Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Degree Apprentices' Lockdown Survey: Reflections on Working and Studying from Home

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: During the first UK lockdown period, degree apprentices in two universities in Scotland were invited to complete a short qualitative survey with their reflections on starting to work and study from home. They were encouraged to complete the survey once a week for four weeks, from the end of April 2020. The survey asked some basic questions about the apprentices, their jobs and courses, followed by four reflective questions asking them to identify the challenges they faced in working and studying that week and how they had resolved or begun to address those challenges. Boundary and border theories were used to orient the initial analysis. The apprentices' main challenges centred on the lack of structure, while three domains (home, work, and study) competed for their attention. Their experiences diverged from each other, due to their diverse work and family contexts, and rarely resembled contemporary stereotypes of young students.

Paper:

Introduction

Degree apprentices (DAs) are employees, working 80% of their time in the workplace and studying for 20% on-campus or remotely. The impact of Covid-19 restrictions on these students provides crucial information about implementation of apprenticeship degrees, plus insights relevant to on-campus students and staff. On 26th March 2020, the UK Government mandated non-essential workplaces to close. A furlough scheme was introduced for employees who could not work from home. Universities moved teaching online. Some assessments were cancelled, with pass marks; other assessments moved online. In this context, many DAs needed to adjust to working and studying in their homes, losing the previous locational distinction of these domains, as well as face-to-face contact with colleagues, lecturers, and fellow students. Some were furloughed, disrupting work-based learning plans. Some continued to work on site, facing additional fears and challenges.

Work/ family border theory (Clark, 2000) focuses on balancing the two domains of work and family, acknowledging their interconnections, by looking at the notional border between them. Traditionally this border is both physical and temporal, but permeated by emotions, technologies, and need. Boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, 2000) covers similar ground, focusing on *transitions* between domains. These two theories together (cf. Park et al. 2020) help us to understand the difficulties of suddenly working and studying from home, and potential actions to improve the

situation. Border and boundary-crossers (our DAs) try to maintain the necessary integrity and permeability of three domains: work, family, and study; domain members (e.g., family, employers, lecturers) can help.

Methodology

A month into lockdown, DAs in two universities were invited to complete a qualitative online survey (Braun et al., 2020), ideally once a week for four weeks. The survey asked introductory questions, such as age, course and work status, then four reflective questions:

- What challenge(s) did I face in working this week?
- How did I (try to) resolve or begin to address these challenges?
- What challenge(s) did I face in studying from home this week?
- How did I (try to) resolve or begin to address these challenges?

Responses were grouped by participant and anonymised. Data was coded using concepts from border and boundary theories; then coded inductively to describe the content more comprehensively. Themes were iteratively developed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2020) aiming to derive a rich account, based on the DAs' heterogeneous experiences and perspectives (Braun et al. 2020).

Results

64 DAs posted 93 responses. See Table 1 for participants' age, course, and work mode.

Of the themes identified, three are noted here: *lack of structure*; *three competing domains*; *very different contexts*. *Lack of structure* describes the confusion as work lost definition along with location; DAs missed the transitions involved in going to work and the co-motivation of shared enterprise with colleagues in the same space. DAs recreated structure by writing schedules for themselves; defining office spaces in their home; and adding transition rituals, such as a walk before work.

Three domains —Family, Work, Study — competed for the apprentices' time and attention, also for space and sometimes technology. Each domain was also affected by the pandemic. Border controllers (like family members, employers, and lecturers) could help with conflicts. For example, children made "do not disturb" signs; employers emphasised flexible working; lecturers created open book assessments, that ran over days.

The apprentices' *very different contexts* made a huge difference to the level of challenge they experienced. Work increased for those who had been in their job longer, whereas work decreased for those new to their role, reflecting Lave and Wenger's concept of central versus peripheral domain membership (1991). Furloughed staff gained spare time, whereas workload increased for those covering for furloughed staff, sometimes displacing study entirely. While working from home created technical challenges, it increased workloads for those working on IT helpdesks. Work-based learning processes were disrupted by changing roles or overwhelmed by workloads. While some exams were replaced with an ungraded pass, others moved online, creating particular stress for those with young children and limited space.

Insights

The findings echo our previous work (e.g. Fabian et al. 2021), which records the DAs' very different experiences, especially in relation to their role and workload. Understanding these contexts is essential to supporting the apprentices. This study highlights the importance of the apprentices' family and colleagues in facilitating both work and study, essential in terms of work definition and motivation, as well as implementation. Finally, many of these factors are shared by on-campus students, though often missing from stereotypes of young students.

References:

Table 1: Participants' characteristics (attributes)

Age:	18 or under	19 to 21	22 to 25	26 to 30	31 to 40	Over 40	**Total**
	4	11	15	10	17	7	**64**
Course (DA):	Cyber Security	Data Science	IT Management for Business	Software Development	Civil Engineering	Early Years & Childcare	
	22	5	14	12	4	7	**64**
Year:	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year			
	29	15	17	3			**64**
Work Mode:	Furloughed	Working from home	Working on site	Mixed			
	5	53	4	2			**64**

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