46

Activity theory analysis of training for workplace mentors in apprenticeship degrees

Ella Taylor-Smith, Sally Smith

Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Technical, Professional and Vocational Higher Education (TPV)

Abstract

Apprenticeship degrees bring the radical possibility of higher education without debt. They also require taking learning off-campus and into the workplace, collaborating with employers on credit-bearing workplace learning, inclusion, and widening access. This study surveyed workplace mentors and university staff about the training universities provide to mentors to support degree apprentices, especially focusing on inclusion. Using Activity Theory (AT), current training was mapped as an activity system, including motivations, format (tools), objectives, guidelines, stakeholders (community), and divisions of labour. Activity systems embody multiple perspectives and interests, developing over time, with the potential for contradictions to become sources of transformative change (Engeström, 2001). The main finding is that few mentors feel they are receiving adequate training for the role, with many not receiving any. The AT analysis highlights the challenges of ringfencing time for mentors and allocating responsibility for appropriate training and inclusion strategies among the collaboration partners.

Full paper

Introduction

Degree apprentices are salaried and their fees are paid, enabling them to complete degrees without debt, as well as gaining work experience. This transformative financial model is key to the apprenticeships' potential for social mobility (QAA, 2019). It also requires active collaboration with employers, including ceding some responsibility to them, such as recruitment (Fabian et al., 2023). Within the tripartite collaboration of employers, universities, and apprentices, workplace mentors are tasked with supporting apprentices (Parkinson and Dziallas, 2024). Ideally, mentors help to link the workplace (and practice) with the university (and theoretical knowledge) (Roberts et al., 2019), most practically through facilitating credit-bearing work-based projects (Taylor-Smith et al., 2023). Given this crucial role, it is in the university's interest to ensure that the mentor has the information and training they need to do this role. Further, given the employers' responsibilities for the apprentices' recruitment and work environment, mentors may provide a conduit for universities' Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) values. Degree apprenticeships need to be good routes for diverse students, both for social mobility and to improve representation in certain industries (Lester, 2020). Appropriately-trained

mentors can learn to be culturally responsive and better support mentees from underrepresented groups (Black et al. 2022).

This study draws on Activity Theory (AT) (Engeström, 2001) to investigate the training that universities are providing to workplace mentors to support them to fulfil their role. This enables us to combine evidence of the training provided, with aspirations around what should be provided, and the constraints and congruencies that shape the training system (and lack of training) over time (Karanasios and Allen, 2014). Modelling the activity system helps us to understand who needs to be involved in enabling training for workplace mentors and supporting diverse degree apprentices.

Methodology

Two aligned, online surveys collected data about the training universities were providing to workplace mentors. One surveyed mentors (n=44) and the other surveyed university staff involved in providing training and or guidance for mentors (n=13). Using a mixture of ratings questions, multiple choice, and open questions, the surveys built a picture of what training was offered and what was received, what was valued and what was missing. The wider contexts included time allocated for mentoring and external guidelines for EDI in apprenticeships (e.g., SDS, n.d.). Data was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively, as appropriate, then coded deductively according to the nodes of our activity system pyramid (Figure 1). This was adapted from Engeström (2001), following Barratt-Pugh et al. (2019), using AT in a higher education context, and Detlor et al. (2018), who provided useful guidance to using AT.

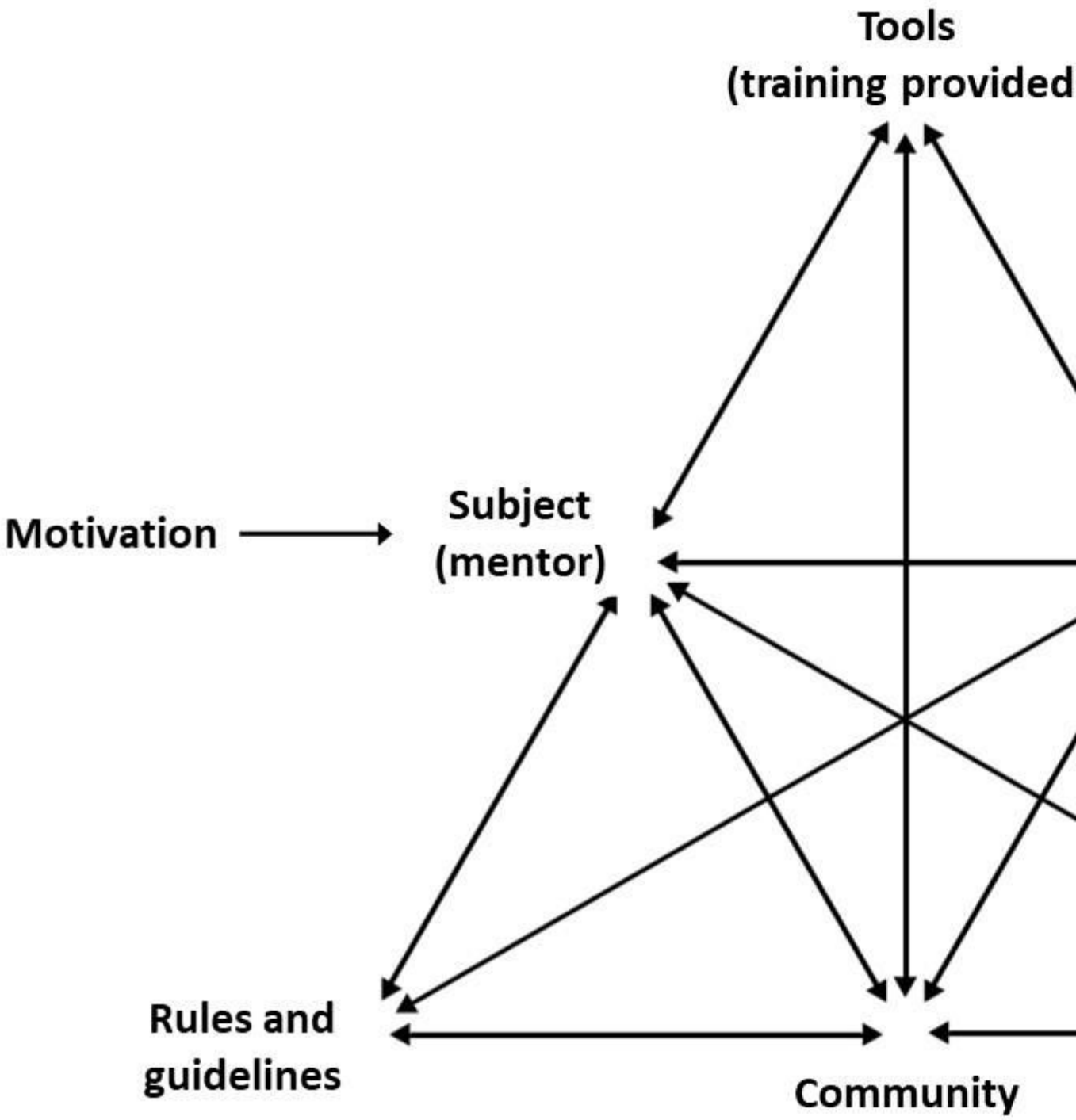
Tools
(training provided
Motivation
Subject
(mentor)
Rules and
guidelines
Community

Figure 1: Activity system

Coding the data and understanding and adapting the activity system, across the research team, was an iterative process. A code was added for “no training” to reflect the prominence of this in the data; this is displayed in the individual nodes. Once the coding was agreed, the data for each node was summarised and added to a pyramid (Figure 2), following Barratt-Pugh et al. (2019). This enabled us to further explore the relationship between nodes and identify congruencies and constraints.

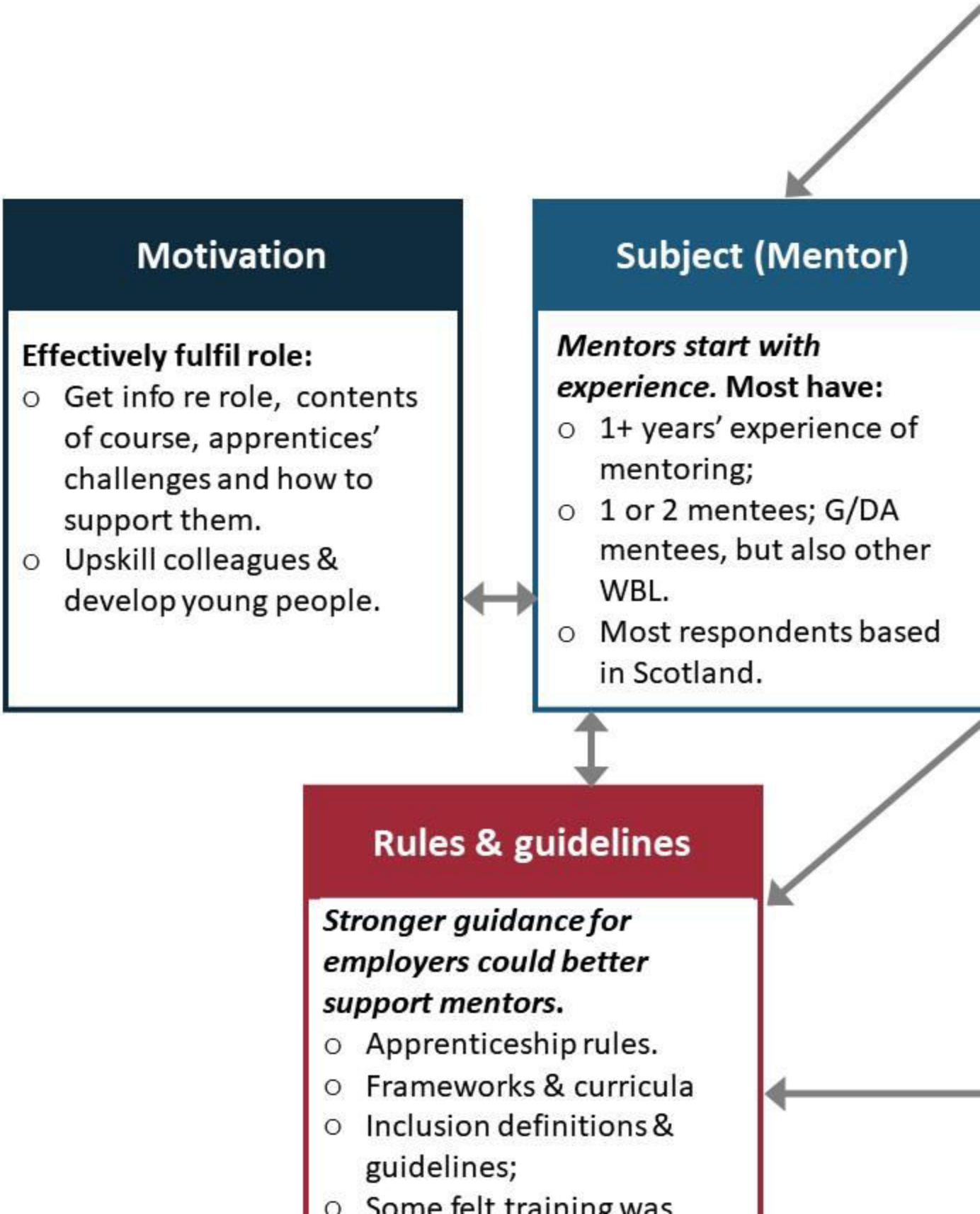
Motivation
Effectively fulfil role:
Get info re role, contents of course, apprentices' challenges and how to support them.
Upskill colleagues & develop young people.
Subject (Mentor)
Mentors start with experience. Most have:
1+ years' experience of mentoring;
1 or 2 mentees; G/DA mentees, but also other WBL.
Most respondents based in Scotland.
Rules & guidelines
Stronger guidance for employers could better support mentors.
Apprenticeship rules.
Frameworks & curricula
Inclusion definitions & guidelines;

Figure 2: Activity system with summaries at each node.

Findings and discussion

The prominent finding was that most mentors felt the training was inadequate or absent. They learned their role through experience, backed up by meetings with university staff, such as the apprentices' academic visitor, and handbooks or guidelines if these were provided. Mentors suggested training involving more of the community (including other mentors, apprentices and graduates). Inclusion guidance was not evident, even via links to external sources. The activity system highlighted the contradiction between the importance of effective mentoring in the apprentices' success and the resources (e.g., time and training) provided to mentors to support them. We identify this as a contradiction between the value and cost of the time and training – the use value and exchange value of commodities that Engeström identifies as the "primary contradiction of activities in capitalism […which] pervades all elements of our activity systems" (2001, 137). Mentors' lack of time or expertise in the mentoring process may lead to apprentices losing out on valuable development opportunities (Roberts et al., 2019; Taylor-Smith et al., 2023).

Many official guidelines and toolkits encourage and support employers to tackle inequalities in apprenticeships and promote inclusive work environments (e.g., IFATE, 2023). These advocate mentoring, but provide no further guidance. Whereas, targeted, social learning opportunities can support mentors to engage in diversity topics and develop their practice (Black et al., 2022).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the [anonymised] research team.

References

Barratt-Pugh, L., Zhao, F., Zhang, Z., and Wang, S. (2019). Exploring current Chinese higher education pedagogic tensions through an activity theory lens. *Higher Education*, 77(5), 831–852. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0304-8

Black, S., Byars-Winston, A., Cabrera, I., and Pfund, C. (2022). Enhancing Research Mentors' Cultural Awareness in STEM: A Mentor Training Intervention. *Understanding Interventions Journal*, 13 (1). https://www.understandinginterventionsjournal.org/article/36522

Detlor, B., Hupfer, M., and Smith, D.H. (2018). Digital Storytelling: An Opportunity for Libraries to Engage and Lead Their Communities. *Canadian Journal of Library and Information Science*, 42(1-2). https://muse.jhu.edu/article/717387/pdf

Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education & Work*, 14(1), 133–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080020028747

Fabian, K., Taylor-Smith, E., Smith, S. and Bratton, A. (2023). Signalling new opportunities? An analysis of UK job adverts for degree apprenticeships. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 13(2), 299-314. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-02-2022-0037

IFATE (2023). *Equity, diversity, and inclusion toolkit*. Institute for apprenticeships and technical education. https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/media/6840/equity-diversity-and-inclusion-toolkit-guidance-for-employers-final.pdf

Karanasios, S., and Allen, D. (2014). Mobile technology in mobile work: contradictions and congruencies in activity systems. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 23(5), 529–542. https://doi.org/10.1057/ejis.2014.20

Lester, S. (2020). Creating conditions for sustainable degree apprenticeships in England. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 10(5), 701-714. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-04-2020-0062

Parkinson, J. and Dziallas, S. (2024). Institutional Perspectives on Formal Work-Based Learning Programs in the UK. In *Proceedings of the 55th ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education (SIGCSE 2024), March 20–23, 2024, Portland, OR, USA*. https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3626252.3630879

QAA. (2019). *Characteristics Statement Higher Education in Apprenticeships*. The Quality Assurance Agency, Gloucester, UK https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/characteristics-statements/higher-education-in-apprenticeships-characteristics-statement

Roberts, A., Storm, M., and Flynn, S. (2019). Workplace mentoring of degree apprentices: developing principles for practice. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 9(2), 211–224. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-10-2018-0108

SDS. (n.d.). *Inclusive recruitment*. Skills Development Scotland. https://employers.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/talent-attraction/inclusive-recruitment

Taylor-Smith, E., Smith, S., Fabian, K. and Bratton, A. (2023). Apprentices' perspectives of the tripartite collaboration at the heart of degree apprenticeships: a longitudinal study. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 35(8). https://doi.org/10.1108/JWL-01-2023-0007

Barratt-Pugh, L., Zhao, F., Zhang, Z., and Wang, S. (2019). Exploring current Chinese higher education pedagogic tensions through an activity theory lens. *Higher Education*, 77(5), 831–852. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0304-8

Black, S., Byars-Winston, A., Cabrera, I., and Pfund, C. (2022). Enhancing Research Mentors' Cultural Awareness in STEM: A Mentor Training Intervention. *Understanding Interventions Journal*, 13 (1). https://www.understandinginterventionsjournal.org/article/36522

Detlor, B., Hupfer, M., and Smith, D.H. (2018). Digital Storytelling: An Opportunity for Libraries to Engage and Lead Their Communities. *Canadian Journal of Library and Information Science*, 42(1-2). https://muse.jhu.edu/article/717387/pdf

Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education & Work*, 14(1), 133–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080020028747

Fabian, K., Taylor-Smith, E., Smith, S. and Bratton, A. (2023). Signalling new opportunities? An analysis of UK job adverts for degree apprenticeships. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 13(2), 299-314. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-02-2022-0037

IFATE (2023). *Equity, diversity, and inclusion toolkit*. Institute for apprenticeships and technical education. https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/media/6840/equity-diversity-and-inclusion-toolkit-guidance-for-employers-final.pdf

Karanasios, S., and Allen, D. (2014). Mobile technology in mobile work: contradictions and congruencies in activity systems. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 23(5), 529–542. https://doi.org/10.1057/ejis.2014.20

Lester, S. (2020). Creating conditions for sustainable degree apprenticeships in England. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 10(5), 701-714. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-04-2020-0062

Parkinson, J. and Dziallas, S. (2024). Institutional Perspectives on Formal Work-Based Learning Programs in the UK. In *Proceedings of the 55th ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education (SIGCSE 2024), March 20–23, 2024, Portland, OR, USA*. https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3626252.3630879

QAA. (2019). *Characteristics Statement Higher Education in Apprenticeships*. The Quality Assurance Agency, Gloucester, UK https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/characteristics-statements/higher-education-in-apprenticeships-characteristics-statement

Roberts, A., Storm, M., and Flynn, S. (2019). Workplace mentoring of degree apprentices: developing principles for practice. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 9(2), 211–224. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-10-2018-0108

SDS. (n.d.). *Inclusive recruitment*. Skills Development Scotland. https://employers.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/talent-attraction/inclusive-recruitment

Taylor-Smith, E., Smith, S., Fabian, K. and Bratton, A. (2023). Apprentices' perspectives of the tripartite collaboration at the heart of degree apprenticeships: a longitudinal study. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 35(8). https://doi.org/10.1108/JWL-01-2023-0007