly distributed. In certain cases, apprentices described strong mentoring relationships where time was actively protected for learning. One participant explained, "My mentor has been very supportive overall and allows me to spend half a day each week focusing on university work in the office" [FG1 A3]. However, this level of support was not universal. Others reported significant differences in access to time and flexibility, with one stating, "Some apprentices are given a full week for study, while I barely get any time at all" [FG1 A5]. Another

added, "I applied for study leave, but it was refused due to workload pressures, even though we are entitled to it" [FG1 A2]. These disparities contributed to perceptions of unequal treatment across similar roles.

These findings extend the work of [17] by providing more detailed evidence of how inconsistencies in mentoring and organizational support are experienced in practice. They also reinforce the argument that apprenticeship systems beyond construction require clearer structural design and better resourcing. The [9] emphasizes the importance of protected time for off-the-job learning to support integration between academic and workplace learning. Similarly, [29] highlight that sufficient time and resources are fundamental to effective apprenticeship delivery. This study further suggests that these challenges remain persistent and that mentor seniority may also shape the depth and quality of support provided.

Overall, the evidence within this theme indicates that apprenticeship outcomes are strongly dependent on the existence of a clear, consistent, and well-resourced support structure. Without such a framework, both apprentices and mentors are left navigating unclear expectations and uneven levels of support. Addressing these structural shortcomings is therefore essential not only for successful EPA completion but also for ensuring apprentices can progress effectively and contribute meaningfully within their organizations.

Theme 3: Employer-provider relationship

The examination of the employer–provider dynamic within apprenticeship systems revealed several persistent weaknesses, particularly regarding the clarity of mentoring responsibilities and the communication of apprenticeship expectations. Apprentices repeatedly indicated that clearer coordination between stakeholders could have significantly improved both their understanding and overall experience. One participant emphasized the need for a more integrated system, stating, "I feel everything should be properly aligned between the organization and the university so that expectations flow consistently through both sides" [FG1 A2]. Another highlighted inconsistencies experienced early in their program, noting, "Over the course of my apprenticeship, I have had to move between three different colleges, and there was never a clear, consistent structure from the beginning, so expectations from both mentors and the program were never fully aligned" [FG2 A2]. This reflects broader concerns regarding a lack of standardization and coherence at the outset of apprenticeship pathways.

Mentors also identified gaps in the support provided by both employers and educational institutions, particularly in relation to understanding apprenticeship frameworks. One mentor suggested that a clearer understanding of academic expectations and terminology would enhance their ability to support apprentices effectively, stating, "It would really help if mentors had a clearer understanding of the type of work apprentices produce and the language used in their assignments so that we can ask more relevant and focused questions" [FG3 M3]. Another emphasized the importance of structured preparation for mentors, noting, "There needs to be stronger internal training for mentors, as well as a more formal induction process in collaboration with the university" [FG3 M1]. This highlights the need for more systematic preparation and improved communication pathways to strengthen mentoring effectiveness.

The complexity of apprenticeship frameworks was also identified as a key challenge. Mentors reported that the language and structural requirements of programs can be difficult to interpret and apply in practice. One mentor commented, "The information around apprenticeships should be made simpler and more accessible so that mentors can engage with it more effectively" [FG3 M1]. This view was reinforced by another mentor, who reflected on the gap between previous experiences and current expectations: "When you draw on your own experience of mentoring, you tend to rely on how things used to be done, but the current system introduces a much larger and more complex set of requirements, which means mentors need an updated understanding to support apprentices properly" [FG3 M1]. This suggests that mentoring approaches need to evolve in line with the changing structure of apprenticeship standards.

Across all participants, there was strong agreement on the need to strengthen mentoring systems by providing a clearer structure and greater consistency. Several suggestions focused on formalizing expectations and standardizing support processes. One apprentice proposed a more explicit framework for guidance, stating, "In a smaller organization like mine, having a clear written guide outlining what is expected from mentors and apprentices would make a big difference. If this had been provided from the start, it would have clarified both organizational and university expectations linked to the degree apprenticeship requirements" [FG2 A4]. Similarly, a mentor suggested increasing stability in mentor assignments, explaining, "In some cases, apprentices may have different mentors over time within the same organization, so having a consistent mentor assigned for a longer period could improve continuity and support" [FG3 M1].

The findings highlight the importance of developing a more structured and coordinated approach to employer–provider collaboration, particularly in relation to supporting apprentices through to EPA completion. The existing literature emphasizes the need for clearer communication and simpler requirements within apprenticeship systems [6, 19]. In addition, [13] and [16] stress the importance of clearer role definition and stronger alignment between stakeholders. This study indicates that these challenges remain largely unresolved, as both apprentices and mentors continue to experience uncertainty and inconsistency in practice.

Strengthening employer–provider relationships, simplifying apprenticeship frameworks, and establishing more consistent mentoring structures are therefore essential for improving apprenticeship effectiveness. As highlighted by [12], meaningful

collaboration between employers and educational providers is fundamental to creating supportive learning environments that enable both apprentices and mentors to succeed and support positive EPA outcomes.

Contributions and implications

This study makes a meaningful contribution by foregrounding the lived experiences of both apprentices and mentors within construction degree apprenticeships, offering detailed insight into how these relationships operate in practice. The findings indicate that, despite a series of regulatory reforms, limited progress has been made in addressing persistent structural challenges, particularly those related to organizational support, mentor capability, and the processes used for mentor selection. The evidence generated here advances this developing area of research and provides actionable implications for both employers and education providers. It highlights entrenched systemic constraints that extend beyond individual sectors and points to a broader need for sustained organizational investment in structured mentoring systems and well-developed support frameworks. The study further shows that apprentices frequently experience insufficient guidance, inconsistent feedback, and poorly aligned mentoring relationships—issues that align with earlier research in this field. Importantly, these challenges are not likely to be unique to construction but are also expected to appear in other apprenticeship-dependent sectors such as manufacturing, healthcare, and engineering, where similar structural pressures exist. Strengthening mentor preparation and enhancing employer engagement could therefore lead to substantial improvements in apprenticeship outcomes.

Within the broader context of increasing global interest in work-based learning models, the English apprenticeship system presents both opportunities and challenges [1]. Although it has been criticized for weaknesses in employer and mentor engagement, it nevertheless offers a relatively flexible and adaptable framework that can respond to diverse labor market needs. From an international perspective, these characteristics position it as a potentially influential model; however, addressing ongoing deficiencies is necessary to enhance its credibility and transferability. By reinforcing its strengths while directly addressing its limitations, the English system could evolve into an international benchmark for work-based education, provided that future policy development prioritizes consistent employer participation and strengthened mentoring structures.

Conclusion

Although mentoring is widely acknowledged as a central element of apprenticeship success, the relational and operational dynamics between mentors and apprentices remain insufficiently examined, particularly in sectors such as construction. This industry, characterized by fast-paced, unpredictable working environments, presents distinct challenges. Nevertheless, the core issues identified in this study—insufficient mentor knowledge, uneven support provision, and unclear guidance structures—are not confined to construction alone.

Insights from both apprentices and mentors currently engaged in programs reveal a shared recognition of the need for significant improvement, particularly in mentoring design, role clarity, and the consistency of support. These observations mirror findings from earlier studies, suggesting that long-standing systemic weaknesses have persisted despite successive policy reforms aimed at enhancing apprenticeship quality. This ongoing disconnect highlights the need for more proactive engagement from both providers and employers in addressing structural deficiencies.

Current completion trends further reinforce the urgency of these concerns. Without clearer frameworks and more effective support mechanisms, the overall effectiveness of apprenticeship pathways may continue to be compromised. This study therefore reinforces the need for targeted improvements, including enhanced mentor training, improved coordination between employers and providers, and more structured definitions of mentoring responsibilities. To achieve meaningful progress, employers and training providers must take a more active leadership role in implementing these changes, making effective use of the flexibility inherent in the English system while simultaneously addressing its persistent weaknesses. By clarifying expectations, simplifying requirements, and ensuring more consistent support, apprenticeship experiences can be significantly strengthened. These steps are essential for improving completion rates and achieving more effective outcomes for all stakeholders.

Limitations

All research designs have inherent limitations, which must be explicitly acknowledged. This study adopted a cross-sectional approach, capturing data at a single point in time, which may limit understanding of how experiences evolve longitudinally across different stages of apprenticeship progression. In addition, the relatively small sample size limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to a broader population, as the data were drawn from a single institution and program area.

However, despite these constraints, some degree of broader applicability can still be inferred from the findings, particularly in relation to the recommendations presented below, which may be relevant beyond the construction sector and potentially applicable in international contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this research, the following sections provide practice recommendations. Implementing changes to enhance apprenticeship programs requires a commitment to continuous improvement. By prioritizing mentor support, providing clearer guidance, and establishing consistent program structures, employers and providers could help address the underlying factors identified in the literature and throughout this study.

Recommendations for practice

The following recommendations are separated into sections to assist employers and providers in optimizing their mentoring initiatives.

Recommendations for employers

Employers should ensure that mentorship activities are integrated into broader workforce development strategies, with clear links to organizational priorities and strategic initiatives. This will allow resources to be allocated accordingly to support the program's success.

1. Employers should establish clear guidelines and expectations for mentors, including key performance indicators (KPIs). Support from training providers in creating these should be provided.
2. Employers should allocate sufficient time and resources to ensure mentors fulfill their mentorship responsibilities effectively.
3. To address the need for structure and guidance, employers should be encouraged to develop a formal mentorship guide or handbook. This resource should outline mentorship roles, responsibilities, and best practices, serving as a reference tool for mentors and apprentices throughout the apprenticeship program.
4. Employers should encourage mentors to share their experiences and challenges. Creating ways for mentors to voice their concerns, share best practices, and collaborate on innovative solutions could enhance the effectiveness and impact of mentorship over time.
5. Employers need to find a balance between recognizing the expertise of senior mentors and ensuring accessibility and approachability for apprentices.

Recommendations for providers

Based on the results of the study, a further six recommendations have been suggested for providers:

1. Providers should actively collaborate with employers to understand their specific needs, goals, and challenges regarding mentors in apprenticeship programs.
2. Providers should consider alternative ways to gather feedback from apprentices and stakeholders. This should encourage evaluating mentor performance regularly and creating strategies to support mentor excellence.
3. The creation of clear guidance for employers should include information on mentor selection criteria, communication expectations, and resources for mentor support.
4. Providers should consider creating mentorship handbooks, toolkits, and online resources to support mentors in their roles. Mentor forums facilitated by providers could also increase the sharing of best practices.
5. Coaches should play a proactive role in facilitating mentorship by including mentors in workshops, EPA activities, and mentor-focused support sessions.
6. Providers should consider working more closely with employers and include them in steering groups. Sharing more in-depth compliance information, including KPIs, could foster greater employer accountability for apprenticeship outcomes.

By deepening our understanding of mentors in degree apprenticeships, all stakeholders can contribute to the continual improvement of apprenticeship programs. This is significant for educators, policymakers, and industry stakeholders alike, as it directly affects the quality and efficiency of apprenticeship initiatives. Although implementing these changes may not guarantee an immediate increase in completion rates, they would create a more supportive environment for apprentices to succeed and create a model that can be emulated more widely, including internationally.

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