

## **The Impact of Apprenticeship Skills Coaches: a rationale for investigation**

### **Introduction**

This [QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project](#) focuses on student engagement within Degree Apprenticeships, specifically emphasising the role and impact of Apprenticeships Skills Coaches. The project is being led by University Centre Quayside, in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University and Middlesex University.

The purpose of the research stems from a previous [QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project](#) (Nawaz and Edifor, 2024) which examined the impact of degree apprenticeships, identified challenges, and interpreted stakeholder motivations within these programmes. From this project, there was recognition of the importance of the Apprenticeships Skills Coach role within degree apprenticeship provision, however further examination needs to be undertaken to better understand modes and practices which would enhance student engagement within degree apprenticeships. As the degree apprenticeships sector matures, higher education providers will likely adopt diverse pedagogical methods for applying Apprenticeships Skills Coaches. These approaches can create pedagogical disparities within the sector.

The scope of the study is to examine current research into student engagement within degree apprenticeships. The investigation focuses on contemporary studies.

### **Degree Apprenticeships**

Degree apprenticeships were first launched in England in 2015 (Department of Business, Innovations and Skills, 2015), and they signified a major transformation in the realm of higher education and vocational training (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020). These initiatives merged theoretical learning with hands-on work experience, enabling apprentices to achieve undergraduate degrees while being employed. The foundation of degree apprenticeships was intended to tackle the deficit of skills, boost employability, and offer alternatives to conventional university education (Universities UK, 2016). This is supported by Bravenboer, (2019) who also suggests that the advent of degree apprenticeships innovatively challenges our view of the relationship between higher education and the professional environment. Degree apprenticeships have presented a compelling option over the past nine years to the key stakeholders within degree apprenticeships provision (Crawford-Lee, 2020), the apprentice, the employer and the degree apprenticeship provider, however, this has not been without complexities.

Degree apprenticeship learning involves a three-way collaboration between the apprentice, employer, and degree provider. Success is defined by academic attainment, maintaining standards, and alignment of apprentice knowledge, skills and behaviours with organisational goals. Despite its advantages, challenges such as employer engagement, cultural barriers, and traditional quality assurance procedures may arise (Taylor-Smith, Smith and Khristin, 2023; Smith, Henderson and Mapletoft, 2023).

To facilitate high-quality delivery and outcomes, there is a requirement to manage key stakeholder interaction constructively and positively through the various stages of the degree apprenticeship delivery and outcomes. These interactions are often seen as complex (Quey-Jones and Rowe, 2022) and may even be seen as a barrier to engaging with this type of provision (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020; QAA, 2024). From a student perspective, areas of difficulty cited include poor degree apprenticeship provider support and poorly organised provision (Department for Education, 2022). A similar theme was identified by employers,

where degree apprenticeship provider support and communication were seen as an issue by some (Department for Education, 2022). This therefore suggests the importance of effective support and communication mechanisms within degree apprenticeships to ensure higher satisfaction levels. This element is often allocated to Apprenticeships Skills Coaches and this coordination element is an area of focus in the [QAA Degree Apprenticeship Toolkit](#), where consideration is given to support for apprentices, employers and staff (The Quality Assurance Agency, 2024).

### **Non-academic Support Definition and Development**

The most precise definition of non-academic support comes from the Higher Education Statistic Agency (HESA) which defines non-academics as “staff who are not holders of an academic contract, including non-academic professionals” (Higher Education Statistic Agency, N.D.). While simplistic, this definition creates uncertainty for Apprenticeships Skills Coaches as it also captures managers, administrative functions, welfare, and technical support. Karp (2011), identifies those non-academic support activities that are believed to support academic success, and that these interventions are both classroom and informally based. However, there is an acknowledgement that non-academic support is distinct from academic interventions in that they develop and enhance different skills and knowledge within the student.

Wolf and Jenkins (2020) in their research highlight key points about the evolving landscape of non-academic staff in UK higher education. Universities face the need for diverse funding sources, the ability to secure external research funding, and rising student expectations. They suggest that this has led to a merging of academic and non-academic roles, with 'all-round' academics being substituted by 'para-academics' who specialise in specific tasks such as student skills development and research management. This is important in terms of Apprenticeships Skills Coaches as universities' increasing complexity and size have driven greater differentiation and specialisation of tasks. This development has created a new class of higher education professionals (Wolf and Jenkins, 2020).

### **Student Engagement**

In their influential paper, Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified the importance of departmental teams being accountable for undergraduate achievement and to assist this, a set of engagement indicators was developed. These principles, known as the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, promoted practices that encourage interaction, cooperation, active learning, feedback, time management, high expectations, and respect for diverse learning styles. This approach has been supported by a range of researchers. Friedel and Rudd, (2009) identified that universities should continue promoting processes that enhance student engagement in learning. Embedding the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education into their teaching methods was directly linked to improved student achievement and outcomes. This approach can be seen within UK-based higher education institutions (Bovill, 2013; Ellis, n.d.; Kings College, London, n.d.).

The importance of these principles is highlighted in their capacity to engage and support undergraduate students. Given the complex nature of degree apprenticeships provision, with its tripartite arrangement, there must be secure procedures to ensure enhanced student engagement and mechanisms for providing strong student and employer communication and support. The introduction of specialist non-academic support staff, or Apprenticeships Skills Coaches appears to meet these objectives (Advance HE Governance Team, 2023).

## **The impact of non-academic support in student engagement**

Support activities not directly linked to academics, whether structured or spontaneous, are thought to raise academic achievement. These often merge with academic aspects such as tutoring. Despite their mutual relationship with academic strategies, non-academic support activities stand out as they focus on distinct skills and knowledge, fostering success via diverse approaches (Karp, 2011). This view is supported by a range of researchers in community-based higher education (McCallen and Johnson, 2019) (Lackner, 2023) and (Rutherford-Quach *et al.*, 2021).

Given the formation of new, non-academic roles to support degree apprenticeships, it is important to consider the evidence that supports best practice in this area. In their longitudinal study, Taylor-Ellis *et al.* (2023) noted some students' difficulties in completing the professional qualification associated with the degree apprenticeship. Other elements that caused difficulties included the workload and time management by the apprentice.

Price, Valentine and Leader (2021) identified the importance of coaching, as a key skill for encouraging and motivating undergraduate students. This was studied through a range of focus groups. Students across ten USA colleges appreciated their coaches for their reliability, care, proactivity, mentorship, motivation, accountability, resourcefulness, and guidance in academic goal setting. These relationships are crucial for recruitment and retention. The study found that the benefits of such coaching increased over time. As a result of these interventions, retention and success rates were improved. In their research, Ceelen *et al.*, (2023) identified the importance of the awareness of students' needs and developing practices such as guiding, modelling, scaffolding, monitoring, and coaching which were acknowledged as significant. This is supported by a similar study focusing on the impact of student advisors and personal tutors (McCary *et al.*, 2011) who identified the importance of these roles in supporting student retention. Dane (2022) emphasises the significance of maintaining a connection with the delivery team. On the other hand, Tinto (1997) highlights the necessity of providing students with diverse learning resources, offering various viewpoints from different team members. James Mulkeen *et al.*, (2019) emphasised the significance of innovative work methods, especially in tripartite setups. Their research highlighted those institutions aiming to offer degree apprenticeships face key challenges and opportunities, which are primarily focused on their capacity to adapt and respond to the requirements of both students and employers. Providing roles that are not academically focused to aid this would be a practical development.

## **The Apprenticeships Skills Coach role**

These characteristics and approaches are important as they underpin the requirements for Apprenticeships Skills Coaches as part of the degree apprenticeship delivery. In their critical investigation into degree apprenticeships, Nawaz and Edifor (2024) identified the importance of degree apprenticeship delivery teams operating as an integrated team (nearly 90% of students found this as very, or extremely important), with similar figures being registered from an employer perspective. As a result of this integrated team, there is the development of consistency and cohesion and enhanced communication. Where students see their support teams as cohesive and collaborative, they are more likely to engage with the Apprenticeships Skills Coaches, leading to higher retention and success rates. This is also likely to have a bearing on employer satisfaction of degree apprenticeships delivery. The impact of this can be substantial. Research by University Centre Quayside (Smith *et al.*, 2023) identified that Apprenticeships Skills Coaches have a perceptible impact in four key areas:

1. **Increased Confidence:** Students reported a boost in self-confidence, enabling them to tackle new challenges and make decisions more effectively. This was supported through Apprenticeships Skills Coach interaction and skills development.
2. **Personal and Professional Growth:** The input of Apprenticeships Skills Coaches enhanced both personal development and professional skills, particularly in emotional intelligence, decision-making, and leadership.
3. **Sense of Achievement:** Working with Apprenticeships Skills Coaches instilled a strong sense of personal accomplishment and pride, motivating further education and career advancement.
4. **Balancing Challenges:** Despite difficulties in balancing the course with other responsibilities, especially during COVID-19, respondents felt relief and pride in their perseverance and success, supported by Apprenticeships Skills Coaches.

### **Conclusion**

Academic and non-academic support boosts student success and enhances the tripartite arrangements between student, employer and degree provider. New roles within degree apprenticeships delivery require proven best practices which have yet to be established. Students face challenges in degree apprenticeship qualification completion. Within this coaching appears to be crucial, with students valuing reliable guidance. These relationships enhance retention and achievement. The role of the Apprenticeships Skills Coach seems to be pivotal for the success of degree apprenticeships provision as a non-academic intervention, however, as yet there seems to be little contemporary and specific investigation into their role and impact.

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