

Abstract for LTSE 2025 Conference

Title: A Sector in Crisis? Insights from how English Business and Management Apprenticeships have Weathered the Storm

Abstract:

English Business and Management apprenticeships have experienced a rapid transformation of their practice, management, and governance (Bravenboer, 2019; Mulkeen et al., 2019). Many of these innovations have been achieved through collaborative practices (Wenger et al., 2002). This paper reports on the experiences of apprenticeship leaders in fostering external partnerships and cultivating resilient learning communities in a volatile higher education (HE) landscape. With challenges including financial constraint (Griffiths & Wheeler, 2024), increasing regulatory scrutiny (OfS, 2023a), and rising stakeholder expectations, business schools mirror many of the systemic pressures encountered within the apprenticeship sector (Lester, 2020).

The research examines how business and management higher and degree apprenticeship teams have leveraged collaboration to innovate, adapt, and thrive, offering valuable lessons for traditional HE provision. Using an autoethnographic approach, we reflect on our experiences as apprenticeship leaders from diverse UK institutions to identify strategies that have enhanced resilience and student success. Three interconnected practices that have emerged across institutions are used to illustrate this: personalized learner engagement, proactive progress monitoring, and cross-stakeholder partnerships. Personalized entry processes—required by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA, 2024), yet which have evolved from the massified admissions practices of traditional HE—ensure programme fit and learner readiness, building trust between providers, employers, and learners (Quew-Jones, 2023). Novel and proactive models of educational governance, bolstered by intensive progress monitoring and a new model of learner coaching and mentoring (Horáčková et al., 2024), enable early intervention and contribute to improved retention rates and outstanding performance. Lastly, cross-stakeholder partnerships—through co-produced curricula and mutual trust—generate systemic intelligence and foster innovation that transcends institutional boundaries (Nawas & Edifor, 2024).

Our findings highlight the adaptability and collaborative ethos of the apprenticeship sector as a blueprint for HE institutions navigating similar constraints. The personalized frameworks and learner-centred approaches emerging from apprenticeships demonstrate measurable improvements in student outcomes, employer satisfaction, and operational efficiency (Smith et al., 2021a). These innovations, emerging in necessity to the resource-constrained yet highly regulated environment, offer actionable strategies for addressing HE's most pressing challenges, including skills gaps, retention, and employability outcomes (Rowe et al., 2016).

The paper contributes to the discourse on HE resilience, advocating for a shift from competitive isolation to cross-institutional collaboration and bottom-up innovation (Bravenboer, 2019). By embedding practices that prioritise student engagement, real-time progress monitoring, and external partnerships, HE providers can enhance their ability to respond to uncertainty while maintaining academic and operational excellence (Lester, 2020). We invite attendees to engage with our findings, providing feedback on the transferability of these practices to traditional degree provision and debating how collaborative networks might further support sector-wide innovation.

This research underscores that solutions to HE's challenges often reside within the sector itself. By embracing collaborative, reflective, and learner-focused approaches, Business Schools and broader HE institutions can not only weather the current storm but also drive positive outcomes for learners, employers, and society.

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