Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning

My employer requires a degree – recognition of prior learning as a legitimate, efficient national mechanism for progressing learners in work

Received 10 July 2025
Revised 6 August 2025
Accepted 23 August 2025

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Abstract

Purpose – We argue that the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and specifically the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) in degree apprenticeships (DAs) in England have challenged established norms providing innovative opportunities for fast-tracking mature learners by recognising their expertise, competencies and behaviours acquired through years of professional experience.

Design/methodology/approach – We use Neo-institutional Theory (NIT) to examine how the wider context for universities offering DAs has changed in the last decade and successfully challenged the academic versus vocational divide. We illustrate the challenges and opportunities afforded for APEL with three different approaches to APEL on a management undergraduate-level apprenticeship.

Findings – We argue that DAs provide essential social mobility and progression opportunities for older learners enabling them to use their expertise from work to accelerate their apprenticeship and that the regulatory drivers for DAs have impacted positively on the legitimacy of APEL in degree awards. We also note that the disconnect between the requirements of employers and the perceptions of government presents a barrier for older learners, effectively barring them from opportunities for career progression.

Originality/value – The paper takes an original approach to examining APEL within DAs using NIT. It moves beyond the discussion of how to do APEL to reflecting on the drivers shaping the opportunities and challenges in promoting this approach to RPL.

Keywords Workplace learning, Recognition of prior learning, Apprenticeship policy, Degree apprenticeship, Employer responsive provision, Informal and non-formal learning

Paper type Practitioner paper

Introduction

Degree apprenticeships (DAs) address areas of higher-level skill shortages, build individual and economic capacity and drive social mobility (Crawford-Lee and Moorwood, 2019; Nawaz *et al.*, 2023). They combine work with degree-level learning (undergraduate or postgraduate) and offer an unparalleled contribution to the inadequate part-time higher-education (HE) opportunities available to mature learners in England. For many mature students who require a degree for their career development, there is no alternative route. The recognition of prior learning (RPL), including for prior experience, is mandated in DAs, and the last decade has seen RPL embedded into England's higher and DA system (QAA, 2025) giving existing employees and their employers an efficient and effective progression route through HE. There

Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2042-390X
p-ISSN: 2042-3896
DOI 10.1108/HESWBL-07-2025-0272

are many barriers to the expansion of RPL in HE which is often seen as risky for individuals, academics and HE providers (Racit *et al.*, 2024). In this paper, we use theoretical concepts from Neo-institutional Theory (NIT) (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), to argue that over the last decade, DAs have challenged established norms in HE shifting what a degree is and what a student is and that these changes have legitimised and facilitated the award of academic credit for prior learning from work. We illustrate our argument with a discussion of the conditions that enable RPL for prior experience across three different university settings and the wider coercive forces that now limit access to older learners seeking recognition for their skills and experience.

Background

Mature students are particularly vulnerable to changes in the provision of part-time courses. The main reason they choose to study part-time is to allow them to continue to work and support themselves and their families (OfS, 2019) making them less geographically mobile and less able to take time out of work to study. Applicants seeking out part-time study opportunities are mainly aged 30 and over, with a higher proportion of women, often with caring responsibilities (Hubble and Bolton, 2022). Part-time student numbers in the UK HE collapsed by 50% after 2008/09 with funding reforms, including the introduction of student fees and loans, economic downturn and other policies potentially contributing to this dramatic shift (Hubble and Bolton, 2022). For a mature learner, there is a great deal of uncertainty and potentially limited returns on investment from undertaking a five- or six-year part-time degree funded by a student loan and the decline in demand has resulted in a decline in provision. However, as Hubble and Bolton (2022, p. 6) note:

> The decline in part-time students is more than a concern for individual students. Individuals tend to undertake part-time studies to improve their skills or to reskill for employment purposes. Part-time higher education can therefore create a more highly skilled workforce which benefits the whole economy and is essential to increase national productivity.

DAs provide an innovative system that responds to this challenge particularly in areas of higher-level skills shortages, with the largest numbers being in health, public services and care and business administration and law (Pullen, 2024). Degree apprentices are employees, and the majority are in employment prior to starting their apprenticeship (Smith, 2023). In January 2025, 66% of Level 6 starters on an undergraduate DA were over the age of 25 and a minority were new employees (GOV.UK, 2025a). Consequently, Pullen (2024, p.26), author of the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) report *Apprenticeships-a system built for adults*, notes that

> reforms to apprenticeships . . . have formalised a view of apprenticeships that is a job with substantial training rather than an introduction to the world of work . . . Employers want ways to train and retain talented staff, across all levels of their organisation, enabling them to grow and progress in a way which is beneficial to the individual and the organisation.

Degree Apprenticeships

The knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) required to achieve occupational competence and the mandated degree are set out in an occupational standard designed by a group of employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) known as a Trailblazer (GOV.UK, 2025b). The KSBs are taught on the degree and practised in the workplace melding together learning from the world of work and HE.

There is no debt burden for individuals. Employers with an annual pay bill of more than £3 million have contributed to the funding of the apprenticeship by an employer levy at a rate of 0.5% of their annual pay bill (HM Revenue and Customs, 2016) with an additional 10%

contribution from the government. However, this funding is in flux. The current government introduced the Growth and Skills Levy to replace the Apprenticeship Levy, with employers being asked to rebalance their funding for apprenticeships and invest in younger workers (GOV.UK, 2025c). Funding for Level 7 postgraduate DAs will be restricted to apprentices aged 16–21 from January 2026 (Phillipson, 2025; GOV.UK, 2025c).

Compliance with the funding rules for DAs (GOV.UK, 2025d) requires that each apprentice undergoes an RPL process. Funding can only be drawn down from the levy for new learning:

> 33. Where relevant prior learning and experience is identified, the provider must summarise the impact including whether, and by how much the apprenticeship content and price has been reduced. (DfE, 2025)

There are clear incentives for apprentices and employers in shortening a DA. Experienced apprentices are more likely to have significant responsibilities inside and outside of work that put additional pressures on their time to learn. It can be very difficult for employers to back-fill their positions to comply with the required time away from work set out for the apprenticeship.

DAs exist within a ladder of apprenticeship progression routes (Skills England, 2025). Many apprentices will have undertaken Levels 4 and 5 apprenticeships at work or other HE level qualifications which can be used for accelerated entry onto Level 6 undergraduate apprenticeships. This is one form of RPL. In this paper, we will refer to this process as the accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL). We have chosen instead to focus on the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) which includes "learning or competence gained from prior work experience, particularly where the apprentices is an existing employee . . ." (DfE, 2025). APEL is much less prevalent in HE than APCL with one of the barriers to its expansion being espoused concern for the organisation's credibility and standards (Racit *et al.*, 2024). Using NIT, we aim to show how the drivers inherent in the wider context of DAs have challenged universities to re-examine the legitimacy of APEL within HE and the how these drivers impact positively on the conditions that enable APEL.

APEL in England

RPL has a long history in England and was largely introduced by the Council for National Academic Awards in 1986, through the credit accumulation and transfer scheme in polytechnics, which were pre-1992 vocational HE institutions that subsequently became universities. This scheme included APEL and APCL at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Whilst APCL is widely utilised in HE, albeit not without issues (QAA, 2025), APEL has featured only as a niche activity despite government policy initiatives over the years. The launch of the two-year Foundation Degree in 2000 included APEL which was expected to be a means of accelerating progress for experienced learners. Nevertheless, an evaluation of FDs by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2004) found little evidence of the use of APEL. A 2004 UVAC report noted that after a 20-year history, very few students were awarded credits through APEL (Garnett *et al*., 2004). In 2007 the HE Funding Council for England declared APEL a national priority area in the context of provision developed with employers through the Workforce Development Programme. An evaluation of the programme made no specific reference to the use of APEL (Dickinson, 2008). APEL has been largely limited to innovative courses in work-based learning outside of mainstream HE (Garnett and Cavaye, 2015).

The knowledge question

A key consideration for APEL and work-based learning practitioners is the knowledge question and how to reconcile the different ways in which knowledge is constructed in different contexts. Cooper and Harris (2013) used the work of Bernstein (1996) to examine the knowledge question and considered the strength or weakness of knowledge boundaries,

permeability in different disciplines and the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge. They also referenced the work of Gamble (2009) who argues that vocational curricula draw on conceptual knowledge and empirical knowledge (from experience or practice) and that curriculum can either follow a strong conceptual logic or a strong contextual logic (according to what is relevant to the real world). These theories have implications for the translation and transfer of prior learning from practice and its relationship to the curriculum. Historically, learning outcomes have been considered a useful means of achieving this boundary-crossing, and the evidence-based portfolio is a widely used assessment method. However, APEL is often perceived by students and academics as more onerous and riskier than following a course of study with concerns expressed about organisational credibility and perceptions around academic standards (Browning, 2020). Where it works well it has been reported to improve self-confidence and access to training and education (Racit *et al.*, 2024). However, Colley *et al.* (2003) have criticised the enthusiasm with which advocates of APEL have embraced learning outcomes, arguing that the requirement that learning needs to be re-shaped in some way to meet the academic equivalent of the learning outcomes renders APEL onerous and difficult. In many cases the credit is not awarded for prior learning but for the value added through new learning by presenting the experience in accordance with certain academic conventions with distinct social values, cultural structures and language. Peters (2006) applied critical discourse analysis to demonstrate the ways in which learning outcomes can play a gatekeeping role in controlling the recognition of learning by the academy. She noted that learning outcomes embody a very specific language and become depersonalised and abstracted from context. Similarly, Allais (2012) argued that the clarity and explicitness of learning outcomes are dependent on their being interpreted against a prior understanding of what is required. CEDEFOP (2022) makes an interesting distinction between the intended learning outcomes which describe a traditional planned HE curriculum, for example, what a learner is able to do in terms of knowledge, skills, responsibility and autonomy; and achieved learning outcomes which describe learning within or without a formal context including knowledge, attitudes, skills and/or competences. This brief review shows that the conditions for APEL go beyond assessment methods to encompass curriculum, pedagogy and epistemology.

The regulatory drivers for DAs

The apprenticeship system has evolved with government policies introducing new drivers (Crawford-Lee, 2024). It is subject to political shifts and changes. Prior to the introduction of DAs, the responsibility for regulating standards in HE rested primarily with the OfS. Table 1 shows the additional bodies in the DA policy arena and how these have changed.

Conventionally, auditing and quality assurance in HE is monitored and reported at the programme and institutional level, with a focus on benchmarks, league tables and institutional-level comparisons. In contrast bodies such as Ofsted provide a focus on support for individual learners. Funding rules requires that the starting point of each apprentice is evaluated through an Initial Assessment of the apprentice's skills and learning, including RPL and that their individual development is monitored in relation to their starting point. Consequently, the regulatory framework set out in Table 1 represents a significant shift from established norms in HE. We will go on to discuss how this shift in the wider context impacts APEL. Using the lens of NIT, we argue that these changes have the potential to create new opportunities for APEL, the mature learner and their employer.

Neo-institutional Theory

NIT describes how institutions interact with one another and with society (Ansell, 2021). Institutions in NIT are not simply individual organisations but the "... the rules, norms and ideologies of the wider society" which are reduced to a limited and narrow range of

Table 1. Regulatory bodies for degree apprenticeships

Locus of responsibility	*Responsible body*
1. Overall accountability for all aspects of apprenticeship programmes, policy and strategy including the allocation of funding and funding rules	*1. Originally the Department for Education (DfE).* This role was transferred in April 2026 to the Department for Work and Pensions with the DfE retaining responsibility for HE
2. Apprenticeship standards development, review and approval	*2. Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE)* (Skills England from June 2025.)
3. The single body responsible for the quality assurance of apprenticeship training at all levels	*3. Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)*
4. Quality of qualifications in the Register of Regulated Qualifications and non-integrated apprenticeship assessment.	*4. Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)*
5. Sets out the conditions of registration for quality and standards in English higher education and minimum standards for student outcomes. Assesses the quality of apprenticeship assessments for integrated higher and degree apprenticeships	*5. Office for Students (OfS)*

Source(s): Authors' own work

legitimising options (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983). These options drive a shared reality which culturally constrains actors and organisations within the institutional context (Wiseman and Baker, 2006) despite the autonomy or competitive relationship they have. Fundamentally, it is not easy to break away from established norms in the HE institution.

NIT makes visible how organisations interact and change under the drivers of wider processes and contextual factors and in turn influence and change them (Peters, 2019). Underpinning these drivers is the need for organisations to survive, not primarily through technical efficiency but through legitimacy (Scott, 1983). By seeming rational, through the lens of the institution, the individual organisation can gain resources, reduce accountability and be socially accepted within the context of that institution (Greenwood, 2008). From an NIT perspective we argue that DAs have challenged established institutional norms that legitimise HE–what a degree is, the way we teach, how we assess and what a student is.

In NIT several factors drive the process of conformity and isomorphism of group norms. The first is regulative or coercive isomorphic forces; these include the political and the organisation's drive to obtain legitimacy. Indicators can consist of rules, laws and sanctions and softer non-governmental regulations. The HE sector is very much driven by the need for legitimacy in its activities as a degree-awarding body. Table 1 represents a potential shift in these coercive isomorphic forces in relation to DAs with new approaches to compliance, rules and sanctions being central to the delivery of DAs.

Secondly, there are cognitive or mimetic isomorphic forces. These incorporate the taken-for-granted, with organisations within the field dealing with uncertainty by imitating the behaviour of other organisations. Legitimacy in HE is driven by attention to league tables and comparisons with other organisations. Consequently, there is a great deal of similarity between individual university policies, regulations and ways of designing and delivering degree provision across the sector. The introduction of new compliance and quality assurance bodies shown in Table 1 over the last decade have driven widespread changes to the design and delivery of degrees at the organisational level, as universities seek to imitate HE providers with positive inspection and audit outcomes for DAs.

Lastly are the normative or professionalization forces generating legitimacy, such as certification and accreditation. Academic promotion structures and awards focus on traditional forms of knowledge acquisition with research pathways being a highly prized career structure

even within the non-research-intensive universities. DAs prize professional practice and situated, work-based knowledge. The alignment of academic and vocational learning is central to delivery of this type of award. New roles have emerged, which are key to the success of DAs and straddle the worlds of practice and academia potentially opening the way for valuing different forms of knowledge.

Sharing practice

The authors were part of a group of academics involved in the design and delivery of DAs with a particular interest in APEL. Three members had successfully developed APEL routes for experienced learners into the later stages of a Level 6 degree apprenticeship in management and the other two wished to do so in the future. We shared approaches and have here identified the themes that emerged. We set out below the different approaches to APEL but our interest in this paper is not to focus on the different assessment methods. Instead, using the lens of neo-institutionalism, we aim to analyse wider conditions that enabled these APEL practices and unpack what has shifted in the wider institution of HE. This is an exploratory paper without claims to generalisation, but we would argue that it highlights some interesting findings relating to the shifting isomorphic and normative forces within HE which impact positively on the conditions for APEL on DAs.

Three approaches to APEL

Two universities had different entry points on the degree for apprentices ranging from Level 4 (year 1 full-time equivalent) to Level 6 (year 3 full-time equivalent) with most learners joining after Level 4. The third university had an entry point halfway through the degree programme for apprentices with prior learning. Most apprentices on each of the programmes joined with APEL. The length of the remaining apprenticeship varied in time depending on the design of the degree and size of the modules to be studied. The apprentices following these accelerated routes performed well with high levels of attainment.

Each institution had developed a different APEL assessment approach in line with their university RPL policies and regulations.

The skills scan and RPL are a requirement of the Initial Assessment. The skills scan sets out the KSBs for the relevant occupational standard (GOV.UK, 2025d). These KSBs are mapped to the degree programme. An initial assessment of prior learning against the KSBs is made by the apprentice on the skills scan, with support from the employer and agreed by the provider at the start of the programme as part of the RPL processes.

Findings

Although the APEL processes in Table 3 were different, we have noted below some common themes. The observations and insights are effectively ethnographic and as such will contain bias and bounded thinking from the writers. We accept the limitations of this position but hope that some of these discussions may resonate or prompt discussion and potentially open up APEL to a wider range of organisations and individuals.

Taking an NIT perspective, these themes reflected a move away from traditional norms that legitimise HE provision in ways that enabled APEL. We will explain each of these observations below in terms of what has changed for a DA and how that change impacts on the conditions for APEL.

Curriculum specifically designed for demonstrating occupational competence

The 360 credit honours degree is the central legitimising aspect of a Level 6 degree apprenticeship. The degree is required to achieve occupational competence. It is possible when designing a DA to take an existing degree programme written for the school leaver and map it to

the KSBs. In essence nothing has changed. Subject areas on traditional degrees are generally defined and partitioned in ways that have not been designed to support APEL. However, in the case of institutions A–C, the curriculum had been designed using the KSBs to write learning outcomes and inform a curriculum that built on prior learning. These learning outcomes describe achieved learning (competence) in addition to planned learning (CEDEFOP, 2022). This had resulted in the design of specific RPL routes designed to meet the needs of the experienced learner, looking forward to what they need to learn to achieve full occupational competence.

Valuing experiential learning and assessing contextualised capabilities as defined in the occupational standard

Universities are encouraged to promote authentic assessments to teach skills for work. For the novice learner on a traditional degree, this will generally take the form of simulation. On DAs, experiential learning pedagogies are valued and legitimised. Assessment is situated and embodied with integration of theory and practice in real-world settings, impactful and context driven. Competencies are practised; projects are implemented. Therefore, the learning that apprentices brought with them through the APEL process aligned naturally with the learning on the degree programme. The KSBs provided a bridge between the world of work and the academic context facilitating dialogue between providers, apprentices and employers. Importantly, what constitutes knowledge encompassed professional, situated work-based learning. Knowledge boundaries had greater proximity to the point of application with a strong contextual logic (Gamble, 2009). Experienced apprentices were valued as knowing individuals. Apprentices were able to translate and transfer their knowledge from the workplace into academic credits through the APEL process and tutors, familiar with the work context, could design with confidence appropriate APEL assessment processes (Pokorny, 2025).

Active partnership with employers

DAs require a tripartite relationship between the apprentice, HE provider and employer. Academic trust with employers and working relationships are legitimised in DAs in new ways. No longer at the fringes of the process, the employer is a key actor in the design of the occupational standard and in the selection and development of the apprentices. They are responsible for recruitment and active engagement with employers at the admissions stage was a feature of all three APEL examples. Employers were key participants in the recruitment process, matching different entry point on the apprenticeship to their employee talent pool. Employers provided the market for apprenticeships changing what an applicant is.

Clear entry points for cohorts of learners

Governmental institutional legitimacy of 18-year-old starters in HE has limited institutional engagement with part-time and mature learners. From a mature applicant's perspective, entry points couched in terms of the traditional school leaver may highlight a lack of alignment with institutional norms-restricting applications and the othering of experience and a view that "I don't fit," "I don't look/sound like a student" (Quew-Jones, 2024). We have seen from the statistics above that on a DA, the mature learner is in the majority. This also changes the norm for what a student is. Universities can be very alienating places for mature learners. Having a visible entry point that values prior learning and a peer group of "people like me" is an important legitimising aspect of a developing a positive student identity promoting APEL applications and a sense of belonging in HE.

Normalised subject areas and scope as a barrier to APEL

The way universities structure their subject areas is well defined and generally based on a quite segmented model. Subjects are separated into clean manageable areas. This is, of course, a sensible and effective way of managing an organisation, but in relation to meeting a work-based

apprenticeship standard, this can cause issues. A workplace will, by nature, be incredibly diverse and have topics and subject areas overlapping and interconnected. The KSBs developed through an apprenticeship standard can be very wide reaching, and relying on clean subject area modules can limit the opportunities for assessing experiential learning from the workplace. The approaches set out in Table 2 relied on more holistic approaches to assessing prior learning, for example referencing the skills scan, KSBs, level descriptors and programme level learning outcomes to assess APEL rather than mapping to individual modules (Pokorny *et al*., 2017).

Quality assurance, agency and APEL

Rather than being a "cultural dope…" or passive receptor (Suddaby, 2013), academic development teams can break away from the institutional norms. This is referred to as institutional entrepreneurship (Mutch, 2007). Institutional entrepreneurs actively develop and create the institution from within. Developing new APEL routes into DAs by the development team is an example of this agency.

The institutional change agents were not just restricted to academic teams. A critical organisational element in supporting change and adaptation to new institutional drivers for DAs were the organisations' central quality assurance team. Their close relationship to the changing compliance and quality assurance environment set out in Table 1 and willingness to adapt was essential in enabling entrepreneurial change. Combining academic, organisational and quality teams together in accepting and changing institutional norms was a critical element in facilitating the new and varied approaches in Table 2, enabling APEL and multiple entry points within degree programmes.

Table 2. Routes into the management degree apprenticeship

	Entry level (4–6)	Maximum length of programme in months
University A	Beginning at level 4	54
	Beginning at level 5	42
	Beginning at level 6	30
University B	Beginning at level 4	48
	Beginning at level 5	31
	Beginning at level 6	24
University C	Beginning halfway through level 5 No level 4 entry was available	24

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3. DA APEL processes

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
University A	• Skills Scan	• Assessed Interview • Employer verification	• Enrolment onto degree apprenticeship
University B	• Skills scan • Pre-selection interviews by employer and university	• Written professional statement	• Enrolment onto degree apprenticeship
University C	• Assessed Interview • Skills Scan • Written career profile	• Three workshops • Three written narratives with evidence	• Enrolment onto degree apprenticeship

Source(s): Authors' own work

Discussion

Together, these findings point to the institutional drivers in Table 1, promoting new ways of thinking about what a degree is and what a learner is. Dimaggio and Powell (1983) have noted the difficulty in breaking away from institutional norms. However, we have observed a shift with the introduction of DAs and a breaking away from the conventional model of academic awards, and the positioning of the student as a novice learner. The drivers for what is "normal" and what is legitimate changed in our shared practices in ways that are not visible from looking at the methods of APEL assessment alone. Barriers identified in the review of APEL literature above were addressed in new and meaningful ways that enabled APEL. What constitutes knowledge had shifted. Work-based knowledge is a central legitimising concept on DAs. Theories and concepts straddled the world of work and academia providing recognition across different sites of knowledge production. This supports the translation and transfer of prior learning from work to academia (Pokorny, 2025a). The purpose of a DA is to achieve occupational competence. The occupational standard and KSBs inform curriculum design and learning outcomes with a focus on assessing contextualised capabilities providing permeable boundaries (Cooper and Harris, 2013). Quality assurance processes support this approach, and these capabilities are visible in the workplace, on the degree and in APEL. Experienced apprentices are valued as knowing individuals both by employers and HE providers. Assessment methods on DAs include professional dialogues, narratives and portfolios to enable evidencing and articulation of learning from work in ways that mirror assessment methods in APEL.

Governmental institutional definitions of apprentices

So far in the discussion, we referred to the institution of HE as consisting of universities and HE providers. A separate and higher-level institutional area introduced earlier in the paper is that of governmental thinking about part-time/mature student education and the resultant impact on education policy. How the government defines apprentices has been, and continues to be, an area of disagreement and debate. Within this higher-order institution, the normalised and legitimised view of what constitutes an apprentice is a young person or school lever. The post experience 30, 40, 50-year-old, who perhaps never had the opportunity to undertake high-level education, does not appear to fit within this socially constructed definition of an apprentice.

At the time of writing, the government has confirmed that from September 2026 it will no longer fund Level 6 management degree apprenticeships hence restricting APEL access. The background noise or pressure as indicated earlier in this paper, is an institutional norm, such that where any programme deviates from a focus on school leavers, it has less legitimacy. For example, a DA programme that is focused on 18-year-olds is more institutionally legitimate, aligned or valid, an assumption not based on objective fact and student numbers but on a constructed definition. Higher level entry may well exist in DA policy and regulations but the pressure to focus on Level 4 entry remains, effectively acting as a de-limiting force in developing APEL.

The employer's as institutional drivers

A separate and distinct set of forces come from the employers as noted by Pullen (2024). Many of the mature post-experience apprentices are participating in the programmes to gain a degree award (Garnett and Reynier, 2025). Informal discussions with students in class have revealed that yes, they are interested in and hugely benefiting from the KSBs which will support and enhance their expertise and approach to work, but a key underpinning driver is the legitimacy gains, within their institution, of a formal honours degree. Many have extensive experience and a high level of skill within their chosen profession or role, but they can observe that the work environment has evolved around them. New staff with formal accreditation in the form of a degree are progressing more quickly. When this group started on their employment journey, a

degree may not have been a requirement, but the landscape has changed. It can be argued that there is now a strong organisationally driven isomorphic pressure to obtain a high-level qualification. A qualification will enable employees to retain their positions, develop and be promoted to align with the institutional norms within their organisational field.

In effect this can be translated as the employers requiring mature experienced staff to have degrees. The individuals themselves may also want this opportunity, but it is the norms of the employer's institution that are driving that demand. So, although we may observe the drive to participate in a DA as coming from individuals, this is incorrect, the landscape the individual works within demands it. This is more clearly observable in large, structured and more bureaucratic organisations where the organisational value of a degree or higher-level qualification is easier to quantify than experience. For example, a degree in management can be added to a job description in a simple and easily actionable manner, and the applicant either has a degree or does not. Requesting and then defining experience with the sector is more of a dialogue and requires a narrative and as such becomes that much harder for the organisation to quantify and the individual to express.

In regulated professions, for example in healthcare, a degree is required for professional registration. This is a barrier for existing healthcare support workers and assistant healthcare practitioners seeking promotion into a regulated role. Our argument would be that experienced staff have an equal and valid need for equitable level qualification to new starters and any prior disadvantages these groups had can be rectified through the DA programmes.

This could be referred to as a value disconnect (Figure 1) or an institutional disconnection of the perception of actors within fields.

The legitimacy drivers and socially constructed perception of degrees by the business are not shared with the government. In fact, it can be argued that each has an entirely different institutionally driven or socially constructed view of what is valuable. This is aligned with the institutional logics perspective wherein each institution has a "... set of assumptions and values, usually implicit, about how to interpret organisational reality, what constitutes appropriate behaviour, and how to succeed" (Battilana *et al.*, 2017, p. 136). There is a mismatch between the employers and government realities around the age drivers of apprenticeships.

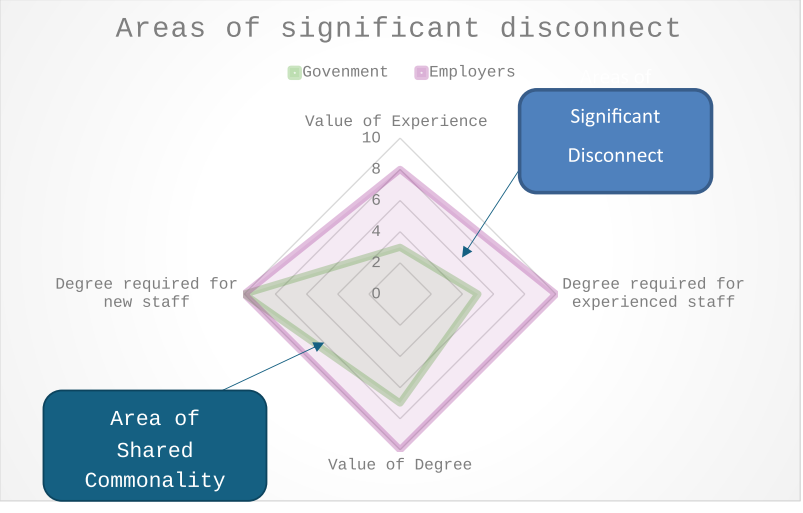

Figure 1. Areas of significant disconnect (a notional graph of value as a function of funding and focus). **Source (s)**: Authors' own work

Figure 1 is a notional graph exploring four areas. If we look to the left, we can observe that both the employers (blue) and the government (green) endow a degree, for new starters, as accepted and legitimised need, there is agreement. To the right of the radar diagram, it could be argued that the rhetoric and funding arguments currently being made by government imply that a degree for experienced staff is not legitimate. However, employers observing what is legitimate and required in their organisations have a different view and observe a degree for experienced staff as being essential for progression.

The vertical axis explores how long-term experience and a degree itself is valued, using government rhetoric, funding and debate as a gauge. We appreciate that this is inaccurate and purely notional but would like to make the point that institutionally employers very much value degrees and experience combined, whereas the funding focus of government noted earlier in this paper seems to move away from supporting those with relevant experience and accrediting their prior learning with a degree.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have observed the catastrophic decline in part-time degree opportunities for mature learners. This has implications at the level of society and for the individual. Undergraduate education is largely targeted at the school-leaver. During the last decade, DAs have provided an innovative response to this decline. Most apprentices on these programmes are in work at the start of their apprenticeship and are over the age of 25. DAs require RPL with benefits to apprentices and employers. However, RPL and particularly APEL have conventionally been a marginal activity in English HE. Reported barriers to its widespread use include concerns about academic standards and the legitimacy of accrediting prior experiential learning in an academic programme (Raciti *et al*., 2024).

Using NIT to examine the conditions for APEL in three universities, we have argued that there has been a significant shift from the historical position we set out above. Instead of piecemeal APEL initiatives located within existing social structures, the policy drivers for DAs have resulted in shifts in curriculum, assessment and delivery models legitimising knowledge from work and in work within degree programmes. This has changed what a degree is and what a student is in ways that supporting the conditions for APEL, promoting fast-track programmes for experienced learners.

We would also argue that our observations of organisational legitimacy drivers within employer institutions demonstrate that many employees require degrees. This is both for new starters and for experienced professionals and is key to addressing labour market skills shortages. Different students with different levels of experience require programmes that are modified to their needs. Individualised education that focuses on the development of the student is far more effective than any one-stop shop for delivering learning.

With this in mind developing programmes that accredit the experience of mature professionals is pedagogically appropriate and a significant outcome of the last decade of apprenticeship policy. Validating the individual's experience through APEL not only enables the delivery of more efficient shorter programmes which align with the commercial needs and restraints of any organisation. The approach also synchronises perfectly with the socially constructed underpinnings of DAs, wherein knowledge is situated and contextualised, not generic. The unique expertise of experienced professionals is then translated and framed into credited elements of progress which unite the two worlds of work and learning perfectly.

There is a danger that the disconnect between employers' needs and government perceptions will result in an inequity in opportunity, in effect writing off older learners. Those that missed or did not require a degree for progress in their early career and have then gone on to be highly experienced find themselves up against a glass ceiling and could be further marginalised and neglected. There is no viable alternative available for them. RPL reinforces the value of a DA to adult learners. It makes the process of acquiring a degree, already a far more efficient mechanism than the traditional undergraduate courses, even more efficient and

effective for employers, employees and funders. We understand that APEL will not be appropriate for all learners, but we have argued here that APEL routes are a legitimate feature of DAs.

There are implications here for practitioners. Programme teams will be at different stages of their apprenticeship journey, and many will have no experience of APEL and be understandably cautious. APEL itself is a practice and this paper aims to develop understanding of the practice by showing how the wider DA drivers go beyond funding compliance, to support the conditions for APEL. Firstly, APEL assessment methods are legitimised through new approaches to curriculum design, the assessment of contextualised capabilities and active partnerships with employers; secondly to recognise that the agency inherent in developing new routes extends to quality assurance teams who are key actors in implementing DAs.

There are also implications for policy makers and employers. APEL enables an effective and efficient mechanism for progressing experienced individuals through to a degree. It is fundamentally a perfect alignment of the principles on which DAs have been developed that KSBs and effectively experience are all critical to a functioning organisation. This should be at the heart of any apprenticeship system going forward. It will be interesting, or perhaps heartbreaking, to see how the wider policy debates around funding impact on these older learners in the future and whether Level 6 degree apprenticeships can retain their position as an innovative system for adults and a way for employers to retain and progress their talented staff.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank our colleagues Dr Sarah Bloomfield (The Open University), Dr Joanna Booth (Nottingham Trent University) and Dr Victoria Rosamond (University of Derby) for debating, sharing and promoting APEL practice with us. This paper would not have been possible without that collaboration.

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