

## The best of both worlds? The working lives of Degree Apprentices in England

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### Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

### Abstract

Degree apprentices are emergent actors within UK workplaces and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) since the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships in 2015. In the context of a growing policy narrative around the usefulness of degree apprenticeships to working lives, the future of employment and social mobility, research about them is developing. However, there is limited focus on the journey of these unique actors, how they position themselves within the worlds of Higher Education and employment, and the possibilities they consider for their future selves. Hence, this paper offers a theoretical and empirical contribution as we draw on the 'space of authoring' from Figured Worlds theory to explore how a cohort of degree apprentices author their experiences and consider the impact of the Degree Apprenticeship on their working lives. We argue that exploring the journey of these early pioneers can offer useful insights for future applicants, employers, policy-makers and HEIs.

### Full paper

Since the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships in 2015, provision is increasingly evident across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England. Alongside a growing policy narrative around their usefulness to working lives and the future of employment, critique of their role in social mobility is emergent. Despite argued as '*a powerful tool for social mobility*', a majority of degree apprentices

are not from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission, 2021:xxiv). Casey and Wakeling (2020) reported that degree apprenticeships appear discounted as somewhat unfamiliar and risky by those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with those from middle-class backgrounds more likely to adopt this route. Degree apprenticeships are argued as not yet widespread, with tensions such as '*deep-seated cultural stereotypes and misconceptions associated with apprenticeships*' presenting in discussions/attitudes towards them (Newton et al, 2019:29). Hence, research around identity, motivation and belonging is beginning to emerge (e.g. Konstantinou and Miller, 2020; Mulkeen et al, 2019). Our paper is situated in this space as we focus on the journey of degree apprentices and their perspectives.

Arguably, dominant discourses of higher education, employability and working life have 'narratives' which underscore how individuals construct meaning, with major 'narratives' of mobility and transformation (e.g. 'rags to riches') often associated with the 'public story of higher education'(Christie et al., 2020, p.240). Given the focus on individual subjectivities appears limited across research on degree apprenticeships, particularly when concepts such as 'social mobility' are in play, we argue that vivid accounts of self, learning and work are useful in critically exploring degree apprentices' experiences. Holland et al's (1998) Figured Worlds is a social practice theory that places emphasis on activity and the interaction of actors in specific contexts, with 'the space of authoring' a particularly useful analytical tool that gives space to 'voice' and 'heteroglossia' (how people orchestrate dialogically competing 'narratives') to facilitate the critical exploration of mundane/small transformations. Although a dense theoretical framework, we argue this lens is useful in theorising how a cohort of degree apprentices demonstrate agency in real-life contexts as they respond to conflicting voices within the wide discourse of learning and employment. We draw on qualitative data across a 2-year period with 22 degree apprentices as we explore the following questions:

1. What is the experience of learning and work during degree apprenticeship (DA)
2. What is the impact of a degree apprenticeship on working life from the DA

Emergent findings illustrate the degree apprenticeship (DA) as a positive experience in relation to career outcomes and productivity, with a strong sense of agency emerging from this cohort of degree apprentices. Indeed, pragmatism, confidence and ambition came through strongly in contrast to a 'junior' figure culturally narrativized as one without much autonomy in the workplace. This juxtaposition appeared in the backdrop of an interesting plot-line of being 'on a quest' as a kind of 'pioneer' experiencing 'the best of both worlds' on 'a road less travelled'. Their stories also went beyond a DA as a way to escape graduate debt and the employability discourse of 'university bad... employment good' (Christie et al., 2020). The cohort rejected enduring societal narratives that posit a degree as a traditional full-time 18-21 year-old experience, whilst privileging real-life work experience as a greater asset than what is taught at university. Nonetheless, there was a sense of pride in 'making it' into university, but also a lack of belonging to that world. This positioned a degree apprentice as a somewhat liminal identity not yet established with status in the HE world in relation to a 'student' or 'graduate' identity claim. However, this cohort are also arguably distinct from traditional HE students as they are already 'employable' given their established status in the employment world. They were also localised and quite rooted to home and family, thus illuminating geographic mobility as a potential further influence. Questions are raised as to how much their positive DA outcomes are influenced by their intrinsic abilities and employment experience in addition to the input of the DA.

Overall, our analysis raises questions as to whether those who are local and confident consider a DA as a place they could belong, and whether employers are 'backing winners' and making 'a safe bet' on who they recruit. This has implications for future apprentices, HEIs, policymakers and employers, particularly in relation to recent arguments around the lack of socioeconomic diversity in DA participation. Therefore, a Figured Worlds analysis raises important questions around who degree apprentices are, how they position themselves, and what factors may influence their DA journey.

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