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Exploring Mentorship and Apprenticeship Success: The Relationship between Construction Degree Apprentices and their Work Based Mentors.

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Abstract

Purpose: *Degree apprenticeships are becoming more established within the higher education sector, however within England there are growing concerns around the completion rates of apprentices. Whilst there are a number of factors which could be impacting this, the support structure surrounding apprentices throughout their programme is a key consideration. This study aims to investigate the support relationship between construction degree apprentices and their work-based mentors through the lived experiences of both the apprentice and the mentor.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *This study adopted a qualitative cross-sectional approach, collecting data from three focus groups involving Level 6 apprentices from a higher education institution and their work-based mentors based in England. The data was analysed inductively using NVivo 12 software to identify codes and key themes.*

Findings: *The relationship between the apprentice and their work-based mentor is key to the success of degree apprenticeships. The data analysis recognised three key themes, knowledge of the apprenticeship process, support structure and employer provider relationship.*

Originality: *This study is an original contribution addressing a gap in the literature around higher-level apprentices and their work-based mentors, generating and analysing new primary data, identifying ongoing issues and formulating subsequent recommendations for practice. There are also implications for the current English apprenticeship model and those seeking to adopt or adapt it more widely.*

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Introduction and Context

The global skills gap, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, is prompting many countries to rethink the way education and work-integrated learning are structured. Within the United Kingdom, degree apprenticeships remain most formalised in England, with different models within Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. There is growing evidence that other countries and corporations are increasingly adopting or adapting similar work-based focused models, in turn impacting on the nature of their higher education (HE) provision (Fortwengel *et al.*, 2021; Martínez-Izquierdo and Torres Sánchez, 2022).

In recent years, the landscape of HE and vocational training within England has undergone a profound transformation (HM Government, 2015), with a notable surge in interest and investment in degree apprenticeships. The shift from apprenticeship frameworks to apprenticeship standards began in 2014 as part of a broader effort to reform apprenticeships and improve the quality of training. This also incorporated the requirement to pass an end point assessment (EPA) and demonstrate the appropriate knowledge, skills, and behaviours (KSBs) set within the standard to achieve professional competence at the end of their study. In 2017 the formal transition began, with new apprenticeship standards gradually being introduced, while frameworks started to be phased out. By the end of July 2020, all new apprenticeship starts were required to be on standards, with frameworks officially closed for new starts. Complementing these changes was the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 (HM Government, 2015; Patrignani *et al.*, 2021), a tax targeting large employers to encourage investment in high-quality training and skills development.

Overall, the transition to standards were intended to ensure that apprenticeships became more employer-led, higher quality, and further tailored to industry needs. While degree apprenticeship (DA) programmes and investment from employers creates the promise of a more accessible and vocational route to obtaining a degree, there exists a growing concern surrounding low completion rates of the EPA (Department for Education, 2023). This issue raises important questions about the underlying factors contributing to this trend, exploring the challenges faced by apprentices, employers, and educational institutions alike (St Martin's Group, 2022). Understanding the complexities surrounding the support offered to apprentices when completing their apprenticeship and the EPA is becoming imperative.

Research has consistently shown that mentorship improves student engagement, academic performance, and overall satisfaction with the learning experience in both general education and apprenticeship-specific contexts (Eby *et al.*, 2008; Roberts *et al.*, 2019). However, reports such as the St Martin's Group (2022) highlight inadequate employer support as a primary reason for apprentices leaving their programmes. While the mentor's role is increasingly recognised as integral to apprentices' professional and personal development (Richard, 2012; Roberts *et al.*, 2019; Zografou and McDermott, 2022), there is limited research evaluating the lived experiences of both the mentor and the apprentice within apprenticeship programmes.

This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between mentors and apprentices within the context of degree apprenticeships, with a particular focus on construction apprentices. It explores mentors' perceptions, their roles, and the support structures that influence apprenticeship outcomes. This study also makes a key distinction between apprentices who have completed their EPA and those who have not yet reached this stage of their programme. The EPA, a formal evaluation marking the culmination of an apprenticeship, plays a critical role in defining programme outcomes. However, only limited research examines how mentorship contributes to preparing apprentices for the EPA and how its absence impacts those who do not reach this stage. This distinction is particularly relevant to understanding the varying support needs across different completion stages.

Although the outcomes can be viewed alongside similar studies, the findings within this research aim to inform strategies to enhance mentorship effectiveness and highlight the need for further change, with implications not only for the construction sector but also for broader contexts and geographies.

Global Perspective on Degree Apprenticeships

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Similarly to England countries such as Canada have faced challenges including low participation and completion rates. For instance Livingstone and Raykov (2020) suggest that despite an ongoing labour shortage in skilled trades the completion rates are reported at 32% compared to Germanys completion rate of 50%. Despite widespread agreement among the public, employers, unions, and governments on the need for a more robust apprenticeship system, progress is hindered by longstanding barriers. These include regional disparities, complex administration, funding challenges, and societal biases favouring academic pathways over vocational training.

Globally, apprenticeship systems vary significantly, reflecting distinct educational, cultural, and economic contexts. Mentorship is seen as a critical component of apprenticeship systems, with models like Germany's dual education system (Martínez-Izquierdo and Torres Sánchez, 2022) and Australia's competency-based apprenticeships offering valuable insights (Fortwengel *et al.*, 2021). These systems underscore the importance of integrating academic and workplace learning through structured support, providing a comparative lens by which to evaluate England's degree apprenticeship approach.

Apprentice Support and the Role of the Mentor

This review draws on peer-reviewed studies, industry reports, and government publications published within the UK since the introduction of apprenticeship standards in 2014. For this review key search terms included 'degree apprenticeships', 'mentorship', 'work-based learning', and 'apprenticeship completion rates. By limiting the review to studies post-reform, and so include the requirement for the completion of the EPA, the researchers aimed to capture the evolving role of mentors within the new apprenticeship standards. This approach ensures the findings are relevant to the current apprenticeship landscape within England and its mentoring practices.

It is worth noting Fuller and Unwin's (2011) expansive model of workplace learning emphasis the role of workplace cultures in shaping the learning experiences of apprentices. Their work highlights how expansive cultures (characterised by inclusivity, high levels of participation, and opportunities for development), foster better outcomes for apprentices. Conversely, restrictive cultures limit these opportunities, potentially contributing to lower completion rates. This perspective provides a valuable lens through which to examine the role of mentors in navigating and mitigating the impact of workplace cultures within degree apprenticeships as they are now.

Richard (2012) suggested that the support structure for DA's should be designed to help apprentices successfully complete their programmes, providing guidance, resources, and assistance throughout their learning journey. This support typically involves collaboration between the employer, the educational institution, and the apprentice (Richard, 2012). Employers play a crucial role in supporting degree apprentices and often assign a mentor or supervisor to the apprentice who guides them through their work tasks and helps them integrate their academic learning into practical work scenarios. The support structure should be flexible enough to adapt to the individual needs and circumstances of each apprentice and the industry in which they work (Martínez-Izquierdo and Torres Sánchez, 2022).

Mulkeen (2019) conducted a study when UK universities were in the early stages of developing and delivering DA programmes. Participants suggested that they faced several challenges when undertaking work-based learning for the first time. This research suggests that there is a requirement to offer academic support to not only apprentices but also the work-based mentor. Employers also suggested that universities need to provide more information in terms of their expectations of the mentor role, an issue which was also found in the works of Quew-Jones and Rowe (2022) who reported mentors had a lack of knowledge and confidence when undertaking the role. Mulkeen (2019) noted that further research which included apprentice views and further consideration of the progression and attrition rates affecting student outcomes was required.

Challenges experienced by employers as they manage degree apprentices in the workplace were explored by Rowe *et al*. (2017). Employers spoke about the amount of time apprentices require to spend off the job, and effective provision of genuine work-based learning. The potential gap in apprentice support when concerning the role of the mentor and the lack of structure within some organisations was also noted in the works of Hughes and Saieva (2019). Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with four employers they also identified the critical nature of the employer and provider relationship to ensure the effective management and mentoring of apprentices in the workplace.

Taylor-Smith *et al*. (2023) conducted a qualitative, longitudinal study using data from interviews with degree apprentices studying towards computing degrees in Scotland. Apprentices spoke of the importance of identifying meaningful links between their study and their day-to-day work and active support from employers, in terms of flexibility and pro-active mentors. Roberts *et al*. (2019) also suggest that support for apprentices was constrained by the mentors' lack of information around the specific requirements and their role, although this may have been influenced by the early stage of the apprenticeship programme. Dawson and Osborne (2020) found similar themes within their research with participants reporting that both levy and non-levy payers were experiencing barriers hindering their engagement. It was recognised that the degree was seen as separate to the specific EPA and as the programme was still in the delivery stage the thought of completing the EPA was not currently a focus.

Apprenticeship Outcomes and Strategies

There is a notable scarcity of industry-recognised reports within the UK specifically addressing the issue of low apprenticeship completion rates and the underlying reasons for this trend. The Apprenticeships Outcomes and Destinations Report by the St Martins Group (2022) stands out as one of the few comprehensive analyses in this area, providing insights into the challenges apprentices face and the factors affecting completion. It aims to answer fundamental questions about why apprentices withdraw from their programme, their reasons for withdrawal and what additional support might have encouraged them to complete. The report provides the first detailed comparison of what happens to apprentices who complete or withdraw from their programme. It starts to build insights into why 48 percent of new apprentices withdraw from their course, while also confirming the benefits of completing an apprenticeship. This said there is little involvement within the data from apprentices undertaking a DA and fewer still within construction.

The findings suggest apprentices do not feel informed enough, and there is a lack of support from employers and providers. The Apprenticeships Evaluation Employers Report also recognises that more work needs to be done on the overall understanding of apprenticeships specifically the EPA (Department of Education, 2020). Mentorship is acknowledged as a critical part of apprenticeship programmes, with literature beginning to explore the perspectives of providers and employers, however the relationship between the work-based mentor and apprentice remains largely unexplored. More specifically, studies that consider the experiences, challenges, and motivations of mentors within degree apprenticeships are limited. This said a report produced by the National Health Service (NHS), provides a comprehensive analysis of how a major public sector employer effectively utilises apprenticeship funding (Health Education England, 2023). The report highlights the importance of mentorship and organisational structure in achieving high completion rates. Lessons from the NHS model, such as proactive mentor training and clearly defined roles, could inform strategies for improving mentorship within construction degree apprenticeships.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2003) to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of degree apprentices and their mentors. Focus groups were selected as the primary data collection method due to their ability to foster interactive discussions, providing richer data than individual interviews (Greenbaum, 2002; Hennink *et al.*, 2020). Focus groups encourage participants to reflect on and respond to the perspectives of others, offering insights into collective and individual experiences.

While focus groups can be critiqued for subjective interpretation (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014), they were well-suited for capturing the nuanced dynamics of mentorship within degree apprenticeships. To strengthen the findings, the study followed a systematic approach to focus group design and analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Data Sample and Collection

As this study aimed to explore the relationship between degree apprentices and mentors, the recruitment and sampling process included both apprentices and work-based mentors. Participants were recruited from Level 6 construction-based degree apprenticeships, with inclusion criteria ensuring they had sufficient experience to reflect meaningfully on mentorship and support structures (Creswell, 2003). Apprentices were required to have at least two years of experience, while mentors needed two years of active mentoring experience. The sample included a mix of individuals from Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and larger organisations, ensuring diversity in roles and organisational contexts.

Recognising the importance of the EPA stage in apprenticeship journeys, the focus groups were divided into three distinct groups:

1. Apprentices nearing their EPA (pre-EPA group).
2. Apprentices who had recently completed their EPA (post-EPA group).
3. Mentors actively supporting apprentices.

This division allowed for targeted exploration of experiences specific to the EPA milestone, which represents a critical component of degree apprenticeship completion. Sessions were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, accommodating geographically dispersed participants and enabling efficient transcription (SAGE, 2022).

According to Guest *et al*. (2017) between three and six focus groups are needed in order to identify up to 90 percent of themes on a given topic and so three focus groups were conducted, each lasting approximately one hour. These were moderated by the principal researcher, who has over a decade of experience in apprenticeships, including coaching for EPA. Transcriptions were completed by the researcher using automated tools followed by manual verification to ensure accuracy. This dual process maintained the integrity of the data and enabled early familiarity with the content (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The three core questions used in the focus groups were developed based on gaps identified in the literature, particularly concerning mentorship challenges and support (St Martin's Group, 2022). The questions aimed to be broad and open-ended, facilitating free expression of participants' perspectives:

1. *What was your understanding/expectation of the apprenticeship requirements and EPA when you started?*
2. *Does the construction industry bring specific challenges to mentorship, and how does this affect the support relationship between mentors and apprentices?*
3. *What additional support or resources could help mentors better assist apprentices in completing their apprenticeship?*

While these three questions formed the backbone of the discussions, additional prompts were used to clarify or elaborate on responses. For example, participants were occasionally asked follow-up questions such as, *"Can you provide an example of how that challenge impacted your experience?"* to encourage deeper insights. In terms of confirmability, the questions were reviewed by two independent researchers including one from a different institution and unfamiliar with the participants for relevance and clarity. Although a formal pilot was not conducted, feedback from these experts informed minor revisions to ensure questions aligned with the study's aims. Table I lists the apprentice participants and corresponding information. Participants are identified by focus group (FG), role (A for Apprentice, M for Mentor), and participant number.

Table I Focus Group Participants

Thematic Analysis Process

Once all focus groups were concluded, the analysis was conducted by the principal researcher, and to ensure the data was analysed consistently, further independently checked by a second researcher. This study followed the Braun and Clarke (2006) framework which consists of six key phases.

Transcription and Coding

During phase 1 the data was transcribed, checking for accuracy against the audio whilst also anonymising the participants. This was followed by several read throughs to allow the researcher to become familiar with the data and start to identify key themes and patterns. The transcripts were next imported into NVivo12, a software designed for qualitative data analysis which allows researchers to organise, manage, and analyse qualitative data efficiently as part of phase 2. The coding process was conducted inductively, assigning codes to the transcript data. As codes were assigned to different segments of the data, a list of initial codes was created which served as a foundation for further analysis.

Defining Themes

Phase 3, 4 and 5 take the list of initial codes and begins to consider patterns. The allocation of these codes into broader, overarching themes or subthemes starts to structure the data. Themes were refined and modified based on this review which involved combining closely related themes, splitting themes into sub-themes, or discarding themes that are not well-supported by the data. Once the final themes were decided and the codes allocated, phase 6 involved writing up the results into a structured narrative that reflects the data accurately including example extracts. These extracts serve as evidence to support the existence of the themes and help to clarify their meaning.

Ethics Statement

The researchers can confirm that appropriate ethical approval was obtained for this study from the outset and that participants were made aware of its purpose and nature. All participants were advised of its voluntary nature when completing the consent forms.

Results and Discussion of Findings

The finalised list of themes and codes detected in the analysis are shown in Table II. The codes are presented in tiers to show the hierarchy of how they link back to the overarching theme.

Table II Theme and Code Structure

Theme 1: Knowledge of Apprenticeship Process

The findings within this theme highlight the critical need for organisations to enhance support for mentors by clarifying roles and responsibilities, improving communication channels, and providing targeted training. These steps are essential for addressing the persistent knowledge gaps that continue to undermine the apprenticeship experience for both mentors and apprentices and can be said to have some more generic applicability beyond construction apprenticeships and the experience in England.

Participants across all focus groups revealed gaps in their knowledge of apprenticeship programmes. Notably, apprentices expressed frustration with their mentors' perceived lack of understanding. One participant noted, *"It was very much having to learn ourselves and then teach that back to our mentors"* [FG1 A2], while another shared, *"I was mentoring my mentor"* [FG1 A3]. These comments highlight an imbalance in the mentorship dynamic, with mentors lacking familiarity with essential aspects of the apprenticeship, such as KSBs. As one apprentice stated, *"They don't know or have an idea what KSBs are and how you can actually meet them"* [FG1 A5].

While apprentices expressed frustration, there was also recognition that mentors might be new to their roles and in need of additional support. For example, one participant noted, *"My mentor was quite upfront and said this was the first time he'd ever had to mentor an apprentice"* [FG1 A3]. This aligns with feedback from mentors, who admitted feeling uncertain about their responsibilities and seeking clearer guidance from their employers or programme providers. One mentor remarked, "*It's 30 years since I was in education... I'd like to better understand KSBs, the end point assessment (EPA), and what should be included to critically challenge the apprentice's work"* [FG3 M3].

The dynamics between apprentices and mentors pose a challenge for employers. Many participants voiced concerns about the lack of resources and guidance provided by their organisations to support apprenticeship programmes. One mentor reflected, *"Maybe that's part of the issue - the mentors aren't understanding. It's all put on the apprentice to understand and inform their mentors"* [FG3 M5]. Another participant noted, *"They understood the degree, but when it came to the apprenticeship, no"* [FG2 A4]. These reflections indicate a disconnect between mentors and apprentices, often compounded by insufficient organisational support.

These findings reflect earlier research by Roberts *et al*. (2019) and Rowe *et al*. (2017), which highlighted similar gaps in understanding and support for apprenticeship programmes. Despite the reforms aimed at improving mentor involvement, it appears that significant knowledge gaps persist. From a practical perspective, both mentors and apprentices are grappling with the complexity of the apprenticeship process, particularly concerning KSBs and their relevance to the EPA. As Roberts *et al*. (2019) suggest, the ongoing lack of progress in addressing these gaps emphasises the need for organisations to provide clearer guidance and resources. Additionally, Minton and Lowe (2019) and Quew-Jones and Rowe (2022) identified similar challenges in engaging mentors and managers in the apprenticeship process.

Theme 2: Support Structure

The data collection highlighted significant challenges within the support structure of apprenticeship programmes, particularly around progression opportunities, communication effectiveness, and the need for a consistent organisational framework. Apprentices voiced concerns about the absence of clear progression pathways. One participant expressed frustration with the slow pace of their development, stating, *"I mean like myself specifically I've only picked up my first site recently and I'm two years down the line"* [FG1 A4]. This sentiment was echoed by others who felt they lacked sufficient exposure to all elements of the apprenticeship, with comments such as, *"I know they can't spoon-feed it to us, but at least give enough exposure to everything where you can do enough portfolio statements"* [FG1 A3].

The challenges were further compounded by a perceived lack of effective mentorship. Many apprentices reported that mentors provided insufficient guidance, feedback, or support. One apprentice noted, *"… there needs to be some accountability on their side of things, like are we holding the mentor meetings as per we're supposed to, are they giving the support"* [FG1 A4]. Another highlighted the superficial nature of some mentoring interactions, saying, *"The mentoring, yeah, we do it. Again, I think it's just a tick box exercise. Do you get a lot out of it? Not really"* [FG2 A2]. This indicates a concern that mentoring often becomes a formal requirement rather than a meaningful engagement.

Time constraints emerged as a significant barrier to effective mentoring. Mentors themselves acknowledged the difficulty in balancing their responsibilities, with one stating, *"So I've got three at the minute, which I'm mentoring. So it's quite a lot, especially filling in the reports and stuff every quarter"* [FG3 M3]. This workload often led to limited availability for meaningful mentor-apprentice interactions, as reflected by an apprentice's comment: *"He might get 10 minutes or half an hour free...I'll catch them up on everything, then it's forgotten about for six months... They are just too busy"* [FG1 A4].

The seniority of mentors also impacted the support relationship. One mentor remarked, *"Sometimes I think when you are too senior in the team, they'll always tell you what you want to know, or what you think you need to know"* [FG3 M3], suggesting that higher-level mentors might provide less hands-on support. This sentiment was echoed by another mentor, who noted, *"I think internally there's a lot more that we could do"* [FG3 M1]. This indicates a need for a more structured approach to selecting and training mentors.

Participants highlighted the need for a consistent support framework within organisations to better guide apprentices. Both apprentices and mentors expressed a desire for clearer and more standardised support structures. For instance, one apprentice suggested, *"There's no consistency, it's not streamlined at all, and I think that's what we want really"* [FG1 A4]. Similarly, a mentor proposed, *"It'd be good if something came out, even if it's just a sort of timetable and a guide for each kind of year"* [FG3 M5], emphasising the need for a structured approach to mentoring.

Despite some positive feedback, such as apprentices appreciating mentors who provided dedicated time for assignments, there was significant variability in support. One apprentice shared, *"Overall with my mentor… he has been really good...he does allow me to have sort of at least half a day a week to have that afternoon in the office where I can just focus on doing my uni work"* [FG1 A3]. However, this positive experience was not universal, as other apprentices reported disparities in support. For example, one apprentice mentioned, *"Some get a week not just a day, I just get none"* [FG1 A5]. Another added, *"We get ten additional days for study leave… I've applied for it, and it got declined because we're just too busy work-wise"* [FG1 A2]. This variability can lead to feelings of unfairness, particularly when apprentices in similar roles receive different levels of support.

These results resonate and further develop the findings of Taylor-Smith *et al*. (2023), identifying specific inconsistencies in support and mentoring quality. Moreover, the results underscore the need for organisations, arguably well beyond the construction sector, to address these issues by providing clear guidelines and sufficient resources for mentorship. The Richard Review (2012) advocates for protected time for off-the-job training to help apprentices integrate their learning with work-based experiences. This study also supports Ross and Riley's (2018) conclusion that adequate resources and time for mentorship are invariably crucial for effective apprenticeship programmes. This study not only shows the challenges mentors face have not improved but also identifies the potential negative impact on the apprenticeship support relationship due to the mentor seniority.

The findings throughout this theme emphasise the critical role of a well-structured support framework in apprenticeship programmes. There is a clear need for organisations to enhance their mentorship structures, ensuring that both apprentices and mentors receive the necessary support and resources. Addressing these challenges is essential for the success of apprenticeship programmes including completion of the EPA and maximising apprentices' contributions to their organisations.

Theme 3: Employer Provider Relationship

The analysis of the employer-provider relationship within apprenticeship programmes highlighted significant areas for improvement, particularly concerning mentorship roles and clarity of apprenticeship requirements. Apprentices noted that clearer guidance could have improved their understanding and the overall experience. One apprentice expressed a need for a unified approach, stating, *"I think it just needs to be a collective, it just needs to feed down from the company and I think that's something the university needs to feed into"* [FG1 A2]. Another apprentice highlighted the inconsistency in the early stages of their apprenticeship, noting, *"I've gone to three different colleges in my six years. There just needs to be a better structure from the get-go so everyone's clear on what they expect and what your mentors expect as well"* [FG2 A2]. This indicates a broader concern about the lack of standardisation and clarity at the beginning of the apprenticeship journey.

Mentors also expressed the need for more support from employers and providers, particularly in understanding the complexities of the apprenticeship requirements. One mentor suggested that greater insight into the assignments and the associated terminology would be beneficial: *"Maybe a little bit more understanding from a mentor's perspective on what their years' work and their assignments look like and some of the jargon behind it would be really useful for a mentor to make sure that we can ask the right questions"* [FG3 M3]. Another mentor called for better training and onboarding processes, stating, *"More support for the mentors in terms of training internally and then probably on boarding of the mentors with the university as well"* [FG3 M1]. This feedback highlights the need for enhanced training and clearer communication to improve mentor effectiveness.

The complexity of apprenticeship roles was another critical issue. Mentors noted that the technical language and requirements associated with apprenticeships can be overwhelming. As one mentor put it, *"I think the apprenticeship information needs to be simplified as well to make it more accessible to them"* [FG3 M1]. This sentiment was echoed by another mentor, who reflected on the differences between current apprenticeship programmes and past experiences, saying, *' ...if you mentor with someone you base it on ... what you've done and what you know and how you did it before ... then there's almost this big additional chunk which is being put in, which I think the mentors need that new level of familiarity to effectively support them through it"*[FG3 M1]. This points to the necessity of updating mentoring practices to align with the evolving requirements of apprenticeships.

There was a strong consensus among participants on the need for improvements in the mentorship structure. Suggestions included providing more structured guidance for mentors and apprentices and ensuring consistency in mentor selection. For example, one participant proposed a more detailed framework for mentorship, stating, *"So in a small company like mine having almost like a manuscript of what is needed from your mentor to your mentee would help. If I had that from the start, where he understood how much was required of them as a company in order to meet the criteria on the degree apprenticeship, it would have been beneficial"* [FG2 A4]. Another suggestion was to implement a fixed mentor arrangement to provide stability, as noted by one mentor: *"Our guys potentially might change mentor quite regularly as well internally. So maybe having a kind of static fixed mentor for a period of time would be useful"* [FG3 M1].

The findings underscore the need for a more structured approach to apprenticeship mentorship, through to successful completion of the EPA. Previous research highlights the importance of simplifying requirements and improving communication between employers and providers (Department of Education, 2020b; St Martin's Group, 2022). Similarly, Mulkeen *et al.* (2019) and Hughes and Saieva (2019) emphasise better alignment and clearer guidance to clarify roles and responsibilities. This study suggests insufficient progress in addressing these challenges, as evidenced by ongoing difficulties faced by apprentices and mentors.

Improving employer-provider relationships, simplifying requirements, and ensuring consistent mentorship structures are critical steps for effective apprenticeships. As recognised by Fuller and Unwin (2011), collaboration between employers and providers is essential to develop these improvements, supporting apprentices and mentors and driving successful EPA outcomes.

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Contributions and Implications

The significant contributions of this study focus on the unique lived experiences from both mentors and apprentices within construction DA's and provide an insight into these relationships. This study highlights that despite regulatory reforms, little progress appears to have been made in addressing core issues such as organisational support resources, mentor knowledge and also identifies the importance of mentor selection. The results from this study contribute to this developing field and provide clear recommendations for employers and providers. The results emphasise systemic barriers that transcend specific industries and highlights a broader need for organisational commitment to providing structured mentorship and comprehensive support frameworks. Moreover, this study reveals that many apprentices encounter barriers such as lack of support, inadequate feedback, and mismatched mentorship relationships, echoing concerns raised in historical studies. These challenges are likely mirrored across other apprenticeship-driven sectors, including manufacturing, healthcare, and engineering, where similar drivers and systemic barriers persist. Addressing these through enhanced mentor training and better employer engagement could significantly improve apprenticeship outcomes.

In the context of global interest in work-based learning models, the challenges and opportunities presented by the English system are particularly relevant (Fortwengel *et al.*, 2021). While the system faces criticisms for its gaps in mentor and employer engagement, it offers a flexible and innovative framework well-suited to diverse workforce needs. Internationally, these features make it a compelling model for adoption, but addressing persistent issues is essential to strengthen its global appeal. By building on these strengths and learning from its limitations, the English apprenticeship system has the potential to set a global benchmark for effective work-based learning, provided future reforms prioritise employer engagement and consistent mentor support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While mentorship is widely recognised as pivotal in apprenticeship programmes, the dynamics of the mentor-apprentice relationship, particularly in industries such as construction, remain under explored. The construction sector, with its dynamic and often unpredictable nature, presents unique challenges. However, the fundamental issues identified in this research (gaps in mentor understanding, inconsistent support, and inadequate guidance) are not confined to this industry alone. The perception of mentors and apprentices actively on programme reveals a strong consensus on the need for enhancements in apprenticeship programmes, focusing particularly on mentorship structures, mentor guidance, and consistency in support. These findings echo historical studies, which documented similar challenges, indicating that systemic issues have continued largely unchanged despite regulatory reforms and efforts to improve apprenticeship standards. This persistent gap underscores the need for organisations and providers to take a more proactive role in addressing these shortcomings.

The current completion statistics further emphasises this urgency. Without a clear framework and better support, apprenticeship effectiveness may remain compromised. This study has reinforced the need for improvement including the development of comprehensive mentorship training, more streamlined communication between employers and providers, and a structured approach to managing mentorship roles. To drive meaningful change, employers and providers must take ownership of these improvements, leveraging the strengths of the English system, such as its flexibility, while addressing these long-standing challenges. By clarifying mentor roles, simplifying apprenticeship requirements, and ensuring consistent support, organisations can significantly enhance the apprenticeship experience. These actions are essential for transforming apprenticeships into a truly effective learning pathway, improving completion rates and outcomes for all participants.

Limitations

All studies are subject to limitations, and it is important that these are recognised and acknowledged. In this study, a cross-sectional design was selected which focuses on a specific point in time which potentially could overlook any longitudinal changes and developments. The number of participants involved may limit the generalisability of findings to a broader population as the sample is taken from a single institution and one programme of study. This said there are some areas of generalisability within the findings that support the recommendations discussed below both outside of construction and the UK.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this research, the following sections provide recommendations for practice. Implementing changes to enhance apprenticeship programmes requires a commitment to continuous improvement. By prioritising mentor support, providing clearer guidance, and establishing consistent programme structures, employers and providers could help address underlying factors recognised in the literature and throughout this study.

Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations are separated into sections to assist employers and providers in optimising their mentoring initiatives.

Recommendations for Employers

Employers should ensure that mentorship activities are integrated into broader workforce development strategies, with clear links to organisational priorities and strategic initiatives. This will allow resources to be allocated accordingly to support the programme's success.

1. Employers should establish clear guidelines and expectations for mentors including key performance indicators (KPIs). Support from training providers in the creation of these should be provided.
2. Employers should allocate sufficient time and resources for mentors to fulfil their mentorship responsibilities effectively.
3. To address the need for structure and guidance, employers should be encouraged to develop a formal mentorship guide or handbook. This resource should outline mentorship roles, responsibilities, and best practices, serving as a reference tool for mentors and apprentices throughout the apprenticeship programme.
4. Employers should be encouraged to gather feedback from mentors regarding their experiences and challenges. Creating ways for mentors to voice their concerns, share best practices, and collaborate on innovative solutions, could enhance the effectiveness and impact of mentorship over time.
5. Employers need to find a balance between recognising the expertise of senior mentors and ensuring accessibility and approachability for apprentices.

Recommendations for Providers

Based on the results of the study a further six recommendations have been suggested for providers:

1. Providers should actively collaborate with employers to understand their specific needs, goals, and challenges related to mentors within apprenticeship programmes.
2. Providers should consider creating alternative ways of gathering feedback from apprentices and stakeholders. This should encourage evaluating mentor performance regularly and creating strategies to support mentor excellence.
3. The creation of clear guidance for employers should include information on mentor selection criteria, communication expectations, and resources for mentor support.
4. Providers should consider creating mentorship handbooks, toolkits, and online resources to support mentors in their roles. Mentor forums facilitated by providers could also increase shared best practices.
5. Coaches should play a proactive role in facilitating mentorship support by including the mentors in workshops, EPA activities and mentor focused support sessions.
6. Providers should consider working closer with employers and include them in steering groups. The sharing of more in-depth compliance including KPIs could foster more accountability from employers in apprenticeship outcomes.

By deepening our understanding of mentors in degree apprenticeships all stakeholders can contribute to the continual improvement of apprenticeship programmes. This holds significance for educators, policymakers, and industry stakeholders alike, as it directly impacts the quality and efficiency of apprenticeship initiatives. Although implementing these changes may not guarantee an immediate increase in completion rates, they would create a more supportive environment for apprentices to succeed and create a model that can be emulated more widely, including internationally.

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Table I Focus Group Participants

Focus Group No	ID Number	Participant Role	Position in Company
FG1	FG1 A1	Apprentice	L6 Design Construction Manager
	FG1 A2	Apprentice	L6 Quantity Surveyor
	FG1 A3	Apprentice	L6 Quantity Surveyor
	FG1 A4	Apprentice	L6 Quantity Surveyor
	FG1 A5	Apprentice	L6 Design Construction Manager
FG2	FG2 A1	Apprentice	L6 Site Manager
	FG2 A2	Apprentice	L6 Site Manager
	FG2 A3	Apprentice	L6 Site Manager
	FG2 A4	Apprentice	L6 Site Manager
FG3	FG3 M1	Mentor	Learning & Development Advisor
	FG3 M2	Mentor	Project Manager
	FG3 M3	Mentor	Technical Director
	FG3 M4	Mentor	Project Manager
	FG3 M5	Mentor	Project Manager

Table II Theme and Code Structure

Theme	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Files	References
1. Knowledge of Apprenticeship Process	1.1 Apprentice Knowledge	1.1.1 Apprentice expectations of mentor		3	113
		1.1.2 Apprentice guiding mentor			
		1.1.3 Apprentice lack of understanding			
		1.1.4 Not understand KSB link to role			
	1.2 Mentor Knowledge	1.2.1 Mentor not understanding KSBs			
		1.2.2 Mentors lack of understanding of the apprentice requirements	1.2.2.1 Construction Industry		
		1.2.3 Mentors not understanding EPA	1.2.3.1 End Point Assessment		
		1.2.4 Mentors not understanding Off the Job			
	1.3 Organisational Knowledge	1.3.1 Company lacks understanding of apprenticeships			
		1.3.2 Company new to apprentices			
		1.3.3 Difficult to understand all the requirements			
		1.3.4 Disconnect between apprenticeship and job role			
		1.3.5 Disconnected Qualifications			
		1.3.6 Relevance of qualification to job role			
		1.3.7 Unaware of apprenticeship process			
		1.3.8 Wider company unaware of apprentices			
2. Support Structure	2.1 Apprenticeship Progression	2.1.1 Increased Apprentice Responsibility		3	105
		2.2.2 Limited apprentice progression			
	2.2 Communication	2.2.1 Better communication from university			
		2.2.2 Good mentor relationship			
		2.2.3 Need to improve company communication			
	2.3 Mentor Support Structure	2.3.1. Inconsistent company approach	2.3.1.1 Inconsistent company approach		
			2.3.1.2 Lack of mentor availability		
			2.3.1.3 Lack of time to mentor		
		2.3.2 Mentor Structure	2.3.2.1 Inconsistent mentor support offered within the same company		
			2.3.2.2 Lack of mentor support		
			2.3.2.3 Need to have correct person as mentor		
			2.3.2.4 Wider company structure for apprentices		
3. Employer Provider Relationship	3.1 Coach Guidance of the process			3	50
	3.2 Improve coach relationship				
	3.3 Suggested recommendations				
	3.4 Support for Mentors				
	3.5 University support				