

Key new roles in higher education apprenticeships: exploring boundary-spanning identities of tripartite representatives

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Higher education (HE) apprenticeships are expanding across the UK, offering opportunities to widen participation and strengthen university-employer relationships. This project explores the emerging role of HE tripartite representatives - university staff who support apprentices and mediate between academic and workplace learning. As education is devolved, national policy frameworks shape how these roles are enacted. Using rich picture workshops and focus groups, the research investigates how models of practice diverge and how professional are formed within this evolving workforce. The paper presents early findings from case studies and focus groups across the four nations, highlighting how these roles influence apprentice support, and foregrounding the lived experience of tripartite representatives. Findings will inform development of sustainable apprenticeships tripartite practices particularly in supporting learners through these innovative and complex programmes.

Full paper

Higher education apprenticeships are a recent innovation within the UK, offering opportunities in social mobility, university-employer relationships, and workforce development. Central to apprenticeships' success is the role of the tripartite representative - the university staff who attend regular meetings with apprentices and their workplace mentors, supporting wellbeing, academic quality, integration, and competency development. While similar roles have existed within other apprenticeships, these roles are novel within HE, and potentially crucial to the apprentices' success

This project is a collaboration between three universities spanning two UK nations, recognising the impact of devolved education policy on HE apprenticeships, including diverse specifications or guidance for this role. . Consequently, the way tripartite

representatives experience and carry out their role is inextricably bound to their national context, impacting practices, professional identity, and career trajectories. This unique comparison of the four UK nations insight into the experiences, challenges, and identity strategies of HE tripartite representatives.

Research Aims and Questions

This research aims to identify how HE tripartite representative roles are undertaken, by whom, and their experience of negotiating academic, professional, and regulatory boundaries, across academic disciplines, in devolved national contexts. The project seeks to address:

- How are the differences between implementations of HE apprenticeships across UK nations and disciplines manifested in the tripartite representative role?
- What are the career paths of the representatives into this role? What skills and identities are they bringing and how are these developing?
- What challenges do they find in supporting apprentices and advising their workplace mentors?
- What identity strategies do they use to achieve successful collaboration?

Theoretical Framework

Apprenticeships exist in complex quality and policy environments (Felce, 2019; Lester, 2020; Smith et al., 2021), reflected in the roles tripartite representatives undertake (Charlton & Power-Mason, 2025). They are boundary spanners, functioning as translators and brokers between distinct theoretical and applied knowledge cultures (Martin & Ibbotson, 2021; Rowe et al., 2023), and regulatory body expectations and requirements (Dalrymple et al., 2014). Such work requires significant identity negotiation (Wood et al., 2016), and representatives by nature operate in liminal spaces, as they manage practical and applied knowledge across academic and organisational contexts (Algers et al., 2016).

Methodology

The study uses a two-phase qualitative research design to foreground the situated knowledge of representatives and explore how institutional and national contexts shape practice and identity.

Phase 1:

- Case studies within three partner universities to identify variation across disciplines and two national contexts.
- Rich picture workshops with representatives from the case study universities. Participants visually depict their tripartite role experiences, surfacing reflections through discourse and drawing (Bell, Berg, & Morse, 2016; Parrott, 2019).

- Workshop data is distilled into personas—fictional, anonymised characters abstracted from the findings (Huynh et al., 2021)—which support analysis and Phase 2 activities.

Phase 2:

- Focus groups based on the initial personas, with representatives at six additional universities, across all four UK nations.
- Based on the focus groups, the case studies and personas are refined and expanded to reflect disciplinary and national implementations.

Conference Presentation: Emergent Findings

At SRHE 2025, we will present:

- Findings from Phase 1: case study data and personas capturing diverse models of the tripartite representative role across different disciplines and two national contexts.
- Early findings from Phase 2: focus group insights into how national policy frameworks and disciplinary environments affect representatives' practices, challenges, and identity work.

We will discuss: how the diversity of implementations influence opportunities and precarities of this emerging professional space; success factors for supporting apprentices; and strategies for embedding sustainable tripartite practices within HE apprenticeship provision.

Contribution to Knowledge

This project contributes to the emerging literature on degree apprenticeships by illuminating the hidden work of tripartite representatives, including an innovative comparison exploring how policy divergence across the UK's devolved education systems shapes practice and professional identity. By theorising the tripartite representative as a boundary-spanning, identity-negotiating actor, this study advances understanding of how hybrid roles evolve within complex educational-policy environments. As a result, practical insights for universities, policy makers, and practitioners can support the professionalisation and sustainability of the representatives' role and better support apprentices