

Tripartite Practitioners: an Emerging Academic Practice Area in UK Technical, Professional, and Vocational Higher Education

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Research Domains

Technical, Professional and Vocational Higher Education (TPV)

Abstract

This paper reports on preliminary findings from a series of data collections with higher education representatives within the tripartite relationship of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships within England and Wales. Drawing on a multi-stage data collection, the research sought to surface the experiences of practitioners in these roles, illuminating the tensions between supporting apprentices' development whilst responding to the regulatory context of continual compliance, which extends far beyond the norm of English HE. The experiences of Higher Education Tripartite Practitioners demonstrate the challenges of offering mentorship, development, and aspiration-building whilst strictly enforcing the rules and reporting associated with apprenticeship governance. The researchers conclude that a novel conception of this dual professional role is needed to support the ongoing professionalisation of this work across the sector, and to situate diverse practices within differing institutions and apprenticeship professions.

Full paper

English Higher Education Institutions have been significantly impacted by the introduction of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships. Providers have responded to complex and nuanced new regulatory, funding and technical regimes prescribed by multiple regulatory bodies. Practices from other apprenticeship contexts have converged with context-specific features of HE, as well as the HE skills and employment landscape (Minton & Lowe, 2019). This resulted in the emergence of several novel practices and roles, including a new practice context within the 'tripartite' setting, one of several sites of interaction between training providers, employers and apprentices (Roberts et al, 2019). While such roles are established in UK further education, and are reflected in some HE contexts, the recognised heterogeneity across apprenticeship formats internationally (Smith, 2022, Markowitsch & Wittig, 2022) mean that few models exist to inform this new workforce in UK HE (Esmond, 2019). 'Higher Education Tripartite Practitioners' (HE-TP) carry responsibility for championing the transformative learning journey of apprentices alongside strict adherence to complex quality and funding frameworks, and whilst an emerging body of literature has highlighted the critical role of the employer mentor (e.g. Fabian et al, 2022; Minton & Lowe, 2019; Roberts et al, 2019), the role and experiences of the providers' representative in this relationship has received limited original empirical investigation, creating a somewhat unrecognised community of HE-TPs.

In this context of emergent practice, the researchers sought to surface and understand the experiences of those acting as provider representative in the tripartite relationship. This paper reports on the first two phases of an ongoing research project with HE-TPs. Phase one, conducted 2023/24, focussed primarily on apprenticeships delivered under the 'business and administration' route, (as defined by IFATE, 2024), as the disciplinary subject home of the authors. Subsequent phases are expanding this to all disciplines covered by apprenticeships routes. Phase one utilised template analysis (King, 1998) on a corpus combining survey data (participants # 73) and over 12 hours of focus groups (participants #29, from #9 HEIs) with HE-TPs.

The findings from this phase revealed that HE-TPs operate under diverse job titles and role remits across institutions. Practitioners' experiences within the business and management route reveal a profession characterised by dichotomy, within an educational framework characterised by heutagogy (Stoten, 2020), despite institutional and regulatory structures more suited to pedagogy and andragogy. These dichotomies present wicked problems for HE-TPs, who must balance a focus on precise regulatory metrics against messy and complex work-integrated environments (Lester, 2023).

Initial findings reveal heuristic continuums and dualities that shape and span practitioners' experiences as they navigate tensions between a focus on development versus compliance; process versus outcomes; discipline-specificity versus expertise in modality; collective and individualist alignment; differing time horizons and orientations; and coaching and mentoring relations. These speak to, and expand, the expansive-restrictive continuum identified by Fuller and Unwin (2003). The underpinning tensions experienced by HE-TPs resonate with 'critical friend' roles across other areas of educational practice e.g. governance or leadership practice (e.g. Kenigs et al, 2023). However, this conception is complicated by the experience of responsibility without control that HE-TPs recount, compounding effects of obligations to both learners and employers within the tripartite relationship, and the pro-active bureaucratic role that HE-TPs play within the apprenticeship governance. As a result, the researchers conclude that HE-TPs represent a novel form of 'dual professional' (e.g. Griffiths & Dickinson, 2023) or integrated practitioner role (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022), in which the knowledge and understanding of apprenticeships represents a technical knowledge set, and in which pedagogic practice extends itself into non-traditional areas integrating heuristic, reflexive, and professionalised training practices (c.f. Hope, 2018; Lillis & Bravenboer, 2020).

Emerging evidence from Phase One with HE-TPs from outside of business and management indicated a divergence of practices across disciplinary areas. This has led to Phase Two, where the identified continuums and dualities will be triangulated with HE-TPs from other apprenticeship routes in Summer 2024, offering a richer and more nuanced view of this emerging area of practice.

By drawing attention to inherent tensions in HE-TPs' roles, and acknowledging how these are shaped by disciplinary, organisational, and personal differences, the authors provide a frame through which both commonality and difference, coherence and tension, can be understood. This may be invaluable for conceptualising roles and practices critical to the success of policy, institutional, employer, and practitioner objectives. The outcomes support ongoing professionalisation of this work and illuminate gaps in understanding of critical University boundary-spanning roles which support the national skills agenda.

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