

## Maximising the effectiveness of degree apprenticeships for enhancing practitioner effectiveness in the workplace

**Supervisors:** [Dr Sarah Bloomfield](#), Department of People and Organisations, [Dr Carolin Decker-Lange](#), Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise and [Professor Mark Fenton-O'Creevy](#), Department of People and Organisations, The Open University Business School

### Project Description:

Drawing on the lived experience of practice-based learning, the project aims to explore the effectiveness of undergraduate management degree apprenticeship programs in the UK. Traditional curricula in management education have been criticised for the disconnect between the formal knowledge and analytical techniques that are taught, and the ambiguity and messiness of management in practice (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2006; Mintzberg, 2004). Degree apprenticeships in contrast are firmly rooted in practice. The apprentice is expected to apply the ideas from their academic learning into their own professional practice in the workplace. There are however issues with completion of degree apprenticeships which can have a negative impact on the apprentice, the employing organisation, and the educational provider (Harris and Simons, 2005; Smyth and Zimba, 2019). Added to this, there is 'no consensus on the benefits of offering apprenticeships' (Mulkeen et al., 2019: 334).

Apprenticeship degrees are an HR tool to foster talent in organisations. Although both the apprentice and the employing organisation are expected to gain from the experience, in practice apprenticeship degrees have been found to generate tensions through e.g.:

- Different motivations and commitments between the apprentice and the employer
- Different views of benefits (or effectiveness) of the apprenticeship degree program (e.g. achievement of degree/apprenticeship, improved performance at work, work promotion)
- Changes in the apprentice's work situation whilst on the program (e.g. promotion, redundancy, change of employer)
- The need for the employer to provide time and support for the apprentice to complete their studies alongside their work role
- The purpose of assessments (e.g. academic assignments vs. evidence of practice)
- The difference between neat academic theory and messy management practice

These tensions highlight the competing motivations and demands experienced by the stakeholders involved in degree apprenticeships. Proposals are invited for PhD research adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective to examine tensions, how they materialise, and how they impact the outcomes and lived experiences with degree apprenticeships, including stakeholders' potentially contradictory perceptions of their effectiveness.

The study is likely to employ a tensions perspective, potentially even a paradox lens (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011), depicting competing but interdependent expectations and demands. A tensions/paradox lens would allow for the exploration of management degree apprenticeships from the perspectives of those involved, including but not limited to apprentices and employers. The literature on practice-based learning (e.g. Eraut, 1994; Cheetham and Chivers, 2005) is also likely to be relevant to the study.

Through its findings the project aims to i) inform public policy in relation to degree apprenticeships; ii) help academic institutions to enhance their degree apprenticeship programs based on a better understanding of stakeholders' needs; and iii) enable apprenticeships to be used as a more effective HR tool within employer organisations.

It is likely that the project will employ a qualitative research methodology and an interpretivist approach, helping to uncover multiple stakeholders' perceptions, potentially competing motivations and subjective experiences. It may be based within organisations using apprenticeships as an HR tool, and could include a comparison of different types of employer organisations, such as public versus private organisations, organisations in different industries, or large companies versus small to medium-sized enterprises. However, we are open to receiving creative proposals that may incorporate other approaches.

#### **About the Supervisors:**

**Sarah Bloomfield** is a Lecturer in work-based learning in the Department of People and Organisations at the Open University. Sarah's works across the management degree apprenticeship programs and her research and practice focuses on how individual and collective managerial effectiveness can be improved in the workplace, recognising that each work situation is unique.

**Carolyn Decker-Lange** is a Senior Lecturer in Management at the Department of Public Leadership & Social Enterprise and Deputy Director (Business) at SCiLAB, FBL's Centre for Innovation in online Legal and Business Education at The Open University Business School. As a former apprentice herself, Carolyn has a particular interest in apprenticeship education.

**Mark Fenton-O'Creevy** is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the Open University Business School. He has a profound interest in the relationship between formal and informal learning. He spent five years running a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning the Centre for Practice-Based Professional Learning.

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