

# 124 Investing in degree apprenticeships: Analysing experiences through Conservation of Resources Theory

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## Research Domains

Technical, Professional and Vocational Higher Education (TPV)

## Abstract

Degree apprentices have reported finding work-life-study balance challenging. This study uses the Theory of Conservation of Resources (COR) to investigate the resources invested and gained by apprentices in the achievement of their goal of a degree while working. Interviews with final year apprentices (n=27) reveal the potential for apprentices to gain from their investment, even before they complete their degrees. COR Theory guides a Framework Method analysis. The findings indicate where more efficient involvement and investment, for example by workplace mentors, is rewarded with resource gain. Employers also gain resources, such as project outputs with the potential to save time and money. This situated perspective provides a new context in which to consider recent policy developments around graduate apprenticeships in Scotland, such as embedding Fair Work First principals. Our findings raise concerns for degree apprenticeship policy developments in England, such as reducing the minimum level of required off-the-job training.

## Full paper

### Introduction

In the UK, apprenticeship degrees were introduced from 2017, to increase productivity and social mobility (QAA, 2019). Apprentices are employed, with time away from work ring-fenced for higher education (HE) study (c.20%) and significant, assessed work-based learning. As apprentices are salaried and their HE fees are paid (Powell, 2023), they can complete their degrees without building up debt (QAA, 2019), widening access to the debt-averse and to those with commitments such as dependent families. Employers fund the apprenticeships through paying a Levy (Powell, 2023); influence the frameworks which govern the contents of the degrees; recruit apprentices and provide them with workplace mentors (Smith et al., 2023).

Degree and graduate apprenticeships are governed by evolving policies in England and Scotland, respectively, aiming to balance the needs of employers, apprentices, and “training providers”, such as universities. Policies stem from skills strategies which aim to increase the number of appropriately-skilled graduates, especially in key areas, such as Technology (SDS, 2023), but also inclusive and sustainable economic growth (Scottish Government, 2021).

### Conservation of Resources Theory

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory arose from a desire to improve employee wellbeing by conceptualising and modelling workplace experiences, with the aim of reducing workplace stress (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011). The theory’s basic premise is that individuals are motivated to acquire resources that help them to achieve their goals, organise their lives, and support personal development. Thus resources (psychological, social, physical, and situational) are things that people value in the pursuit of their goals. *Intrinsic resources* are valued as ends in themselves, while *instrumental resources* act to achieve positive outcomes and/or attain new resources (Singh et al., 2019). Resources can be acquired through self-development and increased status, while resource loss causes strain (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The *resource caravan* principal identifies that people and organisations with more resources are better placed to invest resources and gain more (Hobfoll, 2011). For example, Singh et al. (2019) use COR theory to understand the impact of coworker resources: coworker support and healthy coworker exchanges support employee development and performance, which, following the resource caravan principle, helps in the attainment of new resources, such as promotion. In our research, COR is used to frame our analysis of data from interviews with

apprentices in order to understand the balances and challenges of resource investment and gain towards their degree.

### Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online with graduate apprentices (n=27) in their final year of Business or Computing programmes at a Scottish university, in 2021-2023. Interviewees were volunteers; interviews lasted about 40 minutes and explored the apprentices' experience of the degree apprenticeship, especially the integration between work and study and role of workplace mentors. Interview transcripts were analysed via the Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013), coding and summarising text according to categories derived from COR theory, regarding apprentices / employers / university investing / gaining resources towards achieving the goal of graduating. Findings are derived from an overview of the resulting Framework Matrix.

### Findings

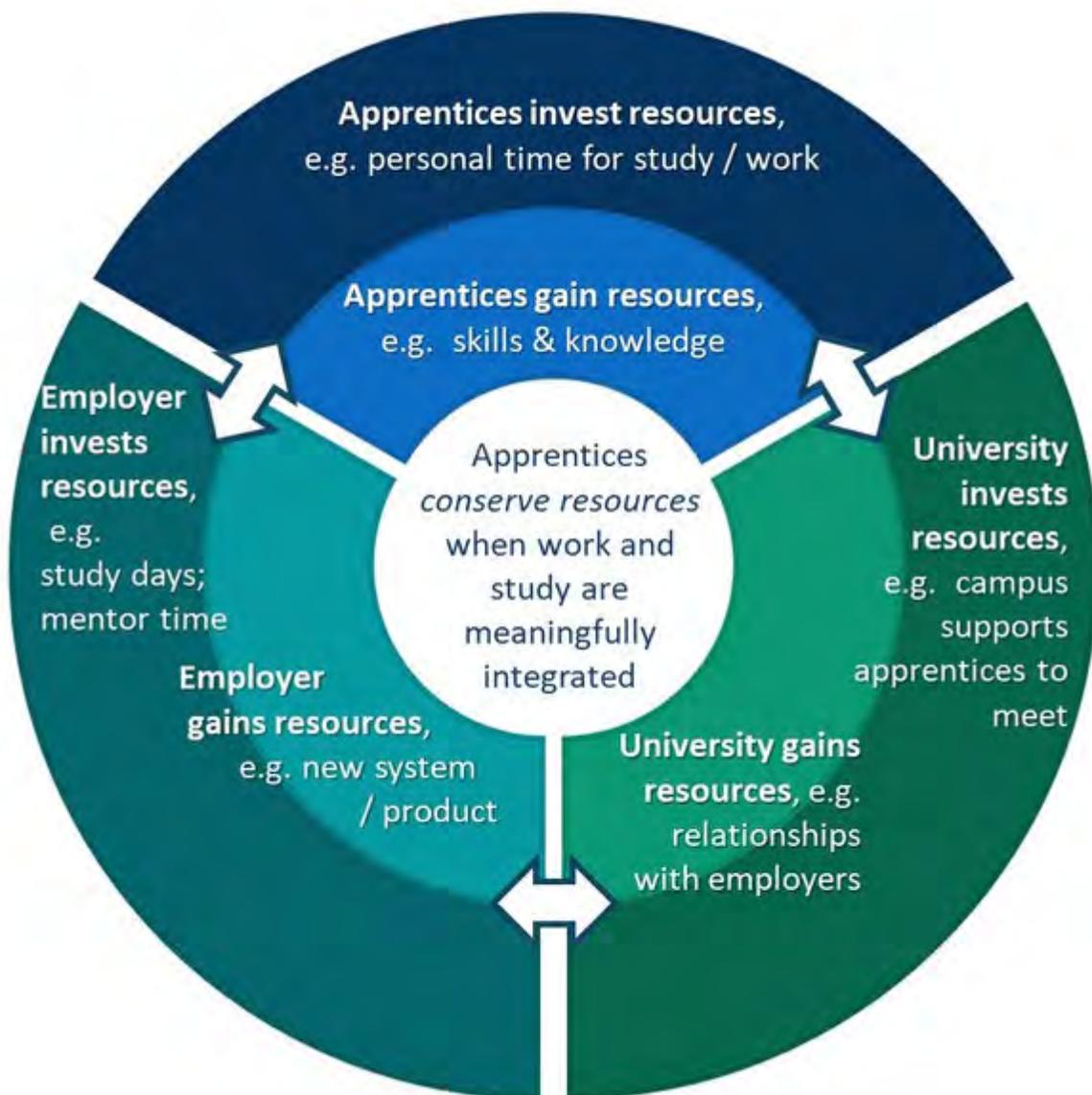


Figure 1: Example resource loss/ gain

The resources apprentices gained were: skills, knowledge, and opportunities; most gained autonomy and status via promotion. Beyond using their skills and providing labour in the workplace, the additional resource that apprentices contributed was their personal time, to study or catch up on work. Employers contributed the apprentice's study day (an average of one per week for these cohorts) and a mentor's time. Both coworkers and peer apprentices contributed crucial support. The university provided education, plus additional individual support, and campus opportunities enabling peer support and friendships. Employers and lecturers could help apprentices to conserve and gain resources through effective integration of their work and study, e.g. through identifying final-year projects to be implemented within the apprentice's work. One apprentice described choosing their project: "They were pretty confident that that's what I should do, because it had a huge client benefit as well." Balancing the multiple demands on their time was the biggest challenge for apprentices, especially when work or study required extra resources.

## Implications

Our findings support Scottish Government policies to apply Fair Work First principles to apprenticeships (Scottish Government, 2021), as the apprenticeships prove to be a good investment. However, if Scotland followed English policy developments, which reduce the minimum off-the-job study time to 6 hours, (Powell, 2023) that would be a considerable threat to apprentices' work-study-life balance.

The COR approach offers great potential for higher education research: e.g., to understand the pressures on students and apprentices as they strive to balance the demands of study, paid work, and family/ personal lives.

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