

How does the experience of Degree Apprenticeships for students normally under-represented in Higher Education (HE), suggest that apprenticeships can support increased access to HE in England?

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Abstract

This study explores the experience of apprentices on Degree Apprenticeship programmes based in the East of England. The study considers whether the experience of studying and delivering apprenticeships reflect the expectations outlined in the legislation that introduced Degree Apprenticeships to England in 2015; and explores whether Degree Apprenticeships can increase participation in English Higher Education (HE). The study employs a mixed-methods approach, surveying apprentices to gain quantitative insights into their reasons for study and their previous aspirations and expectations of HE, and qualitative narrative inquiry interviews with apprentices, university staff, and employers. Analysis of the interviews was abductive, utilising both inductive and deductive inquiry, and uses reflexive thematic analysis. Findings are considered in relation to the theories of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994), and the role of pedagogic practice in cultural reproduction (Bernstein, 2000).

Findings from this study evidence strong professional identity and self-efficacy for apprentices, which challenges academic literature that suggests under-represented groups are disadvantaged in the HE environment. The study identified challenges for apprentices in their engagement with HE learning, and conflict between apprentices and full-time students relating to professional and student identities. The study also found that the identity of university staff as 'academics' was impacted by the negative effect that Apprenticeship Standards, bureaucracy, and regulation had on their sense of self-efficacy. This was found to exacerbate challenges already experienced by academics through the neoliberalisation of the HE sector. The study shows that while apprenticeships could be said to have made HE more accessible for the individuals involved, any positive outcomes relating to the participation of under-represented groups is by accident rather than by design. Employers within the study predominately used Degree Apprenticeships to upskill existing staff rather than employing new staff. This study offers valuable and original insight into the experience of apprentices on Degree Apprenticeship programmes, and the employers and university staff involved. It makes an important contribution to the literature about widening participation, vocational education, apprenticeships, HE policy in practice, and employer-university partnerships; and introduces the new concept of *probable selves*.

The study makes recommendations about the apprenticeship experience and provides important insight into the challenges for HE, and their staff, in delivering education within a restrictive vocational sphere.

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Glossary

A Levels: A Levels are Level 3 (definition below) subject-based academic qualifications that are typically studied by students aged 16-18. They usually take two years to complete and are a gateway qualification for entry into Higher Education in the UK.

Apprenticeship Frameworks: Apprenticeship Frameworks were used between [YEAR] and around 2017, as they were phased out with the introduction of Apprenticeship Standards. Frameworks specified the wide range of training and qualifications that could be considered to meet the academic requirements of an Apprenticeship, but they could range for a single occupation between vocational qualifications and academic qualifications. Employers and training providers could choose which qualifications to offer within a Framework. The Richards Review (2012) criticised Apprenticeship Frameworks on the basis that there were limited progression opportunities, few frameworks existed above Levels 2 and 3, and they involved too wide a range of qualifications within them.

Apprenticeship Levy: The Apprenticeship Levy is an amount paid at a rate of 0.5 per cent of an employer's annual pay bill. Employers are eligible to pay the Levy each month if they have an annual pay bill of more than £3 million or are connected to any companies or charities with a combined annual pay bill of more than £3 million (HM Revenue and Customs, 2023). Organisations can use their Levy to pay for apprenticeship training, but cannot use it for any other costs, including apprentice salaries or back-fill costs, associated with the apprenticeship. Organisations not able to use their full levy can pledge up to 25 per cent of their funds to smaller organisations to support their involvement in apprenticeships. In 2021-22, almost 97 per cent of the Levy was spent (Department for Education, 2023).

Apprenticeship Standards: Since 2015, Apprenticeship Frameworks have been replaced with Standards, which includes the occupational standard and additional requirements specific to the apprenticeship (IfATE, 2023). Degree Apprenticeship Standards mandates a full bachelor's or master's degree as the qualificatory outcome of the apprenticeship. Apprenticeship Standards are produced by Trailblazer groups, and IfATE allocate a funding band. The upper limit of a funding band is the total cap that can be spent using Levy funds to pay for apprenticeship training.

Clearing: Students applying to universities in the UK are required to apply via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). The application cycle has an Equal Consideration Deadline in January each year, after which applications for the following academic intake are considered on a case-by-case basis. Between the beginning of July and the start of the

academic year, applicants can apply directly to universities or via UCAS, for courses that still have vacancies. This is a shortened application period to the normal application process but has seen increasing numbers of applicants over the past ten years.

Contextual Offers: Universities often make lower academic offers for entry for students from a background that makes them less likely to achieve high grades. The aim of contextual offers is to recognise that achievement for some students who experience disadvantage, could be seen to be equivalent to higher grades achieved by advantaged students. UCAS (2026) provides an overview of the types of offers that can be made and the types of situations that can lead to contextual offers.

Degree Apprenticeships: Degree Apprenticeships normally include qualifications up to and including Level 6, but a small number are available at Level 7. A Level 6 apprenticeship would lead to the award of a Bachelor degree and can take up to four years to complete as an apprentice works through levels 4 to 6. Some Degree Apprenticeships are offered as a one- or two-year top-up to a Higher Apprenticeship. Level 7 Degree Apprenticeships lead to the award of a Master's degree on completion and usually take 18 months to two years to complete. According to IfATE (2023), *“these occupations require the application of advanced knowledge, skills and problem solving across a wide range of complex settings. They require the ability to critically analyse, interpret, and evaluate complex information and ideas. They may also require responsibility for leading others, and initiating, planning, and developing complex tasks and processes.”*

End Point Assessment (EPA): The EPA is an independent assessment undertaken by an apprentice at the end of their apprenticeship, which tests their occupational competence and requires them to demonstrate the duties, knowledge, skills, and behaviours set out in the Apprenticeship Standard (IfATE, 2023). EPAs can either be integrated into the Degree Apprenticeship, which means it is completed as part of the degree and assessed by the training provider; or it can be separate to the academic study and therefore organised and funded by the training provider. Apprentices must pass their EPA to complete the apprenticeship.

Higher Apprenticeships: Higher Apprenticeships include qualifications up to and including Level 4 and 5 and are known as Higher Technical Occupations by IfATE. According to IfATE (2023) *“these occupations require the application of knowledge, skills and problem solving in a broad range of activities or tasks, which are complex and non-routine. They require the ability to analyse, interpret, and evaluate information and ideas. They may also require responsibility for managing others, and a level of planning, autonomy, and judgement.”* For universities, Level 5 apprenticeships would normally lead to the award of a Foundation Degree.

IfATE: The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) is the body responsible for oversight of apprenticeships in England. They also approve other technical education, including T Levels and technical or higher technical qualifications.

Levels of Education: Definitions provided using the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) International Standard Classification of Education, ISCED 2011, published in 2012. This document is referenced in the below definitions of each level of education as UNESCO, 2012.

- **Level 2:** Lower secondary education. *“At the end of ISCED Level 2, pupils are typically aged 14-16 years... In many education systems with compulsory education legislation, the end of lower secondary education coincides with the end of compulsory (general) education.”* (UNESCO, 2012: 33-34). In England, Level 2 qualifications are usually taken as GCSEs, which pupils complete at the end of Year 11, and which act as gateway qualifications into Level 3, which is studied as Sixth Form or FE College.
- **Level 3:** Upper secondary education. *“ISCED level 3 programmes usually end... around age 17 or 18... with 12 years being the most widespread cumulative duration [of education].”* (UNESCO, 2012: 38). In England, Level 3 qualifications are usually taken as A Levels or other qualifications such as BTECS or T Levels. Level 3 qualifications are usually taught in FE College or Sixth Form and are gateway qualifications into Higher Education.
- **Level 4:** Post-secondary non-tertiary education. *“The content of ISCED Level 4 programmes is not sufficiently complex to be regarded as tertiary education, although it is clearly post-secondary... Usually, programmes at this level are designed for direct labour market entry... ISCED Level 4 programmes often serve to broaden – rather than deepen – the knowledge, skills, and competencies of participants who have completed a programme as ISCED Level 3. Programmes are often not significantly more advanced... but the context is typically more specialised or detailed than at the upper secondary level of education.”* (UNESCO, 2012: 43-44). In England, Higher Education students who complete the first year of a University programme but do not progress any further, would be awarded a Level 4 Certificate of Higher Education. In Further Education Colleges, students can complete a Level 4 Higher National Certificate. Apprentices on a Level 4 Higher Apprenticeships will usually achieve an award such as the HE Certificate or HNC.

- **Level 5:** Short-cycle tertiary education. *“Programmes at ISCED Level 5... are often designed to provide participants with professional knowledge, skills, and competencies.”* (UNESCO, 2012: 48). Level 4 and 5 study is usually built into a Level 6 undergraduate degree, which is termed as such because it is the final qualificatory level (UNESCO, 2012). However, programmes offered at Level 5 may be termed *“(higher) technical education... technician or advanced/higher vocational training...”* (UNESCO, 2012: 48). In England, Higher Education students who finish their programme at the end of the second year of the undergraduate degree, can be awarded a Level 5 Diploma of Higher Education. However, Level 5 is also the final award within the Foundation Degree; and students in Further Education Colleges can complete a Level 5 Higher National Diploma. Apprentices on a Level 5 Higher Apprenticeship will usually achieve an award such as a Foundation Degree (e.g. the Nursing Associate apprenticeship in the 2+2 programme featured in this research), the HE Diploma, or HND.
- **Level 6:** Bachelor’s or equivalent level. *“Programmes at this level are typically theoretically-based but may include practical components and are informed by state of the art research and/or best professional practice. They are traditionally offered by universities and equivalent tertiary educational institutions.”* (UNESCO, 2012: 51). In England, universities award Level 6 Bachelor Degrees. This is also the Level awarded within a Degree Apprenticeship programme.
- **Level 7:** Master’s or equivalent level. *“Programmes at ISCED level 7 are often designed to provide participants with advanced academic and/or professional knowledge, skills, and competencies, leading to a second degree or equivalent qualification. ... They are traditionally offered by universities and other tertiary educational institutions... Programmes at this level may involve the completion of a research project or thesis that is more advanced than those expected at ISCED level 6 and less advanced than those expected at ISCED level 8.”* (UNESCO, 2012: 55). In England, universities award Level 7 Master’s Degrees, and this is also the Level awarded in the Level 7 Degree Apprenticeships, e.g. Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeship.

POLAR4: Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) is produced by the Office for Students (OfS) and classifies small areas across the UK into five groups according to their level of young participation in HE. Each of these groups represents areas where around 20 per cent of young people live and are ranked from quintile 1 (Q1) (areas with the lowest young participation rates, considered as the most disadvantaged) to quintile 5 (Q5) (areas with the highest young

participation rates, considered most advantaged). This has been updated over the years to POLAR2, POLAR3 and POLAR4 (gov.uk, 2025). It should be noted that there are criticisms of POLAR data as it does not correlate to family income or ethnicity so instead can only be considered as a measure of participation based on local area; however, it is heavily used in government documentation relating to participation rates (Montacute and Cullinane, 2023).

Probable Selves: A complimentary concept to that of Markus and Nurius' (1986) 'possible selves', which is also complimentary to Bourdieu's (1986) habitus. Probable selves is a new concept developed as part of this research, which reflects an inactive view of the likely trajectory of one's life if nothing changes to alter that trajectory.

Russell Group Universities: The Russell Group is a self-selected group of 24 UK universities that are research-intensive institutions (Russell Group, 2023). Entry requirements for undergraduate study are generally high, and they are considered to be largely 'selective' in making offers of study.

Student Number Controls: In England, Student Number Controls applied to students at approved Higher Education providers, which were providers subject to a fee limit condition of registration by the Office for Students. Student Number Controls were in place until 2014/15 and were government-imposed limits on the number of full-time undergraduate students a university or college could recruit. The aim of SNCs was to manage public funding and control the growth of HE, and there were financial penalties for institutions if they exceeded their target.

Trailblazers: Trailblazer groups of employers and other stakeholders develop and review Degree Apprenticeship Standards, which are then reviewed and approved by Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education for delivery.

UCAS cycle: Applicants to UK universities are required to apply using the application within the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). The 'UCAS cycle' is the period of the application process, which starts at the beginning of September for the Higher Education intake for the following September/October. The Main Cycle includes the period from September to mid-January, at which point the Equal Consideration Deadline (ECD) means that all applicants who apply before that date, must be given equal consideration for an offer to study. Following the ECD, applicants can continue to apply through the Late period up to the end of June, during which time their application will be considered on a case-by-case basis. From beginning of July, the application period becomes Clearing (see definition above), which is a shortened application period leading to the HE intake in September/October. The UCAS cycle finishes at the end of August/early September, before starting again for the next intake.

UCAS tariff points are a points value ascribed to qualifications, based on the qualification size and the grade achieved, which can be used for entry into university (UCAS.com, 2025). Universities can specify entry requirements based on grades achieved, e.g. BBB at A Level; or an equivalent number of points, e.g. 120 UCAS points. This allows universities to be able to admit students with a variety of qualifications.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter begins with an introduction to the research topic and the reason it is an important area of study, including the rationale for why this is a relevant and timely area of exploration. I then set out my background as a precursor to the positionality statement that will follow later in this thesis, and my research journey. I also set out the research questions before placing the research in context both in terms of its scope and the key definitions used. Finally, I outline the structure of the thesis and contribution to knowledge.

1.1 Introduction to the Topic and Rationale for Research

Legislative developments throughout the second half of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries, have led to significant changes in English Higher Education (HE). HE was an opportunity available to very few in the post-war years of the 1940s and 1950s (Thompson *et al.*, 2011), but that now sees over 50 per cent participation as shown in *Table 2* (Gov.uk, 2019; Section 2.2.6); although the sector has become one with increasing competition for undergraduate students in 2026. These developments have brought with them the gradual neoliberalism of the HE sector, which, I argue, has led to universities facing financial uncertainty and the need to diversify income streams. Chapter 2 sets out the relevant political and legislative developments that have created a sector open to new opportunities, most notably those that led to the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) in 2015.

The government introduced DAs in 2015 (Gov.uk, 2015b) and as will be explored further in Chapter 2, they were expected to have an impact on increasing access to HE through partnerships with employers and reforms to the tax system (Finance Act, 2016). From 2017, all large employers were required to pay an Apprenticeship Levy (see *Glossary*) to fund an improved apprenticeships system, and universities were able to offer apprenticeships for the first time.

Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) represented a significant legislative development in the funding of both HE and vocational training, and the expectation of government that HE should meet the skills needs of both employers and jobs of the future (Bravenboer, 2016). DAs were developed by Trailblazer groups (see *Glossary*) that included employers and stakeholders such as cross-sector representative organisations, with the curriculum produced as an Apprenticeship Standard to be delivered by approved training providers. DAs were also discussed as an option for free Degree-level study for young people to improve access into professional employment (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015), recognising the significant cost via student loans that full-time students take on for tuition fees and maintenance costs.

My experience of apprenticeships, as will be outlined in more detail in Section 1.2, was that they were a challenging area for universities to enter. When they were introduced, there was limited practical information about how an apprenticeship differed from full-time degree programmes, or the level of monitoring required to ensure universities could maintain training contracts and access to funding. Many aspects of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) systems were different to the systems and processes that universities normally used, and introducing apprenticeships meant renegotiating relationships with existing employer partners. Both universities and employers often had limited knowledge and understanding about the regulatory requirements of DAs because there was minimal guidance available in the early stages about how a DA was expected to differ from existing HE provision (Hughes and Saieva, 2021; Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). While universities attempted to navigate the policies and regulation behind apprenticeships, the government introduced a wide-ranging campaign to promote DAs as an alternative to full-time university study (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015).

This research developed through my professional knowledge of widening participation, and my experience of developing DAs within a university. I identified a gap in the research about the potential impact of DAs on increasing access to HE, recognising that while earlier legislative developments had increased capacity in the HE sector, gaps in participation rates between the most and least advantaged remained, as shown in *Table 6* (Gov.uk, 2025; Section 2.5.1). I acknowledged that DAs represented an opportunity to increase access to HE but was unsure if this would be achieved given the role that employers would play in determining who would participate in DAs. Section 1.3 sets out my research journey and how the research questions developed through the early parts of my studies; but in 2017 when I started this PhD, there were significant questions to be asked about the role of DAs in increasing access to HE.

1.2 My Role as Researcher

I came to this research from a professional background. I had been working exclusively within Higher Education (HE) since graduating from my undergraduate degree in Sociology, and my focus had been on widening participation (WP) to university, and student recruitment.

I had progressed into university as a learner who had been supported by a WP project, which had worked with my school to promote HE. I attended a summer school after completing my exams, and my summer school results were used to secure my admission to my local Russell Group university after failing to achieve the grades required for entry. I therefore started my

degree as a first-generation student with lower academic attainment than my peers. I was also continuing to live at home for university as the cost of university accommodation was too high.

However, even with the support of a WP project, I did not make good university choices. My insurance option if I failed to get into my local university was over 100 miles away, yet my parents could not have managed to pay for accommodation, making it an impossible option. I chose to study Philosophy and Psychology, believing Philosophy would be a continuation of the ethical debates we had at school in a Philosophy module. However, I was shocked to discover that I was expected to learn about early-Greek philosophers, and I was lucky to scrape a pass in first-year Philosophy, mainly through the help of the novel, 'Sophie's World'. In Scotland, students usually study three subjects in first year university, and my third subject was based purely on chance. The meeting to choose my third subject was scheduled at the end of the induction week, because alphabetically my surname of Wilson put me at the end of the list; so, my preferred option of Politics was full. I was asked to choose another subject by a disinterested Philosophy academic, and selected Sociology on the spot. I did not know what the subject was – I only knew it existed because it was often close to Psychology in university prospectuses. Fortunately, I found my academic home in Sociology and ended up completing my degree in it.

I worked throughout university in a range of part-time jobs, one of which was a Student Ambassador, which meant I could pick up casual hours to promote my university, the University of Edinburgh, to visiting groups of students. I often worked with the WP project that had supported me. When I graduated in 2003, I was offered a six-month internship with the WP and Recruitment teams at the University of Edinburgh, before moving to a permanent role within the WP team.

My own experience and choices led to an interest in the choices that under-represented students make, the advice they receive, and the opportunities that are made available to them in the first place. As part of this, I have always had a strong interest in social justice, and the fairness or otherwise, of opportunities. My mantra in life is: 'there but for chance go I', as I have a constant awareness that my own fortunes are based on luck, love, and an accident of birth. Had I been born into a different situation, my life may not be as fortunate as it is. My research questions and interest were thus heavily influenced by my experience of HE and my perspective on life.

After six years working in WP at Edinburgh, I progressed to a new university in England as a Student Recruitment Manager. My role was both to increase recruitment to the university, which had only opened three years before I joined, and to increase participation of those within the

region who were otherwise unlikely to progress to HE. This included young students from traditionally low-participation and/or economically deprived areas, students with disabilities, and mature students. I wrote the University's annual Access Agreement, where I would make recommendations and commitments on behalf of the university to increase activity that aimed to increase access into HE.

In 2015 when the government introduced Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), my role also included portfolio development. I was tasked with introducing Degree Apprenticeships at my university, but there were a range of challenges. One of the areas I thought most exciting was the potential for young people to access free HE through the Apprenticeship Levy. I assumed that employers would recruit school and college leavers, providing a route for those otherwise underrepresented in HE. However, not only was it made clear by our local employers that they would be upskilling existing employees, but I also discovered that universities would have little say in who was enrolled into an apprenticeship. One employer told me that they would be targeting the "best" students in their promotion of DA opportunities. When I asked which schools he would be promoting them in, he listed the local independent schools, leading to the realisation that DAs would not necessarily be used to increase participation of those traditionally under-represented in HE.

A further influence on my decision to undertake this research was the completion of my part-time MBA in 2016, where my dissertation had focussed on the risk to universities from changes in government policy. I had genuine interest in the impact that successive legislative and political developments had on the HE sector, and how it has consequently become a neoliberal sector. I will outline in Chapter 2 the process of neoliberalism in HE, and the impact this had on the financial security of universities. Working at a new university within an increasingly competitive sector meant that I could see the impact of successive changes and developments in government legislation, particularly over the period that tuition fees increased and Student Number Controls (see *Glossary*) were removed. I was involved in discussions and decisions about how competitive we would be on price and how we could grow our market share, and as such, the introduction of DAs became an obvious source of student numbers and much-needed income.

A PhD considering the potential impact of DAs in widening access to HE seemed an appropriate continuation of my interest in legislative developments within the HE sector.

1.3 The Research Journey

This research explores the experience of both studying, and delivering, Degree Apprenticeship (DA) programmes. The focus is on apprentices who have characteristics that make them under-represented in Higher Education (HE) and considers whether the programmes are supporting increased access. Legislative developments impacting the HE sector over the sixty years preceding the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships led to significant interest within the sector, as will be outlined in Chapter 2. However, DAs as a *product* are distinctly different from the traditional degree offered by universities. Employers are involved in both their design and delivery (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013), and there is a significant level of reporting and monitoring both by and of universities, to maintain apprenticeship training contracts (Knight and Hill, 2025). This raises questions about the experience for apprentices, universities, and employers.

My starting point in the research was to explore whether DAs were increasing access to HE by examining the processes around recruitment to apprenticeships. I considered DAs to be an important opportunity to increase access to HE. The debt taken on by students at university, particularly those from the lowest income backgrounds who are eligible for the largest loan amounts, means that HE is a financial commitment that many may be unable to take on. While the academic literature suggests that those aspiring to HE will progress regardless of the financial debt involved (Evans and Donnelly, 2018; Whitty, Hayton and Tang, 2016), the lower progression rate of economically disadvantaged young people, as shown in *Table 6* (Gov.uk, 2025, Section 2.5.1) indicates that financial factors are important for some young people, and may limit their HE options if they do choose to progress (Evans and Donnelly, 2018). However, I was interested in the extent to which employers would consider increasing access within their recruitment decisions. I wanted to understand how apprentices knew about DAs, who supported them, and the extent to which employers made allowances, or actively attempted to target those, with limited social and cultural capital. Having met an employer who aimed to recruit apprentices from independent fee-paying schools, I wanted to understand if his view that these would be the “best” apprentices, was representative of the recruitment practices of other employers.

I started my literature review by reading about widening participation to HE. On the advice of my Doctoral supervisors, I read about gender, class, aspiration, and attainment. I started with Bourdieu, believing that his concept of habitus might be important in my consideration of whether DAs could be seen to fit within the social expectations of young people. However, as I encountered literature relating to vocational education, the breadth of my studies began to

widen. I started to question whether the experience of studying DAs would be similar to the experience of full-time Higher Education. Within the literature, I followed a range of interesting threads, some of which were more relevant than others. The reading of an article by Powell and Walsh (2018) about the lack of academic autonomy over the DA curriculum led me to question how academics felt about DAs – reflecting my experience of working with academic colleagues who questioned the quality of the DA curriculum compared to the existing underlying degree programmes.

Other threads took me to Ulriksen's (2009) 'implied student', which I found fascinating in considering the expectations of students, and therefore apprentices, in the classroom. Following this thread led me to Bandura's (1994) concept of self-efficacy, and Markus and Nurius' (1986) possible selves. Through advice from my Doctoral supervisors, I also became interested in learning and classroom experiences, which took me to Bernstein (2000) and his writing on power, control, and the perpetuation of social structures within the pedagogical environment.

I had expected that my research would be with young school and college leavers who were undertaking DA programmes, but early apprenticeship data showed that they were more likely to be mature students being upskilled by their employers, as shown in *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b, Section 2.5.4). Consequently, this led to a wide range of additional academic threads relating to the barriers for mature students returning to education, and how the identity of a mature student might be affected by their studies as an apprentice.

I found limited literature on Degree Apprenticeships when I started my studies in autumn 2017 but more became available in the later years. As new pieces of academic literature were published, more questions were raised, both in the literature and in my own studies.

1.4 Research Questions

My research questions changed throughout the early stages of my research journey, from an initial focus on the processes that led to apprentices undertaking a Degree Apprenticeship (DA) and how widening participation (WP) was considered within the recruitment and selection processes. It quickly became apparent that Degree Apprentices were not young people, and as outlined in Section 1.3, I became more interested in the experience of DAs. This research therefore explores the experience of delivering and studying Degree Apprenticeships for the three key stakeholders of apprentices, university staff, and employers, recognising that their experiences are likely to be different, but will impact on each other.

The research explored a range of themes relating to increasing access to Higher Education (HE) and the employer-university partnerships required within DA programmes. It considered issues relating to identity, self-efficacy, power, partnerships, and the role of inspection regimes on the apprenticeship experience. The findings are wide-ranging, reflecting the experience of the participants as they navigated a new type of HE. The final research questions are as follows:

Primary Research Question: How does the experience of Degree Apprenticeships for students normally under-represented in Higher Education, suggest that Apprenticeships can support increased access to HE in England?

Secondary Research Questions:

SQ1: How do apprentices perceive their apprenticeship learning experience, particularly in relation to identity, learning, and their interactions with the university and peers?

SQ2: How does the experience of Degree Apprenticeships impact the professional identity of university staff?

SQ3: How does the involvement of employers and the regulatory landscape for apprenticeships, impact the experience of studying and delivering Degree Apprenticeships?

As Webb *et al.* (2017a: 149) observed:

“expansion of opportunities to gain a higher education degree through extending the range of institutions and types of degrees offered, raises issues for social mobility if the outcomes of participation are not equal.”

Webb *et al.* (2017a) was referring to HE within Further Education Colleges and lower outcomes that came from the FE Colleges compared to universities, but the question is equally important about Degree Apprenticeships. My early reviews of the literature led me to question whether it was acceptable for apprentices to have a different experience of HE study on the basis that they were not paying for their studies, compared to full-time HE students.

1.5 Scope of Research

There was a wide range of possible research questions when exploring the experience of a new type of Higher Education (HE), particularly where the perspectives of the three main

stakeholders (apprentice, training provider, employer) were being discovered. It is therefore important to set out the scope of this research:

- Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) were introduced across the UK, but with slight differences between the four nations. The research was based in England and only considered the specifics of English DAs and legislation that impacted English Higher Education.
- While online learning became common during the pandemic, the primary research took place in 2021 and 2022, when online learning was happening *because* of the pandemic but was not being offered as a new opportunity for apprenticeships. The research therefore only included apprentices who were registered as participating in on-campus apprenticeship programmes.
- The research was based within the East of England, including the counties of Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk, and Suffolk; and only Apprenticeship Levy-paying employers were included, although one apprentice was working for a non-Levy employer. I wanted to only include employers who were likely to have multiple apprentices, working with two or more training providers, to avoid the research from becoming a case study. It was also important to me that the employers were actively engaged in apprenticeships as I assumed that they would have a broader experience that would aid the answering of my research questions.
- At the time the primary research was undertaken, there were a small number of programme areas that dominated the number of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship (HDA) starts. These are presented in *Table 3* (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020; Section 2.4.4). These were in Management, Nursing, and Digital, and were being offered in the universities in which my research was based, which meant they became the areas included within my research. As I also had access to apprentices in Social Work, this area was also included.

1.6 Definitions

1.6.1 Widening Participation

There were a range of options available in considering how best to explore the potential for Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) to increase access to Higher Education (HE). These included the options of exploring social mobility, equality of opportunity, or widening participation. The

concept and measurement of social mobility can be problematic, as it can be difficult to measure, particularly if society is becoming more prosperous (Williams, 2016; Breen, 2010). It also requires some in society to move up while others move down, and analysis of a large amount of data over a period of years to truly provide a measure of mobility (Avis and Orr, 2016). This data would have been difficult to access given the recent introduction of Degree Apprenticeships.

Equality of opportunity is sometimes considered as a better measure of equality, as divergence from a normal distribution provides an indicator of whether equality is improving or declining (Philips, 2004). However, it is not always clear what is meant by 'equality of opportunity'. Debates have existed for some years about whether equality of opportunity in university admissions makes it fair for some applicants to be given additional weighting due to the under-representation of their characteristics compared to the fairness, or otherwise, of restricting access to those who display academic excellence (Lazeby, 2016). Attempting to consider whether DAs were equally available as an opportunity for different characteristics of prospective learners could have led to the research being based mainly in statistical measures, which did not align with my interest in stories and experiences. At this point it is important to note that I was aware of the academic debate relating to equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome (Kodelja, 2016). However, as my study was considering access to HE via Degree Apprenticeships rather than the outcomes of the HE experience (e.g. successful completion of a course and progressing into graduate employment), it was equality of opportunity rather than outcome that was a relevant option for this research.

There is a wide range of literature that addresses widening participation and increasing access, which simply refers to an increase in participation rates for those normally under-represented in HE (Emms and Laczik, 2025; Burrell, 2015). Representation is often viewed against the background proportion within the population, which means, for example, that a group would be under-represented in HE if the proportion of that group within the HE population is less than the proportion in the English population. There is significant data available to support this approach, as national data about HE enrolments and apprenticeship starts often includes characteristics deemed to be under-represented in HE (listed in Section 4.4.1). Widening participation was therefore a useful lens for exploring whether DAs were increasing access to HE, due to the availability of comparative data.

This thesis often refers to participation gaps between the most and least advantaged. Government data considers eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) to be an indicator of economic disadvantage, as other data about young people is either not collected or does not

exist in pupil records (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Government-released data consequently frequently refers to this. Eligibility for FSM is based on parental income and faces criticism for excluding groups such as military families, travellers, and asylum-seekers (Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2015), for assuming homogeneity in impact (Burke, 2012; Brooks, 2003) and excluding groups just outside the boundaries (Webb *et al.*, 2017a; Boliver *et al.*, 2015). FSMs is also based on families' entitlement to means-tested benefits, which means any families that do not apply for those benefits would be excluded from the data (Office for National Statistics, 2022). However, as this is a measure widely used within government data, it is used within this thesis for commentary on participation gaps. Information on the HE participation gap based on FSM eligibility is provided as *Table 6* (Gov.uk, 2025; Section 2.5.1).

1.6.2 Defining University Students

When presenting my findings, it was important that I considered carefully how I defined the different types of university students that are discussed within this research. The first group is clear, they are Apprentices, or Learners. Ofsted (2025) require training providers to refer to apprentices in this way, clearly differentiating them from the traditional Higher Education (HE) student population.

The bigger challenge was in how best to identify the HE students who are studying in universities, approximately 80 per cent of whom are on full-time courses (House of Commons Library, 2026; House of Commons Library, 2022). I considered a number of terms: traditional students, young students, full-time students, UCAS-entry students. There were a range of options, and I was aware that I would be assigning an identity to a student population that many may not recognise for themselves. However, as 'traditional' seemed out-of-date, and 'young' would ignore the significant proportion of mature students, both those terms were not appropriate. Increasing proportions of students enter HE in England using the summer Clearing period (see *Glossary*) rather than the traditional UCAS cycle (see *Glossary*), so I did not want to use the application process as a definition. While I recognised that part-time students exist within HE, the numbers have been declining over the past twenty years (House of Commons Library, 2022), and I therefore settled on the term '*full-time students*'. I saw this as an important differentiation between those who were studying a HE programme on a full-time basis and counted in this way in national statistics, versus those who were studying on an apprenticeship programme. Apprentices are also full-time, but they are not full-time students – they are employees on a combined work and training programme.

I recognise that defining the non-apprenticeship student population as 'full-time students' risks excluding those studying on a part-time basis. However, the university in which the apprentices

in this research were based, did not offer the Adult Nursing and Social Work degrees as a part-time option due to the level of placement hours required within the programmes. As the majority of apprentices in this research were studying on Nursing programmes, it was unlikely that the apprentices would come into contact with part-time students in their classrooms. Using 'full-time students' as an identifier for those students not on the apprenticeship programme, was therefore an accurate definition for some of the programmes within the research.

It is also important to note that I use 'full-time' to refer to the degree programmes delivered in universities for a full-time or part-time market, not including apprentices. Again, this seemed to be more appropriate than using the term 'traditional' given that there are many different modes of delivery and experience within full- or part-time HE. I refer to these programmes throughout the thesis, and it was important to define them in the same way as I define the students who undertake those programmes.

I acknowledge that some may disagree with the nomenclature that I have selected for the purposes of this research, but I considered this to be the best way to describe the two groups of HE learners discussed at length throughout my writing.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

Following this chapter, Chapter 2 details the legislative background to the developments in Higher Education (HE) and vocational education that led to Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) being offered within the HE sector. This is important as it sets the context for DAs becoming an important part of the HE offer within the sector.

Chapter 3 analyses key academic literature relating to widening participation to HE and vocational education, which provides an important academic background to the wide range of discussion and debate relating to factors that impact progression into HE. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the methodology and outlines the methods used to undertake the research. Chapter 5 introduces the data analysis, beginning with analysis of the quantitative research, which includes comparisons to national statistics where possible. Chapter 6 outlines the findings from the qualitative interviews, which are presented using a range of illustrative quotes from the interviews, providing a rich account of the experiences of apprentices, university staff, and employers.

Chapter 7 discusses the findings in relation to the academic literature, exploring the themes that emerged and particularly where they challenge existing perspectives within the literature. Chapter 8 returns to the research questions to conclude on what the experience of DAs

suggests about their potential to increase access to HE. This chapter provides recommendations for future policy and practice, and areas for further research.

1.8 Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis makes five principal contributions to knowledge. First, it demonstrates that established professional identities can mitigate many of the transitional challenges commonly associated with widening participation students in Higher Education (HE). Second, it shows that Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) simultaneously strengthen the professional identities and self-efficacy of apprentices while weakening the professional identities and self-efficacy of academics. Third, it identifies that DAs widen participation primarily through employment-based progression rather than through intentional widening participation recruitment strategies. Fourth, it demonstrates that apprentices frequently privilege occupational knowledge over academic knowledge, challenging traditional pedagogic relationships within HE. Finally, the thesis introduces the concept of *probable selves*, extending existing theories of future identity formation by explaining how individuals imagine futures that are likely to occur in the absence of significant changes to their circumstances.

The contribution to knowledge is provided in more detail in Section 8.3.

Chapter 2: Legislative Developments in English Higher and Vocational Education

This chapter considers legislative developments that have impacted the Higher Education (HE) sector in England, and that have led to the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). The chapter begins with an introduction to the concept of 'neoliberalism', which I argue, is an important framework through which the transformation of Higher Education (HE) in England can be understood...

The chapter progresses into an outline of legislative developments affecting both the HE sector and vocational education. It begins with the Education Act 1944 and progresses chronologically, discussing the impact of a variety of policies and reviews until the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) in 2015. The chapter then considers early engagement with DAs by both universities and employers.

The chapter concludes with sections examining government- and university-led widening participation (WP) projects, as DAs were introduced as an opportunity to increase access to HE. It is therefore important to consider the extent to which WP initiatives had succeeded by the time DAs were introduced.

The chapter uses legislative developments to outline how the HE sector has taken on neoliberal characteristics. In doing so, it does not assume the existence of a consistent HE policy across successive governments. Rather, governments have adopted differing and sometimes competing approaches to the purpose of HE, including expanding participation, raising aspirations, strengthening employer engagement, promoting economic competitiveness, and reducing the financial burden of HE on the state. While these objectives have varied over time, I argue that the cumulative effect of legislative developments has been the restructuring of HE according to increasingly neoliberal principles. Drawing on Harvey's (2007) conceptualisation of neoliberalism as a political-economic project, and Birch and Siemiatycki's (2015) understanding of neoliberalisation as a process of institutional restructuring, the chapter explores how reforms have contributed to the marketisation, commodification, and partial privatisation of HE. While attempts were made throughout the past eighty years to increase participation in HE and encourage university-employer partnerships, I argue that increasing competition for students, alongside growing financial pressures, led some universities to embrace DAs not only as a WP initiative, but also as an important opportunity for income diversification.

This context is relevant to my research as it explores how DAs can support increased participation in HE. It is therefore important to consider how factors in the wider sector might impact universities in the delivery of DAs, and the extent to which WP is important within DAs. My primary research with university staff evidenced that sector-wide pressures to diversify income streams have led to increased demands on staff to develop and deliver DAs. These changing demands means that university staff have little choice but to support their universities in the delivery of these programmes, which is important when considering the experience of teaching and studying on DA programmes, and their potential for increasing access to HE.

It is important to acknowledge however, that there are significant limitations in the data available about HE and apprenticeship participation prior to the mid-1990s and, in some cases, the early 2000s. Where possible, data from government sources are used, but in the early sections of the chapter relating to legislative developments for both HE and vocational education, relevant government sourced data is not consistently available.

2.1 Introducing Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism has become one of the most influential, yet contested, concepts within contemporary social science research. Despite ongoing disagreement regarding its definition and application, it provides an important framework through which the transformation of Higher Education (HE) in England can be understood.

I begin with Harvey (2007), whose conceptualisation of neoliberalism aligns closely with the argument developed throughout this chapter concerning the neoliberalisation of HE. Harvey (2007: 2) defines neoliberalism as:

“a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices”.

Harvey (2007) further argues that where markets do not already exist, including in sectors such as education, a neoliberal state seeks to create them. Beyond this, state intervention should be kept at a minimum to allow the market to function freely. Of particular relevance to this research is Harvey's (2007) argument that capitalism generates profit through the commodification of services including education, with the resources transferred from public into private ownership. Within this framework, Harvey (2007) suggests that labour is commodified as individuals participate in a competitive market characterised by increased personal

responsibility and reduced protections for groups already disadvantaged within the labour market. This commodification of labour and emphasis on individual responsibility is particularly relevant to the discussions in sections 2.4 and 3.9 about the impact of neoliberalism within HE on university staff.

It is important to note that Harvey's (2007) conceptualisation of neoliberalism does not require the absence or even a significant reduction, of government intervention. Instead, he assigns the state a central role in creating, supporting and maintaining markets through regulation, legislation, and international collaboration. This perspective is particularly useful when considering the legislative developments discussed later in this chapter, which I argue have contributed to the neoliberalisation of the HE sector.

While Harvey's (2007) interpretation provides a useful framework for understanding developments within HE, particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century, Birch (2015) observes that neoliberalism remains a difficult concept to define precisely. Its intellectual origins are commonly traced to the work of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and other scholars associated with the revival of classical liberal economic thought during the mid-twentieth century. According to Birch (2015: 572), these scholars viewed the market as:

“the most efficient and moral institution for organising human life, meaning that it should replace all other institutions... as the main mechanism for creating, promoting, and maintaining social order”.

Although Harvey (2007) conceptualises neoliberalism primarily as a political and economic project, Foucault (Davidson, Burchell and Foucault, 2008) approached it as a form of governmentality through which individuals are encouraged to act as entrepreneurial and self-managing subjects. This perspective has proven influential within research relating to HE, where neoliberalism is often analysed through the emergence of self-regulating, entrepreneurial academics and students.

Brown (2015) expands this critique by arguing that neoliberalism transforms individuals into forms of human capital whose value must be continually enhanced and demonstrated. Her discussion of neoliberal rationality is particularly relevant to HE, where she suggests universities increasingly prioritise market-oriented training, graduate outcomes, and performance metrics. Brown also argues that corporate management practices have imposed new forms of performance accountability on academic staff. Within this context, the value of academic staff changes from being based within their pedagogical insights to how their performance supports the value of the university. Brown's work is particularly relevant to this

research as it highlights how market logics became embedded within institutional practices and staff expectations; an issue reflected in the experience of academics who participated in my research.

Birch (2015) acknowledges that most academic writers broadly associate neoliberalism with the extension of competitive market principles into everyday life, generally based within the assumption that such developments are beneficial. However, significant criticism remains. Harvey (2007), for example, argues that neoliberalism often creates and reproduces inequality while overlooking to broader structural conditions that contribute to social disadvantage. As Birch (2015) notes, this critical perspective has become increasingly influential within contemporary social science research.

Of particular relevance to my research is the work of Birch and Siemiatycki (2015) who conceptualise neoliberalisation as a process through which institutions are restructured via privatisation, market creation, and the commodification of services. Within this framework, marketisation represents a key mechanism through which neoliberal principles are enacted and institutional change is accomplished. It is the process of marketisation that is most directly relevant to this research.

I therefore argue throughout this chapter that the HE sector has undergone a process of neoliberalisation through marketisation, creating conditions in which Degree Apprenticeships became an important source of financial diversification for universities. However, I do not suggest that governments explicitly sought to neoliberalise the sector. Rather, successive governments increasingly encouraged competition between institutions, requiring universities to demonstrate performance through measurable outcomes. Key aims of this marketisation was the reduction of taxpayer funding of HE and increased efficiency using market principles.

Although neoliberalism remains a contested concept, this thesis draws primarily on Harvey's (2007) understanding of neoliberalism as a political-economic project, and Birch and Siemantucky's (2015) account of neoliberalisation as process of institutional restructuring through marketisation, commodification, and privatisation. These perspectives, together with Brown's (2015) analysis of the effects of neoliberalisation on academic staff, provide the most appropriate theoretical framework for analysing the transformation of HE in England and the emergence of Degree Apprenticeships within that broader context.

The following sections examine the legislative developments in England that I consider to have contributed to the gradual neoliberalisation of the HE sector, and ultimately to the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships.

2.2 Legislative Developments Relating to Higher Education

2.2.1 Education Act 1944 and the Robbins Report 1963

There have been considerable developments in educational legislation over a number of centuries, including the 1834 Poor Law (Amendment) Act, which required pauper children to receive daily education in workhouses (The National Archives, 2026), and the 1841 School Sites Act, which facilitated the purchase of land for school buildings (Legislation.gov.uk, 2026). In 1870, the Elementary Education Act introduced universal education for the first time, making provision for the elementary education for children aged 5-13 (UK Parliament, 2026). This Act started the process of introducing compulsory education for all children.

However, the cost of schooling for young people prior to the Education Act of 1944, was such that continuing in education was virtually impossible for many, and progression to Higher Education (HE) was possible only for the few. Less than two per cent of young people went to university in 1940 (Thompson *et al.*, 2011). The Education Act of 1944 however, made secondary education free for all children up to age 15 (UK Parliament, 2025). The expansion of secondary education was therefore an important precursor to the development of HE, and the Robbins Report of 1963.

The Robbins Committee was convened to determine the extent to which changes in HE could lead to improved global competitiveness of the UK. In the report published in 1963, the Committee recognised that universities were largely dependent on significant grants but lacked a coherent system, which meant there was “*an absence of coordinating principles*” (Committee of Higher Education, 1963: 5). The Report recommended considerable expansion in the sector, with the suggestion that HE should be available to all with the “*ability and attainment to pursue*” degree courses (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 8).

Robbins wanted to see more HE places available, aiming to increase HE participation to 17 per cent of young people by 1980 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). The Committee recognised that both working- and middle-class students performed equally well at university but noted that opportunities for HE progression were limited due to the small number of university places available (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). The Report recommended the creation of six new universities as a high birth rate after the Second World War had led to increasing demand (Andrews, 2021; Chitty, 2014), arguing that increasing HE opportunities for young people would be of economic benefit to the country (McCaig, 2018).

The Douglas-Home Government used the report as a blueprint for HE expansion (Bailey, 2011) but did not act on all recommendations. While Robbins had aimed for better coordination across

all HE, the government introduced a binary policy with the creation of two distinct sectors (Andrews, 2021; Chitty, 2014). The *autonomous* sector included existing universities and Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) and were supported by the University Grants Committee, while the *public* sector was under local authority control and included technical and teacher training colleges (Chitty, 2014). This division split academic and vocational education, a separation that was strengthened by the establishment of thirty polytechnic institutions in the 1960s, with a focus on vocational education. At the same time, thirteen new universities were created offering academic education (Boliver, 2011). Universities were able to award their own degrees, whilst polytechnic degrees were awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) (Chitty, 2014). There were considerable differences in the young people accessing the two types of education, with advantaged young people going to university, while those from non-traditional backgrounds¹ went to polytechnics (Hoskins, 2022).

In the 1960s, the sector saw further developments in the application process and financial support for students at university, with the introduction of a single application system, later named UCAS, in 1961; and the introduction of student grants in 1962 (Willets, 2014). Both changes reflected Robbins' recommendations, removing some of the complexities and challenge around entering university. Prior to 1962, Local Authorities provided financial support for students going to university, but there were discrepancies in the value and number of financial awards provided (Willets, 2014). The new national awards from 1962 provided standardised grants for tuition fees and living costs (Andrews, 2021), but this also meant that universities were receiving an even larger proportion of their income via the state (Andrews, 2021).

In 1960, 5 per cent of young people in the UK participated in HE (Crawford, 2012), increasing to 8 per cent in 1970 but with continued inequalities in access across society (Blanden and Machin, 2004). However, participation rates continued to grow throughout the 1970s and 1980s, reaching 19 per cent in 1990 (Ichino, 2021; Crawford, 2012).

2.2.2 Education Reform Act 1988

The Education Reform Act of 1988 brought significant changes to the polytechnic sector, aligning its funding with universities within a competitive bidding process, which increased total student numbers particularly within polytechnic institutions (Parry, 2022). The Act also introduced a marketised approach into Higher Education (HE), introducing principles such as

¹ Non-traditional refers to those historically under-represented in HE, including those who were socially or economically deprived, e.g. 'working class', ethnic minorities, mature students, or women (Hoskins, 2022)

individualism, autonomy, choice, and targets into the sector. The ERA used words such as *entrepreneurial*, *accountability*, and *value for money* in its description of how universities had to change, beginning the process of creating a neoliberal sector (Hoskins, 2022). Universities had to demonstrate value for money, ensure accountability for public funding, and were expected to start generating income through engaging with businesses in a way not previously expected (Tomlinson, 2001).

Keith Joseph, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education in the 1980s, warned that bankruptcy would become a possibility in HE as the financial health of universities became increasingly based on student experiences and preferences (Ball, 2013). This was the first time the sector had been threatened in this way, and the following sections show that this threat has not been withdrawn or altered by successive governments. The 1988 Education Reform Act was the starting point of creating a sector with a need and appetite for income-generation, particularly through business partnerships, making it relevant to the later introduction of Degree Apprenticeships.

In the early 1990s, there continued to be a distinction between polytechnic institutions and universities. However, while polytechnics were expected to be largely vocational, the reality was that they offered similar courses to those taught in universities with few exceptions (Parry, 2022).

2.2.3 Further and Higher Education Act 1992

The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 made a fundamental change to Higher Education (HE) by bringing the polytechnic and university sectors together into one (Boliver, 2013). Polytechnic institutions were able to apply for University Title, and the regulatory and funding organisations were combined into the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This change resulted in an overnight increase in the number of ‘university’ students in the UK and increased the reach of the sector to those normally under-represented in HE (The Independent, 1992). HEFCE’s mission required universities to work to increase participation of students normally under-represented in HE (HEFCE, 1994), which meant that for the first time, universities were formally expected to engage in widening participation activity (Selby, 2018). The impact of these policy changes and HEFCE’s role in widening participation is discussed further in Section 2.4.

By 1999, HE participation had risen significantly from 19 per cent in 1990 (Ichino, 2021; Crawford, 2012), to 39 per cent in 1999/00 as shown in *Table 1* (Gov.uk, 2019)². During the

² Data has not been found that shows an earlier timeline of changes in HE participation rates.

1990s, the female participation rate increased and eventually surpassed that of males (Finding, 2013). However, subject choice remained gendered: males were more likely to study Engineering, Computing, Maths and Science, all of which had better potential graduate earnings than the female-dominated courses of the Social Sciences, Education and Health (Smith, 2013). This is discussed in more detail in Section 3.2.1.2.

Table 1: Higher Education (HE) participation rates for aged 17-30 in England, 1999/00 to 2006/07

Academic Year	All
1999/2000	39.2%
2000/01	39.6%
2001/02	40.1%
2002/03	41.2%
2003/04	40.6%
2004/05	40.4%
2005/06	43.1%
2006/07	40.4%

Source: Data from Gov.uk (2019)³

2.2.4 Dearing Report 1997

In 1996, the Conservative Government commissioned Sir John Dearing to review Higher Education (HE) and to make recommendations for further developments to meet the future needs of the UK (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). The Dearing Report was published in 1997, shortly after a Labour Government had been elected, and proposed that FE Colleges provide more ‘sub-degree’ courses, at Levels 4 and 5 (see *Glossary*), as a means of increasing the participation rate without achieving a full degree. Dearing also recommended that graduates contribute up to 25 per cent of the costs of HE once employed (Tomlinson, 2001), bringing graduate contributions into the funding discussion for the first time. The Report considered HE as a benefit primarily for the individual rather than society, suggesting it should be seen as a personal investment (Williams, 2016; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997).

Dearing also recommended that learning be considered as ‘lifelong learning’ and not limited to young people, particularly for technical qualifications at Levels 3 to 5, acknowledging that the

³ This table is presented separately to *Table 2* (Gov.uk, 2019; available in Section 2.2.6 below), which also shows HE participation rates. The methodology for calculating participation rates changed in 2006/07, and as such, *Table 2* (Gov.uk, 2019) has a different participation rate for that year than the rate shown in this table. The tables are presented separately to reflect that they use different methodologies and the participation rates in Table 1 are not directly comparable to those presented in Table 2.

UK was falling behind other countries in the proportion of 25–29-year-olds with A Levels (see *Glossary*) or equivalent (McCaig, 2018). This emphasis on skills-based education was significant for vocational education and apprenticeships, as it recognised that this type of education had an important place within Further and Higher education. The Report also recognised the potential for further development of a market in HE, noting that if funding were based on student choice, those choices would ultimately shape the future of the sector (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997).

When the Labour Government was elected in 1997, the new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, identified increasing access to HE as a key priority (Montacute and Cullinane, 2023; Whitty, 2002). At that time, HE participation was approximately 33 per cent⁴ (Lunt, 2008; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). Blair set a target of 50 per cent HE participation for 18–30-year-olds through narrowing the gap in participation of under-represented groups (Whitty, Hayton and Tang, 2016), a target achieved in 2017 as shown in *Table 2* (Gov.uk, 2019; Section 2.2.6). Labour introduced government initiatives to increase participation (Montacute and Cullinane, 2023) reflecting their view that HE had an important role in promoting social justice and economic competitiveness (Lunt, 2008).

2.2.5 Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998

Prior to being elected, Labour opposed the introduction of tuition fees in Higher Education (HE) (Tomlinson, 2001). However, in 1998 they passed the Teaching and Higher Education Act, abolishing maintenance grants and introducing annual means-tested tuition fees of £1000 (Teaching and Higher Education Act, 1998). Concerns about the impact of tuition fees on HE participation led the government to introduce fee reductions for those from low-income households, which subsequently reduced the income for universities (McCaig, 2018), although 56 per cent of students paid the full £1000 tuition fee (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010). The sector responded by lobbying for higher fees or permission to charge top-up fees (Andrews, 2021; BBC, 2000) reflecting concern about their future financial sustainability. During this period there was also a change to student support. Student loans had been introduced in 1990 to increase the overall student support available (Bolton, 2025), and they became the main source of funding throughout the 1990s until grants were fully removed in 1998 (Bolton, 2025). It has been reported that this change led initially to a drop in applications

⁴ The 1997 participation rate has not been published in any government sources, but the Dearing Report, published in 1997, referred to HE participation as “*around one in three for the country as a whole*” (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997).

from under-represented groups⁵ (Chitty, 2014), however the increase in maintenance loan amounts meant that participation rates subsequently returned to expected levels (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010).

In 2000, Labour Education Secretary David Blunkett, proposed a future HE structure with three tiers: research universities, regional universities, and community colleges, with some institutions permitted to charge higher fees (Lunt, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001). Blunkett also introduced two-year vocational Foundation degrees, reflecting the Dearing Review's recommendation to create a new vocational curriculum (McCaig, 2018). The aim of Foundation degrees was to expand HE while addressing technical skills needs, delivered primarily in FE Colleges and in partnership with employers (Bravenboer, 2016; Gallacher and Raffe, 2011; Bowers-Brown and Berry, 2005). Foundation Degrees could be said to be a precursor to Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) due to their employer partnerships and the breadth of programmes that were offered as employment-based, including for example, Business, Agriculture, Performing Arts, and Engineering (Hubble, 2007). However, take-up of Foundation Degrees was low. By 2005/06, just 4 per cent of English undergraduate students were enrolled in Foundation Degrees (Hubble, 2007).

2.2.6 The Future of Higher Education 2003 and the Higher Education Act 2004

Tuition fees returned to the legislative agenda with the 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, and the subsequent Higher Education Act 2004. The introduction of the £1000 tuition fee had not increased the gap in participation between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Crawford, 2012; Machin and Vignoles, 2006) but it also failed to reduce rising government costs of HE (Lunt, 2008). A 'top-up' fee of £3000 was introduced in 2003, allowing universities to set fees up to this maximum and removing the means-tested element of the original fee (Gallacher and Raffe, 2011). The Labour Government faced significant opposition from within the Party but passed the vote (Andrews, 2021; Chitty, 2014). The sector argued that fees were not high enough, warning that universities were at risk of being unable to compete against global universities with higher fees (The Guardian, 2003). There was a dip in Higher Education (HE) enrolments from 43 per cent in 2005 to 40.4 per cent in 2006 following the fee increase as shown in *Table 1* (Gov.uk, 2019; available in Section 2.2.3), but recovered to 43.1 per cent in 2007 and continued to grow thereafter, as shown in *Table 2* (Gov.uk, 2019).

⁵ No supporting data is available.

Table 2: Higher Education (HE) participation rates for ages 17-30 in England, split by gender, 2006/07 to 2017/18

Academic Year	Male	Female	All
2006/7	37.1%	46.5%	41.8%
2007/8	38.4%	47.9%	43.1%
2008/9	40.2%	50.1%	45.1%
2009/10	41.2%	50.9%	45.9%
2010/11	41.5%	50.5%	46%
2011/12	44.6%	53.7%	49.1%
2012/13	38.4%	47.1%	42.6%
2013/14	42%	51.2%	46.5%
2014/15	43%	53.2%	47.9%
2015/16	43.4%	55.3%	49.25
2016/17	43.8%	56.3%	49.9%
2017/18	44.1%	56.6%	50.2%

Source: Gov.uk (2019)⁶

Universities wishing to charge the maximum fee were required to submit an annual Access Agreement to the newly formed regulator, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), detailing spending plans to increase participation within the OFFA remit of creating equality of opportunity (Gallacher and Raffe, 2011; Department of Education and Skills, 2003). Institutions that failed to adequately prove their commitment to access would not be able to charge the increased fee, and OFFA could impose penalties for failure to meet targets (Chitty, 2014). A new Tuition Fee Loan was introduced, repayable once graduates earned a salary of £15,000 per year, effectively creating a graduate tax in all but name.

The introduction of a system in which universities could set their own fee positioned price as a perceived indicator of quality, thereby attempting to create an HE market based on differentiation within the sector (McCaig, 2018; Gallacher and Raffe, 2011). The Department for Education and Skills (2018) suggested that Foundation Degrees would be priced 'competitively', indicating that they would be at a lower price than Bachelor Degrees. In my view, this implied that these vocational programmes were of lower value compared to academic degrees. However, all universities subsequently submitted Access Agreements to charge the maximum tuition fee (McCaig, 2018).

⁶ The methodology for calculating participation rates in this table requires the Department of Education to match twelve years of data to ensure initial entrants for any given year are counted towards that year's participation rate. 2007/08 was the first year that this was possible, so participation data is presented from that year onwards. The 2006/07 rate was presented with 11 years of data by the DoE to show the change in calculation and the difference to the previous rate (40.4%) published in *Table 1* (Section 2.2.3). More information about the change in methodologies is available at Gov.uk, 2019.

The move to top-up fees coincided with the expectation that universities would diversify income streams, part of which would be through international student recruitment, which is heavily influenced by global rankings and league tables (Lunt, 2008). The sector saw a significant increase in international enrolments, growing from 13.9 per cent of the HE population in 2003/04 (HESA, 2005) to 25 per cent in 2023/24 (HESA, 2025b). While this marked a key moment in the marketisation of HE (Lunt, 2008), I would argue that it also increased pressure on universities. The number of European Union students in English universities declined between 2020/21 and 2023/24 following Brexit (Cuibus, 2025), and International student numbers fell in 2023/24 due to reduced visa issuance (Bolton, Lewis and Gower, 2025; Cuibus, Walsh and Nemecek, 2025). Legislative developments clearly impact student numbers, and there is a real potential for global crises or currency problems to also impact International student recruitment. These factors could affect the confidence of universities in their financial planning, leading to the need to diversify income streams through opportunities such as apprenticeships.

2.2.7 Leitch Review 2006

In 2004, the Labour Government commissioned Lord Leitch to review the UK's level of skills to determine how best to maximise economic growth and productivity (Leitch, 2006). Published in 2006, the Leitch Review called for an expansion of skills-based education particularly at technician level (Level 5), reflecting the Dearing Review's earlier recommendations. Leitch highlighted that as 70 per cent of the 2020 workforce had already completed compulsory education it would be necessary for some of this investment to go into upskilling the existing working population (Anderson *et al.*, 2012; Leitch, 2006), something which we now see happening through Degree Apprenticeships (DAs).

The government responded by aiming to simplify opportunities for skills development and adult training under the remit of the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), which already funded apprenticeships; and by strengthening HEFCE's regional focus to support Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) collaboration (Government Response to Leitch Review, 2009). Both the Leitch Review and the government response emphasised the important role for employers in driving skills development as they set the skills agenda for the future.

Leitch recommended that Modern Apprenticeships (primarily offered at Levels 2 and 3 – see *Glossary*) be strengthened (Leitch, 2006), and the government committed to developing apprenticeships and creating clear progression routes into higher level skills. Apprenticeships had largely been ignored in earlier reviews of HE (Bravenboer, 2016), but the government recognised that Foundation degrees could be a progression opportunity from apprenticeships,

aligning apprenticeship and HE agendas for the first time (Government Response to Leitch Review, 2009). A more detailed analysis of vocational and apprenticeship legislative developments, including further discussion of the Leitch Review, is provided in Section 2.5.

2.2.8 Higher Ambitions White Paper 2009 and Browne Review 2010

The 2009 *Higher Ambitions* White Paper reaffirmed Labour's commitment to widening access to university, noting that while participation rates had grown to 45.9 per cent in 2009 as demonstrated in *Table 2* (Gov.uk, 2019; Section 2.2.6), the most selective universities had seen only 'modest' increases in the enrolment of under-represented students (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009). The government maintained its commitment to 50 per cent of young people entering Higher Education (HE) but widened coverage to include adults, part-time study, foundation-degrees, and work-based learning to help meet the target (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009).

The Labour Government commissioned the Browne Review, published in 2010 following the change of government, to consider the long-term affordability of HE alongside the goal of widening participation (The Browne Review, 2010). A key recommendation was to remove the tuition fee cap (The Browne Review, 2010) so that students would pay higher fees on the basis that they would personally benefit from HE (Bravenboer, 2019). In December 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government voted to increase fees to £6000 with the option for universities to charge up to £9000 if they met strict conditions on fair access to HE (Gallacher and Raffe, 2011). The expectation was that only the very top universities, or most expensive courses, would charge £9000, creating competition within the sector based on price (Andrews, 2021; McCaig, 2018; Gallacher and Raffe, 2011). The increase in fees reduced state funding of HE (Gallacher and Raffe, 2011), meaning that funding was, for the first time, almost entirely coming from students. The fees were intended to create a competitive market, but this did not happen (Andrews, 2021). In 2012/13, the first year of the increased fee, the average tuition fee was £8365 (McCaig, 2018).

The change in tuition fees initially led to a spike in HE enrolments in 2011 prior to the new fees being introduced in 2012, rising from 46 per cent in 2010 to 49.1 per cent in 2011; before falling to 42.6 per cent in 2012 as demonstrated in *Table 2* (Gov.uk, 2019; Section 2.2.6). By 2013, *Table 2* (Gov.uk, 2019; Section 2.2.6) shows that participation had recovered to 46.5 per cent, similar to 2010 levels. Research indicated that higher fees did not have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students, indicating that debt aversion affected only a minority within this group (Whitty, Hayton and Tang, 2016). However, while those who wanted to go to

university accepted the costs, their HE choices were often limited by the financial implications of studying (Evans and Donnelly, 2018).

2.2.9 Students at the Heart of the System 2011

As outlined in previous sections, there had been a steady evolution of the sector towards neoliberalism, but I would argue that the 2011 White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*, marked a key point in this process, increasing the potential for financial pressure on universities. The vote to increase tuition fees in late 2010 had already been taken with the aim to create a market based on price (Andrews, 2021; McCaig, 2018; Gallacher and Raffe, 2011), but when universities published their 2012/13 fees in spring 2011, the expected fee differential did not materialise (McCaig and Taylor, 2017). The result was the publication of this White Paper, which aimed to incentivise lower tuition fees (McCaig and Taylor, 2017).

The White Paper started the process of removing Student Number Controls (SNCs – see *Glossary*), completing this process by 2014. Previously, the SNCs meant that even highly selective institutions were bound by the recruitment caps set by government, thereby creating the opportunity for less popular universities to fill their places as second-choice destinations. The removal of SNCs meant that universities could admit as many students as they could teach, creating a more competitive environment for some universities in which price could be a key factor (McCaig and Taylor, 2017). Although this was intended to create a market in HE (Hillman, 2014), once again, price-based competition did not materialise (McCaig and Taylor, 2017). In 2014, the first year without SNCs, the average tuition fee in England was £8600 (HEFCE, 2013 cited in McCaig and Taylor, 2017), indicating that ‘second choice’ universities were still charging close to the maximum £9000 tuition fee.

The increased tuition fees led to a further increase in expectations on universities via their Access Agreements, with the Office for Fair Access requiring more investment and commitment to increasing access, success, and progression, recognising the ‘student lifecycle’ for the first time (McCaig and Squire, 2022). The White Paper stated that HEIs would only have their fees approved “*subject to meeting much tougher conditions on widening participation*” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011), reinforcing the expectation that universities take responsibility for improving access (Gallacher and Raffe, 2011).

The White Paper also emphasised the importance of students having appropriate information to make active decisions about Higher Education (HE) options. This included the requirement for universities to publish increased information about their courses, such as student feedback,

graduate outcomes, and student charters (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011); performance metrics that could be considered as evidence of a neoliberal sector.

2.2.10 Consumer Rights Act 2015

The White Paper was followed in 2015 by the Consumer Rights Act, which defined students to be *consumers* of Higher Education (HE) for the first time (Office for Students, 2024). The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published supporting guidance for students and universities, encouraging students to make better use of information to make informed HE choices (Office for Students, 2024). This was the first time that students were directly being given advice, outside the information, advice, and guidance (IAG) received in schools, about their rights and the information they should expect from universities. Importantly, it also confirmed the rights of students to change their mind, complain, or seek legal action, if they did not get what they were promised or thought they had paid for. Universities were instructed to expect greater scrutiny from students and were required to publish detailed information aimed at helping students to make decisions as consumers rather than as recipients of education (Competition and Markets Authority, 2023; 2015).

The removal of Student Number Controls (SNCs) meant that students would ultimately determine which universities and courses survived (McCaig and Taylor, 2017). Ball (2016: 1049) argues that the neoliberalisation of education had changed it from “*a public to a private good, from a service to a commodity*” with the state acting as “*a contractor, funder, target-setter, benchmarker and monitor.*” This represented a significant shift from HE in the 20th Century when universities were largely left to manage themselves.

I would argue that this change in how students were viewed by government and the HE sector, and the focus on competition within the HE market, are significant in leading to a situation where income diversification was essential. The change in student or consumer choices being key to the future survival of universities (Ball, 2016) meant that, in my experience, HE marketing became more important in a competitive market, and significantly more expensive. The risks from an increasingly consumer-based competitive market made it critical for some universities to consider other income streams to off-set future student recruitment challenges (Bravenboer, 2019). I believe that this meant that opportunities such as Degree Apprenticeships were viewed more positively than they might otherwise have been, due to the increasingly economic volatility of the sector.

2.2.11 Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice 2015

The 2015 White Paper *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* continued the market-oriented approach to Higher Education (HE), focusing on improving graduate skills and outcomes while continuing to increase HE participation. It proposed greater employer involvement in curriculum design to increase the skills levels of graduates, noting that at least 20 per cent of graduates were not in highly skilled employment post-graduation, and that employers were concerned about shortages of high-quality applicants (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). This included a lack of transferable workplace-related skills such as communication and teamworking; and a lack of alignment between degrees and labour market needs (Bravenboer, 2019). Employers also felt that they were not involved enough in course design (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). This White Paper was therefore a precursor to subsequent apprenticeship legislation, linking universities and employers in ways not seen in earlier legislative developments. Further discussion of vocational and apprenticeship legislation is in Section 2.5.

The White Paper also introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to inform student choice and provide employers with information about the universities their future workforce would be coming from (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). It stated that the TEF:

“should also provide better signalling for employers as to which providers they can trust to produce highly skilled graduates.” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015: 13).

For universities, suggesting that the TEF be used as a recruitment metric for employers represented a different level of marketisation for the sector (Bravenboer, 2019). I contend that the government was encouraging student choice to be influenced by the perception of future employers rather than making choices based on individual preferences. The TEF was also proposed as a possible tool for employers selecting university partners for Degree Apprenticeships (Bravenboer, 2019; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015).

I consider the legislative developments throughout the 2010s to have moved the HE sector into one that was market-led, where student choice and performance metrics were becoming key to institutional survival. My view is that this placed considerable pressure on universities to ensure their financial sustainability, making them more receptive to opportunities such as Degree Apprenticeships.

2.2.12 Higher Education and Research Act 2017

The 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) introduced two key developments relevant to this research: increased competition within the sector and an increased risk of institutional failure.

HERA further deregulated Higher Education (HE) to make it easier for providers to apply for 'University Title' and access funding through the student loan system, subject to meeting new regulatory conditions (HERA, 2017). This opened the sector to new entrants, such as private providers of HE, intensifying competition. The Act also reinforced that the sector should be market-driven, making it clear that universities were responsible for their financial stability and that government bailouts should not be the default response for financial failure (HERA, 2017). I consider these changes to have led universities that were already facing challenges in student recruitment, to now experience the double pressure of increased competition without the 'insurance' of government support if they faced financial difficulties.

To strengthen the position of students as consumers, HERA replaced the Office for Fair Access and HEFCE with a new regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), from 2018. Initially, the OfS encouraged and funded sustained outreach activity (Office for Students, 2018a) before developing its guidance further in 2019 to require universities to undertake this type of activity (Millward, 2019), placing more responsibility on universities to increase access to HE.

Following consultation on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2015, HERA introduced the TEF into the sector, including it as a mechanism for tuition fee differentiation. Only providers judged to have the highest teaching quality would be able to justify the highest fees (McCaig, 2018; Parliament, 2015). However, when implemented in 2017, nearly all English universities qualified to increase their fees in line with inflation, and most charged the new maximum fee of £9250 (Times Higher Education, 2017). The average tuition fee rose from £8905 in 2016/17 to £9110 in 2017/18 (Bolton, 2018).

2.3 Neoliberalism in HE and the Impact on Universities

I began this chapter by introducing the concept of neoliberalism and the academic writers whose conceptions of neoliberalism were most relevant to Higher Education (HE). This section briefly considers the impact of neoliberalisation within the sector, following the discussion of relevant legislative developments that were outlined in the previous sections.

The legislative developments outlined in Section 2.3 demonstrate a gradual neoliberalisation of Higher Education (HE), where market principles were applied to the sector, introducing

competition, consumerism and choice (Blum 2022). However, it is important to acknowledge that while universities were increasingly required to rely on undergraduate tuition fees as their main source of income, the real value of tuition fees decreased by 19 per cent by 2023/24 compared to the £9000 fee set in 2012 (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2025).

Legislative developments led to increased competition between universities for undergraduate students, and the associated financial pressures that accompany the greater emphasis on student choice. However, rather contradictorily, while HE has become a more consumer-based market-driven sector with freedom in setting price (within limits), it has not experienced the level of deregulation normally associated with neoliberalism (Olssen, 2016). The sector remains subject to oversight by the Office for Students, particularly through Access and Participation Plans (previously Access Agreements), alongside other targets and benchmarks (Ball, 2016; Gallacher and Raffe, 2011). Increased monitoring of universities has reduced institutional freedom while increasing the administrative burden of managing regulator expectations (Powell and Walsh, 2018), resulting in an increased need for managers within universities (Olssen and Peters, 2005).

The impact of neoliberalism has been on staff as well as institutions (Mahoney and Weiner, 2019; Powell and Walsh, 2018; Olssen, 2016; Ball, 2013; Olssen and Peters, 2005). In a small study carried out by Mahoney and Weiner (2019), academics were found to be increasingly perceived as ‘service-providers’ rather than academics, experiencing a decrease in both autonomy and job security, while also feeling that they were under a heightened level of surveillance. This has been likened to living and working within Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon (Mahoney and Weiner, 2009; Murphy, 2009), where individuals feel constantly under observation (Strub, 1989).

Olssen and Peters (2005: 313) argue that academics are no longer able to approach their disciplines with “*open intellectual enquiry and debate*” as institutional priorities now centre on performance indicators, quality assurance, and audits. They maintain that universities have become more hierarchical with managers dictating academic workloads and course content in response to market demand (Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Olssen and Peters, 2005). This indicates that prior to neoliberalisation, academics were not ‘employees’ in the traditional sense of the word but had relative freedom over their work. The erosion of academic freedom and the influence of targets, metrics, and regulation, are central themes within my research findings. Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) are a different type of HE but have significant levels of regulation, as discussed further in Section 2.5. However, understanding the impact of DAs on

university staff is an important part of considering how the experience of DAs could impact widening participation to HE.

Neoliberalisation has evolved gradually since the introduction of tuition fees in 2003. Successive reforms have introduced new terminologies, roles, structures, performance metrics, and comparative frameworks for courses and universities (Ball, 2013), marking a slow but steady shift towards neoliberalism. I consider neoliberalism in HE as a key factor in preparing the sector to embrace Degree Apprenticeships in a way that had not been seen in earlier vocational opportunities such as Foundation Degrees. The pressures based within marketisation, performance metrics, and income diversification, set the stage for a sector that was willing to consider all opportunities for financial sustainability.

The discussion of neoliberalisation is returned to, briefly, in Section 2.6 where I consider the impact of widening participation initiatives on the HE sector; but at this point, it is relevant to consider how developments in vocational education led to the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships.

2.4 Legislative Developments Relating to Apprenticeships and Vocational Education

The concept of ‘apprenticeship’ has existed for centuries, describing training that combines knowledge acquisition and skills development while in employment (Lee, 2012). By the mid-20th Century, most apprenticeships were in traditional manufacturing roles although numbers declined in the 1970s with the contraction of the manufacturing industry (Lee, 2012).

In 1993, the Conservative Government attempted to reinvigorate apprenticeships by re-naming them ‘Modern Apprenticeships’ (MAs) and channelling funding directly to training providers for delivery (Fuller, Beck and Unwin, 2005). These programmes, designed at Levels 2 to 4, were structured around an Apprenticeship Framework (see *Glossary*), which included a competency qualification, technical knowledge certificate, and English, maths, and IT skills (Lee, 2012). Their aims were to address the UK’s deficit in intermediate skills (Spielhofer and Sims, 2004), and to increase participation among female, ethnic minority groups, and disabled young people (Fuller, 2016). The government also wanted to see an increase in the breadth of sectors available within apprenticeships (Fuller, Beck and Unwin, 2005).

Initially apprenticeship funding was restricted to 16–24-year-olds, but age limits were removed in 2005/06 leading to a growth in apprenticeship numbers from 193,000 in 2003/04 to 224,000 in 2007/08 (Hansard, 2011; Fuller and Unwin, 2009; as cited in Fuller, 2016). However, uptake

was limited by employers using apprenticeships primarily to support low-wage employment rather than skills development (Gambin and Hogarth, 2017). Apprenticeships were generally considered to be a form of education aimed at preparing people for expertise within a specific occupation, and the balance of off-the-job and on-the-job training has varied across the years (Billett, 2016). Frameworks of acceptable qualifications gave employers options that could be selected based on their occupation or sector. However, this meant that apprenticeships were often delivered as employer-focused internal training rather than profession-based programmes, thereby limiting further career progression (Turbin, Fuller and Wintrup, 2014).

Concerns emerged regarding the quality of qualifications within the frameworks (FE Week, 2016) particularly National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) (Machin and Vignoles, 2006). Progression to HE was low due to limited understanding of NVQs among university admissions tutors (Fuller, 2016; Carter, 2009), and a reluctance to accept NVQs as standalone qualifications (Fuller and Unwin, 2012). Bowers-Brown and Berry (2005) found that while many apprentices were interested in progressing into Higher Education (HE), barriers such as funding, time, and employer perceptions, deterred them.

In 2008, the Labour Government tasked the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) with supporting apprenticeship progression to HE (Fuller and Unwin, 2012). UCAS has largely acted as a 'gatekeeper' for entry to HE since the 1960s (Bathmaker, 2015), operating a single application system for universities while also assigning tariff points (see *Glossary*) for qualifications based on study hours and level (UCAS, 2025b). My experience in HE means that I am aware that UCAS is a key source of information, advice and guidance for young people considering HE progression, which means qualifications or opportunities not listed by UCAS could limit progression opportunities.

The government asked UCAS and the Learning and Skills Council to ensure apprenticeship frameworks could be assigned UCAS tariff points to increase progression to HE (Fuller and Unwin, 2012) but this did not happen. Some of the qualifications included in Apprenticeship Frameworks had UCAS points assigned, but not all. However, as HE entry data does not specify how level 3 qualifications are obtained, it is not possible to measure the outcomes for students progressing from apprenticeships compared to progressing from school or college (Fuller and Unwin, 2012).

A Department for Business, Innovation and Skills project in 2015 linked data held by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), to provide a snapshot of HE progression from apprenticeships. It found that of the apprentices who started their programme in 2006/07, 19.3 per cent progressed to HE within

seven years, up slightly from the 18.8 per cent of the 2005/06 cohort (Smith, Joslin and Jameson, 2015). This compares to 41.8 per cent of 17-30 years olds progressing to HE in 2006/07 as shown in *Table 1* (Gov.uk, 2019; available in Section 2.2.3). While age parameters differ - apprentices were aged 16–24 versus 17–30 in *Table 1* (Gov.uk, 2019), the fact that apprentices had an HE participation rate that was less than half that of their peers seems to evidence continued gaps in information and support for progression.

In the early-2010s, there continued to be very limited reference to vocational qualifications and progression routes on UCAS and university websites (Fuller and Unwin, 2012).

Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) were predominately offered at Levels 2 and 3, but with clear gender differences in the levels and course areas studied (Fuller and Unwin, 2011). Female apprentices were over-represented in areas such as Children’s Care, Customer Service, and Hairdressing, while male apprentices were more likely to be in Engineering, Construction, and IT (Fuller and Unwin, 2021). Males were over-represented in higher-paid sectors at both levels (Fuller and Unwin, 2021). Carter (2009) noted that when young people did choose to apply to HE from MAs, they did so without the support of experienced teachers, making it more difficult for them to produce strong applications or make informed progression choices.

A small number of apprenticeships were available up to Level 5 but were mapped to the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) rather than the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). This meant that they were not perceived to be equivalent to HE qualifications despite the level designation (Hordern, 2015b). Consequently, Level 5 apprenticeships did not provide direct progression to the final year of a degree (Level 6), limiting opportunities for apprentices to lower levels in HE (Hordern, 2015b).

2.4.1 The Future of Higher Education (2003); the Leitch Report (2006) and Students at the Heart of the System (2011)

As outlined in Section 2.3, the 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003) and the 2006 Leitch Report (Leitch, 2006) identified an economic need to increase higher-level skills through stronger collaboration between employers and universities on Foundation Degrees and other programmes. The Leitch Report proposed a target of 40 per cent of adults being qualified to Higher Education (HE) level by 2020 through increased partnerships between employers, universities, and individuals; with more training based on employer demand than planned education (Bravenboer, 2016).

In 2011, the White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011) reinforced the importance of employer-university partnerships. It encouraged collaboration to develop programmes tailored to employer needs, with employers sponsoring some or all course costs for students who would be working while studying, providing an important alternative to full-time education (Hordern, 2015b). However, the focus was not on widening participation but on creating additional places in HE without a “*cost liability for the Government*” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011: 51), introducing employer sponsorship as an alternative to tuition fee loans. By 2013/14, approximately ten per cent of students were sponsored by employers (Phoenix, 2016).

2.4.2 The Richards Review 2012

The Richards Review (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012) firmly brought apprenticeships back into government focus, acknowledging that previous reforms had not led to growth in Higher Education (HE) participation or apprenticeships, and had not met employer needs (Gamin and Hogarth, 2017, Bravenboer, 2016). The review highlighted the complexity of Apprenticeship Frameworks, which offered an extensive menu of qualification options, limiting progression between apprenticeships or into HE (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012).

As apprenticeships were largely available only at Levels 2 and 3 (Intermediate and Advanced Apprenticeships), Richards recommended expanding Level 4 Higher Apprenticeships to create progression pathways into professional and senior roles (Lester, 2025; Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012).

2.4.3 The Introduction of Degree Apprenticeships

Following the Richards Review, Prime Minister David Cameron introduced plans in 2012 to develop Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) by stating:

“by making apprenticeships a gold standard option for ambitious young people, we are sending the message that technical excellence is as highly valued as academic prowess” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills; as cited in Lee, 2012: 234).

The expectation was clearly that DAs would be comparable to traditional university study, but I consider Cameron’s use of the words “gold standard” and “ambitious” to be implying that these were aimed at high-achieving students rather than to widen participation; and that they would therefore be an attractive alternative option for those who would normally have progressed to Higher Education (HE).

In 2015, the Deregulation Act fundamentally changed the apprenticeship system, establishing the legal basis for employers and sector bodies to create occupation-based Apprenticeship Standards (see *Glossary*) to meet industrial priorities, phasing out the old Apprenticeship Frameworks (Hordern, 2015b). These Standards were to be created by Trailblazer groups (see *Glossary*) of employers, professional bodies, and universities (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013). Each Standard would specify the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for the occupation, placing employers at the centre of curriculum design (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013). This employer-led approach sought to enhance the credibility and attractiveness for both young people and experienced employees seeking opportunities to upskill (Smith *et al*, 2021; Bravenboer, 2019; Antcliff, Baines, and Gorb, 2016; Hordern, 2015b). All new apprenticeships required 20 per cent of contracted hours to be spent in off-the-job training, with funding routed through employers rather than directly from government to providers.

The new Standards included qualifications up to Level 6 (Degree Apprenticeships) and incorporated recognisable and portable HE awards such as the Certificate of Higher Education (Level 4), Diploma of Higher Education (Level 5), and Bachelor Degree (Level 6) (Fuller, 2016). Research with FE Colleges found that the new Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (HDAs) were seen as a better HE progression option for apprentices on Level 3 programmes (Saraswat, 2016), but until changes were made to the qualifications included within the Level 3 apprenticeship, the issue of universities accepting them would remain (Fuller and Unwin, 2012).

Level 3 apprenticeships have been assigned UCAS points for the first time for 2026 entry into HE, eleven years after the new Apprenticeship Standards were introduced (UCAS, 2025a). Tariff points are based on apprenticeship duration, so for example, a three-year Level 3 apprenticeship is worth 112 tariff points, equivalent to BBC at A Level (UCAS, 2025a). As this is the maximum tariff value for Level 3 apprenticeships, it is clear that this will restrict access to universities with higher entry requirements, perpetuating inequalities in HE participation at selective universities.

The first DA cohort in 2015 enrolled in institutions with existing Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) contracts, while new providers could apply annually to join the Register of Approved Training Providers (Boyd, 2017). Funding reforms in 2017 created the Apprenticeship Levy (renamed Growth and Skills Levy by the Labour Government in 2025), designed to raise apprenticeship training funds via taxation (Gov.uk, 2016). Employers with pay bills of over £3m were required to pay a 0.5 per cent tax into the Levy and were encouraged

to spend the funds within 24 months, providing an incentive for large employers to engage with the new apprenticeships. The government estimated that NHS Trusts would contribute £200 million into the Levy in 2017-18, with the largest Trusts paying up to £4 million per year (Baker, 2019). By 2023, only two per cent of employers were paying the Levy (Department for Education, 2023) and updated figures have not been published as of Spring 2026.

In 2018, the ambition for the ways in which DAs could increase access to HE study was significant. Robert Halfon, the Chair of the House of Commons Education Select Committee, was one of the strongest advocates for DAs as an alternative route to HE, believing that they would be a “ladder of opportunity” for disadvantaged students put off HE by student debt (University Alliance, 2018). However, the Sutton Trust, a charity focussed on improved social mobility, expressed concern that DA opportunities might not be made available to disadvantaged young people, and that they could instead be taken up older or already advantaged workers (The Sutton Trust, 2019).

The government aimed for three million apprenticeships starts by 2020 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015), including increasing the proportion of public sector employees who were apprentices to 2.3 per cent of their workforce (Department for Education, 2017). They also aimed to improve access of the most disadvantaged in society both into apprenticeships and professions (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). The target was not achieved and was subsequently abandoned, in 2022 (Gov.uk, 2022).

2.4.4 Early Engagement with Apprenticeships

Early employer engagement with apprenticeships was slow. One year after launch, eight per cent of Levy funds had been spent (Open University, 2018), and many new apprentices were existing employees whose roles were reclassified as ‘apprentice’ (Fuller, 2016). Employers primarily viewed apprenticeships as a means to upskill and retain staff (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019; Antcliff, Baines, and Gorb, 2016). Research by the Open University (2018) indicated that as many as 40 per cent of employers were writing off the Levy as an additional tax. In the early years of the new apprenticeships, non-levy-paying employers had restricted access to apprenticeship funding, thus affecting their ability to offer Degree Apprenticeship (DA) opportunities (Crawford-Lee, 2018). I would argue that this is likely to have had an impact on access to Higher Education (HE) for young people in areas with high numbers of non-levy-paying employers.

As this research concludes in 2026, there is a significantly more optimistic view from employers and professions about the potential for apprenticeships to have a positive effect on their

workforce (Lester, 2025a), although it has not been possible to determine the proportion of Levy funds being spent each year.

Returning to 2017, DAs were a new area for universities, as they previously had minimal involvement in apprenticeships. Universities were faced with a declining 18-year-old population (Universities UK, 2017), falling part-time and mature⁷ student numbers (UCAS, 2017), and increased competition from alternative HE providers following the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. Changes to the funding of Professional Health courses in England meant that courses such as Nursing were no longer funded by the NHS but were instead subject to tuition fees payable via tuition fee loans (White, 2023; House of Commons, 2017). This brought them into line with other undergraduate courses in England, but there was an immediate 18 per cent decline in applications to Nursing degrees (UCAS, 2017a). Many assumed that Degree Apprenticeships would be most attractive to 18-year-olds (Irons, 2017) and universities therefore saw them as an opportunity to grow their declining student numbers.

However, my own experience working on the development of DAs for a university, was that they were complicated to introduce. Universities were entering relatively new territory, which had previously been a space mainly occupied by Further Education (FE) Colleges. The Universities Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) became a key proponent of DAs, providing support to universities as they navigated the requirements to offer DAs as part of their portfolio, and lobbying for reforms to the Apprenticeship Levy to ensure smaller employers could also access DA opportunities (FE Week, 2018).

By 2018/19, over half of Russell Group universities (see *Glossary*) were delivering DAs, accounting for 9 per cent of apprenticeship starts (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020). However, early cohorts in these institutions had high grades, averaging AAB at A Level, which was comparable to the grades of full-time students within those universities (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020). Outside the Russell Group, the average A Level grades of Degree Apprentices were CCC, again similar to full-time entrants (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020). While more recent data is unavailable, these figures indicate that Russell Group universities were as selective for DA students as for full-time undergraduate students, indicating that DAs were not being used as a tool for widening participation.

In 2017, the Institute for Apprenticeships (renamed the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, IfATE, in 2018) was established to oversee the development of new Apprenticeship Standards and set maximum funding bands for each Standard. Degree

⁷ Students are classed as 'mature' if they are aged 21 or over at the beginning of their course

Apprenticeships (DAs), due to their three- or four-year duration, had the highest price cap of £27,000, compared to £1,500 for the lowest-cost Standards (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2018a). This placed the price of DAs at the same level as full-time degree programmes and also represented an opportunity for employers with large Levy contributions to use their funds on a small number of apprenticeship programmes.

It is therefore unsurprising that *Table 3* (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020) shows that in 2018/19, universities primarily enrolled Degree Apprentices on courses that had existing programmes as the underlying award, and that were likely to be quick to implement. The Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship had Business Management as the core programme; IT or Computer Science underpinned the Digital and Technology Solutions Professional Degree Apprenticeship, and a degree in Adult Nursing was awarded within the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship. *Table 3* (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020) also shows that Level 7 apprenticeships, delivering a Master's qualification normally taught over one or two years, were popular. Given the shorter duration of the programme compared to Level 6 apprenticeships, the Level 7 apprenticeships would have represented good income potential for universities.

It is important to note that *Table 3* (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020) also shows that 53 per cent of apprentices were aged over 25, supporting earlier findings that employers in the early stages viewed DAs as an opportunity to upskill staff rather than taking on new school and college leavers (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019; Antcliff, Baines, and Gorb, 2016).

Table 3: Most popular Degree Apprenticeships by number of starts in 2018/19, showing age and funding level

Apprenticeship Standard	Level	Total starts 2018/19	% over 25	Maximum funding level
Chartered Manager	6	2850	72%	£22,000
Digital and Technology Solutions Professional	6	1508	22%	£25,000
Chartered Surveyor	6	1192	23%	£27,000
Registered Nurse	6	1034	84%	£27,000
Civil Engineer	6	623	18%	£27,000
Accountancy/Taxation Professional	7	6811	29%	£21,000
Senior Leader	7	3410	99%	£18,000
Academic Professional	7	410	99%	£9,000
Total	-	17,838	53%	-

Source: Table produced by author using data from Cullinane and Doherty, 2020

Table 3 (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020) demonstrates important differences across apprenticeship sectors. While most sectors predominately enrol older apprentices and existing employees, Digital and IT apprenticeship attract a younger profile. This suggests that DAs may operate differently across occupational sectors, some acting primarily as workforce upskilling routes and others functioning more like graduate-entry pathways.

Five years after the first cohort of Degree Apprenticeships started, in 2022/23, Higher and Degree apprenticeships (HDAs – see *Glossary*) were the only apprenticeship levels to have seen an increase in starts, and this was predominately among those aged 25 and over (Resolution Foundation, 2024). *Table 4* (Gov.uk, 2025b) shows that between 2019/20 and 2024/25, the number of apprenticeship starts with non-Levy paying employers fell by 3 per cent, while starts with Levy-paying employers increased by 16 per cent. *Table 4* (Gov.uk, 2025b) also shows a significant increase in the number of HDA starts, particularly for Levy-paying employers, although this was also the Level at which there was an increase for non-Levy employers.

Table 4: Number of apprenticeship starts by academic Level and Levy-status of employers, 2019/20 and 2024/5

Apprenticeship Level	2019/20		2024/25	
	Levy	Non-Levy	Levy	Non-Levy
Intermediate (Level 2)	55,950	43,270	34,960	30,720
Advanced (Level 3)	85,710	55,130	92,650	54,440
Higher (Levels 4-7)	67,610	14,860	115,730	25,000
Total	209,270	113,260	243,340	110,160
Change: 2019/20 to 2024/25			+16%	-3%

Source: Gov.uk (2025b)

Understanding the age profile of HDAs is important because it provides an indication of whether apprenticeships are functioning primarily as a school-leaver route or as an opportunity for workforce upskilling *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b) shows that the biggest proportional increase in HDA starts has been in the under-19 age group, but this group represented just 6 per cent of all HDA starts in 2023/24. The largest number of HDA starts have been in the 25+ group, again suggesting that apprenticeships are mainly being used for up-skilling.

Table 5: Number of Higher Apprenticeship starts by age and year, 2019/20 and 2023/24, with number/percentage change between those years

Age	2019/20		2023/24		Change 2019/20-2023/24	
	Number	Proportion	Number	Proportion	Number	%
Under 19	4,230	5%	7,030	6%	+2800	+66%
19-24	22,880	28%	30,700	25%	+7820	+34%
25+	55,350	67%	84,500	69%	+29,150	+53%
Total	82,460	100%	122,230	100%	+39,770	+48%

Source: Gov.uk (2024b)

The most striking feature of *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b) is the dominance of learners aged over 21. This suggests that HDAs primarily operate as opportunities for existing workers to access higher-level qualifications rather than as direct alternatives to full-time HE for school-leavers.

In 2018, IfATE announced a review of existing DAs, expressing concern that universities were charging the maximum funding band with little evidence of price negotiation or market competition (IfATE, 2018). As discussed in Section 2.3, a lack of price competition has long been a characteristic of the HE sector, so this finding should not have been a surprise. It is likely that this review would have caused significant concern for universities, as very early in the DA roll-out they faced the possibility that fee levels could be reduced possibly with very little notice, thereby reducing confidence in DAs as a source of income generation and diversification (Lester, 2020).

2.4.5 Implementation of Apprenticeships in Universities

The introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) brought two significant changes to Higher Education (HE) delivery in terms of regulation and assessment. Universities had previously undergone quality reviews by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), but in 2021 Ofsted assumed regulatory oversight of apprenticeships delivered in HE institutions. Ofsted's prescriptive approach contrasted with the QAA's enhancement-led model, creating challenges for universities (Knight and Hill, 2025). Institutions had already gone through complex processes with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) to join the Register of Approved Training Providers and to access funding (Hughes and Saieva, 2021; Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). Ofsted's involvement meant universities were now subject to quality assurance checks by three organisations: Ofsted, QAA, and the ESFA, making the regulatory landscape both fragmented and complicated (Knight and Hill, 2025). It should be noted that the ESFA closed in March 2025, with all apprenticeship funding responsibilities moved to the Department for Education.

The involvement of Ofsted brought additional regulatory requirements for universities compared to full-time programmes (Quew-Jones, 2019). Key changes for universities were in monitoring off-the-job training, developing individualised learner plans (ILPs), and assessing prior learning for funding purposes⁸ (Gov.uk, 2021); all of which were different to full-time university programmes (Hughes and Saieva, 2021; Bravenboer, 2019). When universities were first introduced to the regulatory expectations around apprenticeships, they were concerned by the level of change and the impact of getting it wrong (Bravenboer, 2019; Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). Universities were aware that apprenticeship contracts had previously been withdrawn from training providers with poor monitoring or completion rates (Gambin and Hogarth, 2016).

Assessment also changed significantly. Traditionally, universities managed assessments internally, except for those linked to Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies. DAs introduced End Point Assessments (EPA) (see *Glossary*), which could be integrated or separate. This meant that universities could award a degree, but the apprentice would not have completed the apprenticeship without passing a separate EPA assessing their occupational knowledge, skills, and behaviours (Office for Students, 2023b). Employers were responsible for selecting the EPA organisation, for which the university would arrange and fund (apprenticeships.gov.uk, 2026). EPA failure rates are monitored and must meet thresholds set by the Office for Students in order for universities to be able to continue to deliver apprenticeships (Office for Students, 2023b).

Both Ofsted oversight and the EPA created additional bureaucracy for universities, but perhaps one of the biggest changes, was the shift in employer relationships (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019; Lowe, Ross and Moore, 2018). While universities have long collaborated with employers for vocational placements in areas such as Nursing, Social Work, and education (Basit *et al.*, 2025; Lee, 2012), apprenticeships introduced competitive tendering for training contracts (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). Price competition, performance indicators and, in some cases, financial penalties, meant that universities were being asked to provide a standardised service, or even a bespoke service, but at the lowest possible price to ‘win’ business (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). In my view, this intensified neoliberalism within HE by introducing additional competition into the sector. Issues around employer

⁸ Universities commonly assess prior learning as part of a process of Recognising or Accrediting Prior Learning (RPL or APL) for admissions purposes, but this is different to the process for apprenticeships that required RPL assessments to vary the price charged.

partnerships, competition, and bureaucracy, were themes that emerged strongly in my findings, and are discussed in Chapter 6.

There have been a range of case studies that show that for universities, developing DA curricula alongside employers were an important opportunity for strengthening strategic relationships (Hughes and Saieva, 2021, Irons, 2017). Such partnerships were likely to be a key driver for university engagement given their importance for wider institutional activities (Lester, 2020; Bravenboer, 2019; Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019), particularly given continuing government pressure to improve skills and employability of graduates (Lee, 2012).

However, apprenticeships may also alter power dynamics between universities and employers, requiring universities to be extremely responsive (Bravenboer, 2019) in order to secure, and retain, apprenticeship contracts. Employers can choose not to award a contract to a university they have previously worked with, or to withdraw their business to ensure they get the best deal and experience from their training provider (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). Failed partnerships could have a significant impact on university reputations, while also impacting the wider work taking place with an employer (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). A discussion of the literature around employer and university partnerships is in Section 3.9 and this theme is also included within my findings.

2.4.6 Involving Employers in Education

When Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) were introduced in 1994, government funding was paid directly to training providers, which meant they had to market the apprenticeships to employers. This was often done on the basis that apprenticeships were 'cost-free', which drove growth in apprenticeship numbers (Gambin and Hogarth, 2017). However, employers still incurred net costs through wages, supervision, and subsidiary costs related to training (Gambin and Hogarth, 2017). This meant that longer and higher-level apprenticeships were more expensive than shorter programmes, leading employers to make short-term or last-minute plans rather than integrating apprenticeships into workforce planning (Gambin and Hogarth, 2020). Apprenticeships tended to include National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), which were often generic rather than industry-specific, impacting the ability of employers to identify relevant apprenticeships for their occupation or sector (Spielhofer and Sims, 2004).

The introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 aimed to increase employer involvement by channelling funding through them (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). While this elevated employers' status as key stakeholders (Powell and Walsh, 2018), the Levy was introduced with little employer consultation (Bravenboer, 2019). Employers in the MA system,

particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs), often lacked capacity to engage fully in apprenticeship activities, such as apprentice-training provider consultations (Ertl and Stasz, 2010). This raised questions about whether Levy funding alone would incentivise employers to fully support apprenticeships (Gambin and Hogarth, 2020; Bravenboer, 2019; Rowe *et al.*, 2017; Gambin and Hogarth, 2016); while also raising questions about the support that training providers would be required to give to employers to ensure they fulfilled their apprenticeship responsibilities (Newton, Hirst and Miller, 2019).

Employer involvement in programme design and validation within universities is a time-consuming process, which can lead to universities working with just one large employer (Irons, 2017). However, this can limit programme applicability for other employers and creates risks if the employer cannot supply a full cohort (Hughes and Saieva, 2021). The risks to universities are thus that apprenticeship programmes are financially unsustainable (Hughes and Saieva, 2021), or that the limited curricula produce graduates with restricted knowledge and skills (Powell and Walsh, 2018).

Given my interest in the potential for DAs to increase access to Higher Education (HE), I would argue that increasing the involvement of employers in all aspects of apprenticeships compared to previous vocational education, means that employers become a key stakeholder in increasing access to university. While apprenticeship funding removes financial barriers for learners, universities cannot independently ensure that underrepresented groups benefit. Employers instead will be the main decision-makers on apprentice recruitment, and while some may view widening participation as important, others may not (Powell and Walsh, 2018). Consequently, the potential of DAs to widen HE participation may not be realised.

2.5 Widening Participation Initiatives

This chapter has outlined how Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) came to be introduced into Higher Education (HE) and how neoliberalism of the sector led to a willingness to offer apprenticeships and work with employers in ways not previously seen. However, it is also important to consider the developments in widening participation (WP) activity by the point at which DAs were introduced, as they offered an opportunity to increase access for under-represented students. I would argue that recognising the work that had previously taken place to widen participation, aside from the increase in capacity in the HE sector that happened throughout the 20th Century, is important background to understanding the sector's approach to widening participation and the pressures on student recruitment.

Early Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) initiatives introduced projects aimed at widening participation (Selby, 2018), but much of national WP policy focused on expanding HE through increasing capacity within the sector (McCaig and Squire, 2022). Few national WP initiatives existed beyond this, and most universities delivered activities that were based within their own priorities (McCaig and Squire, 2022). Selby (2018) as a former Director of Widening Participation at HEFCE, observed that during the 1990s and early 2000s, there were a wide range of approaches to widening participation, some led by government and others by HEFCE, with shifts in political direction throughout. He highlighted that there was a lack of knowledge about what the issues in widening participation were, and even how to measure disadvantage, making it difficult to identify effective practice.

Ball (2018) considers government 'interference' in education as often occurring at the wrong time. He argues that policy has often been unclear or indecisive, and related more to problems within the state than problems in education; with education even being treated as an instrument of the state (Ball, 2018; Hart, 2013). This aligns with the view that governments make selective use of research to support policy developments rather than being led by data (Whitty and Wisby, 2016). Ball (2018) argues that educational policy often allows space for inequalities to persist, as evidenced by continuing gaps in HE participation between the most and least advantaged (Hart, 2013; Machin and Vignoles, 2006). Historically, government policy relating to universities has focused on access rather than supporting inclusivity and success for under-represented groups once on-course (Katarzi and Hayward, 2019). This changed in 2018 when the Office for Students published its first regulatory framework, defining the student lifecycle as including access, success, and progression, and recognising the importance of all stages of this cycle (Office for Students, 2018a).

Given Ball's (2018) criticism of the timing and priorities of government initiatives, the following section considers government-led projects aimed at widening participation, recognising that the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) partly aimed also to increase participation in Higher Education (HE). The final section considers university-led widening participation projects.

2.5.1 Governmental Widening Participation Projects

The introduction of higher tuition fees in 2003 coincided with the launch of the AimHigher programme, a national initiative funded by government to increase outreach in disadvantaged areas (Gallacher and Raffe, 2011; Department of Education and Skills, 2003). At this point, government recognised that widening participation (WP) through expansion of places was not

working and AimHigher marked a shift towards government-funded partnership-led targeted outreach instead (McCaig and Squire, 2022).

AimHigher was funded between 2004 and 2011 before on-going responsibility for outreach work moved to universities via Access Agreements. While AimHigher delivered extensive outreach activity in schools through regional partnerships (Doyle and Griffin, 2012), its impact was difficult to measure due to overlapping initiatives and limited tracking (Burke, 2012; Doyle and Griffin, 2012; Passy, Morris and Waldman, 2009). Some interventions showed success in very specific contexts, such as a project for disabled young people in London (Doyle and Griffin, 2011). However, AimHigher was criticised for not effectively targeting the groups that were least likely to go to Higher Education (HE), and in some cases, working with young people who were already likely to progress to HE (Doyle and Griffin, 2012).

In 2017, the government and Office for Students launched National Collaborative Outreach Programmes (NCOPs), later renamed Uni Connect, to increase participation among the 20 per cent of young people with lower-than-expected HE participation based on GCSE attainment (HEFCE, 2016). Building on AimHigher's collaborative model, Uni Connect required similar Further Education (FE) and HE partnerships to be developed to deliver sustained outreach for students aged 14-18 (Office for Students, 2023d). However, early targeting based on indicators such as Free School Meals (FSM) risked excluding groups such as military families, travellers, and asylum seekers (Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2015). Changes to Uni Connect in 2019 in response to the COVID pandemic sought to bring those and other under-represented groups into its scope, widening the remit compared to the earlier focus (Office for Students, 2021).

From 2023, the remit of Uni Connect changed from aspiration-raising to attainment-raising (CFE Research, 2023). Research by Burtonshaw *et al.* (2024) found that Uni Connect led to young people progressing to HE following intensive outreach delivered within the programme, and that the activities led to a positive attitude and increased self-confidence for HE. However, as with AimHigher, gaps in participation did not narrow over this period, and causality was difficult to establish due to interventions taking place at the same time by universities and charities (Burtonshaw *et al.*, 2024). There was also criticism by those working within the project that changing priorities from the Office for Students meant that there was a lack of consistency in the activity offered throughout Uni Connect, and this impacted on its success (Burtonshaw *et al.*, 2024). However, the Office for Students had clearly learned from the tracking problems of AimHigher, and tracking interventions and outcomes was a key part of the project (Jentl, 2025). The results from the project indicated a positive impact in increasing progression for those who engaged with it, particularly those on Free School Meals (FSM), but more evidence

would be required to confirm causality (Jentl, 2025). The Office for Students plans to further develop collaborative outreach activity in the future, with further detail due to be released in 2026 (Office for Students, 2024a).

The success, or otherwise, of Uni Connect and AimHigher, is relevant to apprenticeships as the reduction in Uni Connect funding means universities are required to assume responsibility for outreach (Universities UK, 2025). Universities often see a recruitment benefit from outreach activity (Flodin and Vidovich, 2019), but the Office for Students requires universities to make a meaningful impact on pre-16 attainment (Office for Students, 2023c), delaying recruitment benefits for at least two years. This requirement coincides with financial pressures. Tuition fees rose to £9250 in 2017 and £9535 in 2025, yet the Office for Students (2025) predicts 41 per cent of universities will report a financial deficit in 2026/27. Combined with a real-terms decline in tuition fee value since 2012 (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2025; Corver, 2021), it would seem that the pressures to invest in early outreach interventions makes it even more important that universities seek income diversification to ensure a steady flow of income. This context is important in understanding engagement with apprenticeships.

When AimHigher started in 2005/06, the HE participation rate in England by age 19 was 30.7 per cent as shown in *Table 6* (Gov.uk, 2025), with FSM-eligible students at 14.2 per cent. In 2023/4, as the Uni Connect projects reduced in scope, the HE participation rate by age 19 was 45.8 per cent, with FSM-eligible students at 28.9 per cent, as shown in *Table 6* (Gov.uk, 2025). *Table 6* (Gov.uk, 2025) also shows that the progression gap between those eligible for FSM and not eligible for FSM changed from 19.2 percentage points in 2005/06, to 20.1 percentage points in 2023/24. The change is small, but it is a widening of the gap. As outlined above, a lack of effective tracking impacted the evaluation of success of AimHigher, but better tracking of Uni Connect suggested a positive impact. However, significant variability between strategies around outreach projects makes it impossible to fully compare them (Negrea and Gartland, 2025), and the lack of evidence of causality makes it difficult to truly measure impact (Burke, 2012). The participation rate of young people in England has increased but the gap has remained, indicating that outreach activity has benefitted all rather than the few.

Table 6: Higher Education (HE) progression rate by age 19, by eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) at age 15. Data shown for 2005/06 up to 2023/24, including the gap in progression rate.

Academic Year	HE Progression Rate		Progression Rate Gap	Overall Progression Rate
	Eligible for FSM	Non-FSM		
2005/06	14.2%	33.5%	19.2	30.7%
2006/07	15.1%	34%	18.9	31.3%
2007/08	15.9%	33.9%	18	31.4%
2008/09	17.4%	34.9%	17.6	32.5%
2009/10	18.6%	36.2%	17.6	33.9%
2010/11	19.8%	37.4%	17.7	35.1%
2011/12	20.3%	38.3%	18	36%
2012/13	21.3%	38.8%	17.5	36.6%
2013/14	22.3%	39.1%	16.8	36.8%
2014/15	24.1%	41.6%	17.5	39.2%
2015/16	25.7%	43.3%	17.6	40.7%
2016/17	26.2%	43.9%	17.7	41.2%
2017/18	26.3%	44.9%	18.6	42.2%
2018/19	26.3%	45.1%	18.8	42.5%
2019/20	26.6%	45.7%	19.1	43.1%
2020/21	28.1%	46.8%	18.7	44.4%
2021/22	29.2%	49.4%	20.2	46.8%
2022/23	29%	49.8%	20.8	46.9%
2023/24	28.9%	49%	20.1	45.8%

Source: Gov.uk (2025)

2.5.2 University-led Widening Participation

Universities, through their Access and Participation Plans (previously Access Agreements), have committed to aspiration-raising and attainment-raising activity to increase access to Higher Education (HE) for under-represented groups. However, participation rates over the last twenty years have increased as much for the most advantaged as for the least advantaged as shown in *Table 6* (Gov.uk, 2025; Section 2.5.1). It is therefore important to consider the role that universities play in access and admissions alongside the challenges they face. This section focuses on university widening participation (WP) activity within the lens of changing government policy. A review of academic literature relating to widening participation is in Chapter 3.

Boliver's (2013) study of applications and offer rates for the twenty universities in the Russell Group, between 1996 and 2006, found that during the Labour Government's first decade, entry rates were higher amongst students from the highest social classes, from independent schools, and of white ethnic backgrounds. Students from Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi backgrounds were less likely to receive an offer of study compared to white students. Further

research by Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui (2015) showed that even when academic attainment was the same, students from disadvantaged areas were less likely to be offered a place in selective universities or courses. However, Boliver (2013) also found that students from state schools were less likely to apply to Russell Group universities, possibly due to low expectations of success (Bok, 2010). The issue of aspiration is explored in Chapter 3, but the low application rates to selective universities made aspiration-raising a key component of Access and Participation Plans over the past two decades, particularly to support recruitment (Flodin and Vidovich, 2019) and progression to selective institutions (Martin, 2024; Barkat, 2019). As seen in AimHigher and Uni Connect, determining causality of outreach activities remains challenging given the range of stakeholders that can be involved in this type of activity (Barkat, 2019; Johnson *et al*, 2019). However, universities often experience recruitment benefits (Martin, 2024; Barkat, 2019, Johnson *et al*, 2019), which may justify the cost of undertaking this activity.

For universities, the focus on increasing access to university is problematic within a marketised sector. Students from under-represented backgrounds historically enter university with lower average grades via 'contextual' offers (see *Glossary*) (Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2015) and have higher non-completion rates (McCaig and Squire, 2022). A Level attainment of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is generally lower than those from more advantaged backgrounds (Tuckett *et al.*, 2021; Machin and Vignoles, 2006), and young people eligible for FSM are more likely to undertake vocational Level 3 qualifications than A Levels (Richards, 2016).

Universities are required to support these students through their Access and Participation Plans, and failure to do so could result in being unable to charge the full tuition fee or subject to a financial penalty (Office for Students, 2023a). To date, only one university has been fined for governance failures that could have impacted student support (Office for Students, 2025a). However, lower entry grades, lower achievement rates, and higher non-completion rates can negatively affect league table positioning (McCaig and Squire, 2022; Carter, 2009), creating a problem for universities within a competitive environment. Universities that recruit high numbers of low-attainment students are potentially more likely to experience disadvantage within league tables, which could impact their attractiveness to future students and their ability to remain financially sustainable. I would argue that the universities most successful in widening participation are also most likely to be vulnerable to market fluctuations, making them more likely to diversify their income through initiatives such as Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). Consequently, while apprenticeships could be an opportunity for increasing access to HE, they also clearly represent an important recruitment opportunity for these universities.

Apprenticeships may therefore be more prevalent in lower-ranked universities than in those higher up the league tables, which are perceived as 'better' institutions.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the legislative developments that have led to a Higher Education (HE) sector that is under financial pressure. The sector has become increasingly competitive with the introduction of new entrants, and successive governments have encouraged marketisation through changes in tuition fees, the removal of the Student Number Cap, and increased regulatory expectations. In addition, regulators have also required the sector to make a financial commitment to undertaking activity aimed at increasing access to HE. While universities are likely to see widening participation (WP) activity as an important part of student recruitment, the costs of this activity must be met while the real-terms fee income is decreasing annually (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2025).

This environment has led to a sector that is open to new opportunities for income generation through Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). Successive governments have encouraged increased employer and university partnerships, with little success; but a HE sector under financial pressure has been receptive to this new opportunity and the number of DA starts have increased significantly since they were introduced. However, DAs are predominately being taken up by those over the age of 25, indicating limited opportunities for young people looking for an alternative to full-time HE.

The next chapter explores the academic literature relating to widening participation and vocational education in an attempt to determine the factors that influence participation in HE and interest in vocational study. It identifies key themes that are relevant to my primary research.

Before concluding this chapter, I note that my primary research was conducted between 2019 and 2021, but my thesis was not complete until 2026. While policies post-2021 have further impacted HE and apprenticeships, they fall outside the scope of my research. Discussions with employers and university staff focussed on reasons for engaging with apprenticeships and their implementation in the early years of Degree Apprenticeships, so while it is likely that recent legislative developments will have changed some of those experiences, analysis was limited to the period of my research.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This chapter begins with a brief reflection on the purpose of education, before introducing the theories that have influenced this research. These are Bandura's (1994; Bandura and Locke, 2003; Bandura *et al.*, 2001) concept of self-efficacy, Bernstein's (2000; 1996; 1977) account of social structures in pedagogical practice; and discussions relating to identity, specifically within the lens of Markus and Nurius' (1986) possible selves. The chapter goes on to consider theories relating to intersectionality in widening participation, and the ways in which under-represented characteristics in Higher Education (HE), are seen to impact progression into HE.

The discussion across this chapter considers participation in full-time and vocational HE and considers both access and success in education. My view is that success in education is as important a factor as access, as supporting under-represented groups to enter HE is just one part of the process in ensuring these groups can progress into professional employment. It is for this reason that Bernstein's (2000; 1996; 1977) theories relating to the perpetuation of inequality through the pedagogical environment is so central to the research.

This chapter introduces a new concept, *probable selves*, which has developed through reflection on the academic literature and analysis of the primary research. This, according to my research, is an important and relevant concept within considerations of identity, habitus, and possible selves.

Before the chapter reaches its conclusion, it briefly reflects on the experiences of employers and university staff involved in DAs, and particularly issues around self-efficacy for academics. The experiences of university staff and employers in the design and delivery of DAs emerged as a significant theme in my findings; and it is therefore relevant to consider the academic literature that explores the impact of neoliberalism in HE on academic staff, as well as the role of employers in the delivery of DAs.

3.1 The Purpose of Education

Before introducing the key theoretical concepts that underpin this research, a useful starting point is to consider theoretical accounts of the purpose of education itself. This is relevant to my research as it is important to consider why Higher Education (HE) exists and why students under-represented in HE might wish to participate in it.

In work originally published in 1916, Dewey suggested that the role of education is about growth, saying that:

“it must progressively realise present possibilities, and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements” (Dewey, 2018: 61).

Although Dewey was not referring specifically to HE, he was advising that education be considered to be a ‘good’ for the future, something that could not be focused on one specific outcome, but that would instead provide experience and skills for agility. The emphasis on ‘individuals’ in the quotation is significant, as Dewey viewed education primarily as a benefit to the individual.

However, as discussed in Chapter 2, decades of legislative developments have increasingly evidenced that successive governments viewed education as important for the economic development of the country. Education has consistently been seen as key to creating a skilled workforce through technical and lifelong education, thereby meeting future employment needs and economic growth (Skills England, 2025; Katarzi and Hayward, 2020; Powell and Walsh, 2018; Fuller, Rizvi and Unwin, 2013). This view is not unique to the UK. The European Higher Education Area, including 49 states, defines three levels of HE: Bachelor, Master, and Doctorate, and describes each as serving the purpose of preparing students for the labour market (EHEA, 2026).

However, the effectiveness of HE in preparing graduates for employment has continued to be criticised by government (Powell and Walsh, 2018). In July 2023, the government issued a press release with the heading ‘*Crackdown on rip-off degrees*’ (Gov.uk; 17 July 2023), noting that universities would be limited on the number of students they could recruit into courses that were not providing ‘good outcomes’ for students. The outcomes they referred to were the rates of graduates entering graduate-level employment within 15 months of completing their course. This focus on employment outcomes is indicative of the neoliberalisation of HE outlined in the last chapter, as it puts pressure on universities to perform well or risk losing their under-performing courses. It also changes the narrative about the purpose of education, pushing it squarely into preparation for employment, rather than studying for the love of learning. If the aim of HE is primarily employment, under-represented students clearly should have equitable access to these opportunities.

3.2 Bandura’s Self-Efficacy

When reflecting on the factors that impact progression and success in Higher Education (HE), as will be discussed throughout this chapter, Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy is, in my view, of significant relevance. While Bandura is primarily known as a social psychologist, I consider

his concept to be particularly powerful when considering power, aspiration, and individual trajectories. Ozer and Bandura (1990: 472) define self-efficacy as:

“concerned with people's belief in their capabilities to mobilise the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over given events.”

In this sense, self-efficacy is an important concept in understanding how individuals can consider themselves as being able to work towards a possible self (Markus and Nurius, 1986), rise to a challenge ahead of them, or even meet the demands of study or work (Bandura, 1994). Bandura (1994) highlights that strong self-efficacy is reflected not only in confidence that a challenge can be overcome, but also in the willingness to attempt it. Conversely, a weak sense of self-efficacy is characterised by reduced confidence and limited motivation to act.

Within this research, I consider self-efficacy to be relevant both to Higher Education (HE) aspirations and to academics' engagement with apprenticeships. For young people, I would argue that self-efficacy is the foundation upon which aspiration is based. If a young person has a strong sense of self-efficacy, their aspirations are likely to be viewed as possible, and they can actively seek out the navigational capacity to achieve that possible self. I would argue that they are more likely to learn from information, advice, and guidance (IAG), and to take advantage of opportunities that arise, even when these challenge the expectations of their habitus. Importantly, self-efficacy for young people can be bound up in a wide range of factors, including family experiences and expectations around education (Yamamoto and Holloway, 2010), and social expectations situated within their habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). Those with weaker self-efficacy may consider their probable self to be fixed, perceiving future changes to be unlikely and considering IAG to be irrelevant or unrealistic. This was a theme seen within my research with apprentices.

I would also argue that self-efficacy is applicable when considering how academics teaching full-time degree programmes engage with Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). This was a key theme that emerged in my findings and is discussed further in Section 3.9.

Bandura *et al.*'s (2001) longitudinal study of young people found that perception of self-efficacy had a greater influence on young peoples' future career aspirations than their academic achievement. A high sense of self-efficacy led them to consider a wider variety of career options, although there was some gender bias. Where they identified high levels of self-efficacy in specific skills, they tended to show interest in traditional-gendered roles relevant to those skills, ignoring alternative roles that tended to be primarily filled by the opposite sex. Bandura (1994) also suggests that a positive perception of self-efficacy can come from perceived

similarity to social models and social persuasion, and that self-efficacy contributes significantly to motivation (Geitz *et al.*, 2016; Bandura and Locke, 2003). Seeing others who are in some way like themselves making decisions and succeeding, can significantly increase their interest and resilience, acting as an “*energising factor*” (Bandura, 1994: 3; Bandura and Locke, 2003).

Bandura (1994) further observes that self-efficacy is crucial for mature learners, particularly mothers, in their decision to return to education. He argues that a high sense of self-efficacy in managing conflicting demands of their personal life alongside a career or HE, makes them more likely to have a positive view of their endeavours than those with a lower sense of efficacy who subsequently experience physical and emotional strain. This insight resonates strongly with the apprentices in this research, as the majority were unable to progress directly to HE from school. Those with strong self-efficacy are more likely to undertake further learning later in life (Maurer, 2001).

I propose that a weak sense of self-efficacy may lead young people to focus on their probable self (see Section 3.4 and Glossary), accepting perceived limitations and doubting their ability to change their path. I would argue that the theory of self-efficacy links clearly back to academic attainment, timely and good quality IAG, and supportive parental and/or social expectations. Positive experiences and encouragement, particularly at times when young people are feeling ambitious (even if their initial ambitions are unrealistic), could increase a positive sense of self-efficacy and the perception that a wider range of possible selves are realistic.

Overall, self-efficacy emerged as a clear and significant theme within my primary research, shaping both apprentices’ decisions to enter DAs and their confidence in navigating those programmes. As Bandura’s suggests, the apprentices in my study all had a strong sense of self-efficacy and a clear perspective of their possible self, which was also bound up in a strong sense of professional identity. Their professional identity was a key foundation to their strong sense of self-efficacy.

3.3 Bernstein and the Pedagogic Environment

In considering the experience for Degree Apprentices within Higher Education (HE), the educational environment emerged as a key area of interest. As highlighted earlier, I consider educational success to be as important as educational access when evaluating the impact that widening participation can, and should, have. It was therefore necessary to review academic literature that examines the role of the classroom environment in the reproduction of social structures and inequalities. Research on widening participation, discussed later in this chapter, frequently highlights the disadvantages experienced by under-represented groups within

educational settings, making this literature relevant to the apprenticeship experience. The work of Basil Bernstein is especially pertinent in this regard.

Bernstein (2000: 3) described pedagogic practice:

“as a fundamental social context through which cultural reproduction-production takes place”.

Although Bernstein wrote extensively on language and pedagogical discourse, his work was grounded primarily in structuralism, which emphasises the influence of social structures, individual behaviour and beliefs (Atkinson, 1985). He was particularly interested in the development of social beings, and specifically *“the relationship between the symbolic orders, social relations and experience”* (Moore, 2013: 33). Symbolic boundaries and the ways in which values, rituals and forms of control are experienced were central to his theoretical framework (Chenery-Morris, 2021; Atkinson, 1985).

Bernstein (2000) argued that pedagogic practice contributes to the creation and reproduction of social boundaries, power, dominance, and even learners' perceptions of themselves. These processes are enacted through both pedagogic discourse and the pedagogic device.

Pedagogic practice refers to the ways in which education is delivered, reproduced and acquired within educational settings. Pedagogic discourse incorporates Bernstein's key concepts of classification and framing (Bernstein, 1977). Classification refers to the degree of insulation between categories of knowledge, such as academic subject areas. If categories are distinctly separate, they have strong classification, while blurred or permeable boundaries would be seen as weak classification (Bernstein, 1990). Framing, however, concerns the extent of control that the teacher or academic holds over the student's acquisition of knowledge. Where academics control communication, pacing, sequencing and selection of content, the framing is strong; where learners have greater autonomy or alternative opportunities to acquire knowledge, the framing is weak (Bernstein, 1977).

The pedagogic device is Bernstein's theory of instructional and regulative discourses, and the way in which knowledge becomes part of a curriculum. Instructional discourse concerns the transmission and acquisition of subject knowledge and skills, while regulative discourse relates to the *“transmission of principles of order, relation and identity”* (Bernstein, 2000: 32). The pedagogic device operates through three interrelated rules: distributive, recontextualising, and evaluative. These govern who has access to knowledge, how knowledge is re-shaped or translated into a curriculum for delivery, and how successful performance is defined and assessed (Chenery-Morris, 2020; Singh, 2002). The rules exist hierarchically, with

recontextualising rules deriving from distributive rules, and evaluative rules deriving from recontextualising processes (Singh, 2002; Bernstein, 1996).

Importantly, both the pedagogic discourse and pedagogic device represent opportunities for power to be held by the academic within the classroom environment, thereby contributing to the maintenance and reproduction of social boundaries (Chenery-Morris, 2021).

Bernstein (2000) was clear that discourse within the pedagogical environment is used to assert power and control within the classroom. Using the example of 'carpentry' being relabelled as 'woodwork' within the educational environment, Bernstein demonstrated how teachers exercise authority over specialised language, while learners may be disadvantaged by unfamiliar terminology. Particularly relevant to the discussion of apprenticeships is Bernstein's (2000: 16) concept of the "*common recognition rule*". He explained that those who attend a lecture and know what is expected of them, are able to better orientate themselves to the rules of the classroom and participate in "*contextually legitimate communication*" compared to those who do not share such understandings.

This research draws on the work of Bernstein particularly concerning the experience of power within the classroom, including the concepts of framing and the rules of the pedagogic device.

My choice of these areas of Bernstein's work to support the analysis of the primary research, is based on the potential impact on apprentices of undertaking Higher Education (HE) through Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). Power relations within the classroom appear especially significant given that apprentices typically attend university on a limited basis, often studying alongside full-time students while spending the majority of their time in employment. From a Bernsteinian perspective, apprentices may experience a comparatively weaker position within the classroom if their understanding of HE norms and expectations is constrained by their limited engagement with the university environment. Studying alongside full-time students, who may possess greater familiarity with academic language and conventions, could potentially affect apprentices' confidence and participation. These considerations were important in exploring how classroom experiences may influence the success of under-represented groups accessing HE through DAs and formed a significant area of discussion within the primary research.

Bernstein's concept of framing is also relevant to apprenticeships because it highlights the extent to which academics influence students' acquisition of knowledge. However, the concept becomes particularly interesting when comparing apprenticeship and full-time HE experiences because employers also play a substantial role in the transmission of knowledge for

apprentices. A defining characteristic of apprenticeships is the partnership between universities and employers, with employers required to support learning through off-the-job training and workplace-based development. This includes the transmission of instructional knowledge and, in regulated professions, support for the acquisition of professional and regulatory knowledge. Consequently, questions arise regarding whether pedagogical framing within apprenticeship programmes should be understood as stronger or weaker than in traditional HE settings, given apprentices' access to multiple sources of knowledge beyond the university classroom.

Bernstein (1990) conceptualised the pedagogic device as comprising distributive, recontextualising, and evaluative rules, which were explored and applied further to educational research by Singh (2002). Using both Bernstein's (1990) definition and Singh's (2002) application of the rules, I would suggest that the rules can be applied to apprenticeships:

- Distributive rule: Academics may exercise influence over the amount and nature of academic knowledge included within apprenticeship programmes relative to the full-time programmes. Findings from the primary research indicated that academics perceived apprenticeship programmes to be lacking in academic breadth when compared to full-time programmes, but their power to improve the apprenticeship programme was limited. Apprenticeships seem to be redistributing power from academics to other educational actors, such as employers, in this field and as part of this, what is considered to be valid knowledge and practice is being redefined. This therefore raises questions about the academic quality and experience of the apprenticeship programme; and the relative academic advantage afforded to full-time students for undertaking, and paying for, their degree compared to those on the 'free' programme.
- Recontextualising rule: The regulated professions and academic programmes that underpin some DA programmes (e.g. Registered Nurse, Social Worker) are unlikely to have substantial divergence between apprenticeship and full-time programmes. However, academics retain some influence over how knowledge is recontextualised for delivery within the full-time programme compared to the apprenticeship programmes which are delivered based on Apprenticeship Standards. Consequently, the transformation of professional knowledge into curricula remains an important site of power and influence.
- Evaluative rule: Compared to full-time programmes, academics have limited power within DAs to determine what constitutes success, as assessment requirements are

partly shaped by Apprenticeship Standards and End Point Assessments. Findings from the primary research suggested that apprentices often perceived assessment and evaluation processes to be more demanding than those experienced by full-time students. This suggests that there is a change in power relating to the authentication and evaluation of learning, from the classroom to the external environment.

When applying the rules of the pedagogic device to DAs, it could be argued that DAs are re-shaping the content of the pedagogic device and the different power dynamics within regulative discourse, all with a shifting hierarchy of professional knowledge and practice. This is relevant to the discussion of widening participation to HE through DAs, particularly in relation to considering the impact of DAs on success in HE.

Further discussion of the classroom experience is in Section 3.7.2.

3.4 Identity, Possible Selves, and Probable Selves

3.4.1 Identity

The earlier section on Bandura's concept of self-efficacy highlighted the important role that a strong sense of self-efficacy can have on individuals facing challenge. I consider both self-efficacy and identity to be key factors in explaining why two individuals with similar characteristics may respond differently when opportunities for Higher Education (HE) arise.

Identity is a significant concept within both sociology and psychology, and the importance of professional identity emerged as a key theme within the primary research. It is therefore relevant to examine the development of the concept of identity and consider its application to studies of widening participation and professional self-efficacy.

Mead (1934) suggested that identity is socially constructed, viewing it as dynamic and shaped through reflection on social interaction rather than existing independently of social contexts. This social and structural understanding of identity was further developed by Bourdieu (1986), who argued that habitus, encompassing the internalised behaviours, habits and beliefs acquired through one's social environment, plays a central role in identity formation. Identity is therefore understood as strongly rooted in social construction. In contrast, Goffman (1990) viewed identity as actively constructed and performative, proposing that individuals maintain both a public and private self, represented through his concepts of the 'front stage' and 'back stage' identities.

The concept of identity has continued to evolve within the academic literature. Hall (2022) acknowledges that identity is shaped by relationships of dominance and oppression, an issue

explored further in Section 3.5 on intersectionality. Burke (2012) argues that identity is complex and multifaceted, with different dimensions becoming more influential in particular contexts and at different points in time. As identity is subjectively constructed and shaped by wider social environments, experiences within HE may generate tensions between competing aspects of identity. Burke (2012) particularly highlights the experiences of white, mature, working class women, for whom participation in HE can create competing expectations and pressures within the different aspects of their identity.

Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 6) argue that the term 'identity', as an analytical concept, is "*hopelessly ambiguous*". They suggest that it is variously used to signify shared characteristics within groups, individual beliefs and understandings, or the basis for social and political action. While scholars disagree about what identity is, how it is constructed, and how it should be understood, the concept continues to be used expansively across academic literature. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) therefore advocate for more precise concepts, such as categorisation or self-understanding, which they consider to better capture the diverse characteristics often grouped under the term 'identity'. Hall (1996), while acknowledging these conceptual challenges, regards identity as an essential analytical tool. He argues that identity is an important concept for understanding or recognising difference, and that identities are relationally constructed through distinction from others.

The literature has increasingly extended discussions of identity to encompass professional identity, a concept particularly relevant to this research. Psychological perspectives generally view identity as evolving continuously through experience. Vignoles *et al.* (2011) suggest that identity develops across three domains: the individual identity, relational identity, and collective identity. These domains encompass personal beliefs about the self, the influence of significant relationships, and membership of social groups. Building on the concept of collective identity, Cruess *et al.* (2015) argue that professional identity is socially constructed through participation within a community of practice, particularly in medicine and healthcare. They emphasise the importance of professional values, ethics, and behaviour in shaping professional identity. Similarly, Pratt, Rockman and Kauffman (2006) found that professional identities in healthcare were validated by others in similar roles, and that organisations play a significant role in creating those identities.

Of relevance to my research is Cruess *et al.*'s (2015) view that for medical students, acceptance into medical school is a key part of the formation of the professional identity, as students transition from a member of the public to a member of the medical profession. The acceptance of apprentices by employers into Degree Apprenticeship programmes also seemed to be an

important part of embedding a professional identity for the apprentices in my study. Research by Jones, Christie and Brophy (2022) found that apprentices demonstrated high levels of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy, which seemed to lead from the support from, and interaction with, their employers. In addition, Cruess *et al.* (2015) suggests that interactions with others can shape professional identity, while professional identity, in turn, influences the nature of those interactions. This aligns closely with the findings of this research, which found that the professional identity of apprentices affected interactions with both full-time students and university staff, and that professional identity, for some, was also shaped by interactions with patients.

Cruess *et al.* (2015) further argue that participation in a learning community and a sense of belonging within that community are instrumental in the development of professional identity, drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991). The relevance of Lave and Wenger's (1991) work to apprenticeship experiences is discussed further in Section 3.7.3.

While professional identity may be grounded within an occupation, there is also potential for it to be shaped by those responsible for transmitting knowledge (Cruess *et al.*, 2015; Daniels, 2008), specifically academic staff within universities or workplace tutors. This links the formation and support of professional identity with Bernstein's (2000) argument that pedagogical discourse functions as a mechanism through which academic staff maintain power and control. Through language and the recontextualisation of the learning curriculum, academics may influence both identity formation and the development of professional identity within learning environments.

I acknowledge that there is significant debate about identity, and that the concept of identity continues to be contested. However, I find theories relating to possible selves, outlined in the following section, to be an interesting addition to the debate on identity, particularly in relation to widening participation. I consider awareness of possible future identities to be important in creating the potential for individuals to consider the pathway to those future selves, and I consider the concept of identity to be relevant to the reflective nature of self-efficacy. For me, identity is an important part of reflexivity, the question of "who am I?", which is a key theme within my research. Participants in the primary research exhibited a strong sense of professional identity, which for many was a source of pride and confidence. Conversely, university staff whose self-efficacy appeared to diminish through their experiences with Degree Apprenticeships also seemed to report a weakened sense of professional identity as academics. Consequently, despite the contested nature of the concept, identity emerged as an important analytical theme within both the reflective processes of the research and its findings.

3.4.2 Possible and Probable Selves

I view the concept of possible selves as being particularly relevant to the active decision-making required for under-represented groups in considering, and progressing to, Higher Education (HE). The theory of possible selves is that they are an unrealised yet potential self, providing a “*conceptual link between cognition and motivation*” (Markus and Nurius, 1986: 954). It is based on the idea that people can imagine a future and the possible self that exists there, which is an individual’s view of the different representations of themselves, whether desired or undesired (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Markus and Nurius (1986: 954) describe possible selves as distinct from “*current or now selves*,” and that they can be either positive or negative. The possible self is one either to work or aspire to, or one to be avoided (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

Possible selves are not fixed and are shaped by continuously changing circumstances, including educational experiences, family background, social context, self-esteem, and opportunity structures (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Young people may image multiple possible selves simultaneously (Oyserman, Brickman and Rhodes, 2007), with some appearing more realistic and attainable than others.

While Markus and Nurius (1986) distinguish between hoped-for, expected, and feared future selves, the findings from this research suggested an additional dimension of future identity. Several apprentices described university education as desirable and potentially beneficial yet simultaneously viewed it as unrealistic within the context of their financial, social, and educational circumstances. Existing theories of possible selves do not fully capture this distinction between what individuals aspire towards and what they perceive as likely to occur. I therefore propose an alternative, yet complimentary, concept: the *probable self*.

The probable self differs from the possible self because it is not constructed around aspiration, hope, or desired futures. Instead, it is constructed around perceived realism. It represents the future that individuals believe is most likely to occur in the absence of significant intervention, opportunity, or change in circumstances. Whereas possible selves describe futures individuals believe may be attainable, probable selves describe the future they expect to experience if existing social, educational, financial, and cultural conditions remain unchanged. In many ways, there is a fatalism in the probable self, compared to a confident optimism in the possible self.

For young people, the probable self reflects who they would expect to become if the influences of their social class, family background, educational experiences, and identity, continue uninterrupted. It therefore incorporates the restrictions and limitations that individuals perceive within their environment. The probable self may influence aspiration more strongly than the

possible self, because it contains an individual's expectations about what is realistically available to people like them.

The concept of probable selves complements Bourdieu's (1992; 1986) notion of habitus. Habitus helps explain how social position, family background, and previous experiences shape perceptions of what is possible. Probable selves describe the outcome of this process by identifying the future that individuals come to regard as most likely for "people like me". In this sense, probable selves may be understood as one manifestation of habitus operating at the level of future identity. They represent an internalised expectation of future outcomes shaped by accumulated social experience.

Probable selves also extend Bandura's (1994) concept of self-efficacy. While self-efficacy focuses on an individual's belief in their capability to perform a task, probable selves focus on an individual's perception of whether circumstances will allow desired futures to occur. An individual may therefore possess high levels of self-efficacy while simultaneously viewing HE as an improbable future outcome. This distinction was evident within the findings of this research, where several apprentices believed themselves capable of degree-level study but did not perceive university participation as realistically available prior to the opportunity presented through the Degree Apprenticeship (DA).

For possible selves to feel realistic, they must be desirable and achievable (Rossiter, 2009; 2007). Their formation is shaped by a range of factors, including present situations and motivations, social context (Nurius and Marcus, 1990), broader cultural and economic influences (Rossiter, 2007), knowledge (Rossiter, 2009), and family experience (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Negative social experiences create a more negative sense of self (Nurius and Markus, 1990), and earlier educational disengagement or success can influence attitudes in later learning (Rossiter, 2007). A lack of family experience of HE can make it difficult for young people to imagine a realistic possible self in HE (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011); in such cases, I would maintain that many would instead envisage a probable self that disengages with education. Teachers and mentors therefore play a crucial role in enabling possible selves by presenting new futures and providing the information needed to navigate towards them (Rossiter, 2009; 2007).

It is important, however, to note that while family experience may negatively impact possible selves and make a probable self more likely, Section 3.6.3 outlines the positive influence that family can have on aspiration, even where the experience of education is limited. Parents from minority ethnic groups have been found to consider positive educational outcomes to be based more on effort than ability, and to have higher expectations of their children's educational

outcomes than white parents (Yamamoto and Holloway, 2010), which may explain differences in HE progression rates by ethnicity. I would argue that the attitude within the family in relation to the possible self available through education, is key to the potential for young people to break away from the probable self into a positive possible self.

Sfard and Prusak (2005: 18) offer a related perspective through their distinction between *actual* and *designated* identities. Actual identities are current stories that people say about themselves (e.g. I am a student), while designated identities refer to “*stories believed to have the potential to become part of one’s actual identity*” (e.g. I want to be a nurse). They note that a disconnect between the actual and designated identities can create a sense of unhappiness, but that designated identities are usually achievable. This distinction has particular relevance for apprentices, many of whom are mature students, as apprenticeships have the potential to reframe actual and designated identities, as illustrated in the findings chapter.

Probable selves differ from Sfard and Prusak’s (2005) designated identities because they are not normative or aspirational. Whereas designated identities represent the identities individuals seek to achieve, probable selves represent the identities individuals expect to experience irrespective of their aspirations. A learner may therefore possess a designated identity associated with HE or professional employment while simultaneously believing that such an outcome is unlikely. The distinction is important because it helps to explain why aspirations alone do not always translate into educational participation.

Research by Oyserman *et al.* (2004) suggests that the articulation of specific actions makes it more likely for young people to reach a positive self, as possible selves without a clear navigable route become impossible selves. However, this requires structural barriers to be viewed as surmountable, as geographical constraints or financial limitations can undermine the potential of a possible self (Webb *et al.*, 2017b) and make the probable self more likely. A clear and realistic sense of a possible self can act as a catalyst for action as well as aspiration. Stevenson and Clegg’s (2011) research showed that university students with the most highly developed sense of possible selves relating to professional occupations, were active in wider enrichment activities aimed at enhancing their graduate employment outcomes. They were predominately middle-class, benefiting from families with positive attitudes towards education and support for extra-curricular activities. Working-class students found it harder to envision professional possible selves and tended to focus primarily on surviving at university, often ignoring or not being aware of wider opportunities. This links to the impact of habitus (Bourdieu, 1992) and connects with the sections in this chapter that consider class and aspirations, as it suggests that the internalised expectations and aspirations from social groups and social

identities, continues to shape experiences throughout HE and into graduate employment. Achieving a possible self requires individuals to believe in their capacity to succeed and to persist despite doubt or criticism (Bandura and Locke, 2003). Self-efficacy is therefore fundamental, as discussed in the following section.

As a form of HE that spans both vocational and academic pathways, DAs have the potential to disrupt the relationship between probable and possible selves. Within this research, HE was not absent from the aspirations of the apprentices, it was absent from the futures they perceived to be realistically attainable. DAs moved HE from an improbable future or one that was practically achievable. The concept of probable selves therefore provides a useful theoretical lens through which widening participation, educational aspirations, identity formation, and social mobility can be understood.

3.4.3 Identifying as an Apprentice

Apprentices differ from full-time university students in that they are full-time employees with 20 per cent of their time in off-the-job training, some of which will take place in universities while some will be used for conferences and alternative training. Consequently, their time in class is limited. Reflecting this distinction, Ofsted (2025) require apprenticeship training providers to use the terms *learners* or *apprentices* rather than *students*, which immediately identifies them as being different to the full-time student population. This separation of the apprentice identity from the 'student' identity raises important questions about how apprentices perceive themselves within the university context, and how academic staff view them in relation to full-time students. Hewson's (2018) small-scale study of mature online learners found that their 'student' identity was weak as family and work identities were stronger, not least because those identities determined the time they had for their studies. Apprentices may similarly experience multiple identities, which could conflict with one another throughout their studies.

Although apprentices could have either vocational or academic backgrounds, the age profile of apprenticeship starts as presented in Table 5 (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.5.4) would indicate that apprenticeships mainly function as an upskilling route for existing employees, and therefore, the majority are likely to have been out of education for some years prior to the apprenticeship. The pedagogical literature discussed in Section 3.7 suggests that learners from vocational backgrounds or with a gap in their educational experience, may experience difficulties in transitioning into the classroom environment (Katarzi and Hayward, 2020; Webb *et al.*, 2017b; Billett, 2016; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Bernstein, 2000). This could contribute to a sense of *otherness* from the beginning of the course, particularly if they experience difficulties in recognising the implicit 'rules' of the classroom or the pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 2000).

In their study of first-year Degree Apprentices, Taylor-Smith *et al.* (2019) found that apprentices distinguished themselves as different from full-time students, and that they continued to identify themselves as employees while at universities, forming a cohesive group of apprentices separate from the full-time student population. Brooks (2007) highlights the importance of time spent with peers for forming deep and meaningful friendships at university, something apprentices may struggle to develop within their short periods of time on-campus.

In courses that continue to be offered for full-time students in professional programmes such as Nursing and Social Work, my findings evidence significant challenges in identity. The full-time model of delivery for these programmes would be to have periods of academic study and periods of placement. During placements, students are formally assessed by practice educators or mentors yet remain clearly defined as *students*. Their purpose is to apply academic learning to practical experiences, and they remain the responsibility of the university (Powell and Walsh, 2018). Apprentices, however, are employees undertaking academic study alongside their ongoing paid work. The responsibilities and pressures of their work continue throughout their studies, and as noted in my findings, their primary identity is always that of an employee. Some apprentices, particularly in healthcare settings, may also supervise or mentor full-time students on placements, creating a challenging dynamic for both apprentices and full-time students.

It is possible that the disconnect between identities could have an impact on apprentices' success or failure on their course, particularly if it leads to insecurity in their role either as an employee or student (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). Their identity might be further impacted by their experience while learning on the course. Academic teaching staff often work primarily within universities, compared to apprentices whose primary role is based in practice. My research found that this can lead to situations where apprentices perceive themselves to have more current knowledge and experience than the academics.

It is important to recognise the potential for apprentices to feel disengaged from their learning if they feel that it is inaccurate or irrelevant to them (Ulriksen, 2016). Bernstein (2000) highlights the power relations intrinsic to the classroom, which is held and conveyed through pedagogical discourse. He considered changes to the discourse used in the classroom compared to the workplace as a method of reinforcing power relations in the classroom. For apprentices, this could create a sense of instability as they learn a new pedagogical language within their occupational area, but as their confidence grows, they could challenge academics based on their more 'current' knowledge, possibly shifting the power balance within the classroom - an experience reported in my research.

These dynamics also intersect with Ulriksen's (2016) concept of the *implied student*, which includes the expectations that staff would have of both students and apprentices. If apprentices do not meet these expectations, and this is not managed effectively by academics, I would argue that the effect could be significant for the apprentices' sense of identity as 'learners' and their engagement on the course. The potential impact on academics is discussed in Section 3.9. Apprentices must engage in a reflective process, including socialisation with other students, as they attempt to balance their student and employee identities (Ulriksen *et al.*, 2016).

3.4.4 Navigational Capacity through Information, Advice and Guidance

Bourdieu's theories about the influence of social and structural influences on aspiration, and ultimately, progression to Higher Education (HE), are important within the wider literature about barriers to progression; however, they do not account for individual autonomy in decision-making. Appadurai (2004) is particularly critical of Bourdieu for placing excessive emphasis on the impact of historical social structures and experiences and instead considers that navigational capacity is key to understanding aspiration. He argues that the level of knowledge that people have is important in being able to navigate to goals, and this can be affected by cultural context and experience.

Research shows that young people often aspire to university or to occupations requiring a degree but lack understanding of the pathways to these outcomes (Gale and Parker, 2015; Bok, 2010; Brooks, 2003). Gale and Parker (2015) found that students frequently turned to parents and family for information, even when parents lacked direct experience or knowledge of HE. Brooks (2003) observed that HE choices of young people were not obviously impacted by their habitus, but that parents with little knowledge about HE would give advice based on their encounters with graduates in their workplaces. Research throughout the last twenty years has indicated that the biggest single source of information and advice for young students comes from parents (Department for Education, 2021), but parental lack of HE experiences could negatively impact the navigational capacity of young people to progress to HE (Bok, 2010)

Information, advice, and guidance (IAG) provided in schools can be an important way of equalising the navigational capacity of young people whose families lack HE experience. Crozier *et al.* (2008) found that students aspiring to Law faced particular challenges when they were unaware of the extra-curricular activities needed for competitive applications. This was also recognised in the 2009 *Unleashing Aspiration* report, which noted that professional occupations in the UK had become more socially exclusive over time (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). Echoing Bourdieu's notion of social capital (1986), the report noted that

internships tended to go to those with good social connections, and that school-based IAG was not going far enough to support young people in navigating into the professions (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009).

The availability of IAG is essential for helping young people understand realistic choices, especially when HE or career aspirations fall outside the norms of their social field (Archer, Pratt and Phillips, 2001). However, IAG provision in schools has been criticised for not fully supporting all young people or not providing support at the right time (Fuller *et al.*, 2014; Fuller *et al.*, 2006). In research carried out by Payne (2003), teachers were observed encouraging students towards their own subject specialisms, indicating that IAG was not completely impartial. The Education Act 2011 required schools to provide impartial and independent careers guidance, yet in Fuller *et al.*'s (2014) study, two-thirds of teachers believed students were not receiving enough information to make informed post-16 choices. Although most teachers (93 per cent) felt confident advising on A Level routes, half reported knowing nothing about apprenticeships. The Department for Education's (2025) guidance for schools on delivering effective careers education emphasises the importance of ensuring that young people understand apprenticeships and other forms of technical education as viable pathways. With successive governments placing increasing emphasis on skills development, technical education and apprenticeships have become more prominent within school-based careers guidance, particularly as students are supported to explore a wider range of career options.

Teachers in vocational education are often better placed to provide guidance about progressing into further vocational education, including apprenticeships, but often have limited experience of HE, which can affect the quality of guidance offered (Carter, 2009). Bathmaker (2015) found that students undertaking vocational qualifications were often late in making HE decisions, thus missing key university deadlines and limiting HE choices particularly as places could already be full.

Reforms to IAG since the Education Act 2011 have been viewed as broadly positive, but Ofsted (2023) notes that alternative pathways, including apprenticeships, are still not promoted effectively. As Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) become more available, a relatively complex application process associated with DAs means that IAG is likely to be of particular importance for those normally under-represented in HE (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020). Employers manage their own application process, sometimes in partnership with universities and training providers, but usually independently; without the centralised UCAS process used for full-time HE programmes. Different timetables and priorities for different employers means the process is unpredictable and challenging, potentially making it difficult for good IAG to be available to

young people. Cullinane and Doherty (2020) argue that the government should incentivise employers to join a centralised application system, but while there has been some progress in DAs being available on UCAS, applications are still largely managed by employers.

Finally, it is important to recognise that much of the academic literature has focussed on the IAG delivered by teachers, but over the past five years, there has been increasing use of educational platforms to support IAG in schools. These tools were promoted to schools during the pandemic (Office for Students, 2020a) and have continued to be used (Department for Education, 2025), but I have not yet found any research on the impact of these platforms on ensuring young people have good wide-ranging IAG. There also seems to be limited research on the role of social media or chat rooms in IAG, but my professional experience in Marketing at an English university means that I have seen that these influences are real and here to stay. Fuller and Unwin (2021) argued that the role of IAG in schools can be over-estimated in the extent to which it influences choices, as friends, the media and social media are increasingly being used as sources of information about options.

Although my research focused on the IAG received by apprentices while still at school, which was prior to the pandemic, navigational capacity informed by informal and digital sources of guidance is an important area for future research.

3.4.5 Risk-Based Decision Making

There is well-established discussion within widening participation (WP) literature about the influence of Bourdieu's (1986) habitus on young people's decision-making. However, Beck *et al.* (2006) argues that young people instead consider their options through a risk-based lens.

For some young people, Higher Education (HE) could be seen to be a risk-free option, as it is a known and established pathway from school that fits within the norms of their social structure. For these young people, choosing to enrol on a Degree Apprenticeship (DA) could be seen to be risky, as particularly in the early years of DAs, it was a relatively unknown option and could be seen to be making a lifelong occupational commitment at a young age (Beck *et al.*, 2006).

For other young people, HE could be seen to be socially and economically risky, particularly if it is perceived as different from the norms within their field (Webb *et al.*, 2017b; Fuller, McCrum and Macfadyen, 2014). Bourdieu (1986) emphasises the role of internalised social expectations as being key in decision-making, which could make HE a very risky option when it is different from social expectations. For these young people, the concept of apprenticeship may be seen to be less risky as it is a type of education with a long history of developing technical and occupation-specific skills. This could make DAs a particularly important opportunity for those

who would recognise apprenticeships as normal in their social structure but who would traditionally turn away from full-time HE. Archer, Pratt, and Phillips (2001) further maintain that working-class men may experience a greater sense of risk when making choices perceived as incompatible with their identity than working-class women, as discussed in Section 3.6.6.

The concept of risk seems relevant to decision-making that involves a new, yet also recognisable, type of education; but also, in the perpetuation of inequality or gendered trends, as making decisions outside a norm can be seen to be risky.

Boudon (2014), however, offers an alternative explanation for decision-making. He proposes that the aims and goals of social actors can best be explained through contextual analysis, suggesting that context exerts a stronger influence on inequality of opportunity than cultural capital. Boudon views context as being based within empirically observable features that are analytical rather than descriptive, and that provide an explanation for social phenomena. In the case of inequalities in education, Boudon's perspective is that decisions are shaped by situational contextual analysis. The factors that a young person could consider in determining whether to progress to HE, could include, for example, their social position, the options available to them (e.g. as outlined in Section 3.6.5 around limitations of geography), their beliefs and social norms, and perceived constraints. Decisions are therefore based on the contextual analysis of what is realistically possible. Choices that may seem irrational from an outsider's perspective, may actually be completely rational due to this contextual analysis. This resonates with the concepts of possible selves, self-efficacy, and designated identities; but also has some resonance with risk-based decision making. I would propose that analysing context and determining what might be achievable within an individual context, is a form of risk-based decision-making.

I would argue that one of the biggest risks of choosing a DA is the relinquishing of control or active decision-making within the education experience. Apprentices cannot choose their university or training provider, as it is the employer who commissions training providers. This brings with it the risk of an employer changing training providers before the programme starts, or even during the apprenticeship. The employer determines the mode of study, such as being in-person, online, or through intensive blocks; the location of study, and even therefore, the days of the week that an apprentice would be required to travel for their studies. The employer will also determine which of the work-based topics or projects that the apprentice will undertake.

Curriculum decisions, where variability exists, are also made by employers (Powell and Walsh, 2018), a fact acknowledged by apprentices in this research. Since apprenticeship design is driven by occupational requirements rather than academic considerations, the academic

content within the Apprenticeship Standard is shaped by employers or employer groups at the design stages, rather than by universities or learners (Powell and Walsh, 2018). For example, employers considering apprenticeship training in Computer Science can choose from multiple pathways, each with distinct Standards and curricula. Employers select the Standard that aligns with organisational needs and then source an appropriate training provider. My research found that where optional modules are available, employers would normally specify the modules their apprentices would study. The apprentices cannot direct their own studies in the way that full-time students can and must also recognise that their employer will have oversight over their academic performance. If they submit a poor assignment, their employer is likely to be aware of it. The one area in which the apprentice retains control, is their willingness to apply themselves to the course (Billett, 2016).

The choice of training provider, as noted above, is with the employer rather than apprentice, and employers can work with a range of training providers at the same time. Their decisions may be based on practical considerations such as cost and logistics, rather than the preferences of apprentices. Employers within my research were clear that logistical considerations were key to their choice of training provider. In support of this, Smith *et al.* (2021) found that while university websites frequently publicise the employers they partner with, employer websites rarely acknowledge training provider partners by name. As a professional within marketing, I would view this as an indication that employers are not considering their training providers to be a long-term partner but are instead the right training provider at the right time. By not advertising the name of training providers, they are making it clear that the apprenticeship is offered but the training provider is not relevant as they could be changed at any point. For apprentices, the implication is that the training provider should not be considered important in their decision to apply for the apprenticeship, as their choices should instead be based on the employer for whom they will be working. This is a significant area of control that the employer holds over the apprenticeship learning experience.

3.5 Intersectionality

A key concept within identity, and of particular relevance for widening participation, is that of intersectionality. Crenshaw (2006: 7) introduced the term in 1989 to explain how varying “*identity categories*” that could be considered as forms of oppression, interact with one another. Her work identified race and gender as important characteristics that are often considered in isolation within identity politics. She argues that in situations such as violence against women, factors such as race or class also shape the experiences of women, but these additional factors are often ignored.

Crenshaw's (2006) observation was that interventions that aim to support women that fails to recognise the impact of class, financial status, or ethnicity, could lead to either a failed intervention or, at worse, the continued reproduction of subordination of women. Crenshaw (2006) also introduced the concept of political intersectionality, suggesting that aspects such as race and gender are situated within two groups with conflicting political agendas. She argues that the experience of sexism and racism is different for women from minority ethnic groups to that of white women or men from minority ethnic groups. Her concern was that failure to recognise the intersectionality of these characteristics on identity, leads to the perpetuation of subordination and disadvantage.

Crenshaw is one of many writers who write about the experience of ethnic minority women as experiencing significant disadvantage, with Hill (2022: 93) observing that "*intersecting oppressions*" are fundamentally based on social hierarchies. Hill considered domination as simply being based on difference, but a difference viewed by those dominant in society as being underpinned by their own superiority. Hill (2022: 110) considers the media, including music and the internet, to be an important place where "*controlling images*" perpetuate oppression. This is where perspectives of the characteristics of people from specific identity categories, particularly females from ethnic minority groups, continue to portray them in stereotypically negative ways. I agree with Hill's view particularly in relation to the way that the media, and the growth in self-produced content on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, provide the opportunity for groups to represent themselves and expectations of their social groups, in ways that are accessible by a wide audience. I consider this as having both positive and negative impacts – the content could perpetuate stereotypes and expectations of young people based on their intersectional characteristics, but the content could equally show young people that there are opportunities outside the expectations of their habitus.

Hill (2022) argues that resistance to oppression must come from self-definition, where groups oppressed within their society define their own identities and realities, challenging the stereotypes that exist about them. When considering Hill's view in relation to widening participation to Higher Education (HE), it leads to questions about how universities define students from under-represented groups and the expectations that the universities have of them. This discussion is therefore relevant to Bernstein's theories relating to both pedagogical discourse and device, but also the following sections relating to factors that impact participation and success in HE.

The concept of intersectionality is important within the field of widening participation. Morley and Lugg (2009) consider a key problem in widening participation to be the lack of recognition

within government policy that a wide range of characteristics intersect with one another to create disadvantage and subordination. Like Hill (2022), they consider different categories of disadvantage to mutually perpetuate oppression.

As a practical example of intersectionality, the combination of being, for example, white, male, and eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), has a particularly detrimental effect on HE participation. Just 13.8 per cent of young people in this group progressed to HE by age 19 in 2023/24, compared to 28.9 per cent of FSM-eligible pupils nationally (Department for Education, 2025b). Other characteristics, when combined, also have a detrimental impact on HE progression, such as class and presence of a disability, class and age, or ethnicity and disability, making it essential to consider the intersectionality of characteristics in any discussion that references social identities, power, and inequality (Webb *et al.*, 2017b).

The following sections of this chapter considers the impact of a range of factors in relation to participation in HE or vocational education, and where possible, reflects on the impact of characteristics on one another in relation to participation and success in HE.

3.6 Factors Impacting Access to Higher Education and Degree Apprenticeships

3.6.1 Gaps in Participation

Returning to Dewey's (1916: 128) writing, he argued that:

"It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them."

The aim of this research was to explore whether Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) contribute to reducing inequalities in access to Higher Education (HE), as the data in *Table 6* (Gov.uk, 2025; Section 2.5.1) continues to show gaps in HE participation between the most and least advantaged. This indicates that the legislative developments outlined in the previous chapter have not improved access and may even have perpetuated the inequalities that already existed. Boliver's (2011) work, conducted prior to the increase in tuition fees in England, considered expansion of HE to only be able to reduce inequalities in access once the enrolment rate of the most advantaged reaches "*saturation point*", as the most advantaged are still most likely and best placed to take up the additional places available. Access to the most selective universities remains difficult, even in an expanded sector, which in itself continues to perpetuate inequalities (Ashwin, 2022; Boliver, 2011).

The introduction of DAs, described by then Prime Minister David Cameron as "*a gold standard option for ambitious young people*" (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills; as cited in

Lee, 2012: 234), also has the potential to perpetuate inequality. DAs offer free degree-level study alongside full-time paid employment, often with large employers, and guaranteed graduate employment. These features are likely to make them highly competitive. Given the selectiveness of the wider university system (Boliver, 2013) and the persistent gap in participation between the most and least advantaged demonstrated in *Table 6* (Gov.uk, 2025; Section 2.5.1), it is difficult to see how DAs would operate differently, an assumption this research set out to explore.

Prospective apprentices do not apply through the standard UCAS system; instead, they normally apply directly to employers or through a combined employer-university application. As the process is similar to a job application, applicants who are already under-represented in HE may also be under-represented in DA recruitment. Data from the Office for Students (2020a) for the first three years of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (HDAs), indicate that Degree Apprentices from the most deprived 40 per cent of English neighbourhoods (IMD Quintiles 1 and 2), remain under-represented compared with the HE sector. The increased confidence that comes with cultural capital and the potential for influence and support from the networks within high levels of social capital (Cochrane, 2015; Bourdieu, 1986), means that those already at an advantage in considering and applying to HE may be at an advantage for Degree Apprenticeships too (Emms and Laczik, 2025; Smith *et al.*, 2021a; Cullinane and Doherty, 2020).

In 2023/24, there were 122,230 HDA starts in England (Gov.uk, 2025b), compared to 554,465 new entrants to university (UCAS, 2023a⁹), which means HDAs represented approximately 18 per cent of all HE starts in that period. However, only 31 per cent of HDA starters (n = 37,730), were under the age of 25, as shown in *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.5.4), indicating that apprenticeships mainly function as an upskilling route for existing employees. This means that there is likely to be few HDA places for school and college leavers potentially leading to intense competition for entry.

The following sections therefore set out some of the factors considered to be relevant to widening participation to HE, and therefore, DAs. The sections follow a broadly chronological route towards HE, considering academic attainment in school before moving into aspiration for

⁹ UCAS data shows the number of university acceptances via the UCAS system. This is referenced here rather than enrolment data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), as HESA includes Degree Apprentice enrolments within their total HE enrolment data.

HE, and barriers to progression, including progressing from vocational qualifications, and the impact of geography, gender and age.

3.6.2 Academic Attainment at School

Progression to Higher Education (HE) is closely linked to prior educational attainment, particularly the achievement of grades sufficient for university entry. In England, achievement of A Levels in grades A-C has remained relatively stable over the past decade at around 78 per cent of young people (Ofqual, 2025). However, attainment is unevenly distributed: young people from disadvantaged backgrounds generally achieve lower A Level grades than their more advantaged peers (Tuckett et al., 2021; Machin and Vignoles, 2006), and those without A Levels, or low grades at A Level, are less likely to progress to HE (Cochrane, 2015).

Young people who are considered to be at an economic disadvantage and eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), have an attainment gap of almost 29 percentage points in English and maths GCSEs compared to their non-FSM peers (Francis-Devine *et al.*, 2025). This gap affects entry into A Levels and subsequently participation in HE (Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2015). FSM-eligible students are also more likely to undertake vocational Level 3 qualifications (Richards, 2016), which, as discussed in Section 3.6.4, makes them less likely to progress to HE than their economically advantaged peers (Cochrane, 2015), and as shown in *Table 10* (Office for Students, 2022; Section 3.7.1), impacts potential HE outcomes.

Patterns of attainment and progression are also shaped by ethnicity. Policy analyses frequently highlights the influence of socio-economic inequality on educational outcomes (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022), but ethnicity-based attainment gaps are equally significant. At GCSE, pupils from Chinese and Indian ethnic groups score the highest, while white pupils score below the national average (Gov.uk, 2024c). White FSM-eligible boys are particularly disadvantaged as only around a third pass English and maths GCSEs, and the HE participation rate of this group is just 13.8 per cent (Department for Education, 2025b). Participation data in *Table 7* (Gov.uk, 2025) shows that white students of both genders have significantly lower HE participation rates than students from any other ethnic group, indicating continued links between GCSE attainment patterns and progression to HE, among other structural factors. However, it is important to note here, as discussed in Section 2.6.2, that while white students' GCSE attainment and HE progression rates are lower than students from other ethnic backgrounds, Boliver's (2013) study of applications and offer rates to the highly selective Russell Group of universities between 1996 and 2006, found that entry rates were higher for students from white ethnic backgrounds. This demonstrates a significant problem in access to selective universities for students from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Table 7: Higher Education participation rates by age 19, by major ethnic group

Academic Year	HE Progression Rate			
	Asian / Asian British	Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	Mixed / Multiple Ethnic Groups	White
2009/10	55.7%	44.1%	37.2%	31.6%
2010/11	56.1%	46.1%	38.4%	32.9%
2011/12	56.5%	48.2%	39%	33.6%
2012/13	56.7%	50.1%	40.5%	33.8%
2013/14	57.2%	50.9%	41.1%	33.9%
2014/15	60.5%	56.2%	44.1%	35.7%
2015/16	62.5%	58.1%	45.7%	37%
2016/17	63.8%	59.8%	45.8%	37.2%
2017/18	64.1%	59.9%	46.7%	38.2%
2018/19	64.6%	59.1%	47.5%	38.3%
2019/20	65%	59.9%	47.6%	38.7%
2020/21	66.3%	62.1%	48.1%	39.7%
2021/22	68.3%	63.5%	51.5%	41.8%
2022/23	68.4%	62.4%	51.8%	41.8%
2023/24	67.4%	63.3%	50.2%	40.5%

Source: Gov.uk (2025)

Gale and Parker (2015) argue that many young people lack the economic and cultural resources needed to support high attainment. This lack of attainment, in turn, restricts access to HE (Whitty and Anders, 2016). Importantly, raising attainment alone does not guarantee increased participation (Webb *et al.*, 2017b). Factors such as cultural capital influence whether young people are successful in securing HE places (Whitty, Hayton and Tang, 2016), or places within Degree Apprenticeships (Emms and Laczik, 2025; Smith *et al.*, 2021), even when they meet academic requirements. For these reasons, attainment remains a central focus of widening participation policy, but it cannot be viewed in isolation.

Attainment emerged as an important theme within the primary research, particularly the impact of attainment, or lack of attainment, on confidence in early aspirations for HE and later progression into Degree Apprenticeships (DAs).

3.6.3 Aspiration to Higher Education

Legislation and widening participation literature often discusses aspiration and the need to reverse a deficit in aspiration amongst those not progressing to Higher Education (HE). However, this focus is highly problematic. Legislative development have attempted to reduce barriers for entry, such as financial obstacles or limited HE opportunities (Burke, 2012), but when participation rates among target groups fail to change, this is often perceived to be a

problem of aspiration (Harrison and Waller, 2018; Gale and Parker, 2015). This reframes aspiration as an individual or group deficit requiring improvement, rather than acknowledging the structural inequalities that shape participation in HE (Burke, 2012). The most recent government initiatives to raise aspiration, outlined in Section 2.6.1, have failed to reduce participation gaps between the most and least advantaged.

Aspiration-focused narratives can also overlook the broader constraints that affect HE decision-making, including the physical location of universities (see Section 3.6.5), academic attainment (Harrison and Waller, 2018), and the level of individual or family economic capital that can make HE unrealistic (Webb *et al.*, 2015b). These narratives obscure the influence of gender, race, parental education, and school environment on the development of aspirations (Burke, 2012; Yamamoto and Holloway, 2010). In his discussion of poverty and navigational capacity, Appadurai (2004) argued that aspiration cannot be viewed separately from social structures and experiences. He argues that the rich have more capacity to aspire because their social experience is of a wider range of aspirations and positive outcomes, compared to those who are 'poor' (Appadurai, 2004).

It is important, however, not to assume homogeneity of social groups, whether considering wealth, class, or educational background (Burke, 2012; Brooks, 2003). Social class, while influential, interacts with multiple other factors that shape expectations and decision-making (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013; Bourdieu, 1992). For example, Brooks (2003) found that aspiration and expectations of lower middle-class young people was influenced by a perceived hierarchy amongst friends and peers, where young people rank themselves in terms of ability against their friends. Their expectations of their next steps, including the status of university and subject, were directly linked to their place in this informal hierarchy.

Irwin and Elley's (2011) research with parents also highlighted notable differences in the ways that middle- and working-class parents view their role in their children's educational journeys. Middle-class parents displayed a relaxed confidence about progression to HE, although it was clear that they would offer strategic support if anything seemed to be going wrong. Working-class parents, by contrast, often valued education highly but had less confidence in their ability to influence outcomes. Irwin and Elley (2011) noted that categorising families simply as 'middle' or 'working' class is overly simplistic, as confidence of parents was shaped by a range of factors. This could include, for example, the difference between having a parent who is a teacher in a deprived area compared to one who teaches in an affluent area (Ward, 2014).

In a review of academic research based in America, Yamamoto, and Holloway (2010) found differences in educational expectations based on ethnicity. They outlined that some ethnic

groups were more likely to view positive educational outcomes to be based on attitude and effort rather than previous educational performance, even experiencing distrust of how teachers reported educational performance. This meant that children were encouraged to try hard in their education in order to achieve positive outcomes, rather than being considered simply as 'able' or 'not able'. This was particularly the case for Asian families and may explain some of the differences in HE progression and outcomes between young people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Discussions of aspiration in education and career decision-making are therefore complex, reflecting the wide range of factors that influence progression to HE (Burke, 2012). Aspiration is closely connected to several theoretical concepts within widening participation, including possible selves (Harrison and Waller, 2018), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1992), and navigational capacity (Appadurai, 2004). These concepts are discussed across this chapter and were central themes in my primary research.

3.6.4 Progression to Higher Education from Vocational Qualifications

When considering progression from vocational qualifications to Higher Education (HE), it is important to return to Modern Apprenticeships (MAs), which were available from 1993 until they were replaced by Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (HDAs) in 2015. MAs were undertaken by apprentices throughout a period of significant change in HE, particularly during the period that the Labour Government of 1997 sought to significantly increase participation in HE.

One of the key challenges associated with MAs was the barrier to progressing to HE due to the range of qualifications included within the Apprenticeship Frameworks (Turbin *et al.*, 2014). The breadth of these qualifications made progression routes unclear (Carter, 2009), and many did not attract UCAS tariff points and were not seen as equivalent to other Level 3 qualifications for university entry (Fuller and Unwin, 2020; Fuller 2016, Turbin *et al.*, 2014).

Throughout the 2000s, leading to the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) in 2015, MAs were offered at Levels 2 and 3 (equivalent to GCSEs and A Levels). They were predominately funded through the Education and Skills Funding Agency, with minimal additional funding required from the employer. Government targets for apprenticeship starts and completion rates were consistently not met, often due to employers perceiving them as irrelevant to their roles, limitations in funding based on age of apprentices, and the perception that they were only suitable for low-skills jobs (Spielhofer and Sims, 2004). In 2014/15, four per cent of Apprenticeship starts were at Level 4 or above, equivalent to first-year degree-level study (Fuller, 2016), illustrating the limited onward progression opportunities from Level 3.

Among the small number of apprentices who did progress to HE, particularly in healthcare, the types of qualifications included within the Level 3 apprenticeships meant that many were eligible only for Foundation Degrees and subsequent progression routes; often taking four-years to complete the full Bachelor degree, compared to the traditional three (Turbin *et al.*, 2014). Progression was further constrained by the limited availability of part-time HE and work-based learning options, despite these being the preferred routes for Level 3 apprentices who did not wish to stop working in order to continue their studies (Carter, 2009).

Research into progression from MAs (Gittoes, 2009, as cited in Fuller and Unwin, 2012) found that female apprentices were more likely to progress to HE than males; apprentices from Black or minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to progress to HE than their white peers; and apprentices with disabilities progressed at a higher rate than those without. Higher progression was also reported in geographical areas with already high HE participation. The trends of progression based on gender and ethnicity mirror that of HE progression of young people in general (Gov.uk, 2026b; HESA, 2020). However, Fuller and Unwin (2012) note that Level 2 completers showed higher rates of HE progression than Level 3 completers, suggesting that many Level 2 apprentices may have gone on to complete more traditional Level 3 academic qualifications rather than following the apprenticeship route.

It is significant therefore, as noted in Chapter 2, that Level 3 apprenticeships will attract UCAS tariff points for learners entering HE from 2026 (UCAS, 2025a). This will make it easier for universities to consider them for entry, as they will carry a recognisable academic value. However, the Level 3 apprenticeship will carry a maximum value of 112 points, equivalent to BBC at A Level (UCAS, 2025a). I am concerned that this will significantly limit access to HE as this will not be an acceptable tariff for some universities and courses. Some professions may also continue to require more traditional Level 3 qualifications than those achieved within an apprenticeship (Turbin *et al.*, 2014).

Separately from apprenticeships, increasing numbers of young people are undertaking vocational Level 3 qualifications, including BTECs and T Levels, or combinations of A Levels and BTECs, before progressing to HE (Richards, 2016). While the purpose of vocational qualifications was originally to develop workplace or occupation-specific knowledge and skills and have historically been seen to be of lesser value than A levels (James Reilly, 2021; Katarzi and Hayward, 2020; Webb *et al.*, 2017a; Atkins and Flint, 2015), universities are increasingly willing to accept them. Almost all Russell Group universities say that they will accept BTECs as either a single qualification or in combination with A Levels (theuniguide.co.uk, 2023),

reflecting on-going public discourse about parity between vocational qualifications and A Levels (Katarzi and Hayward, 2020).

3.6.5 Geography

One of my early motivations for undertaking this research was to consider the potential for educational inequalities to be perpetuated within Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) due to issues of availability within rural areas. There is extensive literature about the positive impact that universities have on the economic fortunes of the area in which they are based (Universities UK, 2021; Henderson, 2020; Robinson and Adams, 2008), even if it is not an immediate priority of the universities themselves (McCann *et al.*, 2023). However, not every county in England has a university, and this can influence the likelihood of progressing to university.

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013) reported that there continued to be gaps in the likelihood of progressing to selective and research-intensive universities for young people who were geographically or financially disadvantaged. Those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to stay at home for Higher Education (HE) (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Christie, 2007), which means HE choices can be limited. While aspiration-raising activity may encourage HE participation, it cannot lead to applications to selective universities if these are geographically inaccessible (Busher and James, 2019; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Rowbottom, 2017). For many students, narratives of social mobility can be challenging in areas where local opportunities are limited and where their choice of college or university is wholly determined by where they live (Henderson, 2020; White and Lee, 2020; Ward, 2014; Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012; Pateman, 2011). This means that geographical location can be a key component of internalised, socially constructed constraints (Bridges, 2007).

For those with limited HE options locally, the expansion of HE into Further Education (FE) Colleges is an important option for accessing HE close to home (Young *et al.*, 2020; Busher and James, 2019), with degrees typically awarded by universities. For some, the option will be available to progress directly from Level 3 qualifications in their FE College to HE without changing institution (Young *et al.*, 2020; Webb *et al.*, 2017a), providing the opportunity to remain within an environment that is usually more inclusive with smaller classes and supportive pedagogies (Busher and James, 2019; Avis and Orr, 2016). Compared to universities, FE Colleges generally enrol more mature students and young people from disadvantaged or first-generation backgrounds (Young *et al.*, 2020; Bathmaker, 2015).

However, while HE in FE provides the opportunity for local Higher Education, outcomes are significantly different between universities and FE colleges. Degrees from the most selective universities in England show the highest returns in terms of employability and salary (Social Mobility Commission, 2023), with returns declining as selectivity decreases (Social Mobility Commission, 2023). Universities UK (2024) found that the likelihood of being in sustained employment five years after graduation was similar between university and HE in FE graduates, but salary outcomes differed significantly. Median earnings for university graduates were over £29,000 compared to £21,000 for HE in FE graduates, and the gap increased to almost £10,000 at ten years after graduation (Universities UK, 2024).

It is also important to note that even before the location of a university is considered, disadvantaged young people in rural areas have lower attainment at Level 2 (GCSE) than those in urban areas (Graham, 2024). This is relevant as attainment, discussed in Section 3.6.2, can impact progression into HE (Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2015) and possibly into DAs.

Around the time that the primary research took place, a report was published by the Higher Education Commission (2019) that found that young people in Norfolk would have to travel an average of 80 miles to a DA vacancy compared to less than ten miles for young people in London. The report recognised that there were also significant logistical challenges for young people in rural areas, as a lack of sufficient public transport infrastructure and poor quality roads, meant that the distances could act as a significant barrier to DAs. Unfortunately, this research was not repeated so more recent data is not available, but it is probable that DA opportunities are unlikely to be spread evenly across the country (Quew-Jones, 2023).

Given that this study examines the potential for DAs to widen participation in HE, the constraining role of geography is highly relevant, particularly as the research took place in a rural area. There are five universities within the East of England (including the counties of Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk, and Suffolk) and there is a network of FE Colleges that deliver HE. However, parts of the region are characterised, as noted by the Higher Education Commission (2019), by inadequate public transport links and poor quality roads. The research took place before the significant development in online teaching that happened following the COVID pandemic, which meant the apprentices within my research were only able to enrol onto the DA programme because they were able to physically access campus-based teaching.

3.6.6 Gender

An important aspect of widening participation in Higher Education (HE) relates to gendered inequalities. Although gender is not usually considered to be a widening participation

characteristic, it becomes relevant when considered alongside other under-represented characteristics (e.g. white working-class boys, as discussed in Section 3.6.2); or in relation to subject choice and future earnings potential (UK Parliament, 2023). Patterns of participation continue to reveal persistent differences based on gender, which are also reflected within Degree Apprenticeships (DAs).

In the academic year of 2024/25, UCAS reported that 55 per cent of HE entrants in England were female (UCAS, 2024). Comparable figures for Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (HDAs) shows that 56 per cent of starts were female, up marginally from 55 per cent in 2020/21 (Gov.uk, 2025b); which means the overall gender balance in participation is similar across both routes.

However, UCAS subject-level data highlights more pronounced gender differences (UCAS, 2025). In 2024/25, 80 per cent of accepted applicants to ‘subjects allied to medicine’, including Nursing, Physiotherapy, Counselling, and other allied professions; were female. In contrast, 20 per cent of accepted applicants onto Engineering programmes and 19 per cent onto Computing programmes, were female. Education and Teaching was a highly gender-skewed subject group, with 89 per cent of accepted applicants being female.

When considering HDAs, *Table 8* (Gov.uk, 2025b) shows that Business and Administration was the largest sector of those listed for apprenticeship starts in 2024/25, and *Table 9* (Gov.uk, 2025b) indicates that 61 per cent of those starts were female. Although this is significantly higher than the male starts, it reflects the gender split across all listed sectors, where female apprentices accounted for 60 per cent of starts, as demonstrated in *Table 9* (Gov.uk, 2025b). However, sectoral patterns also align with those observed in HE more widely. *Table 9* (Gov.uk, 2025b) shows that female apprentices are disproportionally represented in Education and Early Years, Care Services, and Health and Sciences, whereas male apprentices are more likely to be found in Engineering and Manufacturing, and Digital.

Table 8: Number of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship starts (Levels 4-6) in 2024/25 by sector and split by gender

	Female	Male	Total
Business and Administration	17,810	11,570	29,380
Care Services	12,820	4,390	17,210
Digital	6,460	10,500	16,950
Education and Early Years	5,240	1,140	6,390
Engineering and Manufacturing	700	2,980	3,670
Health and Science	9,590	3,240	12,820
Legal, Finance and Accounting	2,280	2,640	4,920
Total	54,900	36,460	91,360

Source: Table adapted from data available at Gov.uk (2025b). Sectors selected for relevance, full list of sectors available from source.

Table 9: Proportion of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship starts (Levels 4-6) by sector, split by gender

	Female	Male	Total Number
Business and Administration	61%	39%	29,380
Care Services	75%	25%	17,210
Digital	38%	62%	16,950
Education and Early Years	82%	18%	6,390
Engineering and Manufacturing	19%	81%	3,670
Health and Science	75%	25%	12,820
Legal, Finance and Accounting	46%	54%	4,920
Total	60%	40%	91,360

Source: Table adapted from data available at Gov.uk (2025b). Sectors selected for relevance, full list of sectors available from source.

These data demonstrate a continuation of long-standing trends in HE and school-based vocational education, where female learners are more likely to study within service-sectors where the pay and future opportunities are lower than the male-dominated fields of Engineering and IT (Fuller and Unwin, 2020; Atkins and Flint, 2015; Fuller *et al.*, 2005). Informal influences of family and friends have a significant impact on the choices of young people particularly in vocational education, such that a sense of choosing to enter an ‘atypical’ role can be seen as negative or socially risky for young people (Robinson, 2025; Curran and Tarabini, 2022; Atkins and Flint, 2015; Fuller *et al.*, 2005).

Analysis of the Individualised Learner Records (ILRs) for apprentices in 2008/9 by Gambin and Hogarth (2016), found that learners from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) background, those with learning difficulties or disabilities, and those with lower prior attainment, comprised a greater proportion of apprenticeship non-completers. Gendered patterns also emerged: apprentices completing Level 2 were disproportionately female, and Level 3 completers were disproportionately male, which meant young males were achieving higher level skills via apprenticeships than females (Gambin and Hogarth, 2016; Fuller *et al.*, 2005).

In theory, DAs could be a good opportunity to bring girls into STEM, or to increase participation of white working-class boys in HE. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, if DAs are used predominately to upskill existing employees (Emms and Laczik, 2025; Gambin and Hogarth, 2016), they are unlikely to disrupt gendered vocational patterns. Instead, widening participation in relation to gender would only be improved by apprentices making different choices when seeking employment, sometime before the DA becomes an option for them; indeed, something the research findings concord with.

The most significant opportunity for addressing gender inequalities through DAs may be in encouraging female school students to apply for roles in traditionally male roles, where DAs may be an opportunity for further skill development. Similarly, females looking for employment following periods spent in childcare could consider roles where DAs will be possible, as female full-time mature students often face considerable barriers to accessing full-time degree programmes due to family commitments and responsibilities (Stone, 2023; O'Shea and Stone, 2011). This is discussed in more detail in the following section.

3.6.7 Mature Students

Understanding the participation of mature students in Higher Education (HE) is essential for analysing widening access and the evolving landscape of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) given that DA starts are more likely to be mature than 'young', as shown in *Table 5* (Ggov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.5.4). The characteristic of 'mature' was included within widening participation (WP) targets and activity as a means of reaching a 50 per cent HE participation rate as outlined in Section 2.3.8, but the barriers to HE are distinctly different for mature students compared to younger students. Apprenticeship data shows that the majority of apprenticeship starts would be considered to be mature students, which means their barriers and experiences are relevant when exploring the extent to which DAs can increase access to HE.

The gender distribution of mature students in Higher Education (HE) has changed slightly over the past decade, but the majority of mature students continues to be female. In 2016, 62 per

cent of mature entrants (defined as age 21 or over at entry) were female, reducing to 57 per cent by 2024 (UCAS, 2025). The expansion of HE in 1992 combined with the growth of HE delivered within Further Education (FE) Colleges, led to a significant increase in mature HE participation during the 1990s and 2000s (House of Commons Library, 2021a). Encouraging mature participation was an important part of widening participation policy in the early 21st century (Mallman and Lee, 2014). However, the profile of mature students is changing. Numbers of ‘younger’ mature students (aged 21–24) are growing, while those aged 25 and over are declining, and mature students now represent a decreasing proportion of full-time HE students in England (House of Commons Library, 2021a).

However, defining mature students simply as those aged 21 or over ignores significant diversity within the group. Differences relating to family commitments, employment status, prior education and training, ethnicity, and financial circumstances, means that mature students cannot be treated as a homogeneous group, nor assumed to experience HE in similar ways (O’Shea and Stone, 2011). Women have historically made up the majority of mature students, often entering HE to gain or change careers following periods spent raising children (Stone, 2023; Busher and James, 2019; Lukacs, 2018), and the desire to be identified as someone other than a wife and mother (Stone, 2023). However, as Bandura (1994) acknowledged, only those with a strong sense of self-efficacy would be able to manage conflicting demands of family, work, and study, particularly as domestic workloads continue to fall disproportionately on women.

Returning to learning requires a wide range of factors to be perceived as being manageable alongside studies. Initially, deciding to stop or reduce employment in order to study (Busher and James, 2019), mature students often experience anxiety about whether they will ‘fit in’ or be able to connect with the wider student community (Reay, 2002). Some have even been seen to modify their classroom behaviour to better reflect the practices of younger students (Mallman and Lee, 2014). Female mature students often have significant external commitments, particularly caring responsibilities (O’Shea and Stone, 2011) and may encounter institutional barriers such as course structures or timetabling that conflict with childcare arrangements (Stone, 2023; O’Shea and Stone, 2011).

Mature and other under-represented students have also historically been more likely to study HE in FE Colleges rather than traditional universities (HEFCE, 2016a). In 2024/25, just four per cent of HE enrolments were based in FE Colleges, although data showing how this may have changed compared to previous years, has not been found.

Research by Beck (1992) found that conflict within the family between expectations of equality between men and women can ultimately affect the choices open to, and consequently the potential of, women. This means that the decisions made by prospective mature students are often much more localised and individualised within the family (White, 2023; Busher and James, 2019; Mallman and Lee, 2014), rather than being based on the internalised habitus, a sense of one's place (Bourdieu, 1986), formed at age 18. Local accessibility is therefore crucial, as discussed in Section 3.6.5. If their closest university has high entry requirements, the opportunity for progression to HE could be significantly reduced for mature students, compared to if they were living close to a less selective university or HE in FE (White, 2023; Reay, Ball and David, 2002). The importance of local provision for apprenticeships emerged strongly within the findings of this research.

Subject choice also reveals gendered patterns within the mature student population. As discussed in Section 3.6.6, female students are over-represented in traditionally female-oriented fields such as Nursing, other health-related professions, and childhood studies, while male students are more likely to study Computing and Engineering (UCAS, 2025). These subject trends for young students are replicated in mature students (UCAS, 2025). Social Work students are more likely to be mature and female (Corten *et al.*, 2025), and mature students are particularly valued in health-related courses as they usually apply with relevant experience and a commitment to working post-graduation within the NHS in their region (White, 2023). Declining numbers of mature students is a serious concern for health programmes and NHS workforce planning (White, 2023).

Despite these barriers, HE can be transformational for mature students, particularly female mature students, who have been found in studies to express a clear sense that HE increases their independence, emotional and financial wellbeing, and can make them a role model for their children (O'Shea and Stone, 2011; Reay, Ball and David, 2002). Gendered expectations surrounding study, work, and family roles emerged as a significant theme in my findings, particularly when considering the choices available to apprentices and the views of their partners and family regarding HE participation.

3.7 Factors Relating to Success of Under-Represented Groups in Higher Education

3.7.1 Attainment from Vocational Level 3 Qualifications

Section 3.6.2 outlined disparities in academic attainment at school and Section 3.6.4 considered progression to Higher Education (HE) from vocational qualifications. Disparities in

outcomes continue into HE for those progressing with vocational Level 3 qualifications compared to academic qualifications. Research by the Office for Students (2022) shows differences in the proportion of students achieving a First or 2:1 in HE based on their entry qualifications, as demonstrated in *Table 10* (Office for Students, 2022). This data shows that 78 per cent of those entering HE with the highest BTEC grades (D*D*D*) achieved a First or 2:1, compared with 98 per cent of students entering with A*A*A* at A Level. The achievement level of the highest BTEC scores (78%) is also lower than for A Level students entering university with DDD (79%). Students entering with mixed profiles of A Levels and BTECs achieved Firsts or 2:1s at rates between 75 and 82 per cent, suggesting that undertaking a vocational qualification reduces the likelihood of students doing well, even when they are still taking one or two A Levels.

Table 10: Higher Education achievement rate by entry qualification and grade, 2019-20 graduates

Tariff Point Equivalent¹⁰	A Level Qualifications on Entry	Proportion gaining a 1st or 2:1	BTEC Qualifications on Entry	Proportion gaining a 1st or 2:1
168	N/A	-	D*D*D*	78%
160	A*A*A*	98%	D*D*D	72%
152	A*AA	96%	D*DD	70%
144	AAA	96%	DDD	69%
136	AAB	95%	No equivalent	-
128	ABB	93%	DDM	64%
120	BBB	93%	No equivalent	-
112	BBC	91%	DMM	63%
104	BCC	89%	No equivalent	-
96	CCC	87%	MMM	59%
88	CCD	84%	No equivalent	-
80	CDD	82%	MMP	59%
72	DDD	79%	No equivalent	-

Source: Produced by author using data available from Office for Students (2022). Note that numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Table 10 (Office for Students, 2022) indicates that students entering HE with vocational qualifications achieve less favourable outcomes than those entering with academic qualifications. This is particularly relevant to DAs because apprentices may be more likely than full-time students to enter HE through vocational routes.

¹⁰ The Office for Students data was presented based on grades for each qualification without the tariff points included. Tariff points are provided here to show A Levels and BTECs are considered to be equivalent to one another within the points system.

However, it is important to note that the choice to study A Levels versus BTECs can be influenced by a range of factors (Francis-Devine *et al.*, 2025; Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2015; Conlon, 2006). Level 2 and 3 subject choice and attainment can be affected by geographical location, the social class of parents, the interest and engagement of parents in education (Conlon, 2006), and economic factors (Richards, 2016). These factors may also explain some of the disparities in degree outcomes between students with A Levels compared to BTECs, as seen in *Table 10* (Office for Students, 2022), which means it is important not to assume that vocational qualifications alone are the reason for students to have lower HE outcomes. However, these disparities raise essential questions about the support provided for students with vocational qualifications as they enter, and progress through, HE.

These issues are highly relevant to this research. DAs are a new progression route that may increase the proportion of university entrants holding vocational qualifications. This raises important questions about the academic readiness of apprentices entering HE and the types of support they may require to succeed. This theme was important within my primary research, particularly in recognising that the neoliberal pressures on universities to maintain strong performance metrics may lead to pressure to ensure all apprentices pass their programmes.

3.7.2 The Classroom Experience

A useful example of Bernstein's observation that the classroom experience is affected by recognition of the rules, is Mallman and Lee's (2014) study of mature students in Higher Education (HE). Their research found that the experience of mature students was heavily influenced by the classroom environment. They found that first year mature students were expected by their institutions and younger students, to be able to 'hit the ground running' simply due to their age. Such assumptions raise important questions about how prepared universities are to offer appropriate academic support to mature students when unconscious expectations perceive them to be self-sufficient learners. These expectations may also place mature students at a disadvantage, particularly if they find the pedagogical environment to be strange following their absence from education (Katarzi and Hayward, 2020; Bernstein, 2000). I would contend that this could create a weak sense of self-efficacy, but also, as observed by Mallman and Lee (2014), lead them to attempt to understand the HE expectations, or even the 'implied student' (Ulriksen, 2009), by observing younger students.

The mature students in Mallman and Lee's study (2014), quickly learned to hide their enthusiasm for learning as it was not supported by younger students. Mature students felt 'sanctioned' by snide comments or looks, as the learning community stepped in to demonstrate acceptable behaviours. Mature students were found to modify their behaviours in order to fit

the established classroom culture. In this way, younger students set the tone of the pedagogical environment

Section 3.6.4 introduced the differences in progression to Higher Education (HE) from vocational qualifications compared to academic qualifications, and the outcomes for students at the end of university. The fact that students with vocational qualifications are less likely to complete their degree compared to those with A Level qualifications (Patrignani, *et al.*, 2019), means that 'widening participation' cannot only focus on access to HE but must also support progression through HE (Katarzi and Hayward, 2020a). This has been a continued focus by government via the Access and Participation Plan guidance for universities from the Office for Students (2023a; 2023c), but Bernstein (2000) and others (Katarzi and Hayward, 2020) argue that the pedagogical experience is key in perpetuating inequalities in education.

At the time of my research, it was common practice for apprentices to be taught alongside full-time students, although this has since been identified as a problematic method of delivery (Lester, 2020). However, apprentices are still likely to encounter full-time students within the learning environment. This is significant given the discussion in Section 3.4.2 about working-class students in HE often focussing on survival because their professional possible self was not strong enough to lead them to embrace wider opportunities in HE more fully (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Apprentices could be assumed to be at a disadvantage within the HE environment for a range of reasons. Their encounters with full-time students could make them feel different to the implied student; and they may have a weak sense of self-efficacy in relation to the pedagogical environment, particularly if they have been out of education for some years (Katarzi and Hayward, 2020; Webb *et al.*, 2017b; Bernstein, 2000). They may also find HE to be a predominately middle-class world with confusing organisational cultures to navigate (Crozier *et al.*, 2008).

Learning in HE typically takes place as a social experience, where learners are participants within the learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). For apprentices, however, this learning occurs across two distinct communities: the workplace, where their membership is based around their occupation and employer; and the university, where they may study alongside full-time students and apprentices from other employers. These communities can be experienced as distinctly different, with contrasting norms, expectations, and behaviours, and therefore with different learning experiences. The classroom experience and learning alongside full-time students was a significant theme that emerged within my research findings.

While apprentices in my study were often taught alongside full-time students, their response to the norms exhibited by full-time students was different to the patterns identified by Mallman and

Lee (2014). The findings are discussed in detail in Chapters 6 and 7, but while the apprentices were all mature students, and viewed the younger students as behaving differently to them, they did not modify their behaviour. The apprentices had strong professional identities, and while their behaviour sometimes clashed with the full-time students, they had no interest in modifying their behaviour in order to fit in.

Apprentices, as mature students more broadly, may exhibit greater enthusiasm and commitment to their learning than younger students (Mallman and Lee, 2014), but it is important to recognise that apprentices are likely to be learning differently to full-time students (Quew-Jones, 2019).

3.7.3 The Learning Experience

Billett (2016) observed that apprenticeship learning differs fundamentally to traditional forms of learning, operating across three interrelated themes. The first, the practice curriculum, involves apprentices acquiring occupational knowledge through participation in workplace tasks. Learning typically progresses from low-risk to highly-skilled activities as the apprenticeship advances, reflecting the increasing potential cost of errors in professional roles. As apprentices will have actively chosen their occupation, their learning experiences are often positive, supporting stronger self-efficacy and a greater willingness to persist despite mistakes (Geitz *et al.*, 2016).

The second theme, practice pedagogies (Billett, 2016: 621), again takes place in the workplace, but is based within the range of learning opportunities that are supported through coaching and instruction. The success of this type of learning relies on the engagement of apprentices with these experiences and is more closely related to the style of learning within vocational qualifications than A Levels.

The third and most significant theme, personal epistemologies (Billett, 2016: 622), requires apprentices to actively engage with learning. Apprentices must be ready for the relevant level of study and be willing to participate intentionally in the learning experience. This requires the learners to have strong self-efficacy as the experience of learning may be different from previous experiences (Geitz *et al.*, 2016). However, engaging with learning and the acquisition of knowledge, particularly within a professional context could, according to Cruess *et al.* (2015) play an important role in the continued development of a professional identity.

The applied nature of learning within the apprenticeship model would indicate a high potential for success, but employer size and engagement can significantly influence outcomes (James Reilly and Laczik, 2021; Bishop, 2017). Both practice curriculum and practice pedagogies

depend on employer involvement, requiring the provision of positive workplace experiences and learning, something which could vary based on employer size. My research identified that apprentices in smaller organisations may experience more limited opportunities, illustrating another dimension of the limited control that apprentices have over their own learning (see Section 3.4.5).

The teaching and learning approaches of the university course is therefore potentially important in the success of apprenticeships. Ulriksen *et al.* (2016) found that full-time students felt most engaged when learning is problem-based with real-world examples relevant to their learning, an approach which mirrors the expectations of apprenticeships. Conversely, the higher dropout rates among vocational learners in Higher Education (HE) (Patrignani *et al.*, 2019) has been suggested as being related to the 'transitional friction' that learners can feel if they do not have a strong sense of belonging due to the pedagogical differences between HE and previous learning experiences (Katarzi and Hayward, 2020).

Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on learning identity consider learning to be most successful when it takes place within a learning curriculum rather than a teaching curriculum. They describe this as the difference between a more participative experience compared to an instructive one. They also highlight that success and belonging comes through learning the language of the profession (Bernstein, 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991). In these respects, apprentices may be advantaged compared with full-time students as they can reflect on their learning via their occupational experiences, while also already being proficient in their professional language. However, university pedagogies have historically been developed for a traditional academic market (Carter, 2009; Bernstein, 2000). This means that the disconnect between vocational experience and qualifications, and an HE based on students progressing directly from academic (e.g. A Level) qualifications, could lead to the pedagogical confusion and sense of uncertainty described by Bernstein (2000). Given that the neoliberalisation of HE (see Chapter 2), has led to universities becoming, I would argue, more open to income diversification, the 'problem' of universities privileging academic pathways, seems to be one that must be prioritised. The norms and language of HE have the potential to continue to exclude many.

This discussion links closely to Ulriksen's (2009) concept of the 'implied student', defined by the curriculum, culture, and framework of a university. The characteristics expected of the implied student may include assumptions relating to their willingness to undertake additional research, classroom behaviour, or levels of intelligence (Ulriksen, 2009; Bernstein, 2000). Students also have their own sense of the implied student, which includes the expectations

they set themselves in terms of discipline, interest in studies, and social interactions. This impacts their sense of belonging but also the prism through which they see, and judge, their fellow students (Ulriksen, 2009). Conflict or annoyance can result from different perceptions of the implied student, or where the expectations of the implied student are not met, thereby creating frustrations for both students and academic staff. However, the implied student model seems to expect homogeneity of the student population, yet the very nature of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) means that participants will be distinctly different from the full-time population. This may lead to the apprentice and student conflict that was identified within my findings.

Katarzi and Hayward's (2019) research with students from a vocational background studying Nursing, Business, and Computing/IT, areas also represented in my study, found that students had concerns about their vocational experiences compared to students taking a more traditional route to HE via A Levels. They were also concerned that their experience in the workplace was not valued in HE, that students from an academic route had better knowledge of the course, and that their age meant that they were less academically able than younger students. They also identified challenges associated with independent learning, exam-based assessment (as opposed to workplace or assignment-based assessments), and studying aspects of a subject not normally included at a vocational level (e.g. mathematics within Computing). These themes were explored within my findings.

The inclusion of Nursing in Katarzi and Hayward's (2019) study is particularly interesting, given that Nursing is a degree programme that has been offered in universities for many years. The programme is based on professional standards and a prescribed curriculum. It could be assumed that the programme content of the DA in Nursing, and similar programmes, would mirror that of the full-time programme. However, Baker (2019) highlights that disparities in expectations and programme content can be problematic, particularly if apprentices perceive differential treatment in assessments (McArthur, 2020). The difference between full-time and apprenticeship routes may, however, lie less in the content and more in the application of learning. The applied nature of apprenticeship learning should lead to high levels of success for apprentices (Duckworth and Ade-Ojo, 2016), but this also creates the potential for learning to be institutionalised rather than applicable across a wider sector or industry (Smith *et al.*, 2021). The perceptions of parity between full-time and apprenticeship pathways were a key concern for both Nursing and Social Work apprentices in my research.

3.8 The Role of Employers in Apprenticeships

3.8.1 Recruiting Apprentices

Apprenticeships and vocational education have historically been considered to be of lesser value than full-time university education (Gambin and Hogarth, 2017), but this has been changing in recent years as large employers such as BT, KPMG, and PwC, introduced school-leaver programmes similar to Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) (Lee, 2012).

The introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy has provided an incentive for large employers to offer apprenticeships, coupled with the chance for young people concerned about funding university to access to free Higher Education (HE). This led to the government viewing DAs as having a role in widening participation to HE (Powell and Walsh, 2018). However, the potential for DAs to increase access to HE requires employers to actively use them in this way, considering this in their recruitment for new apprentices rather than treating DAs as an opportunity to upskill existing employees (Emms and Laczik, 2025; Jones, Christie and Brophy, 2022; Taylor-Smith *et al.*, 2019). For those employers who chose to upskill existing employees, it is possible that apprentices may be from under-represented groups, but places on the programmes are ultimately based on being in the right place at the right time and being encouraged by the employer to accept the opportunity (Jones, Christie and Brophy, 2022).

While employers benefit from levy-funded training, they remain responsible for the salary costs of apprentices throughout the programme. The significant investment means that social mobility is unlikely to be a consideration within recruitment decisions, as employers are likely to be focused on recruiting apprentices who will represent the greatest return-on-investment (Smith *et al.*, 2021a; Rowe *et al.*, 2017; Baker, 2019). Historic research on Modern Apprenticeships found that employers were more concerned with recruiting the right people to their roles, without any thought to specific characteristics or the potential for recruitment to either sustain or challenge gendered stereotypes (Fuller *et al.*, 2005). Many were unwilling to employ new apprentices directly from school or college due to their limited experience of the workplace (Spielhofer and Sims, 2004). The result was that employers often used apprenticeships to upskill existing staff or only offered apprenticeship positions to new staff who were older, thereby reducing opportunities for young entrants.

More recent studies of DAs have found that while employers recognise that DAs represent a chance to diversify their workforce, this was often a minor consideration compared to their need for skill development (Emms and Luczik, 2025). This indicates that, while DAs have potential to widen participation, this depends on employer intent. This is particularly important when

considering the limit that employers could have on the potential for social mobility through DAs (Jones, Christie and Brophy, 2022).

Government data on the socio-economic background of apprentices remains limited, and employers are unlikely to share such information given that apprentices are employees (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020). However, the available research indicates that many apprentices are not new labour-market entrants. In Smith *et al.*'s (2021) small-scale study of Scottish Degree Apprenticeships, only 12 per cent of the 69 apprentices sampled came from the most deprived Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) quintile, and 60 per cent were already employed by their organisation prior to starting the apprenticeship. This aligns with findings by Gambin and Hogarth (2017), who reported that between 2005/06 and 2015/16, 64 per cent of young apprentices and 91 per cent of those aged 25 and over had been existing employees. More recent data from the National Apprenticeships Survey (2023) presented in *Table 11* (Gov.uk, 2024a), demonstrates that most Higher and Degree Apprentices were already employed by their organisation before beginning the apprenticeship. This suggests that apprenticeships predominately function as progression opportunities for existing employees rather than new entrants to the labour market. Together, these studies raise important questions about whether DAs are 'new' opportunities for young school and college leavers, or whether they predominantly serve existing employees. This is a key question when considering the potential of DAs to widen participation to HE (Emms and Laczik, 2025).

Table 11: Proportion of apprentices who were working for their employer prior to starting their apprenticeship

Did you work for your employer before starting your apprenticeship?	Degree Apprentice	Age (apprenticeship population)		
		Under 19	19-24	25+
Yes	51%	25%	37%	79%
No	49%	75%	63%	21%

Source: Gov.uk (2024a). Data includes all apprentices who were on an apprenticeship on 1 January 2023.

National statistical releases about apprenticeships does not generally cover the employment status of apprentices prior to their start, this is only released within the National Apprenticeship Survey and is based on self-reporting. However, national data includes the age of apprenticeship starts. In 2022/23, 33 per cent of all apprenticeship starters across all levels were under 19 (Gov.uk, 2024b). However, among Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (HDAs) in 2023/24, *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.5.4) shows that only 6 per cent of starts were under 19, and 69 per cent were aged 25 or older (Gov.uk, 2024b). These figures indicate that

apprenticeships mainly function as an upskilling route for existing employees, and that they are therefore not being accessed by those progressing directly from school or college.

In the early phases of their development, employers viewed DAs primarily as an opportunity to retain and upskill existing staff (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019; Antcliff *et al.*, 2016). *Table 3* (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020; Section 2.4.4) illustrates this trend: two of the most popular DAs for starts in 2018/19 were at Level 7, which is Master's level study and not available to school or college leavers. The Level 7 Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeship, which has the Master's in Business Administration (MBA) as the underlying degree, has attracted criticism for using public funds to subsidise management qualifications that employers or individuals would otherwise have financed privately (BBC, 2020; Cullinane and Doherty, 2020).

From 2026, funding for Level 7 Apprenticeships will largely be withdrawn, with opportunities only available within a small number of Standards for under-22s or those with an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) up to age 25 (Gov.uk, 2025). This policy shift reflects ongoing debates about the intended purpose of apprenticeships and reinforces questions about their role in widening access to HE.

3.8.2 Supporting Apprentices

Employers play a central role in supporting apprenticeship learning, particularly by providing mentors or coaches who help apprentices apply academic knowledge to the workplace (Roberts, Storm and Flynn, 2019; Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019; Rowe *et al.*, 2017). This is not unique to Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), as it was required within the Modern Apprenticeships previously available. However, in a systematic review of literature relating to Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) within the NHS, Baker (2016) criticised the focus on skills-based learning rather than deeper academic learning. He found that MAs were being used mainly to accredit skills rather than to develop knowledge.

As highlighted in Section 3.7.3, direct engagement with practice is key to successful apprenticeship learning (Jones *et al.*, 2022; Billett, 2016), but this requires employers to be involved in the development and delivery of learning. This could be difficult given the conflicting pedagogies between vocational employer-based learning and university learning (Rowe *et al.*, 2017).

Employer size can also impact the level of engagement and support that employers can offer to apprenticeship learning (James Reilly and Laczik, 2021; Bishop, 2017). Smaller organisations are more likely to need their university partner to provide subject-specialist

support for apprentices (Ross and Riley, 2018), and they may also have fewer projects or opportunities to support apprenticeship learning than large organisations, leading apprentices to feel less engaged with their learning and less able to apply academic content to their everyday practice (James Reilly and Laczik, 2021). Apprentices in smaller organisations may also feel that progression opportunities are more limited, as it is harder for them to be seen, post-apprenticeship, as anything other than an ‘apprentice’ (Jones *et al.*, 2022).

A commitment to providing a positive experience within the apprenticeship programme is important to the success of the programme (Jones, Christie and Brophy, 2022), including varying workloads and recognising that apprentices will have periods where they cannot carry out a full-time job (Jones, Christie and Brophy, 2022; Lester and Bravenboer, 2020). However, research has found that apprentices are sometimes unaware of who their workplace mentor is (Smith *et al.*, 2020), and my findings indicate that frequent changes in managers over different placement periods, can be disruptive.

A growing body of literature recognises the importance of strong collaborative relationships between universities and employers in the success of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) (see for example: Garnett and Reynier, 2025; Knight and Hill, 2025; James Reilly and Laczik, 2021; Lester and Bravenboer, 2020). The experience of working in these types of partnerships is explored in detail within my findings.

3.8.3 Reflecting on the Role of Employers

There is a limited range of literature relating to the role of employers in Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), as noted by Jones, Christie and Brophy (2022). Given the important role that employers play in both recruitment to, and success of, DA programmes, the body of literature is likely to grow, and this research has an important role in adding to it. The inclusion of employers within this research was for two main reasons. It was important to engage with the literature discussed in Section 3.8.1 and 3.8.2 about employers’ role in Modern Apprenticeships and how their early engagement with DAs had developed, but also to consider how their role as partners in education affect both access and success for under-represented groups. Degree Apprenticeships have the potential to increase access to Higher Education (HE) if employers engage with them in that way (Emms and Laczik, 2025; Jones, Christie and Brophy, 2022; Taylor-Smith *et al.*, 2019), and it is therefore important to consider the reasons for employers’ engagement in DAs and what they hope to achieve for their workforce. This was a theme covered within the primary research.

The employers' role in the success of apprenticeships is also a key part of considering whether under-represented groups accessing HE through DAs are able to succeed in their HE. The relationship between employers and university staff is likely to be of significant importance in the quality of the programme delivered to apprentices, and the research raised important questions about how pressures in that relationship can affect the whole apprenticeship experience, particularly in relation to the impact on academic staff's self-efficacy. However, it is also important to consider Bernstein's pedagogic discourse and pedagogic device in relation to the role that employers play in training and instruction. Employers have a role in delivering occupation-specific training within the DA, but this training could conflict with the academic delivery from the university, thus creating weak framing and the potential for apprentices to disengage with learning. They also play a role in determining how to teach their occupation-specific content, the language they use, and the level of importance they place on the university's contribution to teaching versus their own. An employer who considers their practice-based experience to be of greater relevance to the occupation than an academic's knowledge, could undermine the pedagogical experience of the university-based teaching.

As Jones, Christie and Brophy (2022) observed, employers play a key role in the success of 'getting in, getting on, and going further' in Degree Apprenticeships. Their research included the transition to DA graduate, while my research focussed more on the experience of the DA programme. However, it is clear that employers play an important role in DA access and success, and this is an area of the academic literature that is currently limited.

3.9 University Staff

3.9.1 Self-Efficacy for Academic Staff

There is limited discussion about teachers and academics within widening participation (WP) literature, except for their role in delivering information, advice, and guidance (IAG), WP outreach activities (Fuller and Unwin, 2021; Fuller et al., 2014; Carter, 2009; Fuller et al., 2006), or their role in perpetuating or challenging structural inequalities within pedagogical practice (Bernstein, 2000). Grint and Nixon (2015) describe highly skilled workers within a knowledge economy, such as education, as being allowed significant autonomy, discretion, and skill utilisation, but recognise that employee satisfaction declines as organisations increasingly focus on targets and performance metrics. This is particularly relevant given the neoliberalisation of HE throughout the sixty years leading up to the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), and the increased focus on competitiveness and performance. The development of DAs as a new form of Higher Education (HE), and the changes it brings to

academic autonomy, therefore brings the experience of teachers and academics more directly into focus.

The introduction of DAs into the portfolios of English universities has brought significant changes in regulation and inspection for universities, as outlined in Chapter 2. This raises questions about the impact of these changes for university staff, and how this affects the delivery of apprenticeship programmes (Martin *et al.*, 2020). This issue emerged unexpectedly within my primary research, where participants highlighted the significant impact of DAs on their professional roles.

Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is a useful lens for considering these issues. English universities typically have different academic entry requirements and can also be different in the level to which they rely on income from teaching versus research. Academic staff may already feel that their identity as an 'academic' is affected by the type of university they work in or the work they are required to do (Clegg, 2013), but also increasingly by the pressures from neoliberalism within the sector (Martin *et al.*, 2020; Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Olssen, 2016; Bernstein, 2000). These pressures on academic work and identities, means that Bandura's (1994) argument becomes especially relevant in considering the academic experience, particularly that a high sense of self-efficacy reduces feelings of stress and self-doubt, instead creating a feeling of being energised by challenge rather than being threatened by it.

Bandura (1994) also emphasises that stress arises not from specific conditions alone, but from a sense of control. Where those with a low sense of self-efficacy are faced with challenge, their biological response can be of significant stress, causing decreased immunity and acceleration of health problems. However, if experiencing the same stressors but within a high level of self-efficacy, the over-riding expectation is of being able to control the problem, reducing the psychological and biological impact of the stressor. His discussion of school settings illustrates this point:

"Teachers operate collectively within an interactive social system rather than as isolates... Schools in which the staff collectively judge themselves as powerless to get students to achieve academic success convey a group sense of academic futility that can pervade the entire life of the school. Schools in which staff members collectively judge themselves capable of promoting academic success imbue their schools with a positive atmosphere for development that promotes academic attainment regardless of whether they serve predominantly advantaged or disadvantaged students." (Bandura, 1994: 11)

This quote illustrates the importance of academic staff viewing themselves as being in a cohesive group with a high level of self-efficacy but also highlights the importance of control. While some academics already work within regulated programmes, such as Nursing or Social Work, with limited academic freedom over the curriculum, most others have a high degree of autonomy in what they teach (Martin *et al.*, 2020). DAs alter this landscape. Programmes must meet the requirements set out within Apprenticeship Standards, which limits academic freedom (Bravenboer, 2019; Welbourne, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). These constraints could lead to a sense of powerlessness (Martin *et al.*, 2020) and weakened self-efficacy, particularly for those who have previously experienced high levels of pedagogical autonomy. This concern was a key theme within my interviews.

3.9.2 The University Structure and Management of Apprenticeships

Universities in the UK are large and complex organisations, employing an average of 2,255 staff members in 2023/24 (HESA, 2025). As discussed in Chapter 2, the gradual neoliberalisation of the Higher Education (HE) sector has reshaped institutional priorities, which may affect the autonomy and self-efficacy of academic staff. It is also necessary, however, to consider how the university as an organisation, can affect the experience of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) and their potential to increase access to HE.

Bernstein (1975: 103) argues that teachers, or in this case, university academics, are “*socialised into strong subject loyalty*” through their social interaction with other subject staff, and insulation from staff outside their academic area. Competition between departments for resources or recognition can enhance that sense of identity, as does the verbalisation of grievances between departments or across the organisational hierarchy. Bernstein considers such dynamics to encourage “*gossip, intrigue and a conspiracy theory*” about, and across, the organisation. Bernstein’s observations are particularly interesting when used as a lens to consider that the management of a university could be seen to be culturally different from academic areas. All universities included in my research had centralised apprenticeship departments, staffed mainly by non-academic professionals, which were responsible for apprenticeship strategy and compliance. These departments were frequently perceived by academics as disconnected from the reality of the classroom.

There are a range of areas within apprenticeship delivery in which academics could be seen to have lost control or ownership over their courses. At the admissions stage, employers either nominate existing employees or select new recruits for apprenticeship places, retaining significant control over who enters the programme (Emms and Laczik, 2025; Bravenboer, 2019; Rowe, 2018). This may lead to the admission of learners without recent experience of

education, raising questions about the readiness and willingness of universities to alter their pedagogical approach to support those students to succeed (Katarzi and Hayward, 2019). Universities must also weigh pedagogical concerns against the risk of losing an apprenticeship contract by refusing to accept apprentices who are academically unqualified to start the course. While regulated programmes such as Nursing and Social Work are likely to maintain strict entry criteria, other pathways offer more flexibility. For example, apprentices in my research entered the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeships through a 2+2 model of the Nursing Associate Higher Apprenticeship at Level 5, followed by a two-year top-up to Level 6. The published entry requirements within the Nursing Associate Apprenticeship Standard are Level 2 qualifications (Health Education England, 2026), while the full-time Adult Nursing route within the universities in my research, requires Level 3 qualifications. As a result, universities may be expected to admit apprentices with minimal and insufficient educational experience, which is likely to have an impact on the level of support that apprentices need to succeed on the course (Hughes and Saieva, 2021; Lester, 2020).

Universities have had to work quickly to introduce apprenticeship programmes in order to be able to take advantage of the new market, however, they also must manage the potential risk of not winning a contract if their programme does not fit the preferences of their local employers (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019; Martin *et al.*, 2020). During the first decade of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), universities faced significant pressures to ensure that programmes were compliant with regulatory requirements and attractive to employers (Knight and Hill, 2025). There was always the risk that employer contracts could be lost from one year to the next, particularly if any aspect of the partnership or delivery were not suitable for employer partners (Powell and Walsh, 2018), thereby placing additional pressure onto academic teams.

For academic staff, the pressure on universities to maintain and win further employer contracts, means additional pressure is placed on them to ensure their university's success. In a study of academics involved in Business and Science/Technology DAs, Martin *et al.* (2020) found that they felt a lack of control in the content and quality of the programmes and were concerned that their academic reputation would be negatively affected by involvement in DAs. Academics questioned the depth and quality of apprenticeship programmes relative to full-time degrees, raising important questions about equivalency between the programmes, and the willingness of academics to continue to support them. This was also a theme that emerged in my interviews with academic staff.

Apprenticeships require additional assessment and administrative management compared to full-time programmes, both to ensure continued funding and to meet regulatory requirements

(Knight and Hill, 2025). McArthur (2020) challenges whether assessment regimes that lead to stress and overwork can be justified, yet, with Ofsted, such regimes have become a feature of apprenticeship compliance. Academics must manage the competing demands of institutional expectations, external regulatory scrutiny, and their own expectations of academic integrity and freedom.

McArthur (2020: 7) further argues that academics should:

“resist policy cultures that position higher education in narrow economic terms and assessments in a purely competitive skills-based agenda.”

This perspective aligns with findings from my primary research, as academics dealt with the conflicting demands of the institutional need to diversify income streams, versus their personal concerns about apprenticeships. Given the financial pressures facing the sector, including reduced fee income from full-time undergraduate programmes, academics have limited scope to challenge institutional priorities (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019; Martin *et al.*, 2020; Whitchurch and George, 2010).

Neoliberal pressures in HE means that there is significant pressure on academics and apprenticeship management teams to meet institutional needs relating to performativity and quality assurance (Martin *et al.*, 2020; Olssen and Peters, 2005). Universities have become more hierarchical, subject to frequent restructures, and increasingly driven by market demands (Powell and Walsh, 2018; Ball, 2016; Gallacher and Raffe, 2011). This environment places academics under heightened monitoring and management (Whitchurch and Gordon, 2010), particularly as the governmental focus, as discussed in Chapter 2, is increasingly based on graduate skills and employability (Powell and Walsh, 2018), with significant government scrutiny and oversight from the Office for Students.

Mahoney and Weiner (2019: 569) argue that university management practices are increasingly using technology to monitor and control academics, which they see to be a “*step in the Benthamite direction*,” drawing on Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon in which individuals never know when they are being observed. Even prior to the introduction of DAs, Mahoney and Weiner (2019) found that academics were experiencing an increasing loss of autonomy, control, and job security, with heightened level of scrutiny over their practices. The introduction of Ofsted inspections into the HE environment creates an additional layer of scrutiny, which is likely to add to the sense of surveillance experienced by academic staff (Knight and Hill, 2025; McArthur, 2020).

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the theoretical and conceptual foundations that underpin this research. It has explored theories relating to self-efficacy, identity, possible selves, pedagogical practice and experience, intersectionality, widening participation, apprenticeship learning, and the role and experience of university staff and employers in the delivery of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs).

Across the literature, progression to Higher Education (HE) emerges as a complex interaction between individual agency and structural restrictions and inequalities. Bandura's concept of self-efficacy highlights the importance of confidence and perceived capability in pursuing educational opportunities, while Bourdieu's habitus illustrates how social structures shape aspirations and expectations. Markus and Nurius' concept of possible selves provides a bridge between these perspectives by demonstrating how individuals imagine future identities. Building on this literature, the concept of probable selves is proposed as a means of understanding how internalised expectations can constrain educational aspirations and reinforce perceptions of what is realistically achievable.

An important theme within the literature is the significance of identity in widening participation, but also the role that a professional identity can play in increasing self-efficacy. Professional identity is not fixed, but develops through participation within communities of practice, social interaction, and engagement with workplace learning. The literature suggests that professional identity may act as a source of self-efficacy, resilience, and belonging, but may also be challenged by organisational structures and market-driven pressures.

The chapter has also highlighted the importance of the learning environment in supporting or constraining success in HE. Bernstein's work demonstrates how power relations are embedded within pedagogical practice, while Billet, Lave and Wenger, and Ulriksen emphasise the importance of participation, belonging and engagement within learning communities. These perspectives suggest that the experience of DAs may differ significantly from that of full-time students because learning takes place across both workplace and university settings.

The literature further demonstrates that inequalities in HE participation cannot be explained by aspiration alone. Instead, participation is shaped by the intersection of attainment, family economic circumstances, ethnicity, gender, geography, age, family experience, and access to information, advice and guidance. These factors operate simultaneously and reinforce the importance of considering widening participation through an intersectional lens.

Collectively, these theories provide the conceptual framework through which the experiences of apprentices, employers, and university staff are explored within this research. They offer a means of understanding how individuals negotiate constraints and opportunities through DAs, how professional identities are formed and maintained, and how wider structural and organisational forces shape HE participation and success. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to investigate these issues.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this research was to explore the experience of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). It aimed to determine what is known about DAs, building on the legislative background and extensive academic research in widening participation discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. I approached the research with the expectation that it should be used to inform future policy developments and practice relating to widening participation, vocational education, and student/apprentice experience. Given concerns about the speed of implementation of DAs, this study provides early insight into the experience for three stakeholder groups of apprentices, university staff, and employers.

This chapter begins by setting out my positionality within this research. It then outlines my methodological approach and continues into the overview of the research methods used, and a description of the research participants, before explaining the approach to data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations across the research, and how the data was collected.

4.1.1 Research Questions

This research is an exploratory study into the experience of apprentices, university staff and employers, in the development and delivery of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), to consider whether they can increase access to Higher Education (HE). The subsidiary questions were as follows:

SQ1: How do apprentices perceive their apprenticeship learning experience, particularly in relation to identity, learning, and their interactions with the university and peers?

SQ2: How does the experience of Degree Apprenticeships impact the professional identity of university staff?

SQ3: How does the involvement of employers and the regulatory landscape for apprenticeships, impact the experience of studying and delivering Degree Apprenticeships?

4.1.2 Positionality

In reflecting on my methodological approach, I had to balance my academic and professional research experiences. Academically, my strengths lie predominately in the social sciences. My undergraduate degree was in Sociology, although I also studied Psychology for two years and

was comfortable with the statistical analysis required within the programme. I later undertook a Master's in Business Administration (MBA). I conducted primary research using qualitative methods in both my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Professionally however, my role involves substantial quantitative data analysis to identify patterns and trends.

Section 1.2 outlined my background and the circumstances that led me to undertake this PhD. Ennser-Kananen (2020) proposes a set of reflective questions to support the development of a transparent positionality statement without including unnecessary detail. Following this approach, my positionality can be summarised through an outline of my research goals and relevant aspects of my background.

My goal as a researcher is to generate knowledge about the experiences of under-represented students in a relatively new type of Higher Education (HE). As briefly outlined in Section 1.2, this goal emerged from my experience of working in widening participation to HE, my knowledge and interest in legislative developments in HE, and involvement in the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) within a university. I had access to a research field based within universities with whom I had contact throughout the implementation of DAs, and this access was based on professional relationships with individuals in positions of authority.

Reflecting on positionality is an important part of the research design process, as researchers must recognise and take responsibility for the ways in which their experiences and knowledge might shape any or all aspects of the research (Raheim *et al.*, 2016, Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003). My knowledge and experience of HE and DAs meant I was both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in this research (Yip, 2023; Berger, 2015). Although my role within a university was based within the non-academic professional services, my close working relationship with academics on DA development made me an insider. I was able to speak their language, had shared experiences, and understood the HE sector. In relation to employers and apprentices however, I remained an outsider, but with significant subject knowledge.

My insider status facilitated access to the university staff who participated, as well as to apprentices, noting that this was approved by the University's Ethics Committee. My status also gave me the opportunity to seek appropriate employer contacts through professional networks within the regional HE sector. While I could be considered an outsider to some participants, the advantages of insider access made recruitment of participants straightforward (Berger, 2015).

Soedirgo and Glas (2020) encourage researchers to be reflexive about how research participants might perceive their positionality. They advise that this is done through a reflective and iterative process, involving colleagues where possible, and continuing throughout the

whole research experience. I did this through regular conversations with my Doctoral supervisors. I acknowledged that regardless of mitigations, perceived insider/outsider status and power differentials can shape interview dynamics (Martin, Desing, and Borrego, 2022; Berger, 2015). This is discussed in detail in Section 4.6.3.1.

I recognised that my own opinions and beliefs had the potential to influence the direction of the interviews (Berger, 2015), and I chose an interview technique designed to minimise this risk, which is discussed in detail in Section 4.3. However, I approached the research within a social constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges that the researcher and participant co-construct meaning. This is discussed further in Section 4.2.

My positionality was also important in my approach to data analysis (Berger, 2015). I adopted reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), a method that explicitly recognises the active role of the researcher in interpreting and constructing meaning and realities. This approach requires ongoing reflexivity throughout the analytic process. My reasons for selecting this method and the stages of this process are outlined in Section 4.5.

This research is likely to be of interest to academics, university apprenticeship staff, and policymakers concerned with widening participation, vocational education, and apprenticeships.

4.2 Methodological Position

My methodological position can be summarised as belonging within the interpretivist and social constructionist paradigm. I consider knowledge and realities to be created through interpretation and social interaction rather than based within objective measurable and empirical fact (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). My preference is to use qualitative methods to explore experience, while making use of quantitative methods for specific research purposes (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Robson, 2004).

This research aimed to explore the experience of delivering and studying Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), and I used a sequential mixed methods research design, where a survey was used to provide context about the apprenticeship population and to identify prospective interview participants. Narrative interviews enabled exploration of stories relating to apprenticeship experiences, which were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2022, 2006; Bryman, 2016; Cresswell, 2014).

The subsections below briefly set out the philosophical positioning of this research, and the practical implications for design, methods, and interpretation.

4.2.1 Ontology and Epistemology

My academic background in Sociology meant that I found Becker's (2019) discussion of the sociology of education helpful in positioning my research within this discipline. When reflecting on the types of questions that fall within the sociology of education, Becker (2019) included topics such as the relationship between education and inequality, social mobility, and the social mechanisms that reproduce social structures within education. Perhaps most relevant to my research, Becker (2019) highlights the issue of unequal access to Higher Education (HE) as being a key concern within the sociology of education.

There is no single preferred methodology or set of methods within the sociology of education (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Becker, 2019), instead research should be considered within broader philosophical assumptions that support social research. Coe *et al.* (2025) identifies four key components to be ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods.

Ontology refers to the philosophical question of what we know to exist. It can be conceptualised as a continuum ranging from realism to constructivism (Coe *et al.*, 2025; Clark *et al.*, 2021). The realist position is that there is a single objective reality, while constructivism assumes that realities are multiple and continually re-shaped through social interaction and interpretation (Coe *et al.*, 2025; Robson, 2024; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Within this research, I subscribed to a constructivist ontology. This was well-suited to exploring the experience of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), as it acknowledges that realities are shaped by many factors. In this case, by institutional policies, professional expectations and norms, and relationships between universities and employers.

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired (Patel, 2015). Epistemological positions similarly fall upon a continuum, from positivism, which corresponds to the realist ontology; to interpretivism, which corresponds to the constructivist ontology (Coe *et al.*, 2025; Clark *et al.*, 2021). Positivism assumes that knowledge can be learned and achieved through empirical observation and measurement, and it is both knowable and discoverable (Robson, 2024; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In contrast, interpretivism views knowledge as something that is developed through the interpretation of accounts or observations (Coe *et al.*, 2025; Clark *et al.*, 2021).

Within this research, I subscribe to the interpretivist epistemology. This aligns well with my constructivist ontology, and reflects my view that knowledge is created and understood through interpretation of experience, which subsequently fits within the explorative nature of this research.

Methodological approaches, or paradigms, bring together ontological and epistemological assumptions (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Paradigms can be based at either end of the ontological and epistemological continuum or sit between these extremes (Coe *et al.*, 2025). Paradigms are not mutually exclusive as overlaps can occur (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) identify positivism and post-positivism as significant epistemologies within educational research, which meant it was important that I carefully considered whether they were appropriate for my research. Positivism is closely associated with experimental approaches to social research (Robson, 2024; Clark *et al.*, 2021; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018), due to its emphasis on cause and effect, observation, predictability, and replicability (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

However, there are a range of criticisms of positivism, not least that it simplifies knowledge and social truths to observable and measurable facts, without considering the subjective role of social actors or researchers (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Critics argue that it does not allow for the subjective view of the researcher and considers human behaviour to be determined without any freedoms to act differently (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). While positivist approaches can be problematic within social science research, it can still be used alongside other approaches.

Post-positivism occupies the middle ground between positivism and interpretivism. Post-positivists believe that reality exists but acknowledge that it can be interpreted in multiple ways and influenced by multiple theories (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Post-positivists recognise that observation requires interpretation, and while there may be some knowable facts that emerge from that observation, there can also be multiple interpretations, all of which can be equally true (Robson, 2024). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) illustrate this through the example of two observers in the same classroom. The classroom is an objective reality, but what they observe may be different based on where they are sitting and their interpretation of what they see, which can be based on their social experiences and perspectives (Berger, 2015). In post-positivism, their differing realities can be equally true, but positivists would argue that the differing realities cannot both be true.

At the opposite end of the scale from positivism is interpretivism, which is closely related to constructivism. The interpretive paradigm considers human behaviour to be knowable through interpretation and subjectivity (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). While positivist researchers aim to generate a theory for human behaviour, interpretive researchers aim to explore behaviours and attitudes to generate understanding and insight (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006).

Within this research, I predominately subscribe to the interpretivist epistemology, although as outlined in Section 4.3, the mixed methods approach means part of the research is positivist rather than interpretivist. The interpretive paradigm views human behaviour as meaningful and believes it can be understood only through subjective interpretation (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). This applies well to an exploratory study, as the research aims to interpret the experiences and perceptions of the participants.

4.2.2 Considering the Scale of Positivism and Interpretivism

It is perhaps important at this point to recognise that there is also an argument that positivism and interpretivism do not have to exist in opposition to one another. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) argue that it is not possible for realist or positivist researchers to be completely objective, as they are inevitably influenced by their own social experiences, knowledge, and broader social and political contexts (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). They also recognise that there are a wide range of social truths and knowledge that have not been empirically tested but that are still known to be true, and that socially constructed findings can represent accurate realities (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Their view is that there is not the distinct and opposing difference between research paradigms as is often suggested, but that there instead must be an important recognition that researchers are part of a social world and research cannot be separated from that (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) also acknowledge that some research seeks to influence policy and practice, and that such goals may shape the selection of paradigms and methods. However, they argue that the aim of research should always be the production of knowledge and that political or practical interests should not influence research methodologies or findings (Robson, 2024; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). This was an important consideration within my research as this study aims to influence policy and practice. It was relevant in the research design stages to consider whether the priority of the study was to generate knowledge that could significantly influence policy and practice, and that possibly might require a positivist approach; or whether *exploration* should be the priority factor. I determined that the production

of knowledge through an exploration of experience was my primary research aim and the potential to influence policy and practice was a secondary aim. I therefore based the study, as outlined in Section 4.2.1, within the research paradigm that was most relevant to my academic values and to the research question.

Hammersley and Atkinson's (2019) discussion also raises important questions about the positionality of the researcher. Their suggestion that all researchers are influenced by their social experiences is supported by Enns-Kananen (2020), who observes that researchers tend to embark on research based on what they believe to exist. Whether knowledge is grounded in socially constructed understandings or positivist claims to objective fact, such beliefs inevitably determine the type of research that will be undertaken. This raises wider questions about researcher bias and the importance of reflexivity, topics discussed in Section 4.1.2, with Section 4.6.4 addressing reflexivity in ethical reporting. I would argue that bias is not inherently problematic, provided it is recognised and considered within the presentation of findings.

I am generally in agreement with Hammersley and Atkinson's (2019) perspective that there does not have to be a distinct separation between positivism and interpretivism, as I consider it impossible for a researcher to completely separate themselves from their social experiences (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Berger, 2015). However, my sociological background means that I consider socially constructed perspectives to be central to the creation of knowledge, leading me to place myself within the interpretivist paradigm. This led me to prioritise qualitative methods.

4.2.3 Qualitative Research Options

My research aimed to explore participants' experiences, which meant a range of qualitative methods were available. Within an interpretive paradigm, three qualitative approaches seemed particularly relevant to my research: phenomenology, interpretivism, or social constructionism.

Phenomenological research aims to explore and describe participants' lived experiences (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Jovanovic, 2021; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018), placing significant emphasis on the researcher engaging in deep reflective interpretation (Frechette *et al.*, 2020). This did not fit with my preference for the interpretation and construction of knowledge to be based within the interview, rather than predominately through post-interview reflective analysis.

Interpretivism similarly considers interpretation as central to the research process, but this sits with the participant, focusing on how participants make sense of their own world (William, 2024). Although this aligned with my interest in exploring experience, it again differed from my

preference for knowledge to be created through a collaborative process, something that aligns more clearly within social constructionism (William, 2024).

Social constructionism considers reality to be ever-changing, continuously created, and re-created based on the perspectives, experiences, interactions, and contexts of social actors, and that reality is created collaboratively by the researcher and participant (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Jovanovic, 2021; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). As an ontological position, social constructionism links to other perspectives such as intersectionality and feminist theory, both of which consider social characteristics to be linked and having influence on experience, action, and perspectives (Clark *et al.*, 2021), and both of which are also key in discussions relating to widening participation to HE.

I briefly considered, within social constructionism, the use of discourse analysis, which studies how participants articulate their experiences (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Jovanovic, 2021; Burck, 2005). Discourse analysis considers how discourse, power, and subjective truths weave together (Burck, 2005) and places significant emphasis on language and social discourse as a way of identifying meaning (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Similarly, narrative analysis considers how participants construct their accounts of experience, often taking a life story approach (Burck, 2005). While both discourse and narrative analysis were interesting approaches for exploring the experiences of the research participants, my preference was for meaning to be derived from the overall discussion and interpretation of realities, rather than the language or storylines used.

Overall, while there were a range of options within an interpretive approach to qualitative research, social constructionism fitted well to this research, as it allowed both the participant, and I as the researcher, to interpret and construct realities through the exploration of experience.

4.2.4 A Practical Approach to Research

Section 1.2 introduced my academic and professional background, and in considering my methodological position for this research, it was important for me to acknowledge that my professional role has historically required a highly practical approach to research. In professional contexts, I have typically undertaken research designed to answer specific questions arising from organisational needs, which has generally aligned with a realist paradigm. By contrast, my academic work during previous undergraduate and postgraduate studies has been situated ontologically and epistemologically within the interpretive and social constructionist paradigms.

The fact that I have moved between paradigms across my professional and academic roles meant that I initially approached this research from a very practical perspective. My instinct was simply to select the research methods most suited to answering my research questions. This practical approach to research could be viewed as consistent within the pragmatist methodology, which Robson (2024: 35) describes as an “*anti-philosophical philosophy*”. Pragmatism places limited emphasis on ontology or epistemology and instead allows for either inductive or deductive logics, or a combination of both, depending on which best addresses the research problem (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2012). In this perspective, methodological choice is driven not by philosophical allegiance but by the practical demands of the research question (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Cresswell, 2014; Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006).

While I acknowledge that certain principles of pragmatism, such as the flexibility and problem-centred focus, could suit my research, my ontological and epistemological grounding in the social sciences is more firmly aligned with interpretivist and social constructionist traditions. These positions are ones in which I am academically comfortable, and which align with the aims of this study. I therefore chose to situate this research and my academic perspective within a post-positivist interpretive paradigm with a specific emphasis on social constructionism.

4.3 Research Design

4.3.1 Mixed Methods: Surveys and Narrative Interviews

One of my initial aims was to establish whether the apprenticeship population accessible to me was under-represented in Higher Education (HE) based on characteristics recorded and studied by the Department for Education, which are outlined in Section 4.4.1. A quantitative survey was the most appropriate way to investigate this question, but I had also identified that interviews would be an appropriate way to explore the experiences of the Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). This meant that my approach to research methods was to use mixed methods research.

Mixed methods research is often described as a form of research with its own paradigm, ontology, epistemology, and views on social reality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Earlier ‘paradigm wars’ saw researchers debate which of qualitative or quantitative methods was the better approach, but mixed methods, with its roots in pragmatism, recognises that research does not always fit neatly within a single approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2012; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). It also allows for research

to be multi-phase, requiring both quantitative and qualitative methods, and views this as acceptable within social science research (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2012).

The term *mixed methods* can refer to any stage of the research, mixing philosophical assumptions, data collection methods, or reporting practices (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2012). When quantitative and qualitative methods are combined, researchers may shift from a positivist orientation to a constructionist one as the study progresses, creating challenges in defining the research as belonging wholly to one paradigm. Another perspective, however, views mixed methods research not as 'mixing' but as using two distinct approaches side-by-side to answer different parts of a research question (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). As long as the paradigmatic approach to each part of the research is clear, and that outcomes are not philosophically incompatible, using two approaches can be coherent within any research (Robson, 2024; Bryman, 2016). In this study, the survey was designed to collect quantitative data on specific questions, and to identify prospective interviewees, which is a common use of mixed methods designs (Cresswell, 2014; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2012; Mertens, 2010; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). However, the following qualitative phase was the more significant part of the research in addressing the research question.

Table 12 (produced by author) outlines a range of methodological considerations associated with the two data instruments used in this research, demonstrating that there was not any 'mixing' of research but were instead, distinct approaches with different purposes.

Table 12: Outline of mixed methods research

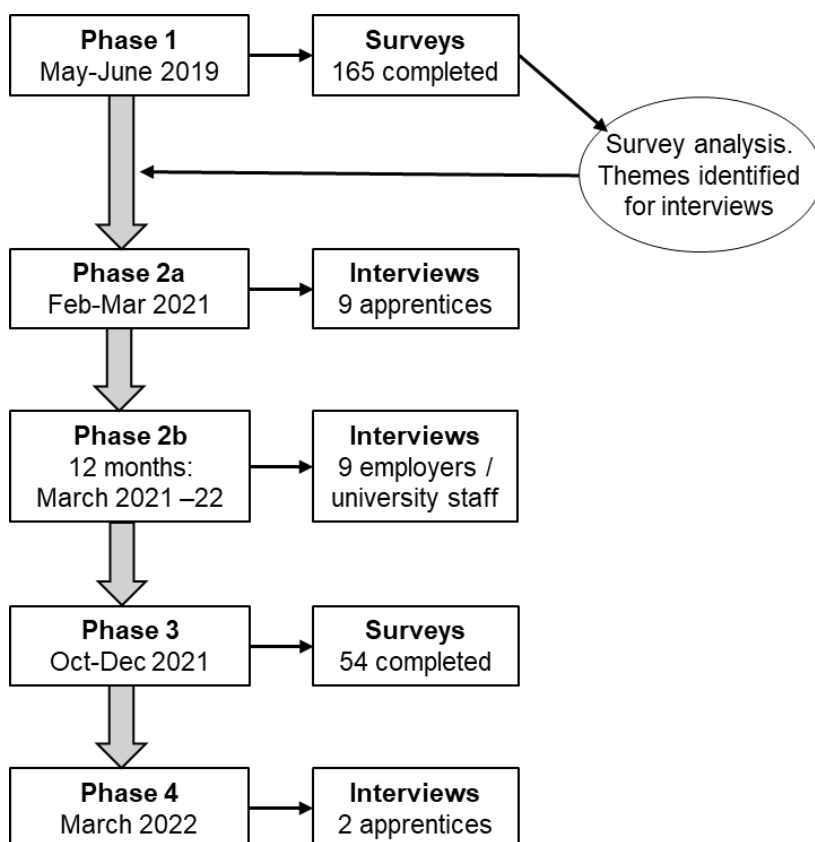
	Surveys	Interviews
Ontology	Realism: a single knowable truth for each participant	Social constructionism
Epistemology	Positivist	Interpretivist
Research sequence: see Figure 1	First and third	Second and fourth. Dependent on survey data.
Research purpose	To identify: • Characteristics of HE under-representation within the population. • Previous interest in, and barriers to, HE. • Reasons for apprenticeship. • Potential interview participants.	To explore the experience of delivering and undertaking Degree Apprenticeships
Research question(s)	Are Degree Apprenticeships widening access to HE?	What does the experience of DAs suggest about their potential to widen access to HE?
Populations and samples	Full apprentice population studying within one university during two research points	Apprentices identified from the surveys, and other stakeholders identified and approached through professional contacts
Data types	Quantitative	Qualitative
Data collection instrument	Surveys	Narrative interviews
Data analysis	Charts and pivot tables from quantitative data, and thematic analysis of free text responses	Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022)
Interpretation	Positivist	Socially constructed
Reporting	Reported as numerical data and percentages compared against national data	Reported based on themes from thematic analysis, with limited comparison to national data
Ethical issues	Consent and anonymity	Multiple ethical issues to be considered. Outlined and discussed in Section 4.6.

Source: Produced by author

Mixed method designs are well-established in education-based research (Stahl, 2017; Morgan, 2014; Irwin and Elley, 2011; Beck *et al*, 2006) and can be used simultaneously or sequentially (Bryman, 2016; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2012; DiCocco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). I

determined that a sequential approach would be most appropriate for this research, so interviewees could be identified from the surveys. This meant the interview phase of the research benefitted from identification of unanticipated themes that emerged from the surveys (Smith *et al.*, 2021; Siraj and Mayo, 2015; Cresswell, 2014; Mertens, 2010). *Figure 1* (produced by author) shows the sequence of the research.

Figure 1: Sequential mixed methods process



Source: Produced by author

As interviewing was the primary research method for this research, the type of interview was an extremely important factor in the research design. I determined that narrative interviews would be the best option for collecting rich data, allowing me to hear the stories of the participants and to understand how they connected their past experiences with their current studies. This interview approach is discussed further in Section 4.3.3.

4.3.2 Research Tools: Designing the Survey

The survey design was based on a range of recommendations from Robson (2024), Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), and Mertens (2010). The survey is provided in Appendix 9.

- Shorter surveys are likely to have better response rates (Mertens, 2010), so the survey was printed across two pages and took approximately two to four minutes to complete. Factual questions were placed at the beginning, and questions that could be considered to be personal in nature, were in the middle and end (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Demographic questions appeared last due to their potentially sensitive nature.
- The survey primarily used closed questions, including dichotomous (yes/no) and multiple-choice questions, with an '*other – please specify*' option. This aimed to provide respondents with the option to select or provide the right answer, without being constrained by the choices that I gave them (Robson, 2024; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).
- A small number of free-text questions were included (e.g. '*what [HE] course did you want to do?*' and '*why did you want to do an apprenticeship?*'). Where possible, open-ended questions were analysed thematically.
- Some demographic questions allowed self-identification.
- A limited number of contingency or skip questions were used (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). In testing, all respondents followed the instructions, but a small number of surveys from the full population were returned with missed items or incorrectly completed questions.

The survey contained 26 questions, including contingency questions, eight of which required a written response. Of those, two questions required a written answer of more than one or two words.

4.3.2.1 Demographic Measures

Demographic questions aimed to determine the extent of under-representation in the apprentice population. Respondents were asked to provide home postcodes to enable analysis using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and POLAR4 (see *Glossary*). Criticisms about the use of these measures include: the assumption of homogeneity of impact, exclusion of groups just outside the boundaries in each measure, and potential for data to be out-of-date (Webb *et al.*, 2017a; Boliver *et al.*, 2015). However, they are used in official Higher Education (HE) participation metrics (Department for Education, 2025a) and therefore provided useful indicative and comparative measures.

Other common indicators, such as eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) or household income, were not appropriate for this population. Both are used within official metrics for those in full-time education and under the age of 18, which the apprentices were not.

Demographic questions included gender and ethnicity. The question on gender included the option of '*other*', and ethnicity required a free text answer. I recognised that self-definition is important (Mertens, 2010) and pre-selecting classifications for ethnic origin can miss out mixed ethnicities (Boliver *et al*, 2015). Consequently, I considered it important that survey participants could describe their own ethnicity.

4.3.2.2 Question Testing

Careful question development was important to ensure understanding and accuracy (Davies and Hughes, 2014; Singh, 2007). Surveys were designed for self-completion, which meant questions had to be interesting for the respondent (Dillman, 2020) and easy to understand without additional clarification (Robson, 2024). The first group completing the survey served as a pilot group to check questions were clear and understood (Mertens, 2010). Analysis confirmed comprehension and no changes were made, and the pilot data were included in the final dataset.

4.3.2.3 Sampling and Access

Ensuring a representative sample is a key challenge in survey research (Robson, 2024; Singh, 2007). One university gave permission for apprentices to be approached, and the academic tutors responsible for the groups were happy to arrange access. The apprentice cohort was small enough that a whole-population approach was feasible and all apprentices enrolled on programmes during the two survey phases were invited to participate, as presented in *Figure 1* (produced by author; Section 4.3.1).

4.3.2.4 Survey Delivery

Surveys were presented on paper for self-completion at the start of classroom sessions. Paper delivery was designed to maximise completion rates, as online surveys could have lower completion rates or require incentives (Robson, 2024; Mertens, 2010). Ethical considerations relating to in-class distribution are discussed in Section 4.6. I recognised that the validity of the responses is ultimately based on honesty of the respondents (Robson, 2024; Mertens, 2017; Singh, 2007), but there were few ways to manage this risk other than to keep questions and answers largely binary and fact-based.

As outlined in *Figure 1* (produced by author; Section 4.3.1), surveys were initially distributed in May and June 2019, and again between October to December 2021. A total of 219 surveys were completed, representing 89 per cent of the apprentice population studying at the participating university. Twenty-six apprentices did not participate either due to personal choice or absence on the day.

4.3.2.5 Timing and Impact on the Research Process

The participant university started delivering Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) in 2017, which meant survey respondents were the first or second cohort of apprentices. *Figure 1* (produced by author; Section 4.3.1) shows the sequential research process, with the first interviews taking place in February and March 2021 after a period of maternity leave. Consequently, some participants were at the end of their DA programme at the point of interview.

It is important to note that the first interviews took place twelve-months after the survey completions. This interval created an opportunity for reflection on the survey findings, and consideration of how the themes from the surveys could be included within the interview. However, Section 4.4.1 notes that the number of apprentices who attended an interview was less than the number that expressed interest in interview participation. It is possible that the delay between survey completion and interview invites affected their willingness to be interviewed.

4.3.3 Research Tools: Narrative Interviews

Focus groups were initially considered as a research tool, as they would have provided a good opportunity for apprentices to discuss their experience, generating shared accounts and perspectives (Cohen, 2024). However, an initial review of early survey responses indicated that apprentices had a range of personal reasons for not progressing straight into Higher Education (HE) at 18, including experience of Local Authority care or significant family or financial difficulties. I rejected the option of focus groups as I recognised that the group setting might limit openness of individual participants who might be unwilling to share those early issues (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Having experienced wide-ranging discussions within classrooms when I was distributing surveys, where apprentices started to speak openly about their background or reasons for undertaking an apprenticeship; I was also concerned that focus groups can be dominated by one or two strong personalities (Robson, 2024). Individual interviews offered the best option for exploring participants perceptions and experiences within their individual realities and contexts (Bryman, 2016; Ulriksen *et al.*, 2016; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). The results of qualitative research cannot be generalised to full

populations (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), which also aligned with my aim: to explore individual experiences and identify themes across those experiences rather than produce population-level claims.

I considered semi-structured interviews but wanted an experience that felt more open and natural than the guided semi-structured interview would allow (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Fully unstructured interviews (Robson, 2024) risked the interview moving off topic completely, so I identified narrative-based interviews as the most suitable option (Mertens, 2010). My approach drew loosely on Hollway and Jefferson's (2012) free association narrative method.

Hollway and Jefferson (2012) observe that allowing participants to speak relatively freely following an initial question can lead to rich stories that would not have been told if the interviewer used rigid questioning or interruptions to remain on-topic. There were several key topics that I wished to cover, so I did not use a fully free-narrative technique; instead, I developed a topic-based interview guide to ensure all areas could be covered (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018), which are available in Appendices 10-12. My interviewing style remained flexible: I interjected with questions or comments to gently nudge participants back on topic or to clarify or follow-up on their points, but I did not limit or stop the narrative (Berger, 2015). The aim was to facilitate co-construction of meaning, using topic-based prompts to encourage participants to articulate their experiences without imposing my own interpretation. For example, when an apprentice mentioned that their uniform had changed upon becoming an apprentice, the prompt "*and what did that mean?*" led to a rich account of weakened professional identity, organisational hierarchy, and perceived status relative to student nurses. Through further light prompts, the participant and I developed a shared understanding of how being viewed differently shaped their sense of identity.

The narrative approach was also important in the potential for participants to link their experiences in a way that might not have emerged within a standard semi-structured interview (Clark *et al.*, 2021). For example, asking apprentices to describe their interactions with full-time students led to unexpected findings about perceived differences in the academic or placement experiences, and the impact on professional identity. Allowing participants to speak at length, with minimal prompts, led to stories with broader themes than were initially expected.

Topic-based interview schedules (Appendices 10-12) were used to guide the interviews (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012). Topics were based on existing literature (Bryman, 2016), such as participants' prior HE aspirations, as well as unanticipated survey findings such as differences in apprentice employment contracts. The schedule also reflected insights from my experience of developing Degree Apprenticeships.

The first two apprentice interviews were treated as pilots, after which additional prompts were added, including for example, the visual representation of identity (e.g. uniforms) for Health apprentices. As the first pilot interviews went well with rich data provided, they were included in the final research analysis.

The interview began with a brief introduction to my background and interest in the research, making my level of knowledge clear. However, I also noted that I was no longer professionally involved in apprenticeships so the interview could be viewed as a neutral discussion. The potential for my professional role to impact the interview is discussed further in relation to power dynamics in Section 4.6.3.1. Although I occasionally asked direct questions, I allowed free narrative flow as much as possible, with topics changing based on the participant's narrative or a gentle prompt from me. I used participants' ordering and phrasing to demonstrate active listening and to encourage elaboration (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). I kept my contributions concise, avoiding long or complex questions (Robson, 2016).

Interviews took place approximately one year into the COVID pandemic and were predominately conducted online, as discussed further in Section 4.7.

4.4 Research Participants

4.4.1 Apprentices

The first cohort of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) within the new Apprenticeship Standards and Apprenticeship Levy started in 2017. As the primary research for this study took place between 2019 and 2022, apprentices represented approximately six per cent of the participating university's total student population. This proportion was consistent with the small populations seen in earlier research in this area (Martin, Lord, and Warren-Smith, 2020).

In total, 219 surveys were completed, and interviews were conducted with eleven apprentices, three employers, and six members of university staff. Chapter 5 presents the characteristics of the surveyed apprentices compared, where possible, with the national apprenticeship population. Sections 4.4.2 and 4.4.3 provides information about the university and employer participants.

Apprentices were asked about characteristics associated with under-representation in Higher Education (HE), based on the list published by the Office for Students (2026a). In order to identify whether apprentices could reasonably be considered to be under-represented in HE, the characteristics shown in *Table 13* (produced by author) were selected.

Table 13: Characteristics of HE under-representation included or excluded from the research

Included	Excluded
Low-income households (based on Index of Multiple Deprivation, IMD)	Religion
Ethnicity	Commuter students
Students whose parents or guardians do not have experience of HE: 'first generation to HE'	Service children
Disabled students	Students reporting as having a sexual orientation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or 'other'
Mature students (over the age of 21)	Students reporting their gender identity as not the same as the sex registered at birth
	Students who are estranged from their family network
	Students with parental responsibility
	Care experienced students
	Students with unpaid caring responsibility, other than parental responsibility

Source: Characteristics listed by Office for Students (2026a), table produced by author.

These characteristics provided the framework through which apprentices were categorised as under-represented in HE within this research, and informed both participant selection and subsequent analysis.

With the exception of religion, the excluded characteristics were those that would normally be considered as relevant to the Higher Education (HE) progression rates of 18- and 19-year-old full-time students. Although some may have impacted apprentices while in school or college, they are not generally considered to be relevant to mature learners. For example, it is common for mature students to have parental or unpaid caring responsibilities (Stone, 2023; O'Shea and Stone, 2011). Religion was excluded because the 2011 Census indicated that just six per cent of the population in the East of England had a religious affiliation other than Christian (Office for National Statistics, 2012). I was concerned that including religion within any of the analysis could lead to deductive identification of individuals given the small size of the apprentice population within the participating university.

The characteristics included within this research were those which the academic literature supported as being relevant to apprentices as mature students (White, 2023; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Reay, Ball and David, 2002), and for which comparable national data were available for

both apprenticeship and HE populations. This allowed the statistical comparisons presented in Chapter 5.

Apprentices represented four subject areas covering five Apprenticeship Standards:

- Management (Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship).
- Digital and IT (Digital and Technology Solutions Degree Apprenticeship).
- Health (Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship and Assistant Practitioner Higher Apprenticeship).
- Social Work (Social Worker Degree Apprenticeship).

These programmes were the only DAs offered by the universities involved in the research and, with the exception of Social Work, were also in the top four nationally by number of apprenticeships starts in 2018/19 as shown in *Table 3* (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020; Section 2.4.4). Their inclusion was based on accessibility, and the findings include the universities' reasons for delivering these programmes.

Table 14 (produced by author) presents the number, and proportion of survey participants for each programme area.

Table 14: Number and proportion of surveys completed by apprenticeship subject area

	Number surveyed	Proportion of population
Management	9	4%
Digital and IT	36	16%
Health	166	76%
Social Work	8	4%
Total	219	100%

Source: Produced by author

Apprentices were able to select within the survey if they were interested in participating in an interview, and those who agreed were invited based on their previous interest in HE (Q: *did you ever consider going to university without doing an Apprenticeship?*), and their self-identification as a first-generation student (Q: *did your parents or guardians go to university?*).

I aimed to interview apprentices who had aspired to HE at some point and who met at least one criterion for under-representation, specifically being first generation in their families to go to university. As the research aimed to explore the potential for DAs to increase access to HE, it was important that interviewees had a historical interest in HE as I considered their reasons for not progressing at 18 to be relevant to their perspectives on the DA opportunity. I also

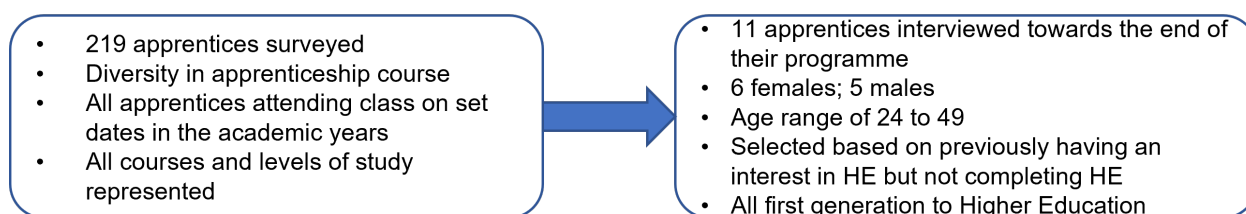
considered their status as a first-generation student to be important, as it meant the information, advice, and guidance for HE progression was more likely to be limited in their family home, compared to apprentices who had a family history of HE. Across all surveys, there were seventy-four apprentices (34%) who met the criteria and who expressed an interest in being interviewed, and ultimately, all were invited to participate. Initial invitations were sent based on programme area, age, and gender to attempt diversity in the sample, although the aim was to explore individual experiences rather than provide findings representative of the population.

Some apprentices responded quickly, while others declined or were unavailable, and further invitations were sent. I aimed for between ten and eighteen apprentice interviews and would have considered additional interviews had they been forthcoming. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest that approximately fifteen (+/-10) interviews are typically sufficient, as additional interviews are unlikely to add to the knowledge produced. The sequential phasing of the data collection process is presented in *Figure 1* (produced by author; Section 4.3.1). Nine apprentices were interviewed from the first phase of surveys; with two apprentices subsequently interviewed from the second phase of surveys. On completion of the eleven interviews, I concluded that the target minimum had been achieved, and that qualitative research orientated towards interpretivism and social constructivism can provide important findings on relatively small sample sizes (Boddy, 2016). I was confident that the rich data from the narrative interviews meant that the sample size was large enough to present compelling findings (Mason, 2010), and that with the addition of employer and university staff interviews, I would have a clear exploration of the apprenticeship experience. I was also aware that seeking approval from another university to attempt to increase the number of interviews would put significant pressure on the time available for analysis and writing (Mason, 2010).

I recognise that findings may have differed slightly had apprentices from multiple universities been included, particularly those relating to experiences with full-time students. However, university staff participants represented three institutions, and all reported similar classroom challenges.

Figure 2 summarises the interview participant selection process, drawing on the model produced by Ulriksen *et al.* (2016: 428).

Figure 2: The process of selecting interview participants (apprentices)



Source: Produced by author, based on Ulriksen et al (2016: 428).

Table 15 (produced by author) presents characteristics of the apprentices who were interviewed. Of the eleven, six were female, five were in Health, three in Management, two in Social Work, and one in Digital. Detailed analysis of participant characteristics is provided in Chapter 5.

Table 15: Pseudonym, course area, gender, and age of apprentice interview participants

Pseudonym	Course area	Gender	Age
Carrie	Health Apprentice	Female	27
Charlotte	Social Work Apprentice	Female	49
Douglas	Health Apprentice	Male	31
Iona	Health Apprentice	Female	44
Keith	Digital Apprentice	Male	24
Nate	Management Apprentice	Male	37
Peggy	Management Apprentice	Female	41
Rory	Social Work Apprentice	Male	29
Rose	Health Apprentice	Female	41
Ruby	Health Apprentice	Ruby	41
Terence	Management Apprentice (non-levy)	Male	33

Source: Produced by author

4.4.2 Universities

The research design included university staff and employers to support the discussion of experience that would be provided by apprentices. However, a surprising finding was the level of impact on university staff in particular, of becoming involved in the design and delivery of Degree Apprenticeships (DA). This raised important questions about how the experience for university staff might impact the experience for apprentices, and whether the university-

employer partnership would impact apprentices. The result of this surprising finding was that more university staff were invited to interview than originally planned.

The university staff participants represented three universities, and the employers each worked with one or more of these institutions. Universities were considered for participation based on their location within the East of England and geographically accessible to me, and their portfolio of DAs. The universities initially identified had strong similarities in their apprenticeship provision and had developed apprenticeships from existing degree programmes. All served predominately regional populations across both rural areas and towns, with limited numbers of large Levy-paying employers besides the NHS and Local Authorities. None offered online delivery of apprenticeships at the time and were only delivering teaching in-person.

Although I was comfortable accessing the full apprentice population from a single university, I wanted to ensure wider representation among university staff and employers as I wished to avoid the research becoming a single-institution case study. I initially approached known professional contacts in three of the five universities within my area. All expressed a strong commitment to widening participation in their Office for Students' Access and Participation Plans, which I considered to be relevant to the discussion of whether this informed their decision to participate in apprenticeships.

One university declined participation citing commercial confidentiality. University 1 agreed to my contacting their staff involved in the development and delivery of apprenticeships, and a colleague who was known to me in University 2 also agreed to participate. We had shared experiences of apprenticeship development, and when she moved to University 3, which I had initially not approached due to a lack of suitable professional contacts, she was able to agree to still participate in the research. Consequently, this colleague was able to represent her experience within two regional universities within her interview.

Table 16 (produced by author) presents information about the university staff participants. Frances represented Universities 2 and 3, while all other university staff were from University 1, the institution from which apprentice participants were sourced.

Three members of staff were academic course leaders, two members of staff had roles primarily to develop apprenticeships and associated policies and procedures, and one was from student support. All staff participants were known to me through my professional involvement in apprenticeships.

Table 16: Pseudonym, role, and university of university staff interview participants

Pseudonym	Role	University
Anne	Student Support	1
Ellie	Health Academic (Course Leader)	1
Frances	Apprenticeship Development	2 and 3
Heather	Apprenticeship Development in HE but with significant experience in Further Education	1
Jean	Management Academic (Course Leader)	1
Martin	Digital Academic (Course Leader)	1

Source: Produced by author

4.4.3 Employers

Employer representatives were invited to participate based on working for Levy-paying organisations as they were more likely to have multiple apprentices and to work with multiple training providers. I invited a Local Authority, an NHS Trust, and a large digital employer to participate. One participant was professionally known to me, while others were invited through university apprenticeship departments or academics in the participating universities.

The employer representatives were senior staff members with the authority to agree to the interviews without further organisational approval, and all had been directly involved in establishing Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) within their organisation and remained engaged in their ongoing delivery. Table 17 (produced by author) provides details of the employer participants.

Table 17: Pseudonym, employer descriptor and organisation information for employer participants

Pseudonym	Descriptor	Organisation Information
Beth	NHS Trust	Worked with Universities 1 and 3, and other national training providers. Had been involved in level 2 and 3 apprenticeships prior to Degree Apprenticeships and worked with the universities for student placements in full-time degree programmes. Face-to-face interview, professionally known to me.
Louise	Local Authority (Social Work)	Worked with University 1 but had worked with a wide range of training providers for levels 2 and 3 apprenticeships prior to Degree Apprenticeships. Online interview.
Mary	Digital employer	Worked with Universities 1 and 2, and other national training providers. Had been involved in level 2 and 3 apprenticeships prior to Degree Apprenticeships. Online interview.

Source: Produced by author

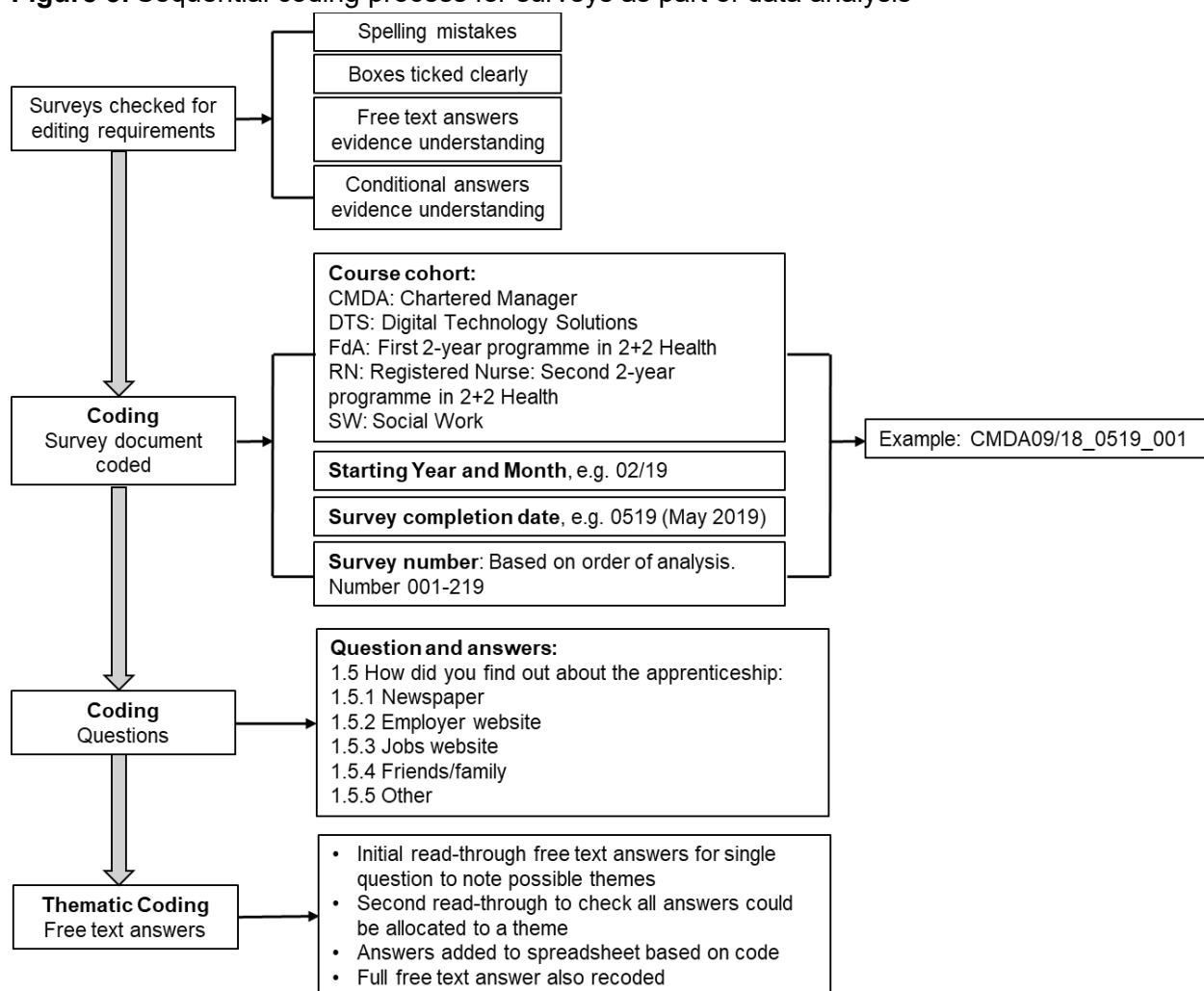
4.5 Data Analysis

4.5.1 Surveys

Surveys were completed over two phases, as shown in *Figure 1* (produced by author; Section 4.3.1), with a total of 219 responses. The data analysis process is illustrated in *Figure 3* (produced by author) below.

All surveys were initially reviewed for editing requirements, including spelling errors or unclear ticked boxes. Free-text and conditional responses were checked to ensure instructions had been followed and that answers evidenced understanding of the question (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Each survey was then assigned a unique code based on the course, intake year and month, survey completion date, and survey number. This was stored in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, enabling straightforward identification of each paper survey. The process for creating an identifying code is shown in *Figure 3* (produced by author).

Figure 3: Sequential coding process for surveys as part of data analysis



Source: Produced by author

All questions and answers were assigned a code to support efficient data entry, and free text responses were analysed thematically (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Open coding was used to create labels that categorise the data (Robson, 2024). The process began with initial read-through to familiarise myself with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022), noting potential themes. A second read-through checked that all responses could be assigned to one of the identified themes, and a final read-through involved allocating free-text responses to themes. For example, when reviewing the reasons that apprentices had not progressed to university directly from school or college, answers clustered into four main themes: cost, attainment, family commitments, and 'changed mind' where they were no longer confident in their subject choice or whether university was right for them. Themes were recorded in the data analysis spreadsheet alongside full free-text responses for use in later reporting.

One unexpected finding arose during data analysis. All Social Work apprentices, along with four additional apprentices in Health, were on temporary employment contracts. This was not an issue that had been identified in the literature as a potential problem in apprenticeships and therefore became an important topic to explore in the interviews.

Survey responses were analysed using Microsoft Excel pivot tables to generate descriptive statistics (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). My aim was to report on the characteristics of this specific population rather than to make generalisable claims and did not therefore wish to use tools to measure statistical significance. The surveyed population was, as outlined in Section 4.8, heavily skewed towards Health with small numbers in other programmes, and I was concerned that statistical testing would lead to misleading conclusions. I was satisfied that descriptive analysis using pivot tables provided clear insights about the population, within the perspective that simple statistical analysis can be effective (Robson, 2024).

4.5.2 Interviews

In my initial planning for the qualitative analysis of narrative interviews, I considered both deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2022). There were important themes from the academic literature particularly relating to widening participation, but I also wanted to undertake analysis based on the themes identified within the data. I therefore decided to take an abductive approach (Morgan, 2007), allowing the analysis to be both deductive and inductive. This enabled the analysis to move between theories from the literature relating to, for example, possible selves, self-efficacy, and pedagogical experience; to insights derived directly from the data. As outlined in Section 4.3.3, the topic-based interview plan was developed using academic literature and my professional experience within the sector. These topics were therefore potential themes for data analysis, but unexpected findings from the interviews, such as those relating to identity and risk, were incorporated into the analytical framework. My approach to analysis, like the research methods, sat within mixed methods, combining deductive theory-based themes with inductive insights from the research (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2012).

Given my preference to undertake the analysis thematically, the two main options were grounded theory or reflexive thematic analysis. I considered Charmaz's (2006) constructivist version of grounded theory, which aligned with my social constructivist epistemological approach. Charmaz built on the original Strauss and Corbin (1990) grounded theory approach, which uses open, axial, and selective coding to identify connections between categories, culminating in a single core category (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This method requires new data to be continuously compared back to data already collected, with

each interview analysed to inform and change the following interviews in a recursive process (Burck, 2005). However, this method seemed restrictive and did not reflect my preference to analyse the full data set at the same time.

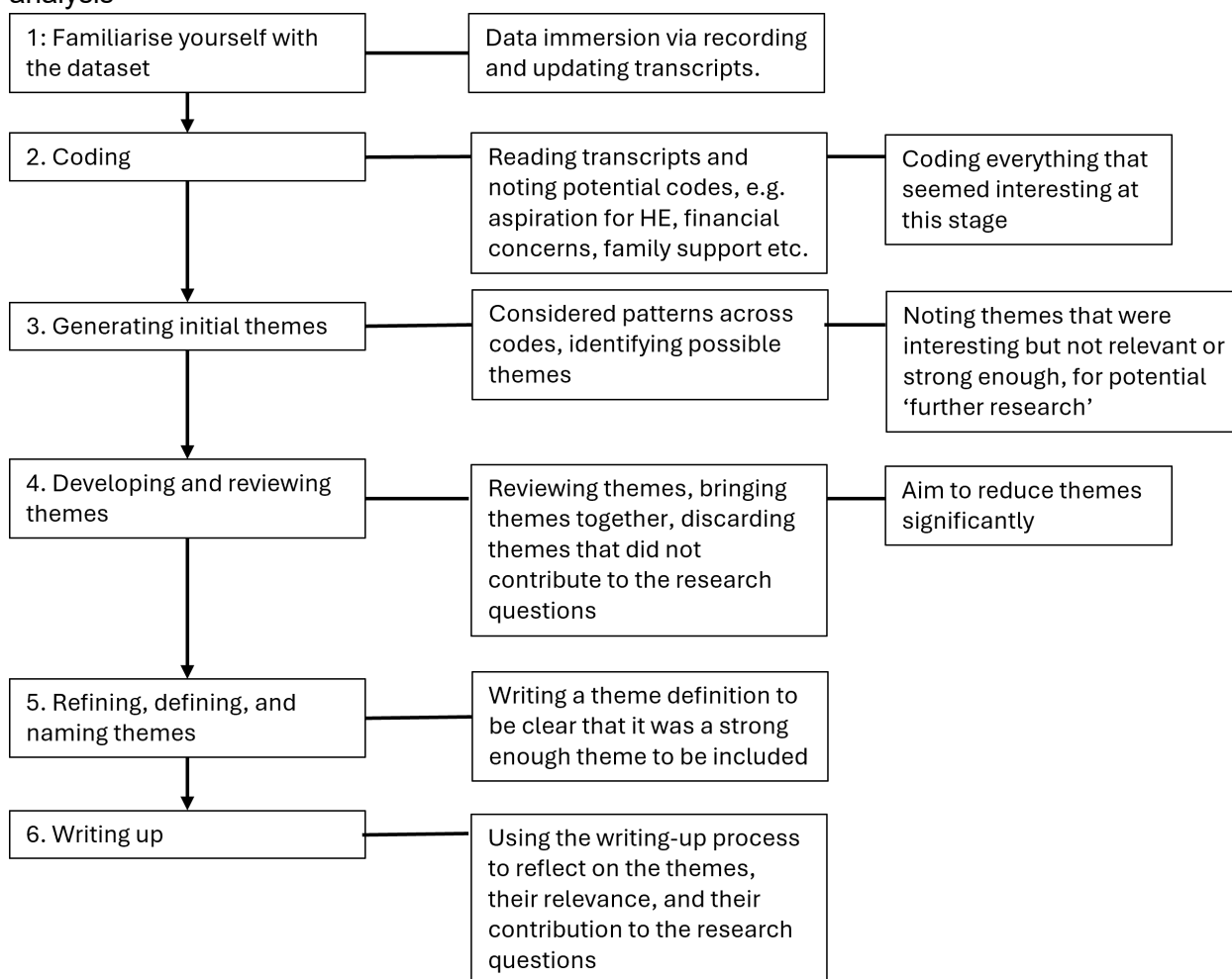
The Charmaz (2006) method instead considers an assessment of code frequency, using those codes to move the analysis towards a specific theory, but this again felt restrictive as it seemed to require some similarity across experiences. My aim to explore individual experiences did not fit with analysis based on frequency of experience.

I considered Braun and Clarke's (2022; 2006) reflexive thematic analysis to fit my preferences, as it accommodates multiple themes within the data and emphasises the role of the researcher as an active participant in the research. This suited my perspective that it is impossible to remove the social experiences and assumptions of the researcher from the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). It also requires the researcher to take a fully reflective approach to all aspects of the analysis, recognising that the researcher's positionality, experiences, and assumptions will shape the analysis (Raheim *et al.*, 2016).

4.5.2.1 Reflexive thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2022; 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2017) six-phase model, culminating in the writing of results, guided the analytic process. This section outlines each phase in detail and explains how the model was applied. *Figure 4* (produced by author) provides an illustration of the analytical process.

Figure 4: Process of carrying out data analysis on qualitative research using reflexive thematic analysis



Source: Produced by author based on six-stage process of reflexive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2022).

Phase 1 - Familiarising yourself with your dataset: Braun and Clarke (2022) encourage immersion in the data. Audio-recorded interviews were uploaded to *otter.ai* for automated transcription and reviewed and amended for accuracy while listening to the MP3 files. Reviewing transcripts provided data immersion allowing initial tentative identification of themes before the more formal thematic analysis started (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Cresswell and Poth, 2018). This was also an important process of confirming that the transcripts accurately reflected punctuation, tone of voice and inflections to prevent any changes to meanings (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Phase 2 - Coding: Much has been written about methods of coding interviews (Bryman, 2016; Ulriksen, 2016; Campbell *et al.*, 2013; Saunders *et al.*, 2012; Charmaz, 2006) but Braun and Clarke's (2022) description of reflexive thematic analysis encourages analysis to be undertaken

within the continuum of latent and semantic coding. A constructivist approach to my data meant that latent coding, considering assumptions and ideas behind what is said compared to the surface-level analysis within semantic coding, fitted better to my study (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This stage of coding is similar to the open coding that takes place in grounded theory analysis and can lead to a large number of codes (Clark *et al.*, 2021).

I initially attempted to use digital software (atlas.ti) for coding but found it difficult to check the codes and to move between the data, and I found manual coding to be more immersive and effective. Transcripts were printed and were worked through in a more physical and tactile way, initially making quick short codes of anything that seemed relevant or interesting (Robson, 2024). Latent coding meant that I was often coding based on what the narrative inferred, such as discussions that indicated power dynamics. Each transcript was reviewed multiple times, including working through the whole dataset in a different order as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). Initial codes were varied and extensive, including topics that related to the literature, surprising or unexpected topics, and even topics not related to the research questions but that seemed interesting (Cresswell, 2014). At this stage, a significant amount of data was coded to reduce the likelihood of data being ignored that contradicted my own views (Robson, 2024). At the end of this process, I had a wide selection of codes to use in the development of themes, which are listed in Appendix 13.

Phase 3 - *Generating initial themes*: Braun and Clarke (2022) are clear that theme development is an active reflexive process, one that is determined by the researcher's knowledge and insights. Theme development is a process that aims to identify patterns across the whole dataset rather than within individual pieces of data (e.g. from one interview). I therefore considered all codes and the extent to which there were patterns across groups of codes. It was important to carefully consider their relevance to my research questions, and to be willing to ignore the codes that did not provide any real richness to my analysis. Including too many themes can lead to incoherent analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

One of the biggest challenges in the development of themes was trying not to overestimate the importance of a single experience by making it into a theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The advice from Braun and Clarke (2022) was to ensure themes make sense across the whole dataset, but this was challenging where, for example, just one participant was working for a non-levy paying employer. As noted in the *Future Research* section (8.6), there are aspects of the research that should certainly be investigated further with non-levy employers.

At the end of this process, I had a range of themes and sub-themes. There were more themes than could be used in the findings, and many codes were not able to be allocated to themes. Table 18 (produced by author) provides an example of the themes and sub-themes that began to emerge at this point in the process.

Table 18: Example list of themes and sub-themes from initial stage of theme development within reflexive thematic analysis

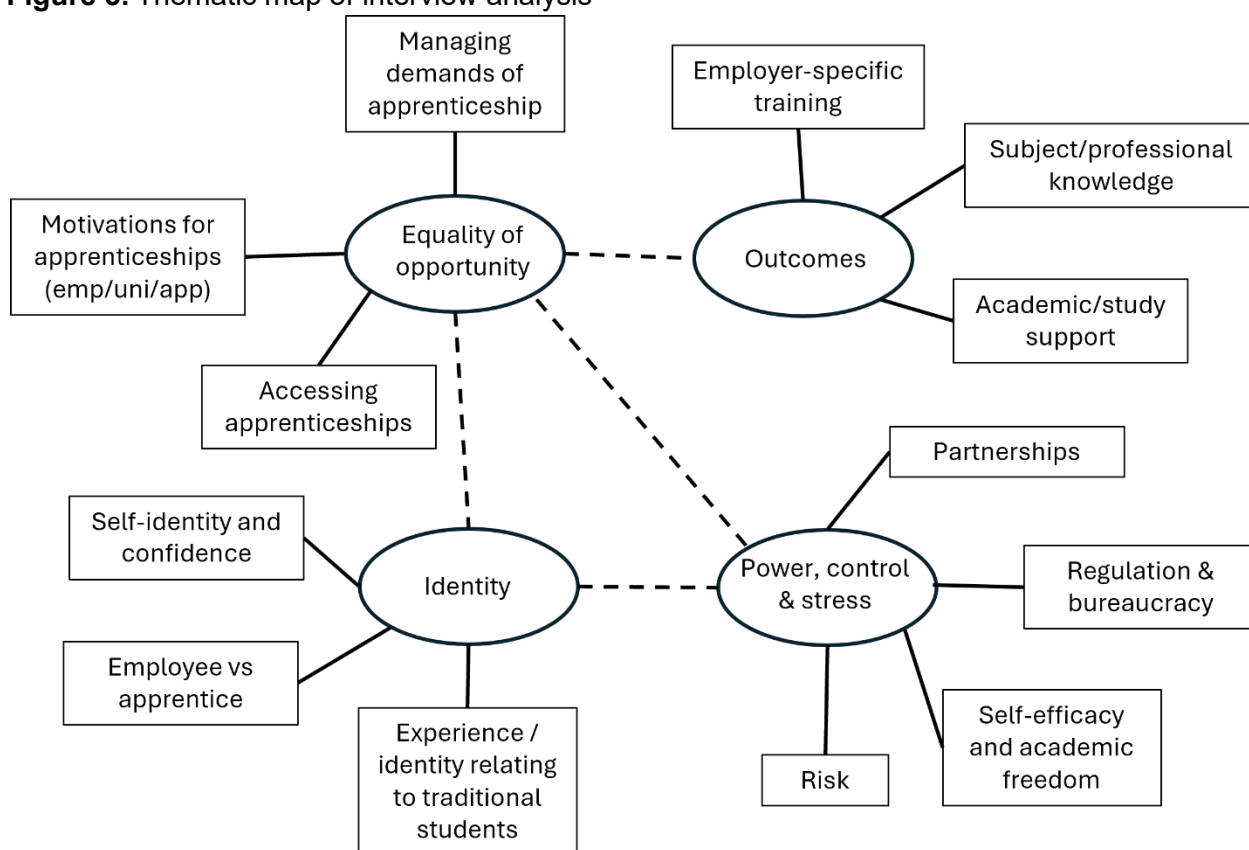
Themes	Aspirations for University from school/college	Employer support	Apprentice vs student
Sub-themes	Influence of family and friends	Expectations	Difference in classroom dynamics
	Financial worries	Workload (work vs university)	'Expert' knowledge from experience
	Career focus	Tripartite meetings	Apprentice teaching students in workplace
	Disappointment	Feeling re employer funding	Rushing through content
	Started but withdrew	Rotation of experiences	Differences in hours/content

Source: Produced by author

Phase 4 - Developing and reviewing themes: Braun and Clarke (2022) note that at this point in theme development, it is sometimes necessary to return to the codes to re-work them. Overlapping codes relating to apprenticeship bureaucracy for example, were re-coded to better differentiate between themes. Determining which themes might be included in the final analysis was also important, as some themes did not have enough meaningful data to be used. Braun and Clarke (2022) and others (Robson, 2024; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) warn against attempting to find themes that reflect the researcher's own views. This was therefore a point at which I had a period away from analysis in order to return with a fresh perspective, aiming to ensure that my analysis had not misrepresented or decontextualised data. Changing codes or trying to fit data into a slightly different theme could have led to data being used incorrectly, so the return to the data was an opportunity to check the accuracy of each piece of data that had been coded.

At this stage, I created a thematic map presented as *Figure 5* (produced by author) to help with the visualisation of the themes that were likely to be used in the findings. This was an important opportunity to visualise how the themes and sub-themes related to one another.

Figure 5: Thematic map of interview analysis



Source: Produced by author

Once I had identified the themes and sub-themes, I created an excel spreadsheet, an example of which is shown as Table 19 (produced by author). Quotes were copied into the document, with identifying information to aid reference to the full transcript, and themes added as filterable labels. Theme labels were updated as the process of thematic analysis was completed.

Table 19: Example of how quotes were recorded, tagged, and tags updated, for inclusion in write-up of results

Participant ID	Quote	Pg	Theme/Sub-theme		Quote or background
			Initial	Confirmed	
Charlotte	"Somebody had put on the feedback, how can we make this better, 'get rid of the apprentices'."	69	Working with students	Identity: relating to full-time students	Quote
Jean	"All you're doing with an apprenticeship is creating a Specialist Programme for one organisation"	205	Control or academic freedom	Outcomes: Employer-specific training	Background

Source: Produced by author

Phase 5 - Refining, defining, and naming themes: Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend writing a theme definition, which is a useful part of the thematic analysis process to ensure that each theme exists distinctly from the others. This again led to further refining both the definitions and the theme names.

Phase 6 - Writing up: Braun and Clarke (2022) consider writing to be an ongoing part of thematic analysis as analysis continues until the final report is complete. This is also the phase where the themes are checked for a final time against the research questions (Clark *et al.*, 2021). During this process, I returned to transcripts multiple times to check relevance, or to refer to additional discussion around an answer that I had not initially included within my Excel spreadsheet. The early immersion in the data proved to be useful at this point, as I knew the data extremely well and was able to remember, and search for, interesting comments that had not been included in the Excel spreadsheet. The writing process was where the narrative really came together, for the first time truly reflecting the experiences and perceptions of all participants.

4.6 Ethics

All research requires consideration of ethical issues relating to each part of the study: the research question, the methods, and importantly, the potential impact on participants (Robson, 2024; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). As this research was placed within the discipline of the sociology of education, the study was designed with reference to the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (2017), and the University of Suffolk Research Ethics Framework (2025¹¹). Ethical approval was granted by the University of Suffolk Research Ethics Committee on 12 March 2019, with further approval on 9 December 2020 to undertake additional interviews.

Ethical research includes a series of principles that should underpin all research designs. These include privacy and anonymity, avoidance of harm, confidentiality, and the accurate reporting of data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The British Sociological Association (BSA) (2017) recognises that ethics is not something to be considered just in the research design, but instead must be an active and continuous process, based in on-going discussion and reflection. Both the BSA and the University of Suffolk's framework (2025) promote research that secures the wellbeing, rights, and dignity of participants; the provision of informed consent; the right to

¹¹ The version of the University of Suffolk Research Ethics Framework at the time of ethical approval is no longer available for review. The reference and associated weblink is the most recent published version from 2025.

withdraw participation; and research free from conflicts of interest. The University's framework draws on a wide range of literature relating to research in the social sciences (Robson, 2024; British Educational Research Association, 2018; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) and reflects ethical standards of research across jurisdictions.

Following BSA (2017) and BERA (2018) guidelines and discussions of ethics within the academic literature (Peterson, 2019; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Kaiser, 2009; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), I engaged with ethical considerations from the earliest stages of planning. I considered how the research purpose, design, methods, and outcomes would abide by ethical principles and practice. The deontological perspective of ethics requires participants to be treated as the researcher themselves would wish to be treated, with respect, honesty, and care (Birnbacher, 1999). The contrasting approach is the consequentialist view of ethics, which considers the most ethical approach to be that which delivers the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Birnbacher, 1999).

Both perspectives have their challenges, not least that significant pieces of historical research would not have taken place if the principles within these approaches were followed in detail (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Ethics is often situational requiring decisions to be based within the specific context of the research (Kaiser, 2009; Birnbacher, 1999). My approach to ethics was deontological, as I did not believe that any part of the research should require the consequentialist approach to be prioritised. Treating others with respect aligns with my own values, and it was essential that my research reflected this. The following sections consider the ethical factors relevant to each part of the study.

4.6.1 Consent and Anonymity

The principle of consent, and informed consent, concerns the rights of the participant to make their own decision about whether to take part in research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). It can be affected by power relationships, incentives, and the extent to which participants genuinely understand what they are consenting to (Kaiser, 2009).

All participants in this study were asked to provide informed consent to voluntarily participate in surveys and/or interviews. Information was shared by email (Appendix 1) to apprentices in advance of my visit to their classrooms, explaining the purpose of the surveys so they could decide if they wished to participate. The email clearly stated that participation was voluntary. Paper surveys were distributed in class via a 'pass-around' method so that apprentices could choose to pass them on without taking one, if they did not wish to participate. Those who did

complete the survey were reminded of their right to return the surveys partially completed, or to withdraw following survey submission.

Surveys requested student numbers or names for interview follow-up; however, during analysis, surveys were stored only with an identifying code to ensure anonymity (see Section 4.5.1). Names and student numbers were not retained electronically after the interview invites were issued, and paper surveys were shredded once the data was entered into Microsoft Excel.

Apprentices who volunteered for interviews were provided with a Participant Information Form (Appendix 2) outlining their rights; and were reminded of their rights in the invitation email, follow-up communications, and at the start of each interview. Granting anonymity is standard in social research (Robson, 2024), and all participants were guaranteed anonymity in pre-survey and pre-interview information, and at the beginning and end of each interview. The Participant Information Form was reviewed and agreed at the beginning of each recorded interview.

Although I did not expect the interview to lead to discussions that would be harmful for participants, I recognised the possibility that a participant could disclose information that would indicate that they were at risk. It was important that this was covered within the consent process (Peterson, 2019). The Participant Information Form included the following statement:

"I understand that if in the course of the interview, I provide any information that indicates that I am at risk (physically, mentally, or emotionally), the researcher (as a University of Suffolk student and employee) has a responsibility to report her concerns to the University's Designated Safeguarding Officer. The researcher will tell me that she is concerned and will discuss her proposed action with me."

I expected a key issue of consent to be related to the ability of university staff and employer participants to be able to give their own consent for participation (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). I therefore approached university staff who were sufficiently senior in their organisations to provide consent without seeking permission, although recognised that they may still wish to do so. As noted in Section 4.4.2, one of the universities I initially approached refused to give permission for their staff to participate, citing commercial confidentiality.

It is important, however, to note that the majority of university staff participants were from a university that provided ethical approval at organisation level for the research to take place. While recognising that they could each provide consent, I was mindful that one participant was professionally very well-known to me, and we had, in fact, a very friendly working relationship. I was concerned that they might feel unable to refuse the invitation to participate. I therefore

made it clear that they could refuse, or recommend a colleague, and made sure there were sufficient opportunities for them to withdraw later, citing, for example, logistical issues (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). My professional network was supportive of my research, but all those who were professionally known to me were also given numerous low-pressure opportunities to decline participation, and I am as confident as I can be that their participation was voluntary.

To be fully present without taking written notes, I sought permission to audio record interviews (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Archibald *et al.*, 2019). Participants were notified in advance via the Participant Information Form and emails that permission to audio record would be requested and were reminded of their right to refuse recording at the beginning of the interview. All gave permission. Recordings were made using Microsoft Teams for online interviews and using an iPhone for the in-person interview. Consent to audio recording was recorded verbally at the beginning of each recording (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). As noted in Section 4.5.2.1, audio recordings were uploaded into otter.ai for automatic transcription. Once the transcripts had been reviewed alongside the audio files to check for accuracy, the audio files were deleted. A copy of the Participant Information Sheet for employers is in Appendix 6 and for university staff in Appendix 7.

Ensuring confidentiality was a key challenge (Kaiser, 2009; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Providing a rich account of participants' experiences alongside information about their institution or location can lead to confidentiality being breached deductively (Kaiser, 2009). While I considered it unlikely that apprentices could be identified from the research, I was careful in selecting the illustrative quotes used given the geographical location of this research. For example, the research was based in the East of England, which means there are a limited number of Local Authorities offering the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship, and potentially a small number of apprentices and employer representatives. Using quotes from apprentices on this programme, or from the employer, could have led to deductive identification. Two participants explicitly cautioned me to "*be careful*" with their stories, one joking "*redact! redact!*", which underscored the need for careful paraphrasing and de-selection of quotes that could contain identifiers (Kaiser, 2009). Some protection arises from the passage of time since the interviews took place, but confidentiality was an important consideration throughout the writing process.

Interview transcripts were stored electronically using pseudonyms, which are used in reporting the findings. Pseudonyms are a useful way of ensuring anonymity and supporting a fluent narrative across multiple interviews (Peterson, 2019). Personal identifying information was

stored separately from transcripts; and a secure key file linking names to pseudonyms was retained solely to enable withdrawal of participation at a later stage, if requested.

4.6.2 Additional Ethical Considerations within the Surveys

As outlined in Section 4.6.1, an email was sent to apprentices prior to attending their class, detailing that a survey would be distributed and that participation was voluntary. Passing out surveys by hand in a classroom could have made the apprentices feel coerced into participating, which is unethical practice (Robson, 2024). However, apprentices could decline participation simply by passing on the bundle of surveys; and I did not physically hand any surveys directly to an apprentice. I used every opportunity to reduce the likelihood of perceived pressure or coercion.

The demographic questions in the survey could have been considered to be personal in nature. These questions were at the end of the survey with a note that they would be used for statistical analysis and respondents could choose whether to answer some or all of the questions. Chapter 5 provides analysis of the results, including data on the number of respondents who did not answer some of the questions. Participants were not told that their postcodes would be used specifically to check their IMD or POLAR4 quintiles, but this information would have been provided if requested. The use of these measures is standard practice in HE participation analysis (Department for Education, 2025a).

4.6.3 Additional Ethical Considerations for Interviews

Interviewing can be a relatively intimate research experience. The researcher and participant often share a space but without the usual 'back and forth' of a social conversation. They instead have a directed discussion led by the researcher (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Raheim *et al.*, 2016). Although the interviews were originally planned as face-to-face, interviewing during the COVID pandemic meant that they were conducted online. This reduced the physical intimacy of the interview experience but also removed some of the practical considerations around interview location, such as ensuring an appropriate and neutral interview venue (Archibald *et al.*, 2019). However, power dynamics within the interview experience, remained an important consideration in the planning and delivery of the interviews.

4.6.3.1 Power Dynamics

All interviews involve an imbalance of power, with participants usually in a weaker position due to their status, position, or knowledge (Martin, Desing, and Borrego, 2022; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Berger, 2015). I was mindful of the potential for unequal power relations and

considered feminist research principles and guidance on research-participant power dynamics, which encourage researchers to recognise, address and challenge power imbalances and inequality (Rouhani, 2019; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). The British Sociological Association (2017) warns that research with powerless or marginalised groups can lead to disparities of power and status.

The interviewer usually holds a significant amount of power within the interview, setting the agenda and changing the direction of an interview at any point (Raheim *et al.*, 2016). Interviewers have a responsibility to manage this imbalance carefully to ensure participants feel able to speak openly (Martin, Desing, and Borrego, 2022), while avoiding the risk of the interview slipping into a therapeutic discussion (Raheim *et al.*, 2016; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

The interviewer also holds power in determining what can be considered as acceptable and worthwhile data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) but also in their interpretation of the words and meanings of the participant in the reporting of research findings (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). It was therefore important that I reflected on my positionality, as discussed in Section 4.1.2, as a wide range of factors can impact how a researcher interprets research findings (Martin, Desing, and Borrego, 2022; Berger, 2015).

I anticipated two distinct types of power imbalance within my research. As a member of staff at a university, apprentices could have perceived me as being senior to them and in a position of power. My role as a postgraduate researcher could also have made them feel that they were educationally inferior (Yip, 2023; Martin, Desing, and Borrego, 2022; Archer, Pratt, and Phillips, 2001) and/or they may have wished to present themselves in a certain way to me (Berger, 2015). A range of characteristics that differ between researcher and participant, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and class can affect the interview dynamic (Yip, 2023; Burck, 2005); and some apprentices may also have been unsure why they experienced or felt things as they did (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). It was therefore important for the pre-interview written information to clearly state the confidential nature of the interview, and for the interview experience to be as relaxed as possible. This was part of the reasoning behind taking a narrative approach to the interviews.

Interviews with employers were likely to create a different power imbalance, where the employer could have seen themselves as senior to me due to their professional status, their role as a procurer of services provided by universities, and any unconscious bias based on gender or age. There was potential for the employer to provide answers based on how they

personally wanted to be viewed or how they wanted their organisation to be viewed. (Raheim *et al.*, 2016).

Power imbalances also had potential implications for interviews with university staff. My role within the non-academic professional services could have led academic participants to view me as an outsider, or they may have wanted to present themselves in a specific way (Mason-Bish, 2018; Berger, 2015). As apprenticeships were a new and evolving area for both universities and employers, participants may have felt embarrassed or concerned about their practice reflecting badly on them or their institution (Raheim *et al.*, 2016; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Again, it was important for the pre-interview information to set the tone and expectation of an open, relaxed conversation, and for narrative interviews to encourage openness.

My choice of narrative interviews aimed to reduce unequal power relations by allowing participants some freedom in directing the flow of the narrative. This freedom meant that some of the employer and university participants asked questions of me during the interview, clarifying my experience of a situation or reminding me of a shared experience, which is common in research situations where the researcher is seen to be an insider (Yip, 2023; Berger, 2015). I was careful with my responses as I was aware that sharing my perspective could influence the narrative of the participant (Berger, 2015), and was mindful that this would not have happened within a semi-structured interview format (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). However, I considered these interruptions as a positive indicator of the comfort levels of the participants within the interview environment, and even an indicator that the participants did not experience a power imbalance in the interview (Raheim *et al.*, 2016).

Although I considered the research topic to be uncontroversial in nature, it was important to be aware that the perceptions of power within the interview could shape the narratives shared.

4.6.3.2 Managing Difficult Conversations

One of the ethical principles within deontological approaches to research, is *non-maleficence*, or the obligation to 'do no harm' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). My expectation was that interviews would lead to comfortable and uncontroversial discussions about the experience of delivering and studying apprenticeship programmes. While I expected that some apprentices might have experienced difficulties in transitioning into HE, these were not expected to be harmful topics for discussion.

However, one participant shared a particularly difficult story that illustrated the pressures she faced and the impact these had on her mental health. It was important that she felt that I was interested in her story and empathised with her experience, while also managing the

interpersonal boundaries between us (Raheim *et al.*, 2016; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). This experience made me aware that ethical guidelines do not provide guidance on managing these types of situations, and I had not adequately considered how I would react to a difficult story or that a participant might be harmed by sharing their experience (Raheim *et al.*, 2016). Telling her story could have led to the participant experiencing further mental ill health, or she might have been seeking a therapeutic response that I was not qualified to provide.

The story was one to which I would normally react emotionally, but I was mindful of my role as researcher and the importance of managing my own emotions to avoid inserting myself into the story (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Raheim *et al.*, 2016). I aimed to respond with interest and care while also experiencing some ambiguity, as seen in other qualitative research (Raheim *et al.*, 2016), about how and when to gently steer the conversation back to the apprenticeship experience. Fortunately, my responses were clearly appropriate for her to feel able to continue the interview, but I was aware that a different response from me could have led her to end the interview early.

As I had not anticipated this type of situation, I did not prepare a debriefing protocol for the interviews. However, I was fortunate that my Doctoral supervision team made themselves available to me as required following interviews and provided the opportunity to debrief on this particularly difficult experience.

The Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 2), which all interview participants agreed to within the recorded introduction to the interview, included a safeguarding statement (provided in Section 4.6.1) that recognised my responsibility to report any concerns to the University's Designated Safeguarding Officer if the participant disclosed information that suggested they were at risk. As the participant completed her story, I enquired about the extent to which her academic tutors and employer managers were aware of her situation and the difficulties that she was experiencing. She assured me that they were, giving examples of the on-going discussions that were taking place with both the university and her employer, and I was satisfied that she was safe.

My aim across all interviews was to show participants that I had a genuine non-judgemental interest in their experiences and perspectives on the basis that participants who felt comfortable would be less likely to censor their stories (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). In many ways, the experience of the interviews was made easier by the necessity of online interviews. There was an intimacy present in interviews in the act of focussing on a face on a screen, but without any awkwardness from physically being in the room with a participant who was telling a difficult story.

My final consideration for this specific participant, was how best to report her experience within the findings, without risking deductive identification of her (Kaiser, 2009). I chose to reference the challenges that she had experienced due to changes in apprenticeship managers and supervisors as they exacerbated her on-going issue, without including any of the detail that would have made her identifiable.

4.6.4 Ethical Data Analysis and Reporting

Reflexivity is essential in qualitative data analysis to ensure that findings are not distorted by the researcher's own assumptions or expectations, particularly overemphasising or minimising findings based on their own perspectives (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Small interview samples can increase the risk of giving undue weight to individual experiences or exaggerating the importance as being representative of a wider population (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Ultimately, the researcher has a responsibility to ensure data is presented accurately, fairly and without misinterpretation (Cresswell and Poth, 2018; Raheim *et al.*, 2016).

Maintaining anonymity is a further critical component of ethical reporting (Kaiser, 2009), as discussed in Section 4.6.1. I was therefore mindful of the quotes I used to illustrate points made, without using phrases or stories that would be recognisable by academics or apprenticeship managers within the region, which would risk breaching confidentiality (Kaiser, 2009).

4.7 Data Collection

The data collection process for the surveys has been outlined earlier in this chapter as it was relevant to the research design, participant recruitment, and ethical considerations. Surveys were only completed by apprentices. Apprentice interview participants were identified and invited following survey completion, whereas employer and university staff were directly invited to participate in interviews.

Overall, the narrative interview experience worked well. Two participants required a significant amount of prompting during the interview but still provided narrative story-based answers. All but one interview was carried out virtually during a period of considerable social restrictions due to the COVID pandemic, and some of the participants were isolating at home.

Originally, interviews were intended to occur in familiar physical settings such as universities or workplaces. However, the move to a predominately virtual social environment during the pandemic meant that this had to change. Participants were sent a link to join a Microsoft Teams meeting. I did not provide the option to join using only audio, instead expecting that all would

join with their video on. None of the participants requested the use of audio only. Logging onto a Microsoft Teams meeting removed the opportunity for the relaxed rapport-building conversation that might take place before a physical interview begins (Anthony *et al.*, 2025; Archibald *et al.*, 2019). To recreate this, I greeted participants in a friendly way when they first joined the call and started an initial informal conversation about where we both were, potential interruptions from pets or family members, and the ubiquitous question about having a cup of tea to hand. In the online environment, the normal visual symbols of power that can exist in face-to-face interactions such as dress, age, or professional stature (Burck, 2005), were less evident. Participants and I were usually in relaxed rather than formal clothing, and there was an immediate informal atmosphere created through the sharing of our immediate contexts, and discussions of technical logistics (sound, etc) (Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014) before beginning the recorded interview.

Interviews were held in places that were comfortable for participants, including kitchen tables, bedrooms, or home offices. A major advantage of online interviews was that they could occur at any time or day based on participant availability (Wakelin, McAra-Couper, and Fleming, 2024; Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014), and interviews were scheduled at all hours of the day, into the evenings, and at weekends. Interviews could also easily be rescheduled if problems occurred. Three interviews were interrupted by young children or pets. Although interviews should be planned to avoid any potential interruptions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014), the pandemic situation made this unrealistic (Wakelin, McAra-Couper, and Fleming, 2024). However, these interruptions often prompted reflections from apprentices on balancing family responsibilities with apprenticeship demands.

While interruptions during in-person interviews could be considered disruptive (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018), the findings from this research were that interviews resumed easily, as if the interruption had not happened. This reflects the academic literature in this area that suggests that society has become more comfortable with virtual meetings and social experiences following the social restrictions of the pandemic; particularly for those under 40, which accounted for the majority of apprentice participants (Anthony *et al.*, 2025; Wakelin, McAra-Couper, and Fleming, 2024). The widespread use of online meetings during the pandemic meant that I expected a sufficient level of comfort with the virtual interview experience for the university staff and employers.

Participants generally appeared relaxed, with the video format allowing normal social responses to facial cues to take place (Wakelin, McAra-Couper, and Fleming, 2024). The online environment also made the process more comfortable for me as the researcher. As noted in

Section 4.6.3.2, one participant shared a particularly difficult story, which was easier to hear and manage within a virtual space.

One interview was conducted in person, which was with an employer in the NHS Trust. We were already known to one another professionally, which helped build the initial rapport as we walked across the hospital site to the building in which the interview would take place. However, once inside the building, we were both required to wear face masks due to on-going pandemic restrictions. This had a significant impact on both of our abilities to read facial cues and to relax into the interview, and while the narrative flowed well, it was not a comfortable experience. As a result of this, I chose to undertake all further interviews virtually.

Topic-based interview guides (Appendices 10-12) were used for all interviews. I used a split-screen on my computer to refer to the interview guide without moving my focus from the participants. Apprentices were encouraged to outline their route into the apprenticeship, their experience of studying, working and employer/university reviews, and their perceptions of their experience compared to full-time undergraduate students. Employers were asked about their experience of introducing and delivering apprenticeships, recruitment of apprentices including aspects relating to under-represented groups in HE, support of apprentices on-course, and relationships with training providers and universities. University representatives were asked comparable questions, but with more around the design of the apprenticeships and the experience of the bureaucracy relating to apprenticeships.

Most interviews lasted 55-60 minutes. Two apprentice interviews were shorter (40 minutes) due to brief responses. Two university staff interviews extended to around 90 minutes, as these participants spoke passionately and were clearly keen for me to understand their experiences. I managed the interviews within the narrative framework to keep the duration to one hour but was comfortable with the longer interviews since the participants were keen to keep talking.

Interviews concluded in a similar way as they had begun. They usually ended with a relaxed and informal recognition of how much the apprentices had achieved in getting to where they were – particularly as some were in the final stages of their course. With university staff and employers, the interviews concluded with a reflection that a lot had happened in a short time. All ended with my thanks for their time and support, and a reminder that they could get in touch to withdraw their consent up to the point at which results would be written up. None of the participants followed up to withdraw their consent.

Chapter 5: Findings: Quantitative Research

In this first findings chapter, I begin by referring to national apprenticeship data relevant to the quantitative research results, followed by analysis of the characteristics of survey participants compared to national data. The employment status and contract type of surveyed apprentices is outlined, before discussion of motivations for starting the apprenticeship and how apprentices became aware of, and were supported in applying for, their programme.

Where possible, national demographic information is presented for 2018/19 or 2019/20, the years in which the surveyed apprentices started their course. Where data is not available for those years, the closest comparator year is presented. All national data refers only to English apprentices unless otherwise stated.

5.1 Surveys

Apprenticeship data presented in *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.5.4) shows that Higher and Degree apprentices nationally in 2019/20 were predominately over the age of 19, and *Table 11* (Gov.uk, 2024a; Section 3.8.1) showed that the majority were existing employees prior to enrolment. Data from the National Apprenticeship Survey presented in *Table 20* (Gov.uk, 2024b) below, highlights that career progression was the dominant motivation for Degree Apprentices, with 37 per cent identifying progression within a specific career as their main reason for starting an apprenticeship. Qualification attainment and financial considerations were secondary motivations. This suggests that Degree Apprenticeships are primarily perceived as employment and progression opportunities rather than alternative routes into Higher Education.

Table 20: Main reasons for starting an apprenticeship of apprentices surveyed as part of the National Apprenticeship Survey, January 2023

Reason for starting an apprenticeship	Degree Apprentices
You wanted to enter into or progress in a specific career	37%
You thought an apprenticeship was a good way to develop work-related skills	13%
You wanted to gain a qualification	18%
You wanted to be paid whilst training	11%
Your employer said you have to do an apprenticeship	8%
You needed to develop your skills because of a promotion at work	3%
Didn't want to go to university/college	1%
Best opportunity available	2%
You wanted to avoid student debt/you wanted your training costs paid	5%
Personal development/interest	1%

Source: Table produced by author using data available from Gov.uk (2024a), including apprentices enrolled on 1 January 2023

The questions in the survey within this study aimed to determine, in a comparable way to the National Apprenticeship Survey, why apprentices had started an apprenticeship and whether they had previously been interested in studying for a degree. The survey also aimed to determine whether apprentices within the surveyed population could be considered to be from groups under-represented in HE. This was a relevant starting point to addressing both the main research question and the subsidiary questions.

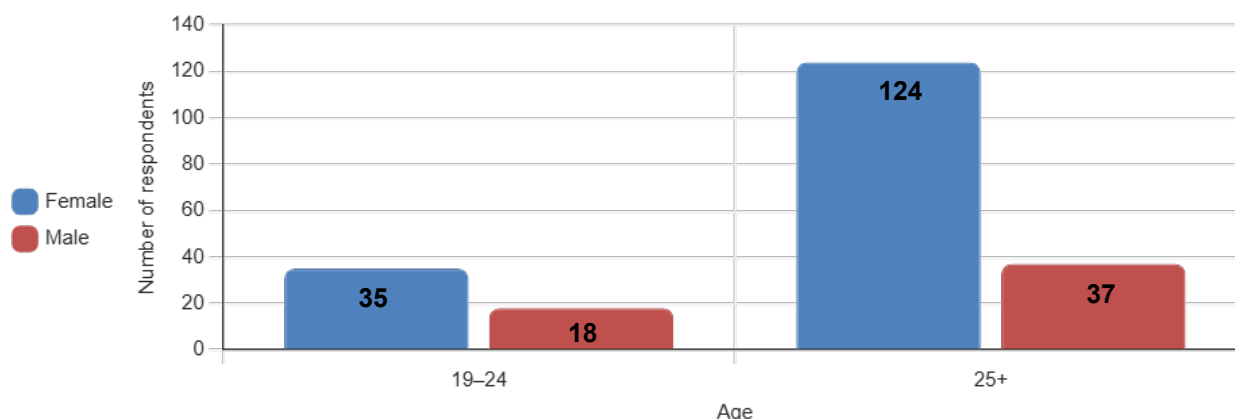
5.2 Characteristics of Apprentices

The survey included questions about the characteristics of apprentices to determine whether they would be considered as normally under-represented in HE. Section 4.4.1 outlined the reasons for inclusion or exclusion of characteristics identified by the Office for Students (2026a) as being associated with under-representation.

5.2.1 Age and Gender

As the surveys were conducted late in the academic year, none of the respondents were under the age of 19. The age profile shown in *Figure 6* (produced by author) indicates that the surveyed population was overwhelmingly mature, supporting the wider national evidence shown in *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.5.4) that Degree Apprenticeships predominately operate as a route into Higher Education (HE) for adults already established in the labour market, rather than for young university entrants.

Figure 6: Gender and age of surveyed apprentices split by age, using age categories used in national data



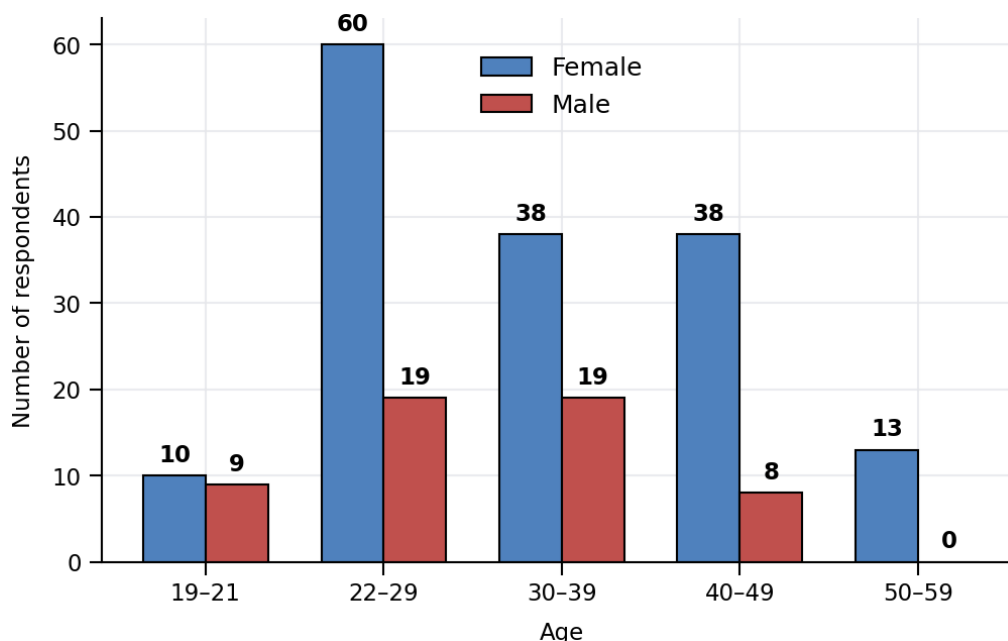
Source: Produced by author. Note that 5 apprentices did not provide age or gender, and percentages are based on the total population that answered the question. Proportions in each age/gender group calculated separately to reduce the likelihood of rounding errors.

In 2018/19, 54 per cent of national Higher Apprenticeship starts were female (Gov.uk, 2025b), which is similar to the 55 per cent of Higher Education (HE) entrants being female (UCAS, 2024). However, 74 per cent of the surveyed population as shown in *Figure 6* (produced by author) were female, likely due to the sizeable proportion of apprentices within the population that were on Health programmes.

Young (age 19-21) apprentices in the surveyed population were more likely to be male, representing 16 per cent of the male apprentices in the population, compared to 6 per cent of the females as shown in *Figure 7* (produced by author). This may be due to the higher number of young apprentices being in the Digital Degree Apprenticeship (DA). The concentration of younger male apprentices within Digital programmes suggests that apprenticeship participation remains strongly influenced by occupational and gendered patterns of recruitment. This finding supports national evidence that DAs may reproduce existing occupational segmentation rather than challenge it.

It is also important to recognise that *Figure 7* (produced by author) shows that 19 (9%) of the apprentices were aged 19-21. These are the only apprentices within the survey who could have progressed directly into the DA from school or college, again reflecting national evidence that DAs are not acting as alternative route to HE for school and college leavers. .

Figure 7: Gender and age of apprentices surveyed, separated into illustrative age categories



Source: Produced by author. Note that 5 apprentices did not provide age or gender, and percentages are based on the total population that answered the question. Proportions in each age/gender group calculated separately to reduce the likelihood of rounding errors.

Chapter 4 presented the number of apprentices surveyed across each course area, noting that the largest subject group within the survey was Health. Apprentices aged 25+ were the majority in the Management, Health, and Social Work apprenticeships. Of the 36 apprentices in Digital, 24 (66%) were aged 19-24, of whom half (n=12) were aged 19-21.

National data for apprentice starts in 2018/19, similarly showed that most apprentices in Management, Health and Social Work were aged 25+, while Digital were younger, with 56 per cent under 24 (Gov.uk; 2025d).

While the general trends aligned, the surveyed apprentices were more likely to be mature and female than Higher/Degree Apprentices nationally at the same time; and the Digital apprentices in the survey were more likely to be young. The surveyed apprentices were also more likely to be female than the HE population, however, this is likely to be due to the substantial number of Health apprentices within the apprenticeship population.

5.2.2 Disability and Ethnicity

Students with disabilities are considered to be under-represented in Higher Education (HE) in England. In 2020/21, the earliest year at which comparable data is available, 19 per cent of HE entrants declared a disability (Gov.uk, 2026b). This compares to 9 per cent of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship (HDA) starts in England in the same year (Gov.uk, 2025b), and 8 per cent (n=17) of survey respondents, noting that 6 per cent did not answer this question. Thus, the surveyed population reflects national apprenticeship trends, which is significantly below the full-time HE population.

Of the apprentices who disclosed a disability, most were in Health (n=14) and/or female (n=14). Disabilities were reported across all age groups but were slightly more common among apprentices aged 30-49 (58%, n=11).

As outlined in Section 4.3.2, ethnicity was collected using a free-text response, recognising the importance of self-definition (Mertens, 2010) and that providing classifications for ethnic origin can miss out mixed ethnicities (Boliver *et al.*, 2015). There was a low response rate to this question, as 20 per cent did not answer the question. Of those that did, 4 per cent identified as being from a Minority Ethnic group. Due to the high non-response rate and the potential for deductive identification of those who identified as being from a Minority Ethnic group, ethnicity was not used for any detailed analysis. However, it was still included, where relevant, as a definition of under-representation. National apprenticeship data shows that in 2018/19, 15 per cent of Higher apprenticeship starts were from a Minority Ethnic background (Gov.uk, 2025b). This compares to 29 per cent of entrants to full-time Higher Education in the same year (HESA, 2020).

Nationally, apprentices with a disability and those from a Minority Ethnic background are under-represented in apprenticeships compared to full-time HE and were under-represented within the surveyed population.

5.2.3 Disadvantage Measured by Geography, and Family Experience of HE

Section 4.3.2.1 outlined the reason for using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) as a measure of the relative disadvantage of areas against one another. As the IMD quintiles each represent 20 per cent of the population, 40 per cent of the UK population would reside in quintiles 1 and 2, which are those considered to be areas of economic disadvantage. Forty per cent (n=88) of surveyed apprentices lived in IMD quintiles 1 and 2, mirroring national Higher Education (HE) entry data (40% in 2019/20) (Gov.uk, 2026b) and exceeding national apprenticeship data (35% in 2020/21) (Gov.uk, 2025b).

The participation of Higher and Degree apprentices, based on IMD, is nationally and within the survey, similar to HE participation.

The Office for Students (2026a) considers family experience of HE as an under-represented characteristic, which is also a key factor within the academic literature. Chapter 3 considered the significant level of discussion around the difficulty for young people in considering or navigating into HE without family or social knowledge and experience of HE. However, reporting and collecting information relating to first generation to HE is problematic as it requires self-reporting and a clear understanding of what is considered within the category of ‘Higher Education’ (HEPI, 2022). While national apprenticeship comparator data is not available, 46 per cent of young students entering HE in 2023/24 claimed to be first generation into HE (HESA, 2025a). Within this survey, 75 per cent (n=165) did not have familial experience of HE. Although this indicates a greater representation of first-generation students within the surveyed apprenticeship population, the lack of comparable national data limits further interpretation.

5.2.4 Multiple Factors of Under-Representation

Table 21 (produced by author) below shows that 97 per cent of the apprentices surveyed would be considered to be under-represented in Higher Education (HE). It is not possible to compare this to the total proportion of under-represented students within English HE as a total is not published (Office for Students, 2023). Consequently, comparisons can only be included for the individual characteristics published, as has been included in the previous sections.

Table 21: Number of surveyed apprentices who would be considered as under-represented in Higher Education, based on characteristics presented in *Table 13* (produced by author; Section 4.4.1)

	Under-represented in HE	Not under- represented in HE	Total
Management	9	0	9
Digital	30	6	36
Health	166	0	166
Social Work	8	0	8
Total	213 (97%)	6	219

Source: Produced by author

The finding that almost all surveyed apprentices would be considered under-represented in HE provides strong evidence that DAs are enrolling learners who possess characteristics commonly associated with widening participation priorities. The national picture of apprenticeships is that apprentices are more likely to be over the age of 21 compared to full-

time university students. Table 22 (produced by author) excluded age as a measure of under-representation, and 87 per cent of surveyed apprentices remained under-represented in HE. This suggests that participation within DAs cannot be explained solely by a mature age profile and that many apprentices possessed multiple characteristics associated with educational disadvantage.

Table 22: Number of surveyed apprentices who would be considered as under-represented in Higher Education, based on characteristics other than age. List of characteristics are available in *Table 13* (produced by author; Section 4.4.1)

	Under-represented in HE	Not under-represented in HE	Total
Management	8	1	9
Digital	24	12	36
Health	152	14	166
Social Work	7	1	8
Total	191 (87%)	28	219

Source: Produced by author

While the data within Table 21 (produced by author) and Table 22 (produced by author) suggests that apprenticeships are commonly enrolling learners who possess at least one characteristic associated with under-representation, the surveys could not go into the level of detail required to check that full- or part-time HE was not an option for the apprentices around the same time as the apprenticeship. The surveys also could not determine whether HE could have been an option for the apprentices in the future. It is possible that the apprentices may have considered full- or part-time HE as mature students, but this could only be explored in the interviews.

5.3 New Recruits and Contract Type

National data presented in *Table 11* (Gov.uk, 2024a; Section 3.8.1) showed that the majority of Higher and Degree (HDA) apprentice starts in 2023 were already employed by their organisation prior to starting their apprenticeship. Of the surveyed group, 85 per cent (n=187) were already employed prior to apprenticeship enrolment.

Table 23 (produced by author) demonstrates that recruitment of new, and young, employees into Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) was limited and concentrated almost entirely within the Digital programme. This finding is consistent with national data showing that 5 per cent of Higher Apprenticeship starts in 2019/20 were under 19, as shown in *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.5.4), and therefore supports the argument that DAs predominately function as an

upskilling mechanism for existing employees rather than as a direct pathway from school or college into HE.

Table 23: Number of surveyed apprentices who were not already working for their employer prior to starting the apprenticeship, split by course and age

	19-21	22-24	25+	Total
Digital	12	11	8	31
Health	0	0	1	1
Total	12	11	9	32

Source: Produced by author

Table 24 (produced by author) shows the number of years that the surveyed apprentices had been with their employer prior to starting their apprenticeship. The distribution shown in this table reinforces the central role of employment shaping access to DAs. Most apprentices had already established significant employment histories before enrolment, indicating that access to HE was frequently dependent upon employer support rather than individual progression through traditional educational routes. Section 5.5 outlines the reasons for the apprentices starting the apprenticeship and considers the reasons based on the employment experience provided in Table 24 (produced by author).

Table 24: The number of years that surveyed apprentices were working for their employer prior to starting the apprenticeship

Number of years working for employer prior to starting the apprenticeship	Number of apprentices	Proportion already working for employer (n=187)
0-1 year	16	9%
1-3 years	61	33%
3-5 years	27	14%
6-10 years	38	20%
11-19 years	20	11%
20+ years	7	4%
No answer	18	10%
Did not previously work for employer	32	-
Total	219	-

Source: Produced by author

There is no nationally published data on contract type, but 5 per cent of surveyed apprentices had temporary contracts. All Social Work apprentices (n=8) and four Health apprentices had temporary contracts. The reasons, and ramifications, of temporary contracts in Social Work were discussed in the interviews.

5.4 Apprenticeship Choice

5.4.1 Other Apprenticeship Options

As Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (HDAs) were a recent legislative development, the survey asked whether the participants were particularly focussed on the programme area of their current apprenticeship prior to enrolment, or whether they had been considering other opportunities.

Twenty-five (11%) had applied for other apprenticeship programmes, and thirteen of these were Health apprentices, who had considered other Health-related apprenticeship programmes. Twelve were Digital apprentices who had not previously worked for their employer.

Of these twelve, seven had applied for other Digital/Computing-related apprenticeships, and five had applied for areas including Finance, Insurance, Engineering, and Medical Research. Four of the 12 had been offered places on other apprenticeships. The wider interest of the Digital group is unsurprising given that these were the apprentices who had not previously been working for their employer prior to the apprenticeship.

It was clear from earlier questions, and the demographic data, that the majority of apprentices were working for their employers already and were likely to be focussed on their existing industries for training opportunities rather than looking elsewhere.

5.4.2 HE Options

Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) were discussed throughout legislation and academic literature as an alternative option for Higher Education (HE), and I expected the apprentices to have previously considered HE study but to have been unable to progress to HE for reasons, based on the literature, relating to cost, Level 3 attainment, or family/social pressures.

Nationally, 43 per cent of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship starts in 2023 had considered alternative training such as a degree (Gov.uk, 2025b). This compares to 58 per cent (n=128) of surveyed apprentices who had previously considered going to university. Of those, half (n=64) had considered the same subject areas as their apprenticeship, and 58 (45%) had applied. This means 26 per cent of the surveyed population had applied for HE when they were at school or college.

The main reasons for not progressing directly to HE from school or college, reflected the reasons expected from the literature:

- Cost: 21 per cent (n=45) were put off by the cost of HE including living costs. Apprentices with disabilities were slightly more likely to cite this reason (30%).
- Attainment: 11 (5%) had not achieved the grades required to go to HE straight from school or college.
- Family commitments: 9 (4%) had family commitments that prevented them from going to HE.

Eleven apprentices had enrolled at university prior to starting to the apprenticeship. Six of these had completed a degree, while five had started a course but had not completed it.

The reasons for not progressing to HE directly from school or college reflect what would have been expected from the academic literature (see for example: Stone, 2023; Busher and James, 2019; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2015; Cochrane, 2015; O'Shea and Stone, 2011; Chrisie, 2007; Bandura, 1994).

The finding that half of the apprentices who had considered HE in school or college had progressed into an apprenticeship in the same subject area could have been an interesting insight into the commitment that the apprentices had felt to their course area when in school or college. However, 60 of the 64 who remained interested in the same area were in Health, and all had worked for their employer prior to starting the apprenticeship. This data indicates that students under-represented in HE who are unable to progress directly into HE from school or college but who have an interest in Health, may seek employment within this sector. It also indicates that NHS apprenticeship provision may offer an important HE progression route for those who were unable to start HE when they left school or college. This was an area that was explored further at interview and the findings are presented in Chapter 6.

It is also important to consider that while 58 per cent of the surveyed apprentices had considered HE while at school or college, more than half of these (55%) did not apply to HE. These apprentices were put off HE before the application stage. Also importantly, 42 per cent of the surveyed apprentices had not previously considered HE yet were now undertaking HE study. The main reason for these apprentices to take up the apprenticeship opportunity was career aspirations (48 per cent). I have not found anything in the academic literature that considers how these apprentices would view and approach HE given their lack of earlier interest. The progression of these apprentices into an HE qualification suggests that apprenticeships have played a role in broadening HE participation by making it feel more relevant or attainable, compared to full-time HE, as was stated within the apprentice interviews.

The interviews focussed on apprentices who had previously considered HE in order to determine how their pathways had developed, so wider discussion about those who had not previously considered HE must be left to future research.

5.5 Information, Advice and Guidance, and Reasons for Apprenticeship

The academic literature relating to participation in Higher Education (HE) covered the importance of young people having access to information, advice, and guidance (IAG) to make informed decisions and to navigate to HE. The surveys found that employers played a significant role in supporting apprenticeship applications, as shown in Table 25 (produced by author), more so than might be expected in traditional recruitment contexts. The navigational role that employers seem to have performed is one that would typically be associated with school or college careers guidance teams or widening participation interventions. Rather than schools, colleges or universities facilitating progression to HE, employers instead acted as the key source of information, encouragement, and support. This is perhaps unsurprising given that employers had an Apprenticeship Levy to spend but links to earlier sections of this thesis regarding navigational capacity and probable selves. Employers have not traditionally been considered in terms of their potential impact on navigational capacity, and for the apprentices, the employers have actively moved them past their probable selves into possible selves. The active role of the employer was an unexpected finding within this research.

Table 25: Who supported the apprentice in applying for the apprenticeship

	Management	Digital	Health	Social Work	Total
Already in employment					
Parent	-	-	13	1	14
Friend	1	-	22	3	26
Someone in the organisation	4	4	119	4	131
School careers advisor	-	-	1	-	1
Other: University academic	1	1	-	-	2
Not in employment					
Parent	-	14	-	-	14
Friend	-	10	1	-	11
Someone in the organisation	-	11	-	-	11
School careers advisor	-	7	-	-	7

Source: Produced by author. Note: some apprentices did not answer this question, and some selected multiple options.

Section 5.3 showed that 12 of the apprentices not in employment were aged 19-21 and could potentially have progressed straight from school or college into the apprenticeship. Of these, four had been supported by their school careers adviser and five by the organisation directly. The remaining three were helped by family and friends. While this question related to applying for the apprenticeship rather than deciding whether it was right for them, the answers indicate that the employer played a vital role in supporting apprentices in navigating to the apprenticeship – even as new prospective employees. As noted above, it was perhaps unsurprising to see that existing employees were supported by their employer, but new Digital apprentices had also been supported by their employer. This was therefore a point that was discussed with the Digital employer at interview as will be explored in Chapter 6.

Apprentices were given a free text option for the reason that they were undertaking a Degree Apprenticeship, and the responses were coded thematically. The largest group (42%, n=93) cited 'career aspirations' as their reason, followed by the benefits of working and studying at the same time (22%, n=49) and financial motivations (19%, n=42). Nine apprentices (4%) were required to do the course by their employer, and seven of these were in Health. Many of those who wanted to do the apprenticeship to further their career also mentioned that the funding helped to make it possible, and it was clear that very few, if any, would have gone to university if the apprenticeship was not available.

The apprentices who were aged 19-21 seemed to have made active choices to apply for an apprenticeship rather than a full-time degree, mentioning that they could get their degree while also working and/or earning money. Older apprentices, particularly those who had been working for their employer for some time, were more likely to answer that the apprenticeship was important for their career development and progression.

5.6 Summary of Quantitative Research

In summary, the majority of the apprenticeship population surveyed would have been considered as being under-represented in HE based on one or more characteristics. The majority would have been classed as mature students. Apprentices from minority ethnic backgrounds were under-represented in the surveyed population and in the national apprenticeship population, compared to the national HE population.

Apprentices were predominately mature, female, and in work prior to starting the apprenticeship; and just 12 of the group could have progressed directly from school or college into the programme. Most of the apprentices did not have familial experience of HE. While 58 per cent had considered going to university straight from school or college, only 26 per cent

had applied, citing cost, academic attainment, and family commitments as the reasons for not progressing.

Apprentices were clear on the benefits of the apprenticeship, both in terms of the funding that allowed them to study while being paid, but also the opportunity to progress in their career.

The next chapter goes on to explore the qualitative findings, allowing more detailed exploration of barriers to HE progression and motivations for undertaking an apprenticeship.

Chapter 6: Findings: Qualitative Research

In this chapter, I present key findings from the qualitative data. As set out in Chapter 4, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was used to identify and interpret themes in the interview data, which have been used to provide the organising structure for this chapter. Each theme includes quotes for illustration purposes.

This chapter is structured around the following themes and sub-themes:

- Participation in Apprenticeships: Responding to the pressures of neoliberalism in HE, the Apprenticeship Levy and upskilling; aspiration and attainment; family commitments and gender; widening participation by accident rather than design.
- Possible Selves and Identity: Possible selves and navigational capacity; perceptions of advantage and disadvantage; professional and apprentice identities; from employee to student; risk.
- Delivering Apprenticeships: Academics: Negotiating the apprenticeship contract; managing power relationships within the university; the apprenticeship curriculum and delivering programmes with employers; regulation: Ofsted
- Monitoring apprenticeships

Each theme and sub-theme are structured in the same way. I begin with a concise introduction based on relevant legislation and academic literature, followed by evidence from the interviews. While the findings reported in Chapter 5 were based on survey results from apprentices, the findings in this Chapter reflect the experiences of apprentices, university staff, and employers. The findings reflect experience across design, development, and delivery of apprenticeship programmes.

Where necessary, I present the data in a chronological way. For example, from programme development and delivery through to apprentice experience; or from experience to oversight. Data is also presented in a way that evidences different perspectives of the same theme.

6.1 Participation in Apprenticeships

The first theme explores institutional motivations for engaging with Degree Apprenticeships, then turns to employer perspectives. It goes on to consider issues of aspiration and attainment for apprentices, including the influence of family and friends. This theme concludes with the question of whether widening participation occurred by accident rather than design.

6.1.1 Responding to the Pressures of Neoliberalism in Higher Education

Chapter 2 outlined legislative developments across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as successive governments initially attempted to increase Higher Education (HE) participation via increased capacity, before focussing on activity related to access. I argued that gradual neoliberalism of the HE sector was exacerbated through the introduction of tuition fees, with the subsequent flatlining and declining value of the fee (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2025), and a governmental push towards competition. In my view, universities faced significant financial pressures and consequently were open to the potential for income diversification through Degree Apprenticeships (DAs).

Academics working in universities were aware of these pressures, as explained by Jean, the Course Leader for the Management apprenticeship:

“The reason we want a[n] ... apprenticeship programme, is because there is a bunch of money available to do something that we already kind of do. And there are, I mean there are other loftier ambitions about ... supporting the local economy and supporting local businesses. And I get that, but ultimately... it's a revenue stream. So, it's a way of getting student numbers, or, theoretically, it's a way of increasing student numbers.”

In 2017, changes to the funding of Professional Health degree-programmes meant that courses such as Nursing were no longer funded by the NHS but were instead subject to tuition fees payable via tuition fee loans (House of Commons, 2017). This brought them into line with other undergraduate courses in England and resulted in an 18 per cent decline in applications to Nursing degrees (UCAS, 2017a). Ellie, Course Leader for the Health apprenticeships, was concerned that a drop in prospective students would increase competition between universities in her region:

“So as a university, we certainly didn't want to miss out on being part of this [Degree Apprenticeships] and supporting what we thought at the time was simply a new way of funding [existing] programmes.”

At this early stage, all academics interviewed considered apprenticeship programmes to be a new way of funding existing provision. Apprenticeship legislation brought with it the expectation that universities and employers would act as partners, and that employers would play a key role in developing the programmes to meet skills-needs (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013). Universities often had existing employer collaborations on areas including work placements, careers support, guest speakers, and graduate employment; which meant that sustaining strong employer relationships was important (Lester, 2020; Bravenboer, 2019;

Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). Martin, the Course Leader for the Digital apprenticeship, explained:

"We're doing it for as long as we can for the cash. The moment the cash stops, or we don't need it ... I think we would walk. The only reason to stay doing it is our strategic partnership with [a] major employer. If it wasn't for that, stuff it! It's not worth the hassle."

Chapter 2 highlighted the work, and investment, that universities were required to undertake by the Office for Students as part of their commitment to widening participation and recognised that many universities experience a recruitment benefit from outreach activity (Flodin and Vidovich, 2019). However, Frances, who led Degree Apprenticeship (DA) development within her institution, experienced resistance:

"[My University] probably doesn't fit the bill in terms of doing as much as it could as far as widening participation. And so that was part of the leverage if you like for saying apprenticeships is a good idea, because this is a way of widening... and actually, that had a backlash, because the academics that I tried to get involved said, 'Oh, do we want this type of student?'. And literally, I had that, you know, 'we don't want these types of students, it's going to be really difficult'. Yeah. And so, it's, although obviously, strategically, it was a good thing to do, the academics on the ground, didn't want it."

Frances' quote is significant because it suggests that widening participation was not universally viewed as a benefit within universities. The resistance described by Frances indicates that some academic staff may have perceived apprentices as educationally risky learners rather than as students whose inclusion reflected institutional widening participation objectives. It also could imply that some university academics have a classist or discriminatory view of students under-represented in HE, which could have a wide range of implications both for the pedagogical experience of these students and for the future of HE as it moves towards a more skills-based focus. This would be an interesting area for further research.

Other than Frances, none of the academics considered widening participation as a driver for their institutional engagement with apprenticeships.

6.1.2 The Apprenticeship Levy and Upskilling

The legislative developments that created Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) did so with an incentive for large employers that the new Apprenticeship Levy could only be spent on apprenticeship training. While this has changed in 2025/26 with the move to the Growth and Skills Levy, in the early years of apprenticeships, the Levy was still very new and often

represented a significant amount of money for large employers (Baker, 2019). All employers interviewed were paying the Levy and one estimated their bill to be over £1 million per year. All had also been engaged in apprenticeship delivery prior to the new Standards being developed, but the size of the Levy elevated apprenticeships to a strategic priority, as recognised by Beth (NHS):

“once the Levy came in, we had to really look at how we were using apprenticeships.”

Data presented in *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.5.4) on apprenticeship starts showed that in 2019/20, when this research took place, 67 per cent of DA starts were aged over 25, indicating that apprenticeships mainly function as an upskilling route for existing employees. Both Louise (Social Work employer) and Beth (NHS) prioritised internal progression, recruiting externally only to fill gaps. Both saw apprenticeships as an important incentive to improve recruitment to lower-level roles as they offered clear progression pathways. Louise (Social Work) observed:

“We are able to demonstrate more and more... the use of apprenticeships as a clear progression pathway... that didn't exist before... I give a lot of information, advice and guidance to people who want to be a social worker ... and I've noticed, I now have different conversations with them, because they may want to start even in homes first as a re-enablement support worker... but they've got their eye on being a Social Worker, and they've heard about the apprenticeship programme... The apprenticeship legislation on the whole has had a positive impact... for our workforce.”

By contrast, Mary (Digital employer) considered apprenticeships to be an important opportunity for growing her workforce from school and college leavers. This reflects national data presented in *Table 3* (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020; Section 2.4.4), which showed that Digital and IT had younger average starts, indicating that they were more likely to be new recruits. The survey findings evidenced that employers played a vital role in supporting new recruits through the application process into the Digital apprenticeship, and Mary explained that this was an important part of her organisation's recruitment strategy. Mary's organisation delivered talks and information sessions in schools, colleges, and in the organisation, encouraging both prospective apprentices and their parents to attend.

However, Mary found recruitment challenging and had to recruit apprentices nationally in order to fill spaces. This raised a significant challenge for the organisation in ensuring a positive experience for the apprentice, raising questions about whether the apprentice should be considered as an *employee* or a *university student*. Mary noted that there were discussions

with her university partner about how to support the apprentice, but it was difficult for apprentices to be in student accommodation alongside those on full-time courses as the apprentice would spend 80 per cent of their time in the workplace instead of at university:

“We have an example where we’ve had people... relocate to come and work for us... But obviously, it has challenges because you know, 18-year-olds do leave home and go to university, but everything’s very set up around them doing that. So, coming here, you know, it’s much more of a challenge for us about how do we make them feel at home and keep them here and make them feel, you know, it is difficult.”

The Digital employer was a large national employer, but Mary’s site was based in a town. Chapter 2 discussed geographical disadvantage on aspiration, but I have not found any literature relating to geographical disadvantage in DAs. Mary’s experience of managing and supporting apprentices raises important questions around the support of apprentices who are moving to rural areas or small towns for DAs, particularly when they are young school- and college-leavers.

6.1.3 Aspiration and Attainment

Much is written in widening participation literature about aspiration and attainment, and the impact individually and collectively on participation in Higher Education (HE) (see for example: Harrison and Waller, 2018; Gale and Parker, 2015; Webb *et al.*, 2015b; Cochrane, 2015; Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2015; Burke, 2012; Brooks, 2004). While Bourdieu (1986) emphasised the influence of social groups and communities on individual aspiration, others such as Appadurai (2004) focused on the capacity to work toward individual goals through cultural and social experiences. One of the expectations of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) was that they would be attractive to those who might otherwise be unable to go to HE (Irons, 2017), yet at the time of writing, I have been unable to locate any literature relating to the motivations for mature apprenticeship entrants.

The quantitative findings in Chapter 5 show that 58 per cent of the apprentices surveyed previously considered HE, and Chapter 4 outlined the selection process for interview participants. All participants had previously considered going into HE, but for some, the possible self of a university student, had been lost early in their schooling:

“As a 16-year-old I always wanted to work for the NHS, but I left school with not many GCSEs. So, I didn’t want to go on to do A levels and go to university, like everyone usually does... I just sort of knew halfway through school, I wasn’t bright enough to go

to university, so I didn't even think about it. You know, it never entered my head." Iona, Health apprentice (44)

Importantly, Iona's account suggests that aspiration alone was insufficient for participation in HE. Her experience illustrates how individuals may exclude university from their probable selves despite having occupational aspirations that would benefit from degree-level study. Carrie, a Health apprentice (27), did apply to university:

"So, I wanted to be a nurse since I was at school really. And I applied to go to university when I finished school, but I didn't get particularly good grades, so I didn't get in. And so, then I just went out into the world and got a job."

Similarly to Iona, Carrie saw her academic attainment as being the end of her aspiration for HE or for becoming a Nurse. Iona (44), also saw finance as a significant barrier to HE:

"I think back then it always seemed that you had to be rich to go to university. I didn't come from a rich family. No one in our family had ever been to university."

A key part of apprenticeship legislation was the funding available via the Levy to provide training that was completely free to the apprentices. The findings presented in Chapter 5 show that 21 per cent of the survey respondents viewed cost as a barrier to HE progression when they were in school or college. The financial support for apprenticeships was a key benefit noted by all interviewees:

"It was also the financial side of it, the fact that I was funded for a degree, and I was still getting paid to do it. I think that is a really attractive part of the of the apprenticeship. And kind of that then outweighed the fact that yes, I would be working evenings, and yes, I would be putting a lot of my own time into this. Because fundamentally, I was still getting paid to do that." Rory, Social Work apprentice (29)

Similarly, Keith (Digital apprentice, 24) recognised the importance of avoiding student debt, and the potential for graduating at the same salary as a graduate from the full-time programme:

"Obviously three years down the line, you're just the same as they [full-time students] are. And you've got the job, you've got the money saved up, you don't have the debt."

While the apprentices recognised the benefits of their degree programme, there were also concerns about returning to education. Rose, a 41-year-old Health apprentice, was concerned that she was too old to go to university:

“I think a lot of people, especially my age, you can’t go back to uni. Going back to uni, it’s not really feasible, is it?”

This was also a concern of Keith, a Digital apprentice, who, at 24, was one of the youngest apprentice participants in the research:

“I’ve been in education longer than normal... I’m 24 now, I’ve been in education for a long time.”

It was interesting to note that the apprentices largely saw young students as the norm, and that even an apprentice in their mid-twenties did not consider themselves as a ‘typical’ student. There are further discussions about how apprentices viewed themselves in Section 6.2.

Much is written in the academic literature about the influence and confidence that comes with social and cultural capital (see for example: Cochrane, 2015; Bourdieu, 1986), which could lead to those already at an advantage in applying for HE also being at an advantage in their application to undertake an apprenticeship. Further research could look into whether this is the case in reality, but as the significant majority of apprentices in this research, and nationally, were already working for their employer, they had already cleared the hurdle of an interview for employment. The issue of social and cultural capital impacting success in an apprenticeship application was therefore not an obvious factor.

The Health apprentices spoke about going through an interview to be accepted onto the apprenticeship, but it was a supportive discussion between their employer’s education team, the university, and the apprentice. The fact that many had been supported by their employer to apply for and start the apprenticeship, led to a strong feeling of gratitude amongst the apprentices:

“I am extremely grateful, because yeah, I would have never got my nursing degree without this apprenticeship. Ever.” Carrie, Health apprentice (27)

6.1.4 Family Commitments and Gender

Widening participation literature frequently highlights the challenges for women returning to education, particularly due to the household division of labour and caring responsibilities (White, 2023; Busher and James, 2019; Mallman and Lee, 2014; O’Shea and Stone, 2011; Bandura, 1994; Beck, 1992). Six of the interviewees referred to having children, but the impact of having a family on their apprenticeship commitment was clearly gendered. Ruby, a Health apprentice (41), had put her ambitions on hold until her children were older:

“So, I used to work at the hospital doing admin. I saw nurses and things around and thought, ‘oh, I quite fancy doing that’. But my children were very young at the time... and my other half works away, so while the children was small, I couldn't have gone into full-time education and done placements and things... And then these apprenticeships came along. So yeah, it's kind of a good opportunity to be able to work and get your degree.”

By contrast, Terence, a Management apprentice (33), also mentioned that he had young children, but while his home life was busier, it had not affected his studies:

“And about that time [starting the apprenticeship] my wife was pregnant. So yeah, during the course, I've had another child. So, I've got two kids now... that have both been born during the degree. So, it's been quite full on.”

Terence had two children, both of whom were clearly young, but did not mention his wife being unsupportive in any way. Elsewhere in his interview, Terence referred to ‘running’ the family business while also building a house during his apprenticeship, implying that his wife was managing the childcare while he did other things.

Douglas, a Health apprentice (31), described direct study support from his partner at home, suggesting that having HE-literate capital within the house was particularly advantageous:

“My partner's kind of been like, she's actually a bit of a Godsend, you know, she loves referencing, which is, yeah, it really is helpful.”

Some apprentices said little about their partners, but two of the female apprentices had experienced resistance from their partners, including Rose, a Health apprentice (41):

“My partner's not so keen. He's not you know, he's not against it. But at the same time, he's just like, ‘Well, why would you want to do that your age?’ And he's like ‘it's extra work and da da da da da’. But yeah. He hasn't stopped me doing it. My actual family are thrilled that I'm doing it. Yeah, friends don't really say too much about it to be fair. It doesn't interfere. I go to work. I come back. Same as always. Nothing's really ever changed.”

Rose's assertion that nothing had changed indicates that those around her, other than her “actual family”, are not interested in the fact she is studying for a degree, even though things have definitely changed for her.

Charlotte, a Social Work apprentice (49), found that her husband was unsupportive of the apprenticeship:

“My parents are [supportive], my son is. Not so much my husband. Yeah, he can be a bit of a pain in the ass, but he can say what he likes as well, he knows where the door is. I’m too old and too, I don’t know if it’s wise or what, to worry about him. He’s big enough and ugly enough to look after himself. And he knows where his bread is buttered, he ain’t going nowhere. So, he either deals with it or he doesn’t... if he’s gonna have a paddy¹², because I want to do something, he can have a paddy. I’m not gonna, I’m not playing into it. I’ll let him get on with it.”

Taken together, Charlotte and Rose’s accounts suggest that family responsibilities and domestic expectations remained important barriers to educational progression for women, even when DAs reduced the financial barriers associated with full-time HE. Their partners did not seem to recognise the purpose of the apprenticeship and what it could mean professionally and financially for Rose and Charlotte. Both were in roles within Health and Social Work with limited salary or career progression, whereas becoming a Social Worker or Registered Nurse provides significant progression opportunities.

The structure of the apprenticeship is such that 20 per cent of the employment hours are expected to be in training, and much of the promotional information about apprenticeships suggests that this is the extent of study required to complete the apprenticeship (Office for Students, 2026). The reality for the interviewees, however, was that they were finding that they had to use annual leave to manage the workload. Douglas, a Health apprentice (31), used a large amount of annual leave to work on his dissertation:

“I’ve been allowed to take annual leave when I’ve needed to, for example, I took I think two and a half weeks off to finish off my dissertation.”

While Charlotte (Social Work, 49) recognised that the information from the university and her employer was not to use annual leave:

“You know, we’ve been told we shouldn’t take our annual leave to do essays, what the hell are we meant to do them in then?”

I would expect that apprentices with family responsibilities would be unlikely to be able to use annual leave for assignments, representing a barrier for them in being able to successfully access or participate in the apprenticeship. Perhaps most important is Charlotte’s comment that they have been told that they “*shouldn’t take*” annual leave to support their academic work.

¹² The use of the word ‘paddy’ is a colloquialism to refer to having a tantrum. It derives from a slang term, which was a nickname for Irish people. This would now be seen as derogatory to Irish people and is a term not commonly used.

The rules of the apprenticeship are that the studies, including assignments, should happen in the 20 per cent off-the-job training, and that additional time taken out of normal working hours should be compensated by additional payments or time-off-in-lieu (Department for Education, 2026). On a typical 37 hour per week employment contract, 20 per cent would equate to 7.5 hours per week. This is different to the expectations of full-time students who are encouraged to view their teaching and independent studies as a full-time job for three years. This could lead to apprentices being set up to struggle relative to full-time students.

6.1.5 Widening Participation by Accident Rather than Design

Chapters 2 and 3 outlined the expectation that Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) could increase access to Higher Education (HE). The quantitative findings were that the majority of apprentices in the surveyed population were from under-represented groups, and the interviewees were selected on the basis of being under-represented in HE. However, for the employers and universities, the participation of under-represented groups was by accident than design. The employers in this research did not set out to increase access to HE via apprenticeships as their priority was mainly to upskill existing staff. Those who did recruit new apprentices did not include under-represented characteristics as part of the selection process.

Recruitment to the apprenticeships was largely based on existing employment and geography, as apprentices had to be able to access the university for their training. Both Beth (NHS) and Louise (Social Work) initially offered apprenticeships to internal candidates, although Beth subsequently opened up recruitment externally from the NHS to ensure she could meet her target numbers. While it was not the purpose of the apprenticeship, for Louise (Social Work), there was no question that it was widening participation:

“I genuinely believe it has widened participation... And one of the questions we asked in our evaluation is ‘Would people have been able to become a social worker without this’ and it was a resounding no, they wouldn’t of, if they hadn’t been given this opportunity they would not have otherwise. Because they couldn’t, they couldn’t step off work. They couldn’t reduce their hours.”

This quotation directly supports one of the central findings of this thesis: DAs created access to HE for individuals who could not realistically step away from employment, even though widening participation was not necessarily the primary objective employers. In the case of both Social Work and Nursing, full-time students are already likely to be from under-represented groups (Corten *et al.*, 2025; White, 2023).

The need to earn money is a known barrier for mature students considering HE (Busher and James, 2019), and the apprenticeship in Social Work made the opportunity possible for Louise's employees. In contrast, Mary (Digital), was recruiting outside the business for apprentices but found that those living close to the organisation and available to apply to the apprenticeship, were generally young, white, and male. She questioned how to attract more women and those from Minority Ethnic backgrounds:

"Our intake ... is predominantly white males. And there is nothing wrong with that. However, we're very well aware, it doesn't reflect, you know, reflect the local area that, you know, why are we not getting female candidates, more candidates from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, you know, that sort of thing."

In Section 6.1.1, Frances, a University Apprenticeships Coordinator, had described the response of her academic colleagues to the potential for increasing widening participation through apprenticeships, as being negative. The academics assumed the apprentices would be difficult to teach, possibly due to an assumption of them entering HE without the normal entry requirements for their courses. The data presented in *Table 10* (Office for Students, 2022; Section 3.7.1) demonstrated that HE students entering from vocational qualifications can achieve less favourable academic outcomes than those entering with A Level. This data had not been published at the time of the primary research, and Frances was not therefore asked about the entry profile of full-time students. It is very possible that Frances' academic colleagues were already teaching students who could be considered 'widening participation' students, but they clearly thought there would be a problem with those enrolling via an apprenticeship.

Louise (Social Work) used the apprenticeships to upskill existing employees, but she also considered the importance of allowing a wide selection of employees to apply for the programme:

"We wanted lower-level entry requirements rather than traditional UCAS points. We wanted people with a vocational Level three, so long as they met, and we put in place a robust recruitment process and selection process. So long as they met that, that was enough. And it's paid off. Learning has been, I think it's been harder for those with lower-level qualifications. But again, that has widened participation, it has enabled them. And as you know, we're six months off our first cohort becoming qualified."

While the priority for Louise as an employer was to upskill existing staff, she was clearly interested in providing the opportunity to staff who might otherwise have been unable to meet

the entry requirements for full-time study. She was cognisant of the potential for the apprenticeships to widen participation, and it was something she was keen to support, if possible, within her apprenticeship planning.

The concern that apprentices might need additional support to succeed in HE meant that Anne, a Student Support Lead, was finding that her university was encouraging apprentices to access support in a way that full-time students were not:

“We’ve traditionally worked in the frame that we work with adults who largely have, you know, their own autonomy and, you know, ability to navigate the student experience and are able to make decisions... but in the setup with apprentices, I feel like actually there’s a fine line that we’re a bit a little bit at risk of crossing, in that we’re just shoving people through a sausage machine. And my example of that has been that with undergraduate students... we largely just promote our services... Whereas with apprentices, [the regulators] wanted something much more rigorous, much more reaching out to that person and booking the appointment for them, you know. It’s slightly, ‘well if they’ve said this, then no, there’s no choice they need to come and speak to a disability advisor.’”

It is possible that Anne’s university required this level of action to maximise apprentice completion rates, which are monitored as part of regulatory requirements (Department for Education, 2026a); but it clearly represented a different approach to normal practice.

Anne’s experience of her university pushing her team to be more proactive with apprentices than full-time students, reflects the view of Ellie, the Health apprenticeship course leader, that the apprentices were having their academic content “*spoon-fed*”. Both felt that more was being done *to* the apprentices compared to full-time students, as full-time students were treated like adults who could choose their level of engagement with both student support and their academic studies. It is possible that this level of support is necessary for apprentices in order to ensure equality of outcome to full-time students given the potential for them to have been admitted to their course with lower academic attainment than full-time students. However, neither Ellie or Anne indicated that their approach to apprentices was based on the assessment of individual apprentices’ academic ability or wider educational needs.

For example, three of the apprentices (Terence, Keith, and Jane) had all either started or completed a degree prior to their apprenticeship and had the Level 3 qualifications required for university. In comparison, some of the apprentices were in older age groups (e.g. aged 40+) and had not undertaken any further study since finishing school. The level of support required

across the cohort could therefore have been quite different, but all the apprentices interviewed were treated the same by their universities.

The delivery of apprenticeships requires training providers to assess apprentices' prior knowledge before they start the course (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2018a), but academics reported that this was often not completed by university apprenticeship departments, requiring the need to 'catch up' mid-course:

"I was told they needed to have completed it [the assessment of prior knowledge] in sort of, the middle of their first year. So, I ended up organising a couple of workshops where I got all the apprentices together and said this is a document that should have been done. We are now going to do this... and I rather unsubtly said, 'Don't say that you're excellent in any of the things'." Jean, Management Course Leader/academic

Jean clearly recognised the importance of the assessment showing that the apprentices did not already know too much as this would affect the level of funding her university was eligible to claim for the programme.

The experiences of the apprentices and employers seem to indicate that for this cohort, DAs provided HE access that otherwise would not have existed for them, although it was not explicitly designed for that purpose. Selection for the programme was based on suitability, interest, geographical accessibility, and meeting workforce priorities.

6.2 Possible Selves and Identity

This next theme considers how possible selves shaped pathways into apprenticeships, and how the identity of apprentices were affected by their experience of studying. The discussion of identity spans the apprentices' perception of advantage and disadvantage compared to full-time students, their perception of differences between the apprenticeship and full-time programmes; and the identity of 'professional' and 'student'. This section concludes with a discussion on risk. This section focusses on the experience of apprentices but includes insight from employers and academics where relevant.

6.2.1 Possible Selves and Navigational Capacity

The theory of possible selves is an important part of widening participation literature relating to aspiration (Markus and Nurius, 1986) as it identifies the role that a wide range of factors, including cultural, economic, social, and familial experiences have on making a future self a 'possible' self (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011; Rossiter, 2007; Nurius and Marcus, 1990). In Chapter 3, I introduced the concept of 'probable selves' – the self that feels inevitable if nothing

changes to affect the future pathway of an individual. As also discussed in Chapter 3, Sfard and Prusak (2005) suggested that a disconnect between a 'designated' identity, the stories one believes as having the potential to become part of their identity, and their 'actual' identity, can cause unhappiness.

Some of the apprentices clearly had an idea of a possible self or a designated identity when they were growing up, but circumstances led to those seeming to be impossible. In Section 6.1.3, and in surveys, attainment at school and financial concerns were highlighted as barriers to progressing straight to Higher Education (HE) from school or college. As suggested by Sfard and Prusak (2005), the inability to progress towards a possible self or designated identity, clearly caused unhappiness, but the apprentices settled into their actual identity, their probable self, until something changed. Carrie, a Health apprentice (27), was quoted in Section 6.1.3 as having not achieved the grades to be accepted into university for a Nursing degree. She explained how a single encounter changed things for her:

"So, then I just went out into the world and got a job... six years I was just out working. And then I actually met someone... and she is a matron at the hospital, and she told me about the apprenticeship. And she said, you know, if you join as a healthcare assistant, and then you can obviously apply for the apprenticeship and then work your way up. And so that's what I did."

The significance of this account lies in the role of an employer representative in transforming HE from an unattainable aspiration into a realistic opportunity. The route into HE emerged through employment rather than through educational guidance or outreach.

For Keith (Digital, 24) however, his possible self within the apprenticeship was based on seeing others take that route:

"I knew a few people from school had gone on to do it [the apprenticeship]. So, I applied for it, and then I got it, and it was kind of a relief, and I'm really happy with getting it."

Employers in Health and Social Work amplified navigational capacity by advertising apprenticeship opportunities around the workplace. Education or training and development teams within the organisations liaised with managers, delivered talks and workshops, and offered one-to-one guidance. In many ways, apprentices were actively guided through the process to becoming an apprentice as their employers played a significant supportive role.

However, a powerful sense of a possible self was also important for the apprentices in continuing in their studies. Many of them commented on the difficulty of balancing academic

work with a day-job or family life, and Beth (employer - NHS) referred to the apprenticeship as being “*not an easy journey*” and requiring “*resilience*” to get through it. For Charlotte (Social Work, 49), her possible self of becoming a Social Worker was key to her perseverance:

“I have found it very stressful. I found it hugely stressful. But as they say, it'll be worth it in the end. I think we're bloody stupid... I could have gone up the grades up to the top of a grade five. And I thought, 'No, I still want to be a Social Worker.' Why did I do this? I could have been earning the money and not had a problem. Not put myself through this, but I did.”

Charlotte's focus on what she wanted to be, and to achieve, was an important part of managing the challenges of the apprenticeship.

6.2.2 Perceptions of Advantage and Disadvantage

Some of the Apprenticeship Standards were developed to lead to professional qualifications already offered at degree level, including Nursing and Social Work, which means it could be assumed that there would be significant similarities between the apprenticeship content and the full-time degree. There is limited literature covering the experience for apprentices in universities, but wider research maintains that if the academic expectations of apprentices were markedly different, or perceived to be different, than for full-time students, the result could be problematic for apprentices (McArthur, 2020; Baker, 2019).

At the time of this research, it was common practice for apprentices to be taught alongside full-time students, although this has since been identified as a problematic method of delivery (Lester, 2020). Social Work, Management, and Digital apprentices, were in classes with full-time students; while the Health apprentices mainly had separate classes but interacted with full-time students on placement in their hospitals. Almost all apprentices thought that they would be better prepared for future employment than full-time students. Douglas, (Health, 31), said:

“I think that a really important thing to kind of remember is that actually, we are going to have newly qualified Registered Nurses with a vast amount experience behind them prior to even getting their degree... for student nurses who have gone through the regular pathway, they'll be very rigid in the way they approach things... we need to be a lot more fluid in the way we kind of approach Nursing. But that comes with time and experience.”

This was also supported by Charlotte (Social Work, 49):

“Will I be better trained? Possibly. Possibly, because we have context to what we're learning. Whereas they [full-time students] don't necessarily.”

The apprentices clearly felt that their identity as an employee, and their experience of the workplace, was a significant advantage for their future employment. Louise, the Social Work employer, also viewed the apprentices' employment within the organisation as a positive:

“they [are] able to bring that insight from such a place of knowledge already. And that's what I think we will see post-qualifying and of course, the other benefits when you've developed them in your organisation is that they know all the systems. Yeah, they just know it. And so, you're already at a different place. Everything from recording systems for case notes, to just understanding how HR works. So that makes a difference. Our best hopes are that they are they are practice ready.”

Louise's view was surprising in that full-time students also undertake Social Work placements, so should also develop a strong understanding of the organisation through their studies. However, Louise clearly thought that the act of developing them as an employee was preferential to the full-time university programmes.

6.2.3 Perceived Differences between Apprenticeships and Full-time Programmes

The apprentices had a strong view of the differences between their course and the full-time programmes. Apprenticeship routes within the research varied from being delivered as a three-year programme (Social Work) to a four-year programme either delivered as a full qualification (Management, Digital), or as a 2+2 Foundation Degree plus Bachelor Degree top-up (Health), compared to the equivalent three-year full-time programmes. While some full-time students may have long holiday periods where they can choose to work or undertake other activities, apprentices were required to be in training for 20 per cent of their annual working hours. Some apprentices perceived there to be a disadvantage in the depth or pace of taught content. Ruby (Health, 41) reflected:

“I don't feel like we get as great an education as a full-time student... So, they do blocks of placement and blocks at university don't they, so I think they get a lot more in-depth education. So, for example, when we did our anatomy and physiology module, it's 10 weeks long, and you'll go in for once a week. And so, in the morning they'll teach you one system, and in the afternoon, they'll teach you another system. And even the teachers are saying, normally we would spend like a whole day just teaching one part of the system, whereas it all seemed a little bit rushed for us because we were literally one day a week.”

Carrie (Health, 27) saw a difference in the expectations of apprentices versus full-time students while in the workplace or on placement, where apprentices were required to work more hours to log the same number of practice hours as full-time student nurses:

“when you’re a conventional student nurse, if you work a 12-and-a-half-hour shift, you can claim 12-and-a-half-hours on your timesheet...The whole time that you arrive on the ward to you leave the ward, all your breaks, everything are included, you get 12-and-a-half-hours that count towards your hours. As apprentices, because we’re getting paid and we don’t get paid for a lunch break, we’re not allowed to claim the lunch break, so we’re only allowed 11-and-a-half-hours, which means we have to do more shifts over the two years than the conventional nursing students to get the same amount of hours.”

Carrie also talked about her experience that as a Healthcare Assistant, when she was working, she was always seen to be working and never seen to be in ‘off-the-job’ training unless there was a learning opportunity that she could take without affecting the care on her ward. Her work and assessed placement time were mixed up to the extent that she was always in work and never seen to be on placement. Iona (Health, 44), however, had placements that were separate to her work time, but still found that there was a difference in expectations of her compared to full-time student nurses:

“Because you work for the Trust, people are just like, ‘well, you know what you’re doing, just get on with it’ sort of thing. Whereas student nurses tend to get a bit more input because... they have to learn everything. So, I found on some placements I’ve had to really push to be invited to be shown stuff. They just think you should know it already, but I don’t.”

For Ruby, Carrie and Iona, the differences they perceived between the full-time and apprenticeship programmes meant that they felt disadvantaged by being an apprentice. The view that they were expected to do more, as outlined by Carrie, was supported by Charlotte (Social Work, 49) in her assessment of the additional work apprentices had to do at the end of the Social Work programme compared to full-time students:

“Our last 60 credits... is harder to get than the [full-time] programme. The [full-time] students do a dissertation... then we have... a case study, and we have to write up notes on this case study. And then we have to go in front of a panel and discuss the case study. So, we have two things to do... for exactly the same reward at the end of it... For me, I would love to have been able to take the time, take the pay cut, and done

the normal degree. Not possible. The only way I'm going to get my degree is this way. I would much rather have done it the other way. It's too much this way."

Charlotte's perception that the level of work required was "*too much*" and that the full-time students had an easier final assessment, is significant in that she believed the full-time route was a better way to gain the degree. As noted earlier in this section, Charlotte thought that she would be better trained than full-time students, but the work required within the programme seems to indicate that she felt disadvantaged by being an apprentice compared to full-time students.

6.2.4 Professional and Apprentice Identities

Some of the apprentices identified themselves as being 'university students', and clearly felt proud to be able to say that about themselves, as explained by Douglas (Health, 31):

"what I quite liked was being known as like a university student, that kind of made me feel quite good about myself... And getting into the University I was like 'I'm actually at a university and doing a university course!'"

However, some of the apprentices found that their sense of identity was significantly affected by their change in role from 'professional' to 'apprentice' or 'student'. This was particularly evident for the Health apprentices.

Health apprentices in this research were employed as Health Care Assistants (HCA) and were put onto the 2+2 programme mentioned in Section 6.2.3. All five Health apprentices were at various stages of the four-year programme. Beth (employer - NHS) explained that in her Trust, uniforms were changed for apprentices:

"What we have done is we decided... that we were going to put all our apprentices into student uniforms. So, they all wear the university that they belong to's uniform. And the idea is that they are always seen as a student. So, if there [are] learning opportunities, regardless of whether they're in their substantive post, or they are on protected learning time, or whatever, they're open for learning opportunities... It's interesting, that I think the uniform has caused problems for the apprentices... the managers think it's a good idea, because they can see, but the apprentices sometimes want to not be seen as a student."

Given the comments in Section 6.2.3 about the lack of learning opportunities when in the workplace, the aim of Beth's organisation to clearly identify apprentices as 'open to learning'

could have been a positive move. However, Iona (Health, 44), who was not in her university's uniform, felt that her role and status was unrecognisable:

"when we started our apprenticeship, we couldn't have university uniforms, because all the Trusts wanted us to have Trust uniforms. So, we ended up having pale grey uniforms with green epaulettes. That was the half the problem because everyone was saying, well where are you [studying]? And what university are you from? Well, it wasn't clear... it's just when you walk onto the ward, and you got a student from [university] in the white uniform, and then you have a student from [university] in the grey uniform, and it's embroidered, you know they're a student straight away... doctors were like, if they're doing a ward round, they'll grab them two students but not me, because I'm in a plain grey uniform. So, I could be a bank member of staff, I could be anyone really."

In Iona's case, the uniform was so nondescript that she did not have a clear identity. This contrasts significantly with Carrie's (Health, 27) experience, who strongly disliked being identified as anything other than an HCA:

"But if I'm then doing my normal job, which is taking two bays of patients, managing their care, doing everything involved in their care, wounds, catheters, drains, everything in a white uniform that says 'student' that's worse than bloody blue I think! Patients are gonna be like, 'Get away from me! Who are you?'. Like, I think, because uniform, massively changes how people see you. My level of authority, as well as my level of skill is instantly going to go down in their eyes, because I've gone from wearing a blue [HCA] uniform to a white uniform. And they're gonna see another student nurse, who might be a first-year student nurse, first placement, like deer in headlights, 'Oh, my God... What do I do?' Like, wearing exactly the same uniform as me who's now been working for four years, I'd like to think very competent in my role. And they're gonna be like, 'well hang on a minute. How are you saying you're allowed to do this to me? And she can't even help me change my knickers!' like, do you know what I mean?"

All Health apprentices identified the colour of their uniform or wearing a lanyard that said either 'student' or 'apprentice' on it as significantly affecting how they were seen at work. As in Carrie's case, they all considered themselves experienced employees with significant skills responsibilities. However, as soon as their uniform changed or they had a new lanyard, they felt that they were no longer seen to be competent in their role because their place within the organisational hierarchy had changed. Their identity changed from 'employee' to 'student' or 'apprentice', and they felt that this was negative for them.

6.2.5 From Employee to Student

For the Social Work apprentices, their sense of identity was affected more in the classroom than when they were in employment. All their teaching happened in the same class as full-time students, and they felt that there was a disconnect between what they were being taught and the reality of their work in practice. This led to them challenging their lecturers during class, as described by Charlotte (49):

“A lot of us will challenge the uni on things. Because they’ll say, this is the law, and this is how it is. And I’ll say, ‘well that maybe the law, but actually that isn’t how it works in practice’, you know, a lot of them [lecturers] have been out of practice for a long while. You know, ‘well it’s the law, it’s the law, you’ve got to do it’. Well, no, actually, no, you don’t. We might have to do it by law, but it’s not necessarily gonna happen. And you know it for a fact. You’ve had very similar cases that something’s happened and you know the Council isn’t going to spend that type of money.”

Charlotte’s quote challenges established assumptions within widening participation literature that under-represented learners lack confidence in academic settings. Instead, Charlotte’s professional identity appeared to legitimise her presence within the classroom and reduce traditional barriers associated with participation. Rory (29) was also frustrated that the realities of working in a sector under significant financial strain was not covered by his Social Work lecturers:

“And they never talk about budgets or funding, but your whole life in practice is surrounded by a budget, it’s surrounded by can I get funding for this care package? Can I get funding for this piece of equipment? It’s all about funding, and it has to be approved by managers... [or] a panel... and they always talk about it, theoretical and ‘you are able to do this and you’re able to do that’... and I said, ‘Okay, but what about the budget?... How did you get that approved? Because I’ve tried, and I can’t. So how have you done this?’... it’s that reality. So, I do think we bring the reality.”

This was a particularly fascinating part of the interviews as the Social Work apprentices could not separate their identity as an employee within the social care sector from their studies in the classroom. They did not recognise that a qualified Social Worker might need to be aware of legislation and regulations, which they as practising Social Work Assistants or Enablement Workers might not be aware of. Instead, they saw themselves as experts within the field who had a right to challenge the lecturers. The discrepancy between what they knew from the

workplace and the theory in the classroom meant that they approached their learning with a closed mindset and could not fully let themselves be university students.

The strong sense of professional identity, and the resulting challenging of academics, meant that the Social Work apprentices were not seen positively by the full-time students in their class, as described by Charlotte (49) when she explained that the class had been asked to provide feedback in a survey:

“there was some feedback. Somebody had put on feedback, [the question was] how can we make this better? ‘Get rid of the apprentices’.”

The Management apprentices also recognised that they were taking on a different role in the classroom compared to full-time students, but this made them popular with the lecturers rather than challenging:

“We [the apprentices] were sort of popular with the lecturers because we were the ones that would push on in the lectures and answer the questions, but you almost felt a bit bad and that you end up dominating the lectures. Because... we’re obviously more confident, and maybe our time is more precious, because... you’re doing your day job effectively at the same time as well. So, we don’t really want to sit there when the lecturer is trying to move on and try and ask questions... And if they’re [full-time students] not going to answer, we’re just going to answer... and push it on.” Terence, Management apprentice (33)

While Terence did not see this practice as problematic for the full-time students, Peggy (Management, 41), was frustrated by her experience of having to study alongside students who she saw as not being as engaged in the class as she was:

“we [apprentices] were always, always on time, and we did our work, and we participated in the discussions. And you know, you’d see people and they’re just wandering in, like, 40 minutes late for an hour and a half lesson. And, you know, there’d be no challenge to it from the tutors and things, and I sort of get the balance that they have to keep, but you know that that was a bit of a frustration... And I think I only had one incident where I sort of lost my rag a little bit and had a little word with some of the students.”

Peggy’s comment about having ‘*had a little word*’ with the full-time students, indicates that she was taking on a role within the classroom that was significantly different from that normally expected of a student. The accounts of both Peggy and Terence suggest that apprentices

entered the classroom with a form of occupational legitimacy that differentiated them from traditional widening participation narratives focused on insecurity, uncertainty, or deficit.

Martin, the Digital Course Leader, could see that the full-time students were finding the apprentices difficult to be around. When asked if the apprentices engaged with the university and their class, he answered:

“Some are, some are definitely not. They turn up, they do their thing, they’re gone. To the extent that there are occasionally factions that basically would sneer at the [full-time] students for that. So, you have to be careful if you get one of those factions in your class, but you need [full-time] students to basically fight their own corner... every so often there’s an obnoxious clique, that basically thinks, well, we got our apprenticeship world, we’re all the greatest things since sliced bread.”

The inference from Martin’s experience, and the way that Rory, Charlotte, and Terence interacted within their classrooms, was that the apprentices had a strong sense of identity and self-efficacy that came from their confidence in their professional role. Martin’s observation usefully provides an external validation of apprentices’ strong professional identities. Unlike many widening participation students described in the literature, these apprentices were not struggling to establish legitimacy but were sometimes perceived as possessing excessive confidence.

When asked how they viewed themselves in terms of being an employee, student, or apprentice, the interviewees recognised their roles as apprentices, and that they were on a professional pathway in their employment to becoming qualified in their area. For example, Keith, a Digital apprentice, identified as an ‘apprentice’ on his university day and an ‘employee’ doing his job on the other four days. The Health apprentices described themselves as Health Care Assistants (HCAs) who attended university in their route towards becoming Registered Nurses. Both Rory and Charlotte however, as Social Work apprentices, described themselves as *“unqualified social workers”*. When asked about their job, they each immediately gave their job title but said they were ‘unqualified’ Social Workers and continued to use the term repeatedly throughout their interviews. They had a clear sense of their professional identity and saw their course as a route to getting paid at the level they thought they were already working at.

As part of considering how the experience of apprenticeships affects the potential for DAs to increase access to HE, I was interested in whether the apprentices considered themselves to be ‘university students’, and whether this was even important to them. Most of the apprentices

expressed their pride at being at university, but they did not feel like a university student. Ruby (Health, 41) explained why this was the case for her:

"I don't think I did feel like a student. And I think it's because of my age. I mean, we'd have the student lanyard and things. But in my head, if you're a student at uni, you're young and you're living the student life, whereas, no, I was just attending a class once a week."

Ruby viewed the full-time students as being different from the apprentices, and did not recognise that some of the full-time students would also have been mature and choosing not to participate in *"the student life"*. For Peggy (Management, 41), the difference was simply that the day spent studying each week was ultimately a day that still had to be 'worked':

"You sort of nominally had your, your day. But those seven hours were crammed into before work, lunch times, after work, and evening, just to make sure that you've covered everything off."

Peggy's experience was that her training time was just time away from work but that her role as an employee, with a job to do, was her priority over being a university student.

6.2.6 Risk

Social Work apprentices took on a risk that was not experienced by the other apprentices in this research. The Social Work employer made the Degree Apprenticeship (DA) opportunity available to existing employees who were working in supportive roles in social care. These employees had been on permanent contracts, but the employer moved them into temporary apprenticeship contracts with the plan to make opportunities available for them to be recruited into permanent Social Work roles when they completed their apprenticeship. Louise, the Social Work employer, viewed this as allowing the apprentices to move to other employers after graduation if they wanted to, without any pressure to stay, while also ensuring they were perceived throughout their training, as 'learners' rather than employees:

"They don't have to stay because we transferred them to fixed term apprentice contracts, so they could all choose to leave. But we took the wider research that shows that apprentices stay in organizations and move up quickly. They want to, and the fact that because they were part of the workforce, they already have established professional networks and personal families."

Louise felt that it was a calculated risk and that they were likely to lose very few of the apprentices. Her view was that changing the role of the apprentices meant they would not be

"sucked into doing stuff that wasn't about being an apprentice social worker" and that this was a positive change for the apprentices as they could focus fully on the apprenticeship. For the apprentices however, this change in contract represented a significant risk, as explained by Rory (29):

"So, I had to give up my substantive post, and I have to go into a fixed term contract with the guarantee of an interview, but not a guarantee of a job... I was okay with it... [But] we've already lost two apprentices last year, who... didn't pass or became not very well and was off sick and kind of they said, 'Look, there's no point continuing this'. And that's people that have lost their jobs... And I think that it wasn't fully explained at the beginning... if you don't pass these assignments, you don't have a job... If [full-time students] fail, they can retake the year or they can go on a different course or they can work out what's right for them, I don't have that opportunity, it is this or I don't have a job."

In addition, the change in contract also meant a change to the pay structure, as explained by Charlotte (49):

"Because the apprenticeship, you actually change jobs. You don't stay on your, your original job. You have to start a whole new contract, and the contract is at a grade four, and I was a Senior, so at the time, it was 5 grand difference. But I think it's a bit more than that, it's about 7 now. Because we don't get the increments like they do. They said we will, but it is dependent on the managers and whether or not they say that you're doing the job, and I don't think they will."

This financial change was a real concern for Charlotte, who was the highest earner in her household. She was worried that it was the role of her placement manager to determine if she would receive an increase in her salary, because she did not get on with her placement manager. Her change in contract from 'employee' to 'apprentice' meant that she did not have a permanent manager and this created problems when she expected each manager to support adjustments that had been made for her while in her permanent post. The result was that she had to renegotiate those adjustments each time she moved placement and had a new manager, which affected relationships with them. Charlotte's overriding concern from the constant uncertainty and negotiations, was that her chances of securing a permanent role at the end of the apprenticeship would be affected.

While Charlotte's experience was very specific relating to workplace adjustments, it raised the issue that the working conditions of apprentices could vary significantly. Louise (employer –

Social Work) saw the change in contract for apprentices as a way to reduce pressure and to ensure they had the time and space to focus on their apprenticeship; but for the apprentices, it created uncertainty and worry.

6.3 Delivering Apprenticeships: Academics

The gradual neoliberalisation of Higher Education (HE) that led to Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) being an important opportunity for income diversification could have led, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, to academics becoming involved in the delivery of a programme significantly different to full-time academic programmes. I was therefore keen to explore how their sense of identity and self-efficacy were affected by DAs, and how this could impact the experience of DAs for apprentices.

The main focus of this section is on power. Firstly, the perception of the balance of power between the university and employers, and then within the university. I then go on to consider power and autonomy over the curriculum and co-delivery with employers, before concluding with the impact on academics of Ofsted's power as an inspectorate of apprenticeships.

6.3.1 Power

6.3.1.1 Negotiating the Apprenticeship Contract

Universities and employers developed and maintained partnerships before the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), to support placements across professional health programmes and education, and to develop the skills and employability of graduates (Lester, 2020; Bravenboer, 2019; Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019; Lee, 2012). However, as outlined in Chapter 2, apprenticeships introduced a change to the relationship between employers and universities, from one of supportive mutually-beneficial partnerships, to one based on contracts for apprenticeship training.

This change meant that employers were able to contract training providers to deliver apprenticeship training, which was expected to lead to opportunities for competition in pricing (Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). However, interviewees reported mixed realities. Beth (NHS) felt that universities dictated timelines and decisions:

"We were sort of sold the story, that the employer is now in control. You negotiate, you ask for what you want. In reality, we found, if I'm being perfectly honest, the universities were not terribly flexible in the, you know, this is a programme, you go with our programme, and this is the price, you pay our price... And I think there are certainly some things that we are listened to. But quite often... I think it is the university that

makes those final decisions... sometimes it's not quite as easy from an employer point of view to work to those timelines or... release staff and, you know, in the way that they, the University are dictating... So, I can't honestly say I feel like I'm in the driving seat. I think we've got good relationships, but I don't think we're in the driving seat."

Beth's use of the word '*dictating*' suggests that she feels that the university is the more powerful partner within the relationship, but Ellie, as a Course Leader in Health, found that she was having to balance conflicting demands between the rigidity of Apprenticeship Standards and cross-partner consistency:

"I think the difficulty was for me, that the Trusts - if there's significant rigidity around the [Apprenticeship] Standards and what you can and can't do, and all the Trusts wanted something slightly different for their employees... So, I think every Trust wanted something slightly different, and that was a challenge in terms of saying that no, we have to offer a course that's fit for all."

While Beth saw universities as making decisions on apprenticeships, Ellie's view was that there were few options that she could offer, particularly as the programme had to meet the needs of multiple partners and the university. In this situation, neither party felt that they had power or control. For Martin, the Digital Course Leader, the pressure came from having a single employer partner, who he felt had all the power in their relationship:

"Our major employer is an 800-pound gorilla that could wipe us out accidentally by hitting us with their elbows... So, the balance of power is very much with them, and... we've had at least once recently, where they've made a threat of taking the provision away... I was asked in a recent quality call, 'Martin, if we have some students elsewhere, seven in their first year, 22 in their second year, and this is all very controversial, but could they be moved to you?' So, something has gone wrong with another provider."

Martin knew that his main employer would actively consider moving the apprenticeship mid-course to another provider, and it caused him significant concern. He felt that he had no power within the relationship, and that he had to do what he could to keep them happy, while also being prepared for the potential of the university losing the apprenticeship numbers and income with little notice.

Reflecting the government expectation of competition on price, Frances, an Apprenticeships Coordinator for a university, found that her main Digital employer was attempting to negotiate on price based on their support of teaching:

“The digital apprenticeship is probably one of the most challenging of them all to deliver... because they [employer] want to be involved in the teaching, but they’re not qualified! And trying to talk to them and saying, ‘Okay, so what qualifications do your [employees] have? They’ve been teaching [lower-level apprentices] for years? Okay, so you know, what, literature and what have you, are you bringing into it?’ Oh, God. I mean, it was cringe-worthy.”

Frances was clear that as her university was responsible for the quality of the programme and awarding a degree, anyone delivering any part of the teaching had to be suitably qualified. However, she was also aware that if another training provider were willing to accept the employer undertaking some of the teaching, she could lose the contract to them.

The academics interviewed found that they were being asked to be more involved in the contract discussions with employers than they might have expected to be. Ellie, Health Course Leader, felt the pressure between meeting the needs of NHS partners while ensuring that she secured the student numbers that her university was expecting:

“If they [NHS Trust] said to me, ‘could you take these 20 students in May?’ And I say, ‘No, I could take them in September’, they could say, ‘Well, fine, we’ll go somewhere else who can take them in May’... I have accountability for the numbers, you know, that we set for our recruitment targets. And if I don’t hit those, there’s repercussions there and, you know, significant financial repercussions. For us, that you’re, you know, you’re fully aware of your recruitment role. It’s like juggling plates I think.”

Ellie also felt pressure from her NHS partners in determining which prospective apprentices could be admitted onto the course. Ellie’s university was delivering the Registered Nurse apprenticeship on the 2+2 model previously outlined, which meant the first part of the apprenticeship led to the award of a Foundation Degree as a Nursing Associate. The entry requirements for the Nursing Associate apprenticeship were specified in the Standard as Level 2 qualifications (Health Education England, 2026) compared to the Level 3 qualifications required for Degree-level study. This meant that Ellie was having to consider the impact of those lower entry requirements on the potential to succeed, while also recognising the pressure coming from the employer who was contracting her university to deliver the training:

“We always recruit with our Trust partners, so it’s always done in partnership. And sometimes it’s a process that’s relatively easy that somebody’s not suitable, and both of us can see that. But sometimes it’s difficult because that particular learner who is an employee can put pressure on. And therefore, the Trust put pressure on us. And you

have the danger of undermining a relationship that has been built up over years, and so there's a tension there. Whilst we don't want the wrong students on the course there is sometimes a tension to take students because we don't want to fall foul of what the Trusts want."

Ellie was again trying to balance the employer's wishes with her knowledge and experience at the university, particularly in the academic expectations of students or apprentices studying Degree level. Her suggestion in this quote, is that she was having to hold back on refusing apprentices as she did not want to risk the important relationship with the employer, but this could lead to apprentices being set up to fail.

6.3.1.2: Managing Power Relationships within the University

Training providers are required to assess the prior learning and experience of apprentices before they start the course to ensure that apprentices are only studying new content (Department for Education, 2026). The regulatory aim of this assessment is to reduce the cost of the apprenticeship, as apprentices can be exempted from academic elements that they have already covered in some way thus reducing the overall cost of the programme. In these early years of apprenticeship delivery, Heather, who was coordinating the introduction of apprenticeships at her university, experienced cultural resistance:

"I've even had [academics] say to me, learners come here on an apprenticeship programme, they have to do everything, I don't care where they studied previously, I'm not interested in their prior learning. So that's what I mean about the change of minds, changing the mindset, or changing the culture, when you've got somebody who's not prepared to take on board somebody's prior knowledge. That's your biggest stumbling block."

While Heather was attempting to get academics on board with the requirements of apprenticeships, Jean, the Management Course Leader, felt that the involvement of apprenticeship managers within her organisation, was challenging for her:

"It's not something I particularly enjoy being part of anymore... my view of apprenticeships in HE is coloured by my experiences and the people I currently work with on them. Like I actually think they're okay. Well designed, well delivered. Processes sorted at the start. Expectations set early. They work; they can work. They can be really interesting programmes. I don't necessarily think they are any better than the standard undergraduate degree, but you know, all good, fine, happy with that. If it requires me

having to continue to work with the people I'm working with at the moment on them. I would rather not."

Jean went on to describe her experience as affecting her academic freedom:

"I just personally don't enjoy the level of micromanagement necessary or that is deemed to be necessary. I identify as an academic. One of the reasons I came into academia is because I don't really enjoy being micromanaged. And I like the freedom that it affords me. I don't get that with apprenticeships."

Jean was clear that it was not her academic colleagues that were the problem, it was the apprenticeships 'office' or managers within the university. Ellie, Health Course Leader, felt pressure from within her university to ensure that apprenticeship completion rates for the Health programme, were sufficient to retain contracts for delivery:

"Our Head of Apprenticeships... has suggested that no apprentice should fail ever. And I've said, 'Well, you know, the difficulty is they will fail', some students will, despite the support and despite the selection process that we did, because this is Higher Education, and, you know, and I understand that the decision that no student should fail, and absolutely, that would be our golden kind of goal. But that's not going to happen."

In Section 6.3.1.1, Ellie had said that she felt pressure to accept apprentices who might not be academically ready for the course, but here she recognises the pressure from the university to ensure that all apprentices passed the course. This led to her feeling that she was expected to 'spoon-feed' the apprentices to ensure they could complete the programme:

"We've grown as a university, but we're moving right back with apprenticeships spoon-feeding education, that I'm not sure brings out well-rounded individuals at the end of a course sometimes, because the spoon-feeding means that they don't necessarily have the skills that you'd like them to have, from a health Higher Education perspective."

Ellie's experience illustrates the tension between widening participation objectives and academic standards. Increasing access is only meaningful if learners are supported to achieve successful outcomes while maintaining academic credibility. The conflict or unhappiness evident between academics and the apprenticeship managers within their universities, was also noticed by employers. Louise, (employer - Social Work) explained:

"From an employer's perspective, it feels like there's a massive split internally at the university. So, there's conflict between different departments that's then impacting on us as employers and making it really difficult for us to have a consistency of message..."

key concerns aren't being heard, and that probably will, it could impact on the future of the programme for sure."

Louise also said that her organisation was considering other Degree Apprenticeships with their main university partner, but that the difficulties they had experienced in the relationship with the university would affect the decision about whether to contract them to deliver these. Given the challenges identified by the academic participants in their negotiations and managing of employers, the fact that internal conflicts within universities could impact the on-going partnership would have been concerning for them, adding more pressure to the relationships than might have been expected.

6.3.1.3: The Apprenticeship Curriculum and Delivering Programmes with Employers

Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) have to meet the requirements of an Apprenticeship Standard, which limits the freedom of academics to determine course content (Bravenboer, 2019; Welbourne, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). In professionally regulated courses such as Social Work and Health, academics were accustomed to working within specified curricula with employer engagement. This was different however, for Management and Digital courses which, in full-time programmes, did not require the involvement of employers or specified content.

Martin, the Digital Course Leader, held the view that the content of the apprenticeship was not as good as in the related full-time degree. However, his university required him to teach apprentices and full-time students in the same class to increase "*financial efficiency*", and he was concerned that the full-time students were ultimately losing out:

"there's so much in the core of [the apprenticeship] that actually we do not care for. No one other than [trailblazer employer] thinks that 'IT Consultant' is something that should be a Degree Apprenticeship. But that is a pathway that came essentially through [employer] and similar big boys. But there's chunks of that in the core, so there are things that we are teaching in the core, which are in shared modules with [full-time] students, and in some ways it's harming the [full-time] students... because they don't have the benefit of living for days upon days in the workplace, soaking up more programming."

This quotation highlights an important tension in DA delivery. If academics perceive apprenticeship curricula as constraining educational quality, the long-term effectiveness of apprenticeships as a widening participation mechanism may depend upon resolving concerns about curriculum breadth and academic standards. Martin's view was supported by Mary, the

Digital employer, who also disagreed with some of the content within the apprenticeship programme.

Jean, the Management Course Leader, was concerned that work-based projects could over-specialise learners, as she explained:

“I don't think the apprenticeships... really addresses what it is they're trying to address. Because I think what they're trying to address is to develop a skills-based workforce that is adaptable, resilient, and can go out and pick up a job and just get on with it... all you're doing with an apprenticeship is creating a tailored specialist programme in one organisation. So, if we're teaching business management for public sector, that individual is stuck in public sector.”

Jean found that the requirements of the apprenticeship was such that she was asking her apprentices to undertake all course- and project-work on their own company or sector, which was identified by Terence (Management, 33) as being particularly problematic given the small size of his organisation:

“Some of the modules, we've had to do work-based coursework on it, which for a company of our size is just impossible... it's almost like you're having to fabricate something just to write a project about it... In one project I [had] to compare the company to a different company... but our turnover is like £2million and [another small building company]'s turnover is £50million.”

Jean also found that she was struggling to get employers to engage:

“I mean, to be honest, most of them [employers], most of them didn't care. It wasn't a priority. The apprentices had asked for CPD... HR suggested the degree and the Levy. They had to be released one day a week for coming to university, they didn't care... I don't think they were really, they weren't really invested in the learning, in the way that I think that Ofsted and Office for Students expect that employers should be... They are not experts in management education, nor do they really want to be. They want to be able to outsource developing their employees in that way... They are more than happy to hand over responsibility of that education to someone else who they compartmentalise as the expert in that learning.”

Jean was experiencing a significant difference in the legislative expectations of employer engagement with apprenticeships, and the reality. Terence (Management, 33), who worked for

his father's small company, was clear that his boss, his Dad, had no interest in engaging with the apprenticeship:

"His attitude has just been: 'just get on with it. If you need anything, let me know, but I don't really want to be involved'".

Similarly, Nate (Management, 37) found that his employer had limited involvement and mainly left him to get on with it, a situation he was generally happy with:

"They [employer] have been very supportive. They're not on the front row of it... had they had more involvement, it could have, I didn't want them to steer it, I wanted to steer it myself."

Nate and Terence preferred that their employers had limited involvement, but Jean found that she was not gaining from the apprenticeship in terms of an improved relationship with employers. She was experiencing pressure and challenging working practices in her university from the apprenticeship management team but was not benefiting in the way she had expected.

The academics interviewed all felt that they had little power or control in the apprenticeships, and that the power was with the employers and/or university apprenticeship management teams.

6.3.2 Regulation: Ofsted

For many universities, the introduction of Ofsted as an apprenticeship regulator represented a new experience, having had limited previous involvement with them. Ellie (Health Course Leader) had been through an Ofsted inspection early in her university's apprenticeship journey, and when she spoke of it in the interview almost two years later, she was still upset by the experience:

"I've honestly felt traumatised, genuinely traumatised by the experience of Ofsted, you know right in the middle of a pandemic, in they came, they were not gonna listen, it didn't matter. I'm dealing with, you know, all the issues around the pandemic, and then having that monitoring visit from Ofsted genuinely, it was really distressing for me and the rest of the team. And I, you know, and I'm not exaggerating that I really felt quite traumatised by the whole thing. It was awful. It was really awful."

The experience of Ofsted meant that Ellie wanted to get out of apprenticeship delivery completely:

"I honestly think from my perspective, I would like to stop the apprenticeship routes... our [full-time student] numbers have increased. So yeah, I think from an institutional perspective, we would probably want to keep them going to be in the market but from my perspective, the challenges on staffing, the stress and the uncertainty around you know, we may be okay for the next Ofsted visit but what about the next one? And I think that level of pressure, whilst it sounds as though I feel we can't keep standards up, I think that we can, but I don't know that we'll ever quite get what Ofsted want. I think that's a challenge. So, from my perspective... I think it's a shame, but I would like to see them gone, because I probably would sleep better on a regular basis."

Ellie saw Ofsted as requiring unachievable standards, and the level of stress and pressure she felt over Ofsted was spilling over from work into her personal life. Her use of the word *"traumatised"* and reference to not sleeping, indicates that the pressure felt was significant. Martin, the Digital Course Leader, had not been through an Ofsted inspection but was expecting one imminently and also felt that the pressure in apprenticeship delivery was too much, even being warned by a colleague that it could be damaging for him. In this quote, Martin refers to 'full-time students' as 'mainstream':

"So frankly, you know, if our [senior leaders] decide to split the provision so that you either teach apprentices or you teach mainstream, I'm doing mainstream, and I will take my chances on our ability to recruit on mainstream degrees because I've essentially had enough of it. And I have been warned by a previous boss that I need to get out of apprenticeships. Because it's no good for me. And, you know, if anything can destroy me, it will be apprenticeships."

The accounts of Martin and Ellie demonstrate that the regulatory burden associated with DAs can affect academic self-efficacy and professional identity. As academics play a critical role in supporting under-represented learners, these pressures may have indirect implications for widening participation outcomes.

Jean, the Management Course Leader, had not been through Ofsted, but felt that after finding recruitment and teaching of apprenticeships difficult enough, the introduction of Ofsted as an inspector of apprenticeships, meant that she did not want to be involved anymore:

"I think most of us are saying, 'they'd be fine, if they actually worked!'" And it didn't help that it ended up coming under Ofsted and all that kind of stuff. So as soon as that switch happened, it became infinitely worse. I mean, it wasn't easy to begin with. But as soon as that switch happened, it was just 'Well, shit. Can we quit yet?'."

While the academics felt that the expectations via Ofsted were too high, Louise, the Social Work employer, felt that the universities were interpreting the expectations of legislative and regulatory requirements differently. In the following quote, Louise also refers to monitoring of off-the-job training, which is discussed further in Section 6.4, but her experience with different training providers suggests that some of the Ofsted pressures are created internally within the universities:

“I still have very high confidence and faith and trust in the programme itself. It's more the monitoring around it, the extra work that the apprentice Social Workers have been asked to do to meet apprenticeship compliance as interpreted by [university]. Because it's different, because of course, I have the beauty of working with six, seven different HEIs and I get to experience different interpretations of apprenticeship legislation and Ofsted and it's very different.”

Louise's perspective indicates that particularly in the early years of DAs when these interviews took place, the level of information available to universities to help them navigate the apprenticeship regulatory requirements, was perhaps limited. The result being that university apprenticeship management teams interpreted the requirements, leading to, for some academics, significant levels of pressure and stress, which was also experienced by apprentices.

Since participating in this research, both Ellie and Jean moved to universities that did not deliver apprenticeships. Both contacted me to say that their expected continued involvement in apprenticeships was their reason for leaving.

6.4: Monitoring Apprenticeships

Legislation requires providers, employers, and apprentices to evidence a minimum of 20 per cent of working hours in off-the-job training aligned to the Apprenticeship Standard (Department for Education, 2026). The Social Work apprentices and employer identified this monitoring requirement as a particularly heavy burden within the apprenticeship. This was not identified as a problem in other interviews, which perhaps supports Louise's quote in Section 6.3.2 that different universities interpreted the apprenticeship requirements differently. For Rory (Social Work, 29) the tracking of off-the-job hours was a significant part of his workload:

“Off-the-job hours take me forever to do... because you have to put what it was, how long it took. But then you have to talk about how it impacted your work, and how it's going to impact your work moving forward. And that needs to relate to the apprenticeship standards. So, it's a big piece of work. We're not given any time to do it.

So, it does get pushed to the backburner; and I don't think there's a single one of us that that is not behind on them."

Charlotte (Social Work, 49) calculated how much time she had spent on monitoring her off-the-job hours and attending meetings relating to her apprenticeship:

"I worked it out in November... between all the meetings they wanted us to attend, and the fact that we was having two lots of supervision... In one month, I had 17 hours' worth of work that I could do. I sat down and worked it all out. It was 17 hours. And they're still expecting us to hold down a full-time job."

In undertaking internal evaluations with her apprentices, Louise (employer – Social Work) had found that this reporting was causing real problems:

"the apprentice Ssocial Workers have said... that it is not a good use of their time on the whole... It feels a bit like a tick-box exercise. And there's a lot of pressure on evidencing their 20 per cent and some, and that's become a massive thing for them... whereas it should just be underpinned, it should just be there. But it's massive. And this evaluation we did, oh my goodness, they loath it. They loath having to do this monthly report, it's massively resented, which is a real shame."

My sense from Rory and Charlotte was that they felt real pressure in the additional requirements of the apprenticeship compared to the full-time programme, particularly as they also had their 'day job' to do as well. Given that Charlotte has previously been quoted as perceiving the full-time route to be easier than the apprenticeship, it was clear that she considered the apprenticeship as requiring significantly more work.

6.5 Conclusion

This Chapter has presented a significant amount of data relating to the four major themes relating to participation in apprenticeships, possible selves and identity, the experience of delivering apprenticeships, and apprenticeship monitoring. Chapter 7 will discuss the findings in relation to the academic literature, but this Chapter has evidenced that the apprenticeship provided an opportunity in Higher Education (HE) that many of the apprentice participants would not otherwise have had. For them, it did represent widening participation. Three of the eleven apprentices interviewed, had already started or completed a degree prior to the apprenticeship, which means HE was something that was available to them. However, they had either not completed the programme (two) or had completed it but been unable to progress into a graduate career (one).

Apprentices interviewed in this research clearly had a strong sense of professional identity, and believed that they were, to an extent, better than full-time students. They saw themselves as at a significant advantage as they were being paid to work whilst undertaking a free degree, and it is possible that their professional identity was heightened by being selected by their employer for the Degree Apprenticeship (DA) opportunity. However, this strong identity as an employee rather than a student, meant all apprentices expressed frustration when they thought their learning was not relevant to them, and some even challenged academics and visiting speakers if they thought their own knowledge was more current than that being taught in the classroom. It is clear that the apprentices did not recognise that their university-based studies should be anything other than directly relevant to their occupation and sector.

This chapter also explored the experience of university staff and employers, which was clearly challenging at times. University staff felt pressured in the DA experience, both in their negotiations with employers and through the pressures placed on them by their universities. They also had significant concerns about the oversight of Ofsted, although only one had experienced an Ofsted inspection. Employers did not feel that they were in a position of power and felt that training providers interpreted the monitoring requirements of apprenticeships differently.

Chapter 7 will explore the findings discussed throughout Chapter 6 in relation to the academic literature, but the final comment from this chapter will lie with Nate (Management, 41):

“Now I've finished, I'm proud of what's been done and can look, not fondly, that's quite a strong word, but it's a scar I wear with pride, put it that way. And I think I'm really, you know, proud to show [my] kids as well that they're able to do that and hopefully influence their choices a little bit.”

Chapter 7: Discussion

This research explored whether the experience of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) suggests that they can increase access to Higher Education (HE) in England. The study considered the experiences of the three different stakeholders involved in DAs: apprentices, university staff, and employers. Chapter 6 outlined the findings of this research.

In this chapter, I interpret and theorise those findings against the legislative context and academic literature on widening participation and apprenticeships. The analysis is framed by a social constructivist perspective, drawing on Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, Bernstein's account of social structures in pedagogical practice, and Markus and Nurius's theory of possible selves. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) of interviews, alongside my professional experience, I critically explore the extent to which the delivery and study of DAs can contribute to widening participation in HE.

I structure this chapter around the three subsidiary research questions. The aim is not to answer those questions, as this is left to Chapter 8, but this structure allows the discussion of the findings to clearly define the experience of the apprentices and the university staff. It also provides space for a discussion of the role and experience of employers.

The subsidiary research questions that form the starting point for each section in this chapter are as follows:

7.1: How do apprentices perceive their apprenticeship learning experience, particularly in relation to identity, learning, and their interactions with the university and peers?

7.2: How does the experience of Degree Apprenticeships impact the professional identity of university staff?

7.3: How does the involvement of employers and the regulatory landscape for Apprenticeships, impact the experience of studying and delivering Degree Apprenticeships?

The chapter then concludes with Section 7.4, which uses the primary research question to summarise the overall experience of DAs and their impact on increasing access to HE.

7.1 How do apprentices perceive their apprenticeship learning experience, particularly in relation to identity, learning, and their interactions with the university and peers?

The survey identified that 97 per cent of the researched population were ‘under-represented’ in Higher Education (HE) based on meeting one or more characteristics of under-representation. While the majority were under-represented on the basis of age, the age profile reflected the national apprenticeship population, as seen in *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.4.4), which showed that the majority of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship starters were aged over 21. Chapter 3 discussed the factors that impact mature students studying in HE, which include family responsibilities (Stone, 2023; O’Shea and Stone, 2011), and the financial impact of stopping or reducing employment to study (Busher and James, 2019). Both the national and survey data indicate that apprenticeships make HE more accessible for mature students, as mature students are over-represented in apprenticeships compared to full-time HE.

Apprentices invited for interview met at least one criterion associated with under-representation in HE. Three had previously started university, and reasons for non-completion were based on the subject choice they had made. All interviewees stated unequivocally that the Degree Apprenticeship (DA) pathway enabled degree-level study they otherwise could not undertake. For this cohort, DAs widened access to HE.

The discussion of the findings begins with the apprentices’ experience of studying.

7.1.1 Learning in the Classroom

Chapter 3 examined a range of literature relating to the learning experience, and the reasons that those under-represented in HE could experience weakened self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994), and self-confidence within the HE environment. Bernstein (2000) characterised the classroom as a space where social boundaries, power, dominance, and learners’ self-perceptions, are preserved and amplified through pedagogical practice. Katarzi and Hayward (2020) further argued that the understanding of pedagogical regimes in HE would be more limited for those progressing to HE from employment, than from academic education such as A Levels.

University pedagogies have historically been designed for a ‘traditional’ academic student body (Carter, 2009), creating a potential disconnect between vocational qualifications and experiences, and those progressing directly from A Levels. This mismatch can contribute to the pedagogical confusion and uncertainty identified by Bernstein (2000). However, research shows that working-class students, regardless of their qualifications, often encounter difficulties

both with university structures and pedagogical approaches that differ from earlier educational experiences (Webb *et al.*, 2017b; Crozier *et al.*, 2008).

While there is significant academic literature that suggests that those entering HE from vocational backgrounds or who have been out of education for some time, experience 'transitional friction' (Katarzi and Hayward, 2020), research from Mallman and Lee (2014) found that mature students were expected by universities, to 'hit the ground running'. The difference between the expectations of universities and the confidence of mature students in their study was such that mature students looked to younger students in order to understand the classroom environment, modifying their behaviour in order to fit in.

The assumption from the literature would be that apprentices may be at a disadvantage within the classroom for a number of reasons. Firstly, they were from groups under-represented in HE, did not have familial experience of HE, and they were studying on just one day per week compared to full-time students. Their recognition and understanding of pedagogical expectations in HE would therefore have been expected to have been limited. Secondly, the majority of apprentices were over the age of 21, and have completed their school education some years before. As outlined in Section 3.9.1, some of the Health apprentices may have been admitted to university with Level 2 qualifications, thus not meeting the usual academic entry requirement of recent Level 3 study, creating the potential for immediate academic uncertainty. Finally, while the apprentices were not asked if their school qualifications were A Levels or vocational BTECs, the data presented in *Table 10* (Office for Students, 2022; Section 3.7.1), showed that academic outcomes for university students from vocational qualifications can be significantly lower than those from academic qualifications. Any apprentices who had a vocational background may also therefore, have been more likely to struggle in HE.

There are a wide range of reasons based within the literature that would suggest that some, if not all, apprentices would experience a weakened sense of self-confidence and academic self-efficacy, when faced with the HE classroom. From a widening participation perspective, these characteristics would typically position apprentices as learners likely to experience uncertainty, reduced belonging, and weaker self-efficacy within HE. The existing literature would therefore predict that apprentices would encounter many of the transitional challenges associated with under-represented groups.

However, the findings of this research significantly contradicted these assumptions. The apprentices in this research displayed strong professional identities evidenced through their willingness to challenge lecturers and full-time students in the classroom; and, in the case of a

Social Work apprentice, challenging a visiting speaker. As illustrated in the interview data presented in Chapter 6, apprentices justified these challenges through reference to their workplace expertise and professional experience. Their confidence in questioning academic perspectives reflected a belief that occupational knowledge had a legitimacy equal to, or greater than, academic knowledge. They described themselves as being more engaged in the classroom with a desire to progress efficiently through content, even when this may have been detrimental to full-time classmates. Their view was that their time was more precious due to outside commitments.

The apprentices appeared to enter HE with an already established professional identity, which differed significantly from the identity construction usually associated with undergraduate students. Rather than developing a student identity through participation in the university environment, they appeared to interpret the university through the lens of their existing professional identity, which had developed through their employment.

The apprentices may not have recognised the rules of the classroom, but they felt that their position as an employee, even a 'professional', were of greater importance than those rules. They did not indicate any willingness to learn or follow the rules, they simply wanted to make sure they had the training they were entitled to and for which their employer was paying. The result was that they were not always popular with other students, although some viewed themselves as being more popular with academics due to their level of engagement with the learning.

The apprentices' expectations that they receive training directly relevant to their occupation reflects Brown's (2015) argument that neoliberal rationality increasingly positions individuals as human capital, investing in education primarily to enhance their future economic value.

Ulriksen's (2009) 'implied' student is also a useful conceptual lens for the classroom relationships between apprentices, full-time students and academics. As outlined in Chapter 3, there are two types of 'implied student': the student that the university expects, and the 'student' that students themselves expect, which includes discipline, interest in studies, and social interactions. As the 'implied student' affects the prism in which the student views their fellow students, it is clear that the apprentices had a strong sense of the 'implied student' that they expected in their classroom, and the full-time students were not meeting their expectations. Similarly, the apprentices did not meet the expectations of the 'implied student' for the full-time students, although this has also been seen in previous research relating to mature students in the classroom (Mallman and Lee, 2014). While Mallman and Lee (2014) found that mature

students modified their behaviour in order to 'fit in' with the full-time students, my findings were that the apprentices were not willing to do this. The result, for some, was conflict with full-time students.

While research conducted by Katarzi and Hayward (2019) found that students from a vocational background were worried that their workplace experience was not valued in HE and they were academically under-prepared, the results from this research did not align with that view. The apprentices reported that academics valued their vocational experience and their engagement in the classroom, and while some admitted that they doubted their academic ability at the beginning of the course, these doubts diminished quickly. Their professional identity outweighed any of those concerns. The significance of this finding for widening participation is that apprentices did not appear to enter HE primarily as under-represented learners. Instead, they entered as established professionals, suggesting that professional identity may mitigate many of the transitional challenges associated with widening participation students.

The findings from this research were that the apprentices had a strong sense of self-efficacy, to the extent that they saw themselves as being at a clear advantage compared to full-time students, and even more important in the institutional hierarchy due to the knowledge they contributed within the classroom. In some cases, they considered themselves to have greater knowledge than academic staff if they felt their lecturers were not as informed about practice as they were. It is possible their elevated levels of confidence came from being selected by their employer to undertake the apprenticeship, as all recognised the significant investment their employers were making in them. The apprentices' willingness to challenge academic authority may however suggest a weakening of the traditional pedagogic framing discussed by Bernstein (1977), with workplace knowledge increasingly competing with academic knowledge. Apprentices had two sources of knowledge and training, with one based squarely within the workplace in an organisation and occupation in which they were committed. This compared to the one-day-per-week source of knowledge within the university classroom, suggesting that the pedagogic framing within the classroom was competing against the strong framing in the workplace. The behaviour of the apprentices suggest that they considered workplace-based learning and expertise to having greater legitimacy than academic expertise.

The levels of self-confidence were such that none of the apprentices interviewed seemed to reflect on the importance of breadth in their studies. All seemed to expect their studies to be clearly relevant to their day-to-day job, rather than being relevant to their future professional role and career progression. The only area that apprentices seemed to reflect upon, was their

perception of equity between the expectations of the apprenticeship compared to full-time degree programmes, as seen in earlier research (McArthur, 2020; Baker, 2019).

The Health apprentices observed that placement hours were counted differently; and time pressures on classroom hours meant apprentices had to learn theory more quickly. In Social Work, an apprentice perceived the demands at End Point Assessment to be significantly different for equal reward. Apprentices still thought they had the better package in terms of being paid while studying, but they saw the different expectations to achieve the same degree as being unfair.

7.1.2 Disengagement in the Classroom

Bernstein (2000) wrote of the way that discourse within the classroom changes to a learning language over a language that is known and recognised outside the classroom. His example, as outlined in Chapter 3, was of 'carpentry' being referred to as 'woodwork', taking a term recognised within society and changing it to a term that is introduced and managed within the learning environment. He argued that this could be a way of the teacher or academic asserting their power and control of the classroom and learning environment. Ulriksen *et al.* (2016), also wrote of the 'implied student', where the academic's expectation of how a student should act, speak, and conduct themselves within the classroom, can impact the sense of belonging.

These writings are relevant to considering the level of engagement that apprentices would feel towards their learning, and their confidence when managing an academic language that was different to the language used in their workplace. I also was interested in whether the apprentices would recognise that they were not meeting the expectations of the 'implied student'. However, as discussed in the sections above, this was not the case. Some of the apprentices were comfortable enough in the classroom to challenge the academics on theory versus reality, and none of the apprentices expressed any confusion with the academic language used. However, the engagement of apprentices was significantly impacted by their perception of whether the academic content was relevant to them, and/or sufficiently aligned with their occupational realities. The apprentices seemed to view their learning as, to some extent, transactional. It had a specific purpose in relation to their occupation, and they did not seem to be willing to consider whether their learnings were useful for a wider purpose, or even just interesting to know. This emphasis on occupational relevance reflects wider neoliberal shifts within HE, where the value of learning is increasingly judged through employability and economic return, rather than intellectual development.

Billett (2016) suggested, as discussed in Chapter 3, that there are three types of learning within apprenticeships, the first two of which take place within the workplace. The third, personal epistemologies, requires apprentices to intentionally participate in learning, and any differences to previous experiences can only be managed through a keen sense of self-efficacy (Geitz *et al.*, 2016). The apprentices were comfortable with their workplace learning, although some felt they were not able to access the range of learning opportunities that they would like. However, the findings indicate that their personal epistemologies were not strong enough, as, for example, none of the apprentices interviewed seemed to have reflected on the educational purpose of their studies. They recognised the transactional relationship between their studies and progression in their career, but did not acknowledge the relevance and importance of breadth of learning, which meant they struggled to intentionally participate in their university-based learning. Apprentices appeared to evaluate academic content through the lens of their professional identities. Knowledge that could not easily be connected to their occupational role was often viewed as less valuable, contributing to disengagement despite continued confidence in their ability to succeed academically. The apprentices seemed to privilege the context-specific knowledge from their workplace over the subject-discipline knowledge from the university, which, as noted in Section 7.1, suggests weak pedagogic framing in their university learning.

This is an important finding in relation to widening participation because it suggests that under-represented learners entering HE through employment may engage with learning differently than those progressing directly from school or college. Their engagement was shaped not solely by characteristics associated with disadvantage, but also by occupational experience and professional identity.

Two academics, for example, spoke of the limitations within the apprenticeship content compared to the full-time programmes, which is discussed further in Section 7.2. One Management apprentice found that some of the content was not relevant to his organisation or his sector and had to ‘make things up’ in order to complete assignments and projects. This apprentice was working for an SME, and his experience echoed concerns raised in earlier research about the potential for limited application of apprenticeship learning within smaller organisations (James Reilly and Laczik, 2021). As discussed in Chapter 6, several participants explicitly contrasted classroom discussions with their day-to-day professional experiences, arguing that workplace realities carried greater credibility than academic explanations. The risk was therefore of disengagement as the apprentices’ level of self-confidence meant that they

did not view themselves as having anything to learn from content that was either irrelevant or that did not fit within their workplace reality.

The Social Work apprentices defined themselves as ‘unqualified Social Workers’, believing themselves to already be doing the work but requiring the degree to allow them to be paid at the appropriate level. They did not recognise that learning theory in the classroom might help them in their current or future roles as they were too concerned about full-time students being taught something that, to them, was not real life. The Management apprentice who felt that the content was not relevant to his organisation or sector, did not reflect on what he was gaining from this, his focus only was on the immediate difficulties he experienced in his assignments and projects. The task therefore for the universities and lecturers, is to better explain the relevance of the teaching and the topics covered within the apprenticeships.

The legislative expectation of apprenticeships was that they would be occupation-based and would provide employers with much needed skills within their workforce. However, the reality of the Apprenticeship Standards was that employers, academics, and apprentices perceived limitations in the relevance of the Standards to their occupations or sectors. This could have been a positive for apprentices in recognising the wider knowledge they may have gained from the apprenticeship, but this would have required an element of reflection about the overall purpose of education. All were clear that their focus in the apprenticeship was progression in employment with their employer, rather than an interest in learning. This reflects the perception of apprenticeships by government as being skills- and occupation-focused, but it creates the potential for disengagement when apprentices or employers consider content to be irrelevant.

Returning to Ulriksen’s (2009) ‘implied student’, the experience of apprentices and the increasing focus at government-level on skills development, could lead to the ‘implied student’ changing in the future. Universities may see more students in classrooms with an extremely specific occupational and skills-based purpose for being there, which could change the way that students are expected to act or behave. The introduction of DAs could therefore be seen to be an additional factor in the neoliberalism of universities, as they progress the debate about the purpose of education by intentionally focussing on skills rather than academic learning

7.1.3 Learning in the Workplace

The apprentices in this research recognised that they were in a fortunate position to be paid while studying for a degree. They were grateful for the opportunity, and did not feel under pressure from their employers, although they recognised that there would be disappointment if they did not pass their programmes. Two of the apprentices interviewed were on temporary

apprenticeship contracts, and would lose their job if they failed, as discussed in detail in Section 6.2.6. However, while they recognised the risk of failure, none of the interviewed apprentices were concerned that their performance was being monitored by their employers.

The interviewees did, however, feel that they were in a more advantageous position than full-time students. Comments made by several participants in Chapter 6 described the apprentices as having a more secure future than full-time students because they were already employed and developing occupational experience. They considered their workplace experience to place them in a stronger occupational and academic position than full-time students, a view echoed by one of the employers. One of the academics described apprentice groups as being obnoxious at times, because they clearly saw themselves as being 'better' than full-time students.

Lave and Wenger (1991) purported that learning takes place in a learning community, which is a social experience. This was relevant when considering how apprentices would manage their learning when working within two learning communities: the classroom and the workplace. As discussed in Section 7.1.1, the apprentices were confident in the classroom. They did not express any concerns about their academic ability and saw themselves to be an asset in the classroom because of their professional identities.

The workplace, however, was quite different. Health apprentices saw themselves to be in a very different position to their peers. They considered the full-time Nursing students to have a better learning experience within their placements, as their role was only to be trained and not to undertake a 'day job'. Some apprentices did not have separate placements from their place of work, as their roles were varied enough that their employers saw their normal workplace as suitable for undertaking their on-the-job training. One apprentice who was based in a specialised department, was given separate placements which helped distinguish her work and training time.

Interestingly, while the apprentices were confident in their professional identity, those who did not feel they were getting a sufficient variety of experience within the workplace did not feel able to speak up about it. In both Health and Digital, apprentices commented about restricted learning opportunities compared to full-time students, or even compared to other apprentices, but did not raise this with their managers. Only one Health apprentice had raised it due to the specialist area in which she was based. This seems to evidence differentiated self-efficacy. The apprentices had high levels of academic self-efficacy through their positive sense of professional identity, which was validated by employers selecting them for, and supporting

them in, the DA. However, they had a lower self-efficacy in relation to their organisation. It is possible that this reflected their sense of place within large Levy-paying organisations or their relationships with managers, but further research would be required to explore this further.

Perhaps an important aspect to the strengthening of professional identity within the programme, was that some of the Health apprentices spoke about their experience of training full-time students while on placements. They recognised that they were in a strange position of sometimes being academically at a lower level of the programme than the full-time students on placement but being professionally senior to them and able to train them. The apprentices therefore simultaneously occupied the identities of learner and experienced practitioner. This dual positioning further differentiates apprentices from widening participation students commonly discussed within the academic literature, many of whom are assumed to be developing professional identities alongside, or after, their academic identities. In contrast, the apprentices entered HE with already-established professional identities. There was no indication of conflict between the apprentices and full-time students in the workplace, perhaps because of the clear professional hierarchy between them in those situations.

7.1.4 Identity: Employee versus Student or Apprentice

I did not find any academic literature on the potential for conflict in identity between being an 'employee' versus 'apprentice' role, but it was a significant theme in my findings for Health apprentices.

The Management, Digital and Social Work apprentices did not identify any issues around their identities, other than, as previously mentioned, the view of the Social Work apprentices that they were 'unqualified' Social Workers. The conflict in their identity related more to their role as an employee, where they believed their current role was not reflective of the work that they were doing. The main conflict in identity was in Health, and it related to how apprentices were seen within their workplace rather than in the university.

All Health apprentices within this research were identified as apprentices through a change in uniform. Prior to the apprenticeship, all were working as Health Care Assistants, and continued to do so with specified roles and responsibilities within their hospitals. The symbolic marking of apprentices through uniforms disrupted previously established professional identities. Although apprentices continued to undertake similar workplace responsibilities, their visible reclassification as learners altered how they perceived themselves and how they believed others perceived them. The participants interpreted uniforms not simply as indicators of learner status, but as signals of reduced professional legitimacy, particularly in interactions with

patients. They felt that they were no longer being viewed as a professional but were instead being viewed by patients with scepticism about whether they could perform their duties. They also struggled with working alongside full-time students, as they felt that the lack of confidence sometimes displayed by inexperienced Nursing students reflected badly on them in the eyes of patients.

The interviews took place in the early years of the implementation of DAs, and the Health apprentices also felt that their identity was confusing within their hospitals. This may have been a failing of communication within the hospitals, but when in work, they were seen as employees rather than learners. Some felt that the doctors did not recognise that they should be given learning opportunities in the same way that full-time students were, and that there was a lack of recognition in general that their apprenticeship was also a pathway to becoming a Registered Nurse.

It is possible that as DAs have become embedded into the NHS, the recognition of apprentices has improved; but in the early years of apprenticeships, some of the apprentices clearly felt significant conflict between their professional and learner identities. For widening participation learners, this finding suggests that gaining access to HE does not eliminate tensions around identity. Instead, participation may create new tensions as individuals negotiate professional, learner, and organisational expectations simultaneously. This is an area that future research could usefully explore.

All apprentices clearly identified themselves as 'apprentices' when studying at the university, and, similarly to research by Taylor-Smith *et al.* (2019), they tended to form a cohesive group separate from the full-time student population. The Management apprentices spoke of spending their breaks together, usually working on their 'day job' and sharing ideas, but keeping separate from the full-time students. The apprentices therefore maintained their occupational professional identity through their community of practice in the workplace but also established their 'learner' identity within the small close-knit apprenticeship community in the university.

While Ulriksen *et al.* (2016) had suggested that it was important for apprentices to balance their identities and to socialise with full-time students as a way of developing a student identity, the apprentices did not appear motivated to develop a conventional student identity. This finding further challenges assumptions within widening participation literature that successful participation in HE requires assimilation into established student cultures and identities.

7.1.5 Summary

Apprentices in this research had strong professional identities, high levels of engagement in their classroom learning, and the confidence to challenge other students and sometimes, lecturers. They did not evidence any concern about their place in the classroom or a lack of recognition of the norms and expectations within HE. Professional identity acted as a protective resources, moderating the uncertainty commonly associated with transition to HE, and, perhaps as a consequence of the strength of their professional identity, apprentices did not express any interest in developing a student identity.

The challenge to identity for some came more from the experience within the workplace, where Health apprentices did not feel that they were recognised as professionals. However, there was a risk of disengagement from learning for apprentices with high levels of self-confidence in their professional knowledge and experience, as they felt some academic content was out-of-touch with reality or irrelevant. These findings are significantly different from the academic literature that places under-represented students as being more likely to experience low levels of self-confidence and weakened self-efficacy due to the sense of being different. The apprentices were proud to be different.

The interview quotations presented in Chapter 6 consistently demonstrated that difference was interpreted positively by apprentices. Their workplace experience and professional expertise were sources of confidence rather than markers of disadvantage. This finding challenges a significant body of widening participation literature that associates difference with uncertainty, marginality, or reduced belonging. For these apprentices, difference was a source of confidence, legitimacy, and expertise.

A key finding in relation to how apprentices perceived themselves, is the level of confidence they had in their place within the labour market. The apprentices already had a job and were guaranteed progression and stability in their employment if they passed the apprenticeship, which meant they considered themselves to have a powerful position in the labour market. They also had been selected, either competitively or directly by managers, for the apprenticeship, which meant their employers were evidencing the belief that they had potential for progression and continued employment within the organisation. This level of confidence and the impact on their classroom experience, is not reflected in any part of the academic literature relating to widening participation and apprenticeships and represents a key finding about how Degree Apprentices experience learning. More broadly, the finding suggests that professional

identity may be a more important factor than under-representation in understanding how some mature and vocational learners experience HE.

7.2 How does the experience of Degree Apprenticeships impact the professional identity of university staff?

University staff were acutely aware of the sectoral pressures outlined in Chapter 2 and the strategic case for Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) as a source of income diversification. Academics felt that they did not have any power in pushing back on apprenticeships within their universities but also recognised that the assumption within the sector was that DAs would be attractive to 18-year-olds (Irons, 2017), and this was an important market for their universities. In the early years of apprenticeships, academics generally perceived DAs to be a positive opportunity, particularly as they believed it was delivering existing programmes within a different funding model.

This section focusses on the experience of university staff in delivering apprenticeships, both within the classroom and in relation to power dynamics within their universities. The experience of working with employers and managing the regulatory landscape is discussed in Section 7.3.

7.2.1 The Classroom

There is little in the academic literature relating to the experience for academic staff in delivering apprenticeships. However, Olssen and Peters (2005) wrote that academics can no longer approach their disciplines with open intellectual inquiry as a result of neoliberalisation, and Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg (2017) recognised that university managers play an increasing role in dictating academic content to meet market demand. Some academic areas had always been based on prescribed curricula set by regulatory bodies, but this was not the case for Management and Digital Course Leaders. They largely had academic freedom in their full-time courses and were clearly frustrated that this freedom had been significantly affected by apprenticeships.

The experience of the academics in this research, was that they were mainly required to teach apprentices alongside full-time students, something which has since been identified within the academic literature as being problematic (Lester, 2020). The Digital Course Leader was concerned that jointly teaching the apprenticeship with the full-time students meant that the content for full-time students had been negatively changed to comply with the Apprenticeship Standard, and he did not have the autonomy to improve it.

The experience of the Management Course Leader, and views of the Social Work employer, mirrored concerns in the academic literature that warns that apprenticeship learning has the potential to be institutionalised (Smith *et al.*, 2019). The Management Course Leader recognised that the necessary focus for apprentices on their own sectors and organisations meant the programme was too specialised. However, the Social Work employer was more positive about this, expressing the view that the apprentices would have a better understanding of the organisation than graduates from the full-time programme.

The Management and Digital Course Leaders felt that they were being asked to deliver programmes that they did not think was better than the full-time programmes, with no autonomy to improve them. The findings supported earlier research by Martin *et al.* (2020), that found academics felt a lack of control and were concerned that their academic reputation would be negatively affected by their involvement in DAs. The findings also support the theories of Grint and Nixon (2015), that workers within the knowledge economy experience declining satisfaction as their autonomy decreases and the focus on performance metrics increase. These findings also evidence a weakened sense of self-efficacy for the academics, who felt unhappy and stressed by their experience of developing and delivering the apprenticeship programmes. The interview data demonstrated that academic frustrations were frequently linked to perceived reductions in autonomy and concerns that curriculum decisions were driven by employers and Apprenticeship Standards, rather than disciplinary expertise. The Digital Course Leader in particular, mentioned that no-one thought the content of the DA was good, except for the large employers within the trailblazer group. He clearly felt that his programme was being dictated by others and was unhappy at being required to comply with the Apprenticeship Standards.

These findings are important in the context of widening participation because the effectiveness of DAs in supporting participation depends not only on access to HE, but also on the quality and sustainability of the educational experience provided once access has been achieved. As discussed throughout this thesis, the success of widening participation activity cannot be judged solely on increasing access, as the success of under-represented groups within HE is of equal or greater importance. The effectiveness of the apprenticeship programmes could therefore be undermined by the impact of the programmes on the confidence and autonomy of the academics responsible for supporting learners once they enter HE.

Academics did not report any experiences of being challenged or undermined in class but had witnessed conflict between apprentices and full-time students. They acknowledged that

apprentices had a strong sense of self-efficacy and were active participants within the classroom, but other than recognising that their confidence could make them 'obnoxious', the experience of academics was that apprentices were a positive addition to the classroom. However, this research did not include a Social Work academic, and it was only the Social Work apprentices who had openly challenged their lecturers within the classroom.

It is important not to place too much weight on individual experiences within an exploratory study, and it is possible that the Social Work apprentices within this particular study were more confident and willing to challenge than apprentices might normally be. More importantly, as discussed in detail in section 7.1.2, was that the academics all recognised the potential for the apprentices to disengage when learning was not considered to be relevant.

7.2.2 Power Dynamics within the University

The impact of the neoliberalisation of Higher Education (HE) has been, as was discussed in detail in Chapter 2, an increase in performance metrics and management oversight within the sector (Powell and Walsh, 2018; Olssen and Peters, 2005). Academics clearly felt significant pressure from within their universities. Several interviewees described these pressures through references to micromanagement, contract retention, and performance expectations, highlighting the extent to which apprenticeship delivery altered their day-to-day academic practice. Bandura (1994) argued that individuals in this type of situation are more likely to experience stress when confronted with challenge. This was the case for the academics interviewed in this research, with all recognising their feeling of stress and powerlessness in contract negotiation and management.

Academics were aware that their full-time courses, or their universities in general, were facing pressures in student recruitment, so apprenticeships were a necessary area of income diversification and generation. However, it had put them into an uncomfortable position. The academics also recognised that performance measures would play a part in future apprenticeship recruitment, and this led to them feeling under constant pressure to ensure their courses were performing well. One academic for example, spoke of the challenge she faced from the apprenticeships team who had told her that apprentices should not be allowed to fail.

The two interviewees who worked on the implementation of apprenticeships within their universities spoke of the need for their universities and academics to have a shift in culture and to accept that new processes and policies would be required as apprenticeships were going to happen. They did not reflect on the impact of this on their academic colleagues, but instead took the view that the academics did not have a choice.

The Health Course Leader had experience in delivering regulated courses, but the Management and Digital Course Leaders did not. They recognised that apprenticeships were a notable change to their normal practice, as discussed within the academic literature (Bravenboer, 2019; Welbourne, Devins and Reynolds, 2019); and they felt powerless in making improvements because the apprenticeship managers/departments were exerting pressure on them. They experienced conflict in their professional identity as university academics, as they felt that they did not have any autonomy over the continued development of apprenticeships within their universities. Two of the academics subsequently left their employment to work in universities that were not involved in apprenticeships, evidencing that the impact on their professional identity from apprenticeships was greater than they were willing to accept.

Academics experienced a clear tension between their identity as autonomous scholarly professionals and the increasingly managerial expectations associated with apprenticeship delivery. These tensions materialised in some of the academics' engagement with apprenticeship management teams, and employers were aware of the challenging power dynamics within the universities. One of the employers interviewed had experienced the conflict that was taking place within one of their university partners and felt that it was having a negative effect on the apprenticeship. The level of impact was such that they were considering looking elsewhere for future apprenticeships training.

7.2.3 Summary

The academic staff experienced a negative impact on their professional identity due to their involvement with apprenticeships. Some experienced a reduction in the academic freedoms they enjoyed in full-time programmes, and all experienced an increase in the management and oversight of their work due to the requirements of their universities to ensure strong apprenticeship success rates and future apprenticeship recruitment. The academics did not view the apprenticeship programmes as being better than the full-time programmes, and some saw the content as being of poorer quality and relevance to their course areas. Some viewed the apprenticeships as being too focussed on an occupation or too applied to each apprentice's organisation or sector, reducing the breadth of academic coverage compared to full-time programmes.

The academics within this research were not positive about apprenticeships, and it is possible that their frustration and sense of pressure could have impacted on the teaching and delivery of apprenticeships. This raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) as a widening participation mechanism if academic staff feel unable to

influence curriculum quality, programme design, and employer relationships. The impact of the academic experience on the quality of apprenticeship teaching and learning could not be explored fully within the interviews. However, the tensions within universities around the management of apprenticeships were not always well hidden, as one of the employers had noticed it and felt it was a limiting factor to their future business with a university partner.

The introduction of DAs challenged established academic professional identities by limiting autonomy over curriculum design and pedagogic decision-making. While DAs appeared to strengthen the professional identities of apprentices by reinforcing their value within the labour market, they simultaneously weakened the professional identities of academics through increased managerial oversight, regulation, and reduced autonomy.

7.3 How does the involvement of employers and the regulatory landscape for Apprenticeships, impact the experience of studying and delivering Degree Apprenticeships?

Apprenticeships were introduced by the government as an employer-led programme, where universities and employers would work collaboratively to develop a skills-based workforce. As such, employers and universities worked together in trailblazer groups to create the Apprenticeship Standards, and it was expected that, via the Levy, employers would seek to play a key role in the contract and delivery of high-quality apprenticeships. This section discusses how the employers and universities worked together across the apprenticeship journey but also considers the impact of the regulatory landscape on the employer-university partnership and the apprenticeship experience.

7.3.1 The Relationship Between Employers and Academics

The employers interviewed in this research were highly engaged in apprenticeships. All had previously delivered apprenticeships before the change to Standards and the Apprenticeship Levy and saw them as an important method of upskilling their workforce. Two of the three employers had made the opportunities available to their existing workforce, while one employer recruited new apprentices into the organisation.

The employers and universities worked in partnership in the admission of apprentices onto the course, but the employers had the final say over who would be admitted, reflecting the academic literature (Emms and Laczik, 2025; Bravenboer, 2019; Rowe, 2018). One Course Leader felt pressured by the importance of the employer partnership to admit apprentices who might otherwise be unsuitable. The apprenticeships that were delivered on a 2+2 model of

Foundation Degree followed by Bachelor Degree, had entry requirements specified in the Apprenticeship Standard as Level 2 qualifications. In that case, the Course Leader involved felt that it was not possible to reject employees put forward by the employer without risking a strategically important relationship. Both the Course Leader and a member of university support staff outlined how they had to 'spoon-feed' academic content and push apprentices towards student support, reflecting the academic literature that highlighted the need to provide additional support to apprentices to ensure they can succeed on the course (Hughes and Saieva, 2021; Lester, 2020; Katarzi and Hayward, 2019).

The finding that academics had limited control over who was admitted to the apprenticeship programmes is particularly important for widening participation because it demonstrates that employers effectively acted as gatekeepers to Higher Education (HE) opportunities. Access to Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) was therefore frequently dependent on employer decisions rather than direct interaction with universities.

It is important to recognise that increasing access to HE by admitting apprentices with Level 2 qualifications, when the entry requirements for the full-time programme would normally be Level 3 qualifications, could be argued as setting the apprentices up for academic failure. This was not a decision made by the employer or university in this research but was instead the requirements set out in the Apprenticeship Standard and expected by the employer to be accepted by the university. The Standards are therefore encouraging progression through Apprenticeship Levels, but I would argue that it is not 'good' progression if apprentices are not academically ready. The success rates of apprentices entering HE with Level 2 qualifications is, I would argue, an essential area of further study. Understanding these outcomes is particularly important from a widening participation perspective, as lower entry requirements may increase access but do not necessarily guarantee equitable participation or success. If these apprentices experience lower success rates than those entering with Level 3 qualification of full-time students on equivalent programmes, the result suggests that widening access has not translated into widening *success*. In such circumstances, the policy could represent a widening participation paradox, increasing entry to HE while simultaneously reducing the likelihood of a successful outcome.

The academic literature relating to apprenticeships, reflects the importance of developing and maintaining employer relationships (Hughes and Saieva, 2021; Lester, 2020; Bravenboer, 2019; Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019). However, the academic literature does not reflect the findings from this research, which was that neither the employers nor the Course

Leaders felt that they had power in the relationship. Employer interviewees described the reality of apprenticeship partnerships as considerably less employer-led than government rhetoric had suggested, while academics described feeling unable to challenge employer requests for fear of losing contracts. One of the Course Leaders had been part of a conversation with an employer where it was made clear that the employer could, and would, move learners to another training provider, mid-course. These pressures relating to the contracts reflected the discussion within the academic literature about the ease with which employers could move their intakes from one year to the next if the course or contract was not right (Martin *et al.*, 2020; Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019; Powell and Walsh, 2018). The result was that the Course Leader felt significant pressure in the partnership.

The Course Leaders indicated a weak sense of self-efficacy in regard to their relationships with employers. They did not feel that they were in control of the relationship, and some had been asked by employers, as part of contract negotiations, for things that would be difficult to accept or deliver. This included paying employers to deliver teaching on the DA programme, or providing free skills training for other employees based on the number of apprentices offered to the university. These sometimes awkward conversations seemed to affect the professional identity and self-efficacy of Course Leaders and leads to important questions about how this could affect the teaching and learning experience for apprentices on the course, and therefore their success on the course. Further research should examine the efficacy, and success, of the teaching and learning experience for learners or students, where academics are experiencing weakened self-efficacy.

Section 7.2.2 discussed the conflict within universities between Course Leaders and apprenticeship managers, and the impact of this conflict created a sense of powerlessness in the academic relationships with employers. The Course Leaders' universities determined how apprenticeships would be delivered, including joint teaching of apprentices and full-time students, which meant the Course Leaders were only able to offer what had been determined by apprenticeship managers. They felt that they were responsible for securing contracts, but with their hands tied in terms of the offer to employers, but also in terms of who was accepted onto the course. The relationship between the universities and employers therefore increasingly resembled a market transaction rather than a traditional educational partnership, consistent with accounts of neoliberalisation within HE (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2007).

While the employers interviewed were very engaged with apprenticeships, the experience of the Management Course Leader and some management apprentices was that employers were

disengaged, something which had also been seen in Modern Apprenticeships (Ertl and Stasz, 2010). The Management Course Leader struggled to get employers to support course meetings or to attend tripartite meetings to discuss the progress of apprentices and felt that the benefit sold to her of improved employer partnerships, was not coming to fruition. This raises important questions, as also discussed in the academic literature, about how successful the apprenticeship can be if the employer is not delivering their part of the occupation-based curriculum and pedagogies (Billett, 2016), and how training providers can better support employers to fulfil their responsibilities (Newton, Hirst and Miller, 2019).

7.3.2 Employers as Trainers and Assessors

In 2018/19, when the university staff involved in this research were establishing apprenticeship provision, funding rules allowed employers to be sub-contracted to deliver elements of training (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2018). In these circumstances, the university could not offset some of the negotiated price for the employer-delivered training but would instead be required to pay the employer directly for this provision (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2018: 34). One interviewee responsible for implementing apprenticeships described a difficult conversation with an employer about delivering some of the teaching. Her role required ensuring compliance with the university's quality standards, which created tension in managing employer expectations alongside the quality requirements of the university.

The Social Work employer described the apprenticeship as more beneficial to her organisation than the full-time degree route, as apprentices were developed within the organisation and gained a stronger understanding of its processes and culture compared to full-time students. She had also moved the apprentices onto temporary contracts, believing this would help them focus more fully on their role as apprentices rather than as contracted employees. Her account raises some key questions.

First, if the employer viewed the apprenticeship as offering greater organisational benefit, this may have led to an over-investment in the programme, potentially increasing the practical, emotional, and day-to-day support provided to apprentices. Such a position prompts questions about whether the organisation would feel able to fail an apprentice during placement assessment. Second, the use of temporary contracts heightened the stakes for apprentices. One apprentice expressed significant anxiety about losing his job if he failed the course, as he did not hold a permanent role outside the apprenticeship. This situation could place considerable pressure on the employer not to fail apprentices, or to encourage the university to offer additional opportunities for them to pass the course

The Social Work situation also raises questions about the purpose of education. In the neoliberalism of Higher Education (HE), the sector has become bound by performance metrics, including graduate-employability. Universities continue to offer the full-time Nursing and Social Work programmes, funded by students through tuition fee loans, who may perceive themselves to be at a significant disadvantage in terms of graduate employment prospects compared to apprentices. Particularly when employers clearly view the apprentices as being on the preferred route. The risk is that Degree Apprenticeships become employer-focussed training programmes offering a preferential opportunity, while students on the full-time programmes face the prospect of not being employed post-graduation.

7.3.3 The Regulatory Landscape

Chapter 2 outlined the regulatory landscape for DAs, which included the Office for Students, the Quality Assurance Agency, and Ofsted; and noted the concern for universities due to the additional regulatory requirements for apprenticeships (Hughes and Saieva, 2021; Bravenboer, 2019; Quew-Jones, 2019). The introduction of Ofsted as an inspector of apprenticeships was a significant concern for the university staff in this research.

One of the Course Leaders had experienced an Ofsted inspection and described it as a “traumatic” experience. The other Course Leaders were awaiting an inspection and were clearly concerned about what it would be like. The Course Leaders described the standards required by Ofsted as being potentially difficult to meet, even though they were confident that their programmes were as good as they could be. They were all clear that they did not want to be involved in programmes that required Ofsted inspections¹³.

However, it was not only Ofsted that was seen to be problematic for apprenticeships, as the wider regulatory requirements of DA monitoring were seen to be onerous and stressful. One employer felt that university partners interpreted requirements differently, with one university requiring significantly more than other universities when monitoring off-the-job learning. Apprentices also expressed strong dissatisfaction with the volume and difficulty of this work.

There was also confusion about what was required prior to the start of the apprenticeship, with one Course Leader retrospectively undertaking the assessment of prior skills and knowledge. When asking apprentices to complete the assessment, she advised them not to rate themselves as “excellent” in any area, as this could conflict with what the university had agreed

¹³ It is important to note that since the primary research was carried out, the tragic death of a headteacher following an Ofsted inspection at a Primary School in England, has led to changes in the approach of Ofsted relating to wellbeing of staff involved in inspections; and the introduction of a more nuanced approach to grading educational institutions (Gov.uk, 2025).

with employers regarding training needs and the negotiated apprenticeship price. Having reviewed more recent funding guidelines, the pre-enrolment assessment of prior knowledge and skills is an important part of onboarding apprentices. However, the experience of the Management Course Leader evidence the difficulties for universities in navigating new rules and processes early in the delivery of a new type of Higher Education (HE).

It is possible that there have been improvements in the guidance around reporting and monitoring apprenticeships, and clarity in the expectations of Ofsted, which might have reduced the need for universities to interpret and communicate those requirements. However, the burden of inspection and apprenticeship monitoring was such that it caused significant stress for university staff and apprentices within this research.

7.3.4 Summary

The introduction of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) created opportunities for universities to significantly enhance their partnerships with employers. However, while some engaged actively with these programmes, the partnerships were characterised by power imbalances that were exacerbated by monitoring requirements, regulatory demands, and performance measures. Some employers did not engage once contracts were in place, while others sought levels of involvement that suggested limited awareness of the academic requirements of DAs, including the need for teaching qualifications or relevant academic expertise to deliver training. The relationship between universities and employers had changed from traditional educational partnerships based on placements and employability support, to a relationship based on marketised transactions. This is consistent with accounts of neoliberalism within Higher Education (HE) (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2007). The findings suggest therefore, that widening participation outcomes within DAs are shaped by labour-market priorities, employer recruitment decisions, and contractual relationships, rather than by traditional university-led widening participation strategies.

The regulatory landscape was a key source of stress for Course Leaders, as they dreaded the prospect of having an Ofsted inspection and the impact on their university, and themselves, if they failed. The strength of feeling expressed by academic participants, including descriptions of inspections as traumatic and emotionally exhausting, suggests that regulatory pressures were experienced as significant professional challenges rather than routine quality assurance processes. Apprentices were directly affected by the monitoring required of apprenticeships, finding it onerous and time-consuming; and something that, once again, full-time students did not have to do.

The perception of the apprenticeship as a preferred route into, in this case, Social Work, raises important questions about the future of the full-time programme. Over ten years since Degree Apprenticeships were introduced, both Nursing and Social Work are still offered as full-time programmes alongside the DA routes. While teaching may now be delivered separately, there are clearly questions about how the graduates from the full-time programme may be considered when compared against the DA graduates, and the implication for those graduates given their funding of the programme via tuition fee loans. This would be an interesting area for further research, particularly as Social Work and Nursing full-time students undertake unpaid placements as part of their course.

7.4 How does the experience of Degree Apprenticeships for students normally under-represented in Higher Education, suggest that Apprenticeships can support increased access to HE in England?

This section summarises the findings from the earlier sections through the lens of the main research question. The key findings from the research are presented in Chapter 8.

This research found that while at school or college, the apprentices in this study had their aspirations and expectations of Higher Education (HE) affected by their social and cultural capital and their habitus. As reflected in several interview accounts, participants often described HE as something intended for other people rather than for themselves, despite recognising its value and desirability. . HE existed within their possible selves but not within their probable selves, as the constraints of financial circumstances, family responsibilities or educational experiences constrained their opportunities. Their habitus clearly continued to affect their sense of identity and their feelings of pride at being offered a place on the apprenticeship, as almost all could not believe that *they* were getting to go to university. It was something that they did not see as being an option for them or for people like them. Some had doubts about their academic abilities at the start of their programmes, but their professional identities were strong and gave them an increased sense of self-confidence than might have been expected for apprentices entering an HE learning community on just one day each week..

The legislative background to Degree Apprenticeships was based on improving the development of skills in partnership with employers and providing an alternative means of funding HE. The apprentices and employers were clear that the funding of apprenticeships made them an attractive option, and the universities clearly viewed them as representing an important opportunity for growing student numbers. For the universities however, the rules around funding brought significant challenge and made apprenticeships a more restrictive area

of delivery compared to full-time HE. The level of restriction in the curriculum and the introduction of Ofsted inspections meant that universities had to make extensive changes to their culture and their teaching and learning policies, with a considerable amount of stress placed on the shoulders of academic staff delivering the programmes.

Academic staff did not feel that the programmes were better, or even comparable, to the existing degree programmes, as the Standards required them to teach topics that they did not think were as strong as those offered within the full-time programmes. Course Leaders felt that the apprenticeship curricula were not as strong as the full-time programmes. For employers and apprentices however, the restriction was annoying but there was not the same visceral frustration that was felt by university academics. Apprentices and employers believed the courses to be applied to their organisation or sector and felt that they would be better qualified graduates than those on full-time courses. They did not express any of the concerns within the academic literature that the curricula would be too narrow with restricted knowledge and skills (Powell and Walsh, 2018).

The legislative expectation that Degree Apprenticeships would provide occupation-based skills development was largely being met according to this research, but this was predominately in Health and Social Work, programmes that already exist as professional full-time degrees. The Management apprentice who worked for a small employer was challenged by the content of the course and its applicability to his role, but as he was the only apprentice within this research to work for a small company, it is difficult to conclude whether his experience would be found in other small companies. Some of the employer partners working with the universities in this research were completely disengaged from the apprenticeship delivery, which created challenges for the academics delivering the programmes.

Some apprentices and all academic staff clearly felt that the apprenticeship experience had an impact on their sense of identity. Some apprentices experienced little to no conflict between their identity as an employee or apprentice, and other than the challenge of fitting their day job and studies into their week, they were able to get on with the programme and work towards its completion. However, for others, the conflict in their sense of identity was considerable, as was their experiences of self-efficacy. Health apprentices particularly struggled with their employee versus apprentice identity, both in their interactions with their patients and their access to learning opportunities in the workplace. Some of this was not helped by the difference in how their training versus work time was viewed by their employer, and the difference in the way that placement hours were counted for apprentices compared to full-time students.

Classroom interactions between apprentices and full-time students created conflict as apprentices assumed the position of professional seniority over full-time students. This made the apprentices feel different to full-time students, and while some full-time students seemed to treat the knowledge from the apprentices as of benefit to them, other full-time students were less welcoming to the apprentices. Some of the apprentices challenged academics, suggesting weak framing in terms of pedagogic discourse, as they privileged the knowledge they had from their occupation-specific training in the workplace alongside their real-world experiences within their professional roles. Their pedagogic identity remained strongly within their professional identity as the apprentices largely did not want to develop a 'student' or 'learner' identity.

Some apprentices experienced a slight challenge to their sense of self-efficacy, worrying that they would be unable to complete the course and finding the additional monitoring that they had to undertake within the apprenticeship as having an impact on their ability to do their day job. It is possible that this was not helped by the lower levels of academic attainment required for some apprenticeship courses compared to full-time programmes. However, the biggest challenge in self-efficacy was for academic staff, who felt that they were teaching courses that were not as strong as full-time courses, and that they were expected to spoon-feed apprentices to ensure they would pass the course. Some academics felt micromanaged and impotent in the face of the pressures coming from internal changes relating to apprenticeships, and the prospect of an Ofsted visit. Academic staff were very aware of the pressures from their universities to ensure the apprentices performed well, recognising the potential impact of poor performance on future contracts.

This research found that Degree Apprenticeships increased access to HE for the apprentices that were on programme, but this was by accident rather than by design. The employers did not actively attempt to recruit traditionally under-represented groups, and while the Social Work employer recognised the potential for DAs to widen access, the apprentices ultimately reflected the mature female cohort seen in full-time Social Work programmes (Corten *et al.*, 2025). The available employees for the DA programmes were already in employment and their access to HE was therefore based on employment-based progression rather than intentional widening participation activity. Importantly, occupational decisions had generally been made before the DA opportunity emerged. Consequently, some apprentices entered pathways that already reflected established gendered occupational patterns, suggesting that DAs may reproduce existing inequalities in occupational participation rather than challenging them.

While participation in HE widened for the apprentices involved in this research, the findings suggest that access was shaped by a complex interaction of age, prior educational experience, professional identity, employment status, and wider opportunity structures. These findings demonstrate that widening participation is not experienced uniformly, even among learners who share characteristics associated with under-representation. Rather than being defined solely by these characteristics, apprentices' experiences of HE were mediated by their occupational backgrounds, labour-market position, and perceptions of what opportunities were realistically available for them. This suggests that widening participation students cannot be understood solely through the lens of disadvantage but must also be understood through the interaction of identity, employment, educational history, and access to opportunity.

For some apprentices, the experience was mainly positive. Others however, experienced significant challenges within the apprenticeship and spoke about the stresses and pressures related to the programme that they did not think were a feature of full-time programmes. This research was not a comparative study into the DA versus the full-time programme, but it raises important questions about the perceived experience. It also raises questions within a social justice dimension, of whether it is acceptable that the apprentices experienced more stress and pressure, with, in some cases, limited access to workplace training and differing systems for counting placement hours, in order to receive a free degree. However, further research into the contrasting experiences on full-time programmes versus DAs would be necessary to truly interrogate that question.

A major contribution of this research is the finding that professional identity appeared to mitigate many of the transitional challenges commonly associated with widening participation students. Rather than entering HE as under-represented learners defined by disadvantage, many apprentices entered as workers, practitioners, and professionals. Their established professional identities appeared to reshape the traditional widening participation experience, challenging assumptions about confidence, belonging, and educational transition within HE.

This research created significant new knowledge to add to the academic literature relating to widening participation, vocational education, mature students, and academic experiences within a neoliberal HE sector. The following chapter sets out the key findings and provides commentary on the thesis journey, critically exploring the approach taken and setting out areas for further study. It also documents plans for dissemination of this research.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The legislative background of the neoliberalisation of Higher Education (HE) and the increasing focus of higher-level skills education by successive governments led to a situation where Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) were largely welcomed by universities as a new opportunity for income generation and diversification. When the primary research took place between 2019-2021, DAs were in their infancy and there had not yet been a graduating cohort. Ten years later, in 2026, DAs continue to be part of the HE and vocational landscape and look likely to remain. There have been some changes: funding rules have been updated annually with more information to support delivery of apprenticeships; the Levy has changed to increase the breadth of training covered; and there has been changes to funding based on age groups and Levels of apprenticeships.

These changes make clear that DAs are not going away. The HE sector continues to face significant financial pressure, and governments continue to highlight apprenticeships as an important part of developing the higher-level skills in the workforce.

This Chapter revisits the original research question and aims of the study, before presenting the key findings split across the three stakeholders of apprentices, university staff, and employers, continuing the structure from Chapter 7. It then goes on to outline the contribution to knowledge, before considering the strengths and limitations of the research. Following a discussion of the significant implications for policy and practice that has come from this research, the Chapter goes on to consider the possibilities for future research within this area. Finally, the Chapter concludes with my reflections on the research.

The findings from this research are significant and it is important that they become part of the academic literature relating to widening participation, mature students, vocational education, Degree Apprenticeships, employer and university partnerships, and the impact on university academic staff of the neoliberalisation of HE. The research will be disseminated through a series of journal articles and conference presentations dedicated to the key findings from this study. It is important that these findings become part of the established academic literature within this area.

8.1 The Research Problem and Aims of this Research

As summarised in Chapter 1, I have a personal and professional background in widening participation (WP) to Higher Education (HE), and a professional background in the

development of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). The research problem therefore was initially based within a concern that while DAs represented an exciting opportunity to increase access to HE of groups traditionally under-represented, I was concerned that they would not. The view of a single employer that they would be recruiting apprentices from independent schools, as they would be the 'best' students, initiated my interest in this research. When I started my studies in 2017, academic literature on DAs was extremely limited as they had been introduced into the HE sector less than two years before.

The research aims developed throughout the early stages of the academic literature review, as it became apparent that DAs were predominately being taken up by mature students. Literature relating to the experience of academic staff within a neoliberal HE led to questions about the delivery of DAs, and how that might impact the potential of DAs to increase access to HE. The overarching aim of the research was to consider whether DAs could support increased access to HE by exploring the experience of the development and delivery of DAs, alongside the experience of studying a DA. The research aimed to explore the experience of apprentices who had characteristics that were under-represented in HE, and the experience of university staff and employers in the delivery of DAs.

The research questions are provided below:

Primary Research Question: How does the experience of Degree Apprenticeships for students normally under-represented in Higher Education, suggest that Apprenticeships can support increased access to HE in England?

Secondary Research Questions:

SQ1: How do apprentices perceive their apprenticeship learning experience, particularly in relation to identity, learning, and their interactions with the university and peers?

SQ2: How does the experience of Degree Apprenticeships impact the professional identity of university staff?

SQ3: How does the involvement of employers and the regulatory landscape for apprenticeships, impact the experience of studying and delivering Degree Apprenticeships?

8.2 Key Findings

This thesis began with the legislative background that led to a situation where the Higher Education (HE) sector was open to the income diversification opportunity that came with

Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). DAs were expected to be attractive to 18-year-olds (Irons, 2017), which made them an important opportunity to grow student numbers in an HE sector that had been increasingly marketised. An important underlying theme of this research, as recognised by the university staff participants, was that neoliberalism forced DAs into HE.

8.2.1 Quantitative Findings

National apprenticeships data presented throughout Chapters 2 and 3, and detailed in Section 5.2, along with the survey data within this research, evidence that Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) are making HE more accessible for mature students, but not for other under-represented groups.

Degree apprentices are likely to already be in employment as shown in *Table 11* (Gov.uk, 2024a; Section 3.8.1), and over the age of 25, as demonstrated in *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.4.4). However, Section 5.2 compared the survey data with national data, finding that Higher and Degree Apprentices (HDAs) are less likely to have a declared disability or be from a Minority Ethnic background than full-time HE students (Gov.uk, 2025b). They are as likely to be from an economically disadvantaged background, but more likely to be male compared to full-time HE students (Gov.uk, 2025e). The apprenticeships seem to be making HE more accessible for male and mature students, but not as accessible as full-time HE for other groups.

The data presented throughout Chapters 2 and 3, and Section 5.2, also showed that gendered stereotypes are perpetuated within apprenticeships, as females are over-represented in Health, Social Work, and similar caring-related programmes, while males are over-represented in Digital/IT, and Management. This was also reflected in the apprenticeship population I surveyed for this research. The apprentices surveyed had been interested in similar course areas while at school, indicating that their HE interests were already situated within gendered stereotypes at that point. However, financial factors, academic attainment, and/or family commitments, meant that HE was not realistically attainable at the age of 18, their selection of post-school employment sectors meant that they were then able to pursue the apprenticeships within those same areas of interest.

However, the apprenticeship also made the opportunity available to those who had not previously considered going to university. Of the surveyed group, 42 per cent (n=91) had not considered going to university while in school or college. These apprentices largely took up the opportunity as a means to progress in their careers, and all were from under-represented groups. This finding is important in relation to widening participation because it suggests that DA participation was not always dependent on pre-existing aspirations towards HE. For some

apprentices, participation emerged through employment opportunities rather than educational ambitions, indicating that traditional widening participation approaches based on aspiration-raising may not fully explain progression into HE through apprenticeship routes.

It is possible that some of the apprentices would have had the opportunity to pursue a degree in the future through other means, but all saw it as an opportunity that they would not otherwise have been able to do. As noted in the findings, the requirement to stop work to study for a degree meant that as mature students, it would have been difficult for any of those surveyed to do so. The findings therefore suggest that DAs can make HE more accessible to individuals whose possible selves may have included university participation, but whose probable selves did not. In these cases, the apprenticeship altered perceptions of what was realistically attainable by removing some of the financial and employment barriers associated with full-time HE participation.

The data in *Table 5* (Gov.uk, 2024b; Section 2.4.4), also shows that nationally, DAs have over-representation of mature students compared to full-time HE, while universities have seen declining mature student applications and acceptances (UCAS, 2025). While the apprentices in this research were undertaking HE as an opportunity that would have otherwise been unavailable to them, the majority were upskilling via their employer, rather than progressing to HE via an alternative opportunity directly from school or college. This had been identified in the academic literature in Chapter 3 as a likely scenario, as the significant investment required by employers in apprenticeships means that existing employees are more likely to represent the greatest return on investment (Smith *et al.*, 2021a; Baker, 2019; Rowe *et al.*, 2017). The employers in this research largely saw apprenticeships as an important progression opportunity for their existing staff and sought external recruitment only if necessary to meet their target numbers.

Only the Digital apprenticeships in this research were for new employees, but they represented just 16 per cent of the apprentices surveyed. The small number of newly employed apprentices meant that just 9 per cent of the apprentices were aged 19-21, and only 9 per cent had worked for their employer for less than one year prior to starting their apprenticeship.

The key finding across the quantitative data both within the research and from national data, is that Higher and Degree Apprenticeships have an over-representation of mature students, but they have not made HE more accessible for young people, or for those from an ethnic minority group or with a disability. This finding suggests that DAs widen participation primarily through employment-based progression rather than through widening participation recruitment

strategies. Access to HE was therefore mediated by employment status and employer decision-making, rather than direct interventions aimed at under-represented groups. Consequently, participation widened for individuals, but widening participation itself was largely incidental rather than intentional.

8.2.2 Apprentices

The apprentices within this research did not enter the apprenticeship with a strong sense of a *possible self*. They did not actively choose to study a Degree Apprenticeship (DA) and did not have to navigate a route to the DA opportunity. Their participation in the apprenticeship programme was often contingent upon employment circumstances and employer decisions, rather than deliberate progression planning towards Higher Education (HE). This distinction is important because it further suggests that widening participation occurred through workforce development structures rather than through traditional educational recruitment pathways.

For the majority of apprentices who were on Health programmes, if they had not already been working for the NHS, the apprenticeship opportunity would not have been open to them. One apprentice said that she had applied for a role in the NHS knowing that the apprenticeship might be an option, but her enrolment on the programme was still based on her meeting the required expectations within her Trust to be put forward for the opportunity. The apprentices were encouraged by their managers or education teams to consider the DA and were supported in their application. Some had partners who were unhappy about their participation in the DA, but for those, the possible self that was made available to them by their employer, was strong enough to counter any dissent. Perhaps the most important finding in this case for the NHS, is that the apprentices who had an interest in a Health-related degree programme at school or college but who could not progress directly to HE, chose to work for the NHS anyway. They took entry-level roles in the NHS, which meant they were in the sector and able to be offered the DA opportunity when it came up. This represents a strong commitment to Health-related careers, and the NHS, even when the pathway to degree-level study is not available.

Importantly, this finding suggests that aspiration towards a professional career was not necessarily absent. Rather, HE itself was often absent from participants' probable selves. The apprenticeship provided a route through which professional aspirations could finally be connected to higher-level study.

The apprentices did not have to fundamentally change their lives in order to participate in HE, as the opportunity was a continuation of their employment-based training. They did not face a drop in salary or the logistical challenge of fitting their studies into their lives, as their studies

were actively supported and funded by their employers. Mature students entering full-time education often have to stop work or reduce working hours to do so (Busher and James, 2019) and usually require the logistics of life to fit alongside their studies to make HE an option for them (Stone, 2023; O'Shea and Stone, 2011). This research found that these barriers did not exist for the apprentices, however the apprentices generally still required the logistics of life to allow their study time. Concerns about fitting the academic work into their lives without using annual leave meant that apprentices with significant caring responsibilities may have faced challenges with completing academic work.

Apprentices approached their studies with a high degree of confidence based on their position within the labour market. While the majority within this research were already employed prior to the start of the apprenticeship, those who were recruited into the apprenticeship also saw themselves as being in an advantageous position because they had a salaried job compared to the full-time students on their course. The professional identity held by the apprentices was extremely strong. They considered themselves to be different from full-time students. They were confident in expressing their feelings in the classroom, and were not afraid of conflict with full-time students as they felt that their time was precious and they did not want it to be wasted. The finding that the confidence levels of the apprentices based on their professional identity was stronger than their identity as an under-represented student challenges a significant strand of widening participation literature that assumes under-represented learners enter HE with weakened confidence, uncertainty, and reduced educational legitimacy. Instead, these apprentices entered HE with occupational legitimacy and established professional identities that acted as protective factors against the transitional difficulties commonly described in the literature. The apprentices did not consider themselves to be at a disadvantage, and did not act in a way that suggested disadvantage.

Academic literature frequently acknowledges that 'widening participation students' should not be considered as a homogenous group, as the experience of Higher Education (HE) can be different based on whether a student is under-represented based on age, for example, compared to a student who is economically disadvantaged. However, the academic literature also homogenises widening participation students on the basis that they experience a wide range of disadvantage within the HE environment. A key finding of this research was that the apprentice group *could* be seen to be homogenous based on a strong professional identity rather than other under-represented characteristics. All participants, without exception, had a strong professional identity, which led them to have a strong sense of self-efficacy. They believed they were capable of progressing in their DA because their workplace experience

made them more 'qualified' for the academic work. This is an important as it suggests that professional identity may be a more powerful explanatory factor than traditional widening participation characteristics when seeking to understand the experiences of some mature and vocational learners in HE.

This leads to another key finding, that apprentices were at significant risk both of disengagement and unhappiness, if they felt that their knowledge was more current and rooted in practice, than the academic knowledge shared as part of their learning. Some apprentices challenged academics, while others experienced disengagement when assignments or projects were not relevant enough to their roles or workplace. The apprentices were not reflective of the importance of breadth within their academic studies. They also did not recognise that their academic lectures covering, for example, legislation relevant to their role, might be important for their future progression even if the circumstances of their job might mean practice sometimes did not reflect the legislation. The most striking example of this was in Social Work.

The professional identity of the apprentices was strong in the classroom, but there were challenges to their identity in the workplace. An important finding from this research was that the identity of 'apprentice' was seen to be confusing in the workplace for Health apprentices in particular. They felt that the term was not as clear as 'student' in terms of their level of knowledge and professionalism, leading to concern expressed by patients about their competence, and a lack of training opportunities being made available by senior staff or doctors. This was a clear area of concern for the apprentices in this research. It is possible that in the years since the primary research took place, the workplaces involved have better communicated what being an 'apprentice' means, which may have improved the learning opportunities offered to apprentices. However, it is also possible that for Health apprentices, there could still be an issue with patients perceiving apprentices as in training rather than being professional and competent Healthcare workers.

8.2.3 University Staff and Employers

The academic literature outlined that academic freedom has been eroded through the neoliberalisation of the Higher Education (HE) sector, but the findings of this research indicate that this process has been accelerated within Degree Apprenticeships (DAs). Academic staff were concerned about the quality of what they were delivering within the prescribed curricula of the DA Standards. These concerns are important for widening participation because the effectiveness of DAs in supporting under-represented learners is dependent not only on

providing access, but also on the quality of the educational experience and the success of the learners in their HE programmes.

University managers were more involved in oversight of DAs compared to non-apprenticeship programmes, and non-academic staff involved in developing DAs, viewed academics as having no choice but to accept the DA requirements. Academics were expected to play a key role in the development and management of employer-partnerships, but they felt a lack of control over all aspects of the relationship, and pressure to ensure the apprenticeship contracts were continued. This finding represents an important addition to the academic literature, which is limited in relation to the impact on academic staff of involvement in DAs or the wider experience of neoliberalism. The concerns of academic staff regarding the quality of the DA programmes leads to important questions about how their feelings will impact their sense of self-efficacy in relation to their academic role, and the resulting impact on the teaching and learning experience and the success of apprentices on the programmes.

The academic literature is equally limited on the experience of Ofsted for university staff, as universities have traditionally had limited engagement with Ofsted. An important finding was the level of trauma and stress felt by university academic staff in relation to Ofsted inspections, and the wider monitoring of apprenticeships. Academic staff reflected on the importance of positive outcomes and metrics on the continued delivery of apprenticeships, and associated income generation, for their universities. It is important to note that recent changes in how Ofsted inspections take place and the associated grading of educational institutions, may have had a positive impact on the perception of the Ofsted inspection for academic staff.

Earlier chapters in this thesis reflected on the important university and employer partnerships that existed prior to the introduction of DAs, but there is limited academic literature on those partnerships in the context of DAs. This research found that neither employers nor university staff felt in control of the partnership, which is new addition to the academic literature. There were concerns on both sides about where the power was held, and university staff were extremely cognisant of the potential for employer partners to withdraw apprenticeship contracts with little notice. This caused significant levels of stress for the university staff. These findings therefore raise questions regarding whether marketised apprenticeship relationships create conditions that support or constrain the long-term widening participation potential of DAs, particularly given the important role that academic staff play in supporting the success of under-represented groups in HE. Academic staff experienced weakened self-efficacy and professional identity due to the difficulties associated with employer partnerships and contracts,

and this could impact their efficacy within the classroom and their ability to support apprentices on-programme.

The research also found that training providers interpreted the guidance around apprenticeship monitoring differently, and that employers did not always recognise the important role for universities in maintaining and ensuring the quality of their programmes. These findings add to the limited literature relating to university and employer partnerships, and lead to recommendations for future policy and practice in relation to DA development and delivery.

8.2.4 Conclusion

The key findings challenge a range of theories across the academic literature, including that Bourdieu's habitus has a significant impact on the experience of Higher Education (HE) for those who would be considered as under-represented. Apprentices in this research had a strong sense of professional identity, which had more impact on their pedagogical experience than the habitus developed and set at the age of 18. Academic literature predominately considers under-represented groups to be at a disadvantage in the HE environment, whether due to a feeling of being different (Katarzi and Hayward, 2020; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Crozier *et al.*, 2008), academically inferior (Reay, 2002), too old compared to the younger full-time students (Mallman and Lee, 2014; Reay, 2002), or through a lack of understanding and recognition of how students are expected to behave within the classroom (Ulriksen, 2009; Bernstein, 2000). However, this research found that professional identity can operate as a protective factor within HE, moderating many of the disadvantages traditionally associated with under-represented groups in HE. This challenges assumptions that under-represented learners necessarily experience lower confidence, weaker belonging, or diminished self-efficacy upon entering HE.

Chapter 3 began with a discussion about the purpose of education, and the increasing emphasis by government of education being for the purpose of skills development with measurable graduate outcomes. The findings of this research, however, leads to questions about the fundamental purpose of HE. The legislative background, and the academic literature, considers HE to be a very specific type of education. Studied full-time, mainly young people progressing directly from school or college, and with important employer partnerships to support projects and activities that lead to graduate employment. It also generally considers teaching activities to be classroom- or lecture-based, with the power held by the academic lecturer (Bernstein, 2000). However, the literature does not often consider the range of vocational programmes already available in HE, and the different experiences they might offer

for students undertaking placement hours or problem-based learning. Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) significantly add to the vocational opportunities within HE. Like the existing opportunities, DAs are occupation-based with high levels of workplace-based learning, but with the important difference that those studying DAs are employees rather than university students. The findings of this research add to the question of what the purpose of HE is, and what widening participation means when access is increasingly mediated by employment, labour-market participation, and employer investment rather than direct engagement with universities.

Considering DAs to be attractive to 18-year-olds represents a fundamental misunderstanding of who the customer is within the apprentice-employer-university relationship, which ultimately is a frustrating misunderstanding. Schools continue to promote them to Sixth Formers and their parents as a potential, and advantageous, alternative to full-time HE, yet the employers are completely in control of whether apprenticeships are available to them. It is clear that a good job, free degree-level study, and a guaranteed graduate-level job would be attractive to 18-year-olds, as it would be attractive to anyone considering degree-level study as a mature student. However, crucially, Degree Apprenticeships cannot contribute to widening participation to Higher Education while the employer is the customer. The employer chooses who to recruit into new DA vacancies or selects existing employees to participate in the DA opportunity. Consequently, this research suggests that DAs should not be understood primarily as a widening participation intervention. Rather, they are employment-based workforce development mechanisms that may generate widening participation outcomes under specific circumstances. While some employers within this research recognised the potential to widen access and considered it within their recruitment or selection of apprentices, it was a secondary factor. Their aim was to have the right person in the role, and any impact on widening participation was a bonus.

This thesis has demonstrated that for the apprentices participating in the research, the DA provided them an opportunity within HE that would otherwise not be available to them. For them, it absolutely did provide access to HE. However, they were in the right place, at the right time. The experience of studying on a DA is difficult, with high levels of monitoring and clear challenges in relation to employee/learner identity and managing a full-time job alongside studies. There is an important social justice question about whether it is fair that those getting free access to degree-level study actually end up with a more difficult experience, but that is an area that would require comparative research in order to determine if the experience really is harder than the full-time programmes. My findings are that the experience for academic staff

is harder in DAs, but they are also experiencing increasing challenges in HE in general due to neoliberalisation.

Overall, this research concludes that DAs increase access to HE for many individuals who participate in them, but they do not systematically widen participation because they are not designed primarily as a widening participation intervention. Access is mediated by employers, employment status, and workforce development priorities. Consequently, widening participation occurs largely as a by-product of apprenticeship legislation rather than its central objective.

8.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis makes five principal contributions to knowledge. First, it demonstrates that established professional identities can mitigate many of the transitional challenges commonly associated with widening participation students in Higher Education (HE). Second, it shows that Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) simultaneously strengthen the professional identities and self-efficacy of apprentices while weakening the professional identities and self-efficacy of academics. Third, it identifies that DAs widen participation primarily through employment-based progression rather than through intentional widening participation recruitment strategies. Fourth, it demonstrates that apprentices frequently privilege occupational knowledge over academic knowledge, challenging traditional pedagogic relationships within HE. Finally, the thesis introduces the concept of *probable selves*, extending existing theories of future identity formation by explaining how individuals imagine futures that are likely to occur in the absence of significant changes to their circumstances.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature relating to DAs, widening participation, vocational education, and HE. By examining the experiences of apprentices, university staff, and employers, the research provides a holistic account of DAs that has been largely absent from existing literature. While the findings generate a range of insights relevant to policy and practice, five principle contributions to knowledge emerge from the research.

Contribution 1: Profession identity as a protective factor in HE

The first contribution is the finding that professional identity can mitigate many of the challenges commonly associated with widening participation students in HE. Existing literature frequently positions students from under-represented groups as entering HE with lower levels of confidence, weaker self-efficacy, uncertainty regarding academic expectations, and a reduced

sense of belonging (Ulriksen, 2009; Crozier *et al.*, 2008; Bernstein, 2000; Bandura, 1994). However, the apprentices in this research did not generally experience HE in this way.

Instead, apprentices entered HE with established professional identities that had developed through employment and workplace experience. These identities appeared to act as a protective resource, enabling apprentices to approach university study with confidence and a strong sense of legitimacy. Rather than focusing on survival within the HE environment, apprentices frequently viewed themselves as experienced professionals bringing valuable expertise into the classroom. This finding challenges assumptions within widening participation literature and suggests that professional identity may be a more significant influence on the HE experience than previously recognised for some groups of under-represented learners.

Contribution 2: Degree Apprenticeships and the reconfiguration of professional identity

The second contribution is the finding that Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) simultaneously strengthened the professional identities and self-efficacy of apprentices while weakening the professional identities and self-efficacy of university academics.

For apprentices, participation in a DA reinforced their sense of professional value, labour-market relevance, and occupational value. Their workplace experience and employer investment contributed to high levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy. In contrast, academics described reduced autonomy, increased managerial oversight, heightened regulatory scrutiny, and growing pressure associated with employer relationships and performance metrics. These experiences contributed to weakened professional identities and reduced self-efficacy among academic staff.

The research therefore demonstrates that DAs can affect different stakeholder groups in fundamentally different ways. This finding contributes to literature concerning both academic work and the neoliberalisation of HE, highlighting how the same policy initiative can simultaneously empower one group of participants while disempowering another.

Contribution 3: Widening participation through employment rather than HE recruitment

The third contribution concerns the relationship between DAs and widening participation. This research found that DAs did increase access to HE for the apprentices involved in the study. However, this increased participation was largely achieved through existing employment rather than through deliberate widening participation activity.

Most apprentices were already employed within organisations that chose to utilise their Apprenticeship Levy. Their access to HE was therefore dependent upon employment

circumstances and employer decisions rather than HE or employer recruitment strategies specifically designed to widen participation. Consequently, the research suggests that DAs increase participation for those who gain access to them, but do not systematically widen participation across society. Access is primarily mediated through employers, who remain the gatekeepers of the opportunity.

This finding contributes a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between DAs and widening participation, demonstrating that increased participation can occur without widening participation being an explicit objective.

Contribution 4: Apprentices' prioritisation of occupational knowledge

The fourth contribution relates to the nature of learning within DAs. Apprentices frequently prioritised occupational and workplace knowledge over academic knowledge, evaluating educational content through its perceived relevance to professional practice.

Many apprentices approached learning from a strongly occupational perspective and became frustrated when academic content was perceived as insufficiently related to their workplace role. Drawing on Bernstein's work, the findings suggest that workplace-based knowledge frequently competed with, and at times challenged, the legitimacy of academic knowledge within the classroom. Apprentices often viewed their practical experience as providing knowledge equal to, or sometimes greater than, that provided by academics.

This finding contributes to understanding of pedagogy within DAs and raises important questions regarding the balance between occupational relevance and broader academic learning in vocational HE.

Contribution 5: The concept of *probable selves*

The final contribution is theoretical. This thesis introduces the concept of *probable selves* as an extension of existing theories of identity and future orientation. While Markus and Nurius (1986) conceptualise possible selves as representations of who individuals might become, and Sfard and Prusak (2005) distinguish between actual and designated identities, neither framework fully captures the future that an individual expects to occur if existing circumstances remain unchanged. Probable selves represent this expected future. They are neither aspirational nor feared futures, but futures shaped by perceptions of realism and likelihood. The concept complements Bourdieu's notion of habitus by describing how social structures and life experiences shape expectations about attainable futures and extends Bandura's theory of self-efficacy by recognising that individuals may believe themselves capable of success while

simultaneously viewing opportunities for success as unlikely to arise. For many apprentices in this study, HE existed within their possible selves but not within their probable selves. It was only through the intervention of the DA that participation in HE became perceived as realistically attainable. The concept of probable selves therefore provides a new theoretical lens through which widening participation, educational aspirations, social mobility and identity formation can be understood.

Conclusion

Taken together, these contributions provide a new perspective on DAs, widening participation, and the changing nature of HE. The research demonstrates that under-represented learners cannot be understood solely through the characteristics that make them under-represented. Instead, their experience are shaped by the interaction of identity, employment, educational history, and opportunity structures. By highlighting the importance of professional identity, the differentiated effects of DAs on stakeholders, the employment-driven nature of participation, and the concept of probable selves, this thesis contributes original knowledge to debates concerning widening participation, vocational education, apprenticeships, academic work, and the neoliberal transformation of HE.

8.4 Strengths and Limitations of this Research

This research included the views of a wide range of stakeholders, adding a new perspective to existing literature, particularly in relation to the experience of academics and employers, which is not often found in the literature. The research also allowed an open discussion about the experience of developing, implementing, and delivering apprenticeships, which led to a wider range of insights than had been expected from the literature review. Interviewees were positive about the inclusion of a range of stakeholders in this research and were interested in how others would view the same situations. Employers and university staff were reflective about their experiences and how their contracted partners might view the situations differently.

However, there were some methodological limitations to the research. My approach was to use narrative interviews to elicit a range of stories relating to the Degree Apprenticeship (DA) experience. This meant that the analysis could not be based on frequency of experience as an indicator of a wider pattern within DAs. A semi-structured or structured interview could have found patterns of experience in a way that this research did not.

In addition, the apprentices within this research were based at one university. The intention was not to undertake case study research, and the use of university staff and employers sought

to provide the wider context and experience of DAs. However, the majority of university staff were from the same university in which the apprentices were based, and all universities represented in this research were teaching-based rather than research-based. It is possible that a different type of university may have had a significantly different pedagogical environment in which apprentices were required to enter, possibly affecting their sense of self-efficacy due to a clearer lack of recognition or understanding of the classroom experience. This creates some limitations in the research and its wider applicability, although I return to my original intention, which was to explore experience.

A key strength of the research in terms of timeframes, is the experience shared by apprentices due to interviews taking place towards the end of their programmes, rather than the beginning. The primary research started with surveys in 2019, when the apprentices were early in their programmes, as the first or second cohorts of DAs. The need to have a period of maternity leave between the surveys and interviews, meant that apprentices had significantly more experience in their programmes by the time they participated in interviews. I believe their stories and experiences were richer as a result of this passage of time. The move to online interviews due to the COVID pandemic, was a benefit to my research as I believe it increased the number of interviews that could take place. If interviews were held in person, the data collection period is likely to have taken much longer.

I acknowledge that research, particularly within a socially-constructed interpretive paradigm, is subject to the potential of bias. However, I recognised this from the beginning, and undertook numerous opportunities for reflection. Chapter 4 outlined my methodological perspective, including my position that the experience and perspective of researchers inevitably influence their research; but recognition of this and reflexivity when making choices or judgements, is an important part of the process in social research.

Due to the early stage of implementation of Degree Apprenticeships when my research took place, and the extended time it has taken to complete this thesis due to my professional role and two periods of maternity leave, there have been significant changes in the world of apprenticeships since my research began. However, there are themes within the research that remain relevant, and that can and should be considered in the continuation of apprenticeships within HE.

Finally, the strengths and limitations of this research usefully provide context for what I would have done differently if I were undertaking this study again. The key change that I would make, would be to seek wider representation of experience across universities. I would recommend

including apprentices from more than one university and a wider spread of university staff from multiple universities. This would provide the opportunity to explore whether similar themes are experienced.

8.5 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

This section outlines the recommendations of this thesis for future developments in the delivery of apprenticeships and is likely to be of interest to those developing apprenticeships within universities, and those engaged in policy implementation and delivery. Discrepancies in the legislative expectations compared to the reality of implementation and delivery indicates that greater transparency is required about the expectations of apprenticeships, and more needs to be done to make apprenticeships an alternative opportunity for young people leaving school and college.

Degree apprenticeships have the potential to increase access to Higher Education (HE), but also to provide a positive experience of HE for those from under-represented backgrounds. All apprentices in this research had a strong sense of professional identity, including those who were new recruits into apprenticeships. This sense of professional identity created strong self-efficacy, and this was an important factor in the apprentices feeling confident and comfortable within the HE learning environment. As discussed in Section 8.2, academic literature has outlined the problems that under-represented groups experience in accessing and participating in HE, but these problems were not evident in the apprentices participating in this research. This research adds important new knowledge into the wide range of academic literature about under-represented groups participating in Higher Education.

Apprenticeships are predominately taken up by those who are over the age of 19 and in employment. If apprenticeships are going to be a route to increasing access for under-represented groups, without also being a more difficult and stressful experience than full-time HE programmes, I would recommend the following changes and developments in policy and practice.

8.5.1 Recruitment into Apprenticeships

The recruitment process for apprenticeships sits with employers and as noted in Section 8.2.4, I consider this to be a key problem in the potential for Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) to increase access to HE. It is important that more is done to balance the opportunity for upskilling with creating opportunities for school and college-leavers.

- Governments should consider incentivising employers to make a proportion of apprenticeship opportunities available to school and college-leavers. Employers were clear that the spending of the Apprenticeship Levy was a driver in their development of an apprenticeship but also recognised that there are additional costs to supporting an apprentice, such as salary, which are not covered by the Apprenticeship Levy. Providing opportunities to offset some of those additional costs may make employers more willing to recruit new young apprentices.
- Government should collect and publish data about DA opportunities that better indicate the level of opportunity available to school and college leavers, based on geographical location. The government continues to promote DAs as an alternative to full-time HE study, and schools and colleges are expected to also promote them within their information, advice, and guidance. However, this research found that the majority of apprentices were existing employees, and national data shows that the majority of apprenticeship starts are not of school-leaver age. This means that an opportunity is being promoted that may not be truly available, which is likely to be particularly frustrating for young people with real financial concerns about going into full-time HE. I would also note that promoting DAs could lead to young people not fully exploring all of their post-college options, as they focus on their aim to secure a Higher or Degree Apprenticeship. I am concerned that this could lead some to leave school or college without a DA, but also without having considered their other options.
- Employers and universities should work closely together in agreeing the academic and professional experience required of apprentices to give them the best chance of succeeding. Employers should also consider using lower-level apprenticeships to better prepare those who have been out of education for some time, before putting them forward for Degree-level study. I acknowledge however, that this would require Apprenticeship Standards to be developed with pathways of progression as an integral part of their design.
- While this was not covered within the primary research, Chapter 2 included information about the UCAS tariff points assigned to Level 3 apprenticeships and noted that the maximum tariff points able to be achieved is equivalent to BBC at A Level. This tariff point level is unlikely to be accepted by all universities as some, particularly Russell Group universities, have significantly higher average tariff points for entry. Consideration should be made by UCAS and IfATE how Level 3 apprentices may be able to evidence the level of academic ability required by these universities to ensure their route into selective

universities is not restricted by their choice to study a Level 3 apprenticeship over A Levels, BTECs, or T Levels.

- The primary research, and comparison to national data, found that the proportion of Higher and Degree apprenticeship starts disclosing a disability is significantly below that of the entrants to full-time HE in England. This is a characteristic recognised by the Office for Students as under-represented within HE, which suggests the proportion in apprenticeships is seriously under-represented when considered against the wider population. Policy makers should consider how to incentivise employers to make Higher and Degree apprenticeships more accessible and available for those with a disability.

8.5.2 Increasing Clarity Regarding Apprenticeship Monitoring

University staff, apprentices, and employers experienced significant stress and uncertainty over the monitoring of off-the-job training, with employers reporting that university partners often interpreted guidance and requirements differently. University staff also reported conflict within their institutions around this area.

- Guidance to universities and employers should clearly state the monitoring requirements for Apprenticeship Standards, including specifying different levels of monitoring required at different levels of apprenticeship and in the lead-up to the End Point Assessment. Guidance should include templates produced for each Standard, allowing apprentices to evidence their experience against the Knowledge, Skills, and Behaviours, and providing a clear space for their off-the-job training to be described.
- Apprenticeship Standards should provide clear guidance about the types of activities that are acceptable off-the-job training for each Standard, and how hours should be counted.
- Good practice guidelines should be produced to support employers in ensuring off-the-job training is available for all apprentices, including those with significant responsibilities within their day job. Health apprentices in this research were largely counted as employees throughout all their training time, which meant they could not be given training opportunities without ensuring that patient care would not be affected. Employers should have a clear guideline about what is expected for those apprentices in terms of training in the workplace, to ensure their training is equitable to full-time students.

8.5.3 Review the Breadth of Study and the Assessment Requirements of the Apprenticeship versus Full-time Degrees

Apprentices, and academics, recognised that there was more limited academic coverage than within full-time degrees, and that there was different assessment requirements for apprenticeships compared to the equivalent full-time degrees.

- Apprenticeship Standards should be reviewed to allow greater breadth of academic coverage to increase the knowledge and understanding of apprentices within their subject area. For example, Management apprentices could be allowed to compare their sector to other types of organisations or sectors, increasing their breadth of study but still retaining relevance to their occupation and sector.
- Academics should provide an introductory guidance session for all apprentices to highlight why their studies may take them outside the reality of their normal day-to-day practice. Academics should recognise the strength of professional identities and the potential for apprentices to reject or disengage from theories or areas of study that seem irrelevant, and to set the expectations of apprentices in advance that this is an acceptable part of HE study.
- PSRBs and Trailblazer groups should review the requirements for apprentices versus full-time students in practice to ensure there is parity in how placement hours are calculated. Apprentices should not be required to do more than full-time students, and placement/learning time should be protected in a way that means their hours are counted in the same way as full-time student placements.
- IfATE and Trailblazer groups should review the assessment requirements for Degree Apprenticeships against the usual requirements for the full-time degree, to ensure that there is parity in expectations. Apprentices should not be required to do more, but to instead undertake work that is relevant to their apprenticeship.

8.5.4 Employers to be Mindful about Professional Identity

Health apprentices in this research raised the issue that their professional identity in the workplace was undermined by the change in uniform that identified them as an apprentice.

- Employers and PSRBs should review the requirements for apprentices to be identifiable as apprentices while in the workplace and consider allocating hours to apprenticeship learning

when they are identified as such, with the apprentices being identifiable in their professional roles at other times.

8.5.5 Universities, IfATE and Ofsted to Create Guidance around the Regulatory Requirements of Apprenticeships in Universities and the Expectations of Ofsted

Academics were extremely concerned about the involvement of Ofsted in inspecting apprenticeships and believed that regardless of the quality of the programmes, it would always be difficult to meet the expectations of Ofsted. This is not a positive situation for any university or academic. The Ofsted inspection should be seen as an opportunity to review practice and to make recommendations for future delivery. The following recommendation recognise that there is an important role in ensuring that apprenticeship funding goes to universities who are providing a good apprenticeship experience but also acknowledges that the inspection should start with the expectation that the university *will* be providing a good experience.

- Detailed guidance should be produced by IfATE and Ofsted, with the support of universities identified as providing excellent apprenticeship programmes, to support universities in ensuring their own practice is at the standard required to give apprentices a positive learning experience.
- Universities must recognise the impact that monitoring and inspection has on academic staff and provide the support necessary to ensure this is not detrimental to mental health.
- Apprenticeship and academic teams should work collaboratively to provide a positive experience for all involved in apprenticeships. Universities should recognise that where internal conflict arises, there will be an impact both on the staff involved but also on employer partners, potentially impacting the likelihood of further apprenticeship contracts.

8.6 Recommendations for Future Research

This research took place in the first five years of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), when the number of courses available was limited. It meant that my research included just four course areas, three of which were in the top five nationally for apprenticeship starts. Universities had entered into the apprenticeships market believing that they could deliver programmes based heavily on existing degrees, and often co-taught apprentices and full-time students for this reason.

The legislative world of apprenticeships has moved on significantly since this research took place, as has guidance for universities. The interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021, but the thesis was not complete until 2026. The research took place in the early stages of DA development when it was an emerging system, which meant the guidance for universities and employers was limited, and this is highly likely to have affected the experience of DAs for all stakeholders. This was seen in the findings, where academics had to ask apprentices mid-course to complete the assessment of prior skills, which should have been completed before they enrolled. Similarly, some of the apprentices were taught in classes with full-time students, which is no longer considered to be good practice. Some of the challenges around identity or the quality of the programmes are likely to have reduced as the universities and employers have settled into their programmes. The partnerships between employers and universities are likely to have improved as they have become more aware of what a good apprenticeship programme looks like, and the stresses of Ofsted may well have lessened. Or not.

It is important to recognise that introducing a new type of education without the time taken to develop guidance and to support early adopters is likely to cause significant stress and challenges the potential for a positive early experience. It is likely that a little more time before the first DA enrolments could have reduced some of the challenges identified within these research findings.

The research raised questions that would benefit from further research.

1. Degree Apprenticeship opportunities across geographical areas: In the five years since conducting interviews, the variety of apprenticeships offered within universities in the East of England, where this research was based, has not changed significantly. There are options available where apprentices will travel or undertake online learning to access their training, but the range of degree level apprenticeships remain limited. Yet, apprenticeships continue to be promoted by government and discussed in the media and in schools/colleges as a real alternative to full-time Higher Education (HE). Further research should consider the level of opportunity available to young school and college leavers across a range of geographical areas, including both rural counties and large cities.
2. The surveys found that 42 per cent of the apprentices had not considered HE while at school or college yet were now undertaking a HE qualification. Widening participation literature that considers the experience for under-represented groups of students in HE, does not currently include those who did not have HE aspirations prior to starting their programme. Undertaking research with this group to explore their experience could add an

important dimension to the existing work about supporting under-represented groups to succeed in HE.

3. The model of apprenticeship offered to the Health apprentices in this research meant that the apprentices could be admitted to HE-level study with Level 2 qualifications. Many had been out of formal education for one or more decades and were not required to undertake any preparatory learning prior to starting their apprenticeship. Further research should examine the outcomes for apprentices being admitted to L4-6 study in universities who do not have Level 3 qualifications or recent study, as this is still the entry requirement for the Level 5 Nursing Associate apprenticeship that many of the Health apprentices in this research were studying. Future research should compare outcomes against apprentices with Level 3 qualifications or recent study, to determine if admitting apprentices with Level 2 as their highest qualifications is more likely to lead to non-completion of the apprenticeship. This would be important research to support the admissions decisions made by universities and employers, but also to identify the additional support that some apprentices may need in their academic studies. It would also lead to essential questions about the purpose of widening participation if increasing entry to HE simultaneously reduces the likelihood of a successful outcome.
4. All but one of the apprentices in this research were working for large levy-paying employers, and their experience was with employers who had multiple apprentices in their organisation and who had historical experience of apprenticeships. One apprentice was working for a small employer, and his experience of the apprenticeship content was that it was often not applicable to his role and that he had to approach assignments with creativity in order to evidence his learning within his role and organisation. Further research should be carried out with apprentices in small organisations to evaluate the effectiveness of the programmes for employers and apprentices where the breadth of opportunity and applicability in the workplace may be limited.
5. This research found that employers ultimately were responsible for whether Degree Apprenticeships would widen participation to Higher Education (HE), but there were wider themes relating to employers than originally expected. The relationship between employers and academic staff was an interesting theme and raised questions about how that relationship might affect the professional identity and self-efficacy of academic staff, and how that in turn could affect the apprenticeship experience. Further research could also consider the extent to which employers can, and do, support the personal epistemologies

of apprentices and therefore, their engagement with academic learning. This research found weak framing within pedagogical discourse in the university environment as apprentices were privileging the knowledge gained through their occupation- and workplace-based learning, which could undermine the academic experience of the apprenticeship. Further research exploring how employers can support and enhance the apprenticeship experience at Degree level would add important new context into further development of vocational education.

6. The academics in this research talked about being micro-managed and not having control over the curriculum that they were teaching. Further research should be undertaken on the impact on academics of moving HE into a more vocational space, and the extent to which they have settled into apprenticeships and the level of institutional management and government oversight involved. It is possible that apprenticeships have become 'normal' given that HE has delivered vocational qualifications for many years (e.g. qualifications across Allied Health Professions and Social Work), but wider research on academic identity across the breadth of areas now included in vocational education, could inform good practice within universities.
7. The levels of stress involved for academics through the involvement of Ofsted cannot be minimised. The academics interviewed in this research spoke passionately and emotionally about their concerns relating to Ofsted. I acknowledge that changes to Ofsted inspections may reduce the stress-levels for those involved in inspections but also recognise that inspections by regulators are always likely to be of concern for academic staff. Concern was raised within my findings that even programmes that the academics considered to be good, might not meet the expectations of a regulator or inspector. Research about the impact on academic staff and the level to which regulatory inspections lead to improved outcomes for students and apprentices, should be undertaken.
8. Finally, this research was carried out with apprentices studying physically on a university campus that was commutable for them. Online learning is likely to have increased the geographical spread of apprenticeships but may also have an impact on the learning identity of apprentices. Degree Apprenticeships typically have a duration of around four years, which could mean that apprentices have only online classes and online connections with their cohort for a significant period of time. Further research that considers the experience of online learning in Degree Apprenticeships could add further useful knowledge to the development of policy and practice in the delivery of Degree Apprenticeships.

8.7 Reflections

The research journey to completing this thesis was long, lasting almost nine years from beginning to end, with two breaks for maternity leave within it. I started the research thinking I was interested in processes around recruitment to apprenticeships but quickly learned that apprenticeships were not available to young school and college leavers in the way that I had hoped. As I began to delve into the academic literature, I found a range of theories that resonated with my academic interests, my personal experiences as an under-represented student in Higher Education (HE), and my professional experience working in universities. While this was exciting and inspiring, the real excitement came with the primary research. I was surprised to find that many apprentices who had aspired to HE in school, did not get as far as applying because of the barriers they faced; and I was particularly surprised to discover that some of the apprentices were on temporary employment contracts. However, the real high came in the interviews. Early interviews introduced new and fascinating themes, particularly relating to identity, and I genuinely sat in the interviews thinking, “this is gold dust.” I could see that the interviews were adding new knowledge that challenged existing narratives relating to under-represented groups in HE. My challenge, therefore, was properly reflecting this new knowledge in my thesis.

My position as both a researcher and a member of university staff, brought some challenges to the research experience. It created a key issue, as discussed in the Ethics section, around consent to participate in the research, as I knew some of the academic staff very well. However, it also created a challenge to me personally, in how I viewed my role as a researcher. As a member of professional services, the non-academic area of a university, I was not entitled to any research leave to complete my studies. I was therefore either on a full-time or 90 per cent contract for the duration of my studies, which meant fitting my studies around my work and family life were challenging. A PhD is not normally expected or required in English university professional services departments, and there were many times that I could happily have decided that I could not commit the time any further because it would not be valued for my future career progression. However, I was extremely lucky that my university waived the fees, and that my managers and colleagues were supportive of my continued studies.

A key concept that came about through my research was that of *probable selves*. When listening to the apprentices tell their stories about their aspirations and routes into HE study, I became very aware that many had had a clear expectation of what their lives would look like if they continued on a trajectory based on their experiences aged 16-18. All the apprentices clearly challenged their probable selves, and I could see how I had also challenged my probable

self. My parents were supportive of progression to HE but worried that it would cost too much for little return, and consequently, a widening participation project was a fundamental part of my own progression. However, I was lucky that my parents did not expect the probable self to be my, or my sisters', futures. They encouraged us to work hard and to do well.

Like the apprentices, I was in the right place at the right time. Individual colleagues encouraged me to undertake a PhD and agreed to waive the fees. While I was not entitled to research leave, my managers over the nine years agreed to four days of study leave per year, which was valuable when undertaking research analysis or completing chapters. It is possible that had I been working in a different university, this opportunity would not have been made available to me.

My final reflection is that I am proud of the contribution to academic knowledge that this study has made. This new knowledge challenges existing narratives about under-represented groups and can be used to inform practice in supporting under-represented students in HE. The apprentices had high levels of confidence but were at significant risk of disengagement with their studies, and this is a key finding in relation to the retention and success of these learners in the future.

8.8 Finally...

As a professional within Higher Education (HE) with a strong personal and professional interest in widening participation (WP), it was a disappointing conclusion to find that Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) will not increase access to HE simply because they are not designed to do so. Employers are the customers of DAs, and they decide who the DA opportunity will be given to. DAs are therefore not widely available to many young people for whom the cost of HE makes it unattainable.

However, I have made my peace with this disappointment over the duration of my studies because DAs still offer an important opportunity in HE. The employees in roles who require upskilling are likely to fall into one of two categories: graduates from unrelated programmes that need significant new skills for their role, and employees who did not go to university and therefore require significant upskilling for their existing role or career progression. For those in the second category, DAs represent an opportunity that possibly was not available to them while in school or college. The majority of apprentices in my research were in this second category, and for them, DAs made HE accessible.

I therefore finish this research with the clear view that Degree Apprenticeships are a good thing. There is much to be done, as outlined in the earlier sections, to ensure full-time students and apprentices have comparably positive experiences; and to ensure that apprentices are supported to fully engage and succeed in their studies. It is important that as DAs move into the next decade of their development, they truly begin to represent an alternative HE pathway for under-represented groups as they leave school or college. The potential is there; it just has not been realised to date.

Appendix 1: Emails to Apprentices

Surveys Email:

[Note that the email was sent before the COVID pandemic and interviews were expected to take place at the apprentice's university].

Dear student

I am a PhD student at the University of Suffolk and am carrying out research into Degree Apprenticeships. I am exploring the reasons that students have chosen to study for a Degree Apprenticeship and the experience of studying the Apprenticeship.

My research will involve a short paper-based questionnaire and an interview that will last no more than 60mins. Your Course Leader has given me permission to visit your class on DATE at TIME to give out the paper questionnaires. Participating in any part of the research is entirely optional – you will not be required to complete the questionnaire or participate in an interview if you do not want to. It will only take a couple of minutes to complete, and you can confirm on the questionnaire if you are also happy to be interviewed.

If you are interested in being interviewed, I will contact you to make arrangements. The interview will take place at your University.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions, and I look forward to meeting you in class on DATE. If you are not able to be at that class but would like to participate, please let me know.

In-class information:

Hello. I am a PhD student at the University of Suffolk and am researching Degree Apprenticeships. Hopefully, you will all have seen an email from me about visiting your class today. I am exploring the reasons that students choose to study Degree Apprenticeships, and the experience on the course.

I have a questionnaire here that I will hand out. It should only take 2-3 minutes to complete, and it is completely optional. You don't have to complete it if you don't want to. If you do complete it, you can tick a box at the bottom to say if you'd be interested in taking part in an interview about your experiences. The interview will take no more than an hour, and it will happen here on your university campus.

Please note that there are questions at the bottom of the questionnaire about your characteristics, including your gender, age, and ethnicity. You can choose not to answer any of these questions.

I'll hand these out, and I would be grateful if you can pass them back to the front when you're finished – including the blank copies if you choose not to complete it.

Interviews Email:

Dear NAME

You might remember almost two years ago completing a paper survey in one of your classes, which was for my PhD research. Having had a period off my studies, I am now at the point of interviewing apprentices, and I would like to invite you to an interview if you are available and happy to be interviewed.

Firstly, please note that while I am also a member of staff at the University of Suffolk, I am undertaking this research as a student. I therefore do not have access to information about you other than what you answered in the survey. Information shared as part of this research will not be shared with anyone else in your university.

My research is looking at the reasons behind students choosing to study an Apprenticeship, as well as the experience of studying an Apprenticeship alongside working. The interview will be an informal discussion. I'd like to hear about your reasons for choosing to do an Apprenticeship and your experience of the course so far.

I have attached a 'Participant Information sheet', which you should read before agreeing to participate. Please let me know if you are still happy to participate in an interview, and we can arrange a suitable date and time. The interview will take place on Microsoft Teams, which I will share a link for. I am completely flexible on dates and times, so please just let me know what suits you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet – Apprentice Interviews

Study Title: Widening Participation to Higher Education: Degree Apprenticeships, Policy, and Practice

Main Investigator: Karen Hinton

Academic Supervisor (for Student research):

Professor Mohammad Dastbaz (primary supervisor)

Dr Clare Gartland (secondary)

You are invited to take part in a study that is exploring the experiences of students studying Degree Apprenticeships. This research involves interviews with both Apprentices and Employers.

This Participant Information Sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why I am doing the study, what your participation would involve, what the benefits and risks to you might be, and what would happen after the study ends. I will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Informed Consent Form to keep. Please make sure you have read and understood the following information.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of students studying Degree Apprenticeships. The research is using semi-structured interviews to find out about the decision-making process around choosing to study an Apprenticeship and the experience on the programme. The study will also use data published by the Government about Apprenticeships, and interviews with employers.

2. What will my participation in the study involve?

The interview will be an informal discussion, where I will ask you questions about your decision to do an Apprenticeship and your experience on the Apprenticeship. The interview will last up to 60mins.

3. What are the possible benefits and risks of this study?

There are no risks to participating in the study. The interview is designed to gather information only – and you can choose to give as much (or as little) information as you are comfortable with. As a student on an Apprenticeship, the interview aims to find out about your experiences – and it should therefore be a relaxed discussion where you can reflect on your reasons for doing an Apprenticeship. There is relatively little research about Degree Apprenticeships as they are still relatively new, and this research is therefore an opportunity to increase understanding of the experiences of Degree Apprenticeships.

4. Who pays for this study?

I am an employee of the University of Suffolk and am being sponsored by the University in undertaking the PhD.

5. What if I feel uncomfortable with an aspect of the study?

You can tell me that you are not comfortable and can choose to opt-out of the study if you are not comfortable with continuing to participate.

6. What if I don't want to answer a question being asked of me?

Please just say that you do not want to answer the question.

7. What are my rights?

You have the right to choose to opt-out of the study between your interview and the point at which data analysis begins. You should inform me within ONE MONTH of your interview if you no longer wish your interview to be included in the research. You do not have to provide a reason for making this decision.

8. What happens if I change my mind?

You can choose to end the interview at any time, without providing a reason for your decision.

9. What happens after the study?

If you want to see the final research, please tick the box in the following Consent form, and you will be sent a final copy of the research when it is complete.

10. Who do I contact for more information if I have concerns?

Please contact me (the researcher) Karen Hinton (*email address provided*), my Primary Supervisor, Professor Mohammad Dastbaz (*email address provided*) or the University's Graduate School (*email address provided*)

11. How will my data be stored and for how long?

Your questionnaire data will be anonymised and held for the duration of the research, until up to two years after the Thesis has been completed and assessed. Your interview will be transcribed by me, and the audio file will be stored securely by me. I will store the transcription file securely, but this will be anonymised. You will be ascribed a Pseudonym (a fake name) and will be identified by the pseudonym in any published papers. This pseudonym will be presented with your age range, and your stage on the Apprenticeship (e.g. 'Year 2, Health Apprenticeship'). I will hold a separate file that identifies each participant with their pseudonym. At the end of the specified time, all audio files and transcriptions will be deleted.

12. How will my data be destroyed?

Data will be held in a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive account, accessible only by me. Up to two years after the thesis has been completed and assessed, your data will be deleted from the accounts.

Date: 5 February 2021

Appendix 3: Apprentice Interviews: Informed Consent Form

The University of Suffolk expects all research to be carried out in accordance with the following principles:

- The emotional well-being, physical well-being, rights, dignity, and personal values of research participants should be secured.
- Research participants and contributors should be fully informed regarding the purpose, methods, and end use of the research. They should be clear on what their participation involves and any risks that are associated with the process. These risks should be clearly articulated and if possible quantified.
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from coercion. Participants have the right to withdraw at any time.

This research has been approved by the University of Suffolk Ethics Panel. Should you have any concerns about the Ethics of this research, please feel free to contact the Chair of the Ethics Panel (*email address provided*) or the Research Development Manager (*email address provided*)

Study Title: Widening Participation in Higher Education: Degree Apprenticeships, Policy, and Practice

Main Investigator: Karen Hinton

Academic Supervisor (for Student Research): Professor Mohammad Dastbaz (primary) and Dr Clare Gartland (secondary)

Please initial the boxes below.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 5 February 2021 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to end the interview at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.

I understand that my responses will be anonymised and any personal or identifying information removed from published materials

I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.	
I understand that the data I provide will be used solely for the purposes of the research study outlined and will not be used for any other purpose. I also understand how long my data will be stored for.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that if I wish to withdraw my consent to participate in this research, I must contact the researcher before within ONE MONTH after my interview date by email.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would like to be sent the final research report once it has been completed and assessed.	Yes, I would like to see the final research report <input type="checkbox"/>
	No, I do not want to see the final research report <input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that if in the course of the interview, I provide any information that indicates that I am at risk (physically, mentally, or emotionally), the researcher (as a University of Suffolk student and employee) has a responsibility to report her concerns to the University's Designated Safeguarding Officer. The researcher will tell me that she is concerned and will discuss her proposed action with me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in the above research project.	<input type="checkbox"/>

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
<i>To be signed and dated in presence of the participant</i>		
____Karen Hinton_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature
<i>To be signed and dated in presence of the participant</i>		
<u>Copies:</u>		
<i>Once this form has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants.</i>		
<i>A scanned copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record by the researcher. This must be kept in a secure location.</i>		

Appendix 4: Emails to Employers

Dear NAME

My colleague NAME in the Department of NAME at the UNIVERSITY NAME has given me your details as one of the employers involved in Apprenticeships.

I am both a member of staff and a PhD student at the University of Suffolk. I was involved in setting up Apprenticeships at the University in 2016-17 and am now undertaking a part-time PhD to look at how Apprenticeships policy is happening in practice. I am about to start interviewing apprentices about the factors that influenced their decision to do an Apprenticeship and would also like to interview employers.

I am interested in finding out from you about your experience of Apprenticeships so far. I'd like to discuss why your organisation decided to get involved in Degree Apprenticeships, the recruitment and selection process, and the experience of the Apprenticeship for your business. I'd therefore like to carry out an interview, lasting no more than 60mins, with someone in your organisation who would be able to discuss apprenticeships with me.

Participation in this research will not have any impact on your relationship with UNIVERSITY NAME and they will not know that you are participating. Participation is entirely voluntary.

Would you, or one of your colleagues, be interested in participating? The interview can take place at your premises at a date and time that suits you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Interview Email:

Dear NAME

Thank you for confirming that you are able to participate in my research about Degree Apprenticeships.

The interview will take no more than 60mins and will be an opportunity for us to explore your organisation's reasons for participating in Apprenticeships, how the recruitment and selection process worked, and the organisation's experience of Apprenticeships so far.

I will ask you questions about how the organisation has engaged with Apprenticeships but will not expect you to give me any information that could be considered commercially sensitive. The

interview should be an informal and relaxed experience. Your organisation will not be identified in the research report.

I have attached a 'Participant Information Sheet', which you should read before agreeing to participate. If you are still happy to participate in the interview, please give me some dates and times that would be suitable for you, and I will be very happy to meet at your office. You are very welcome to meet me at the University of Suffolk if that would work better for you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix 5: Emails to University Staff

Dear NAME

If known to me: As you may be aware, I have started a PhD which is looking at the introduction and experience of Degree Apprenticeships.

Following my involvement in setting up Degree Apprenticeships at the University of Suffolk in 2016-17, I am now looking into how Apprenticeships policy is happening in practice. I have started interviewing apprentices about the factors that influenced their decision to do an Apprenticeship and am also interviewing employers. I wanted to interview some university staff involved in apprenticeships, as I am aware there was a lot involved in getting them started, and I am keen to find out how they are going now.

If not known to me: My colleague NAME in the Department of NAME at the UNIVERSITY NAME has given me your details as I am undertaking a PhD which is looking at the introduction and experience of Degree Apprenticeships, and they thought you might be able to be involved.

I am both a member of staff and a PhD student at the University of Suffolk. I was involved in setting up Apprenticeships at the University in 2016-17 and was keen to do some PhD research about them. I have started interviewing apprentices about the factors that influenced their decision to do an Apprenticeship and am also interviewing employers. I wanted to interview some university staff involved in apprenticeships, as I am aware there was a lot involved in getting them started, and I am keen to find out how they are going now.

For all: I am interested in finding out from you about your experience of Apprenticeships so far. I'd like to discuss why your university decided to get involved in Degree Apprenticeships, the partnership with employers, and the experience of delivering apprenticeships. I'd therefore like to carry out an interview with you, or someone else whom you think might be interested, which will last no more than 60mins.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and your involvement will be confidential. I will not be sharing any identifying information about participants either to my supervisors or within my research findings.

Would you, or one of your colleagues, be interested in participating? I can meet at any suitable venue for you, and at a date and time that suits you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Interview Email:

Dear NAME

Thank you for confirming that you are able to participate in my research about Degree Apprenticeships.

The interview will take no more than 60mins and will be an opportunity for us to explore your university's reasons for participating in Apprenticeships, the partnership with employers, and the experience of delivering apprenticeships.

I will ask you questions about your experience with apprenticeships but will not expect you to give me any information that could be considered commercially sensitive. The interview should be an informal and relaxed experience. Your university will not be identified in the research report.

I have attached a 'Participant Information Sheet', which you should read before agreeing to participate. If you are still happy to participate in the interview, please give me some dates and times that would be suitable for you, and I will be very happy to meet you at a location convenient to you. You are very welcome to meet me at the University of Suffolk if that would work better for you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix 6: Participant Information Sheet – Employers

Study Title: Widening Participation to Higher Education: Degree Apprenticeships, Policy, and Practice

Main Investigator: Karen Hinton

Academic Supervisor (for Student research):

Professor Mohammad Dastbaz (primary supervisor)

Dr Clare Gartland (secondary)

You are invited to take part in a study that is exploring the experiences of students, universities, and employers in undertaking Degree Apprenticeships. This research involves interviews with Apprentices, University Staff, and Employers.

This Participant Information Sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why I am doing the study, what your participation would involve, what the benefits and risks to you might be, and what would happen after the study ends. I will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Informed Consent Form to keep. Please make sure you have read and understood the following information.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of students undertaking Degree Apprenticeships. A key part of the policy around Degree Apprenticeships is the importance of employers, as employers have been involved in creating Degree Apprenticeships and play a key role in supporting Apprentices in their training. I am particularly interested in the decision-making process for employers in choosing to engage with Apprenticeships, and the recruitment practices you used to get the best Apprentice(s) for your organisation. Part of this research will also consider the impact of apprenticeships on employer-university partnerships. The study will also use data published by the Government about Apprenticeships, and interviews with apprentices and university staff.

2. What will my participation in the study involve?

The interview will be an informal discussion, where I will ask you questions about your organisation's involvement in Apprenticeships, including the recruitment process and the organisation's experience so far. The interview will last up to 60mins.

3. What are the possible benefits and risks of this study?

There are no risks to participating in the study. The interview is designed to gather information only – and you can choose to give as much (or as little) information as you are comfortable with. As an employer engaged with Apprenticeships, the interview should be a relaxed discussion where you can reflect on your experience of Apprenticeships so far. The questions will also not require you to provide any commercially sensitive information. There is relatively little research about employers' experiences of Degree Apprenticeships, and this research is therefore an opportunity to increase understanding in this area.

4. Who pays for this study?

I am an employee of the University of Suffolk and am being sponsored by the University in undertaking the PhD.

5. What if I feel uncomfortable with an aspect of the study?

You can tell me that you are not comfortable and can choose to opt-out of the study if you are not comfortable with continuing to participate.

6. What if I don't want to answer a question being asked of me?

Please just tell me that you do not want to answer the question.

7. What are my rights?

You have the right to choose to opt-out of the study between your interview and the point at which data analysis begins. This means that you must inform me before *1 June 2022* if you no longer want your interview to be included in the research. You do not have to provide a reason for making this decision.

8. What happens if I change my mind?

You can choose to end the interview at any time, without providing a reason for your decision.

9. What happens after the study?

If you want to see the final research, please tick the box in the following Consent form, and you will be sent a final copy of the research when it is complete.

10. Who do I contact for more information if I have concerns?

Please contact me (the researcher) Karen Hinton (*email address provided*), my Primary Supervisor, Professor Mohammad Dastbaz (*email address provided*), or the University's Graduate School (*email address provided*)

11. How will my data be stored and for how long?

Your questionnaire data will be anonymised and held for the duration of the research, until up to two years after the Thesis has been completed and assessed. Your interview will be transcribed by me, and the audio file will be stored securely. I will store the transcription file securely, but this will be anonymised. Information from your interview will be identified in the research report by a generic job title (Apprenticeships Lead, HR Director, etc) and your organisation will be identified by its sector (e.g. large IT company, Healthcare provider). If the flow of writing would be helped by you being identified by a name, you will be ascribed a Pseudonym (a fake name) and will be identified only by the pseudonym with the job title/sector information as above. I will hold a separate file that identifies each participant with their pseudonym/characteristics. At the end of the specified time, all audio files and transcriptions will be deleted.

12. How will my data be destroyed?

Data will be held in a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive account, accessible only by me. Up to two years after the thesis has been completed and assessed, your data will be deleted from the accounts

Appendix 7: Participant Information Sheet – University Staff

Study Title: Widening Participation to Higher Education: Degree Apprenticeships, Policy, and Practice

Main Investigator: Karen Hinton

Academic Supervisor (for Student research):

Professor Mohammad Dastbaz (primary supervisor)

Dr Clare Gartland (secondary)

You are invited to take part in a study that is exploring the experiences of students, universities, and employers in undertaking Degree Apprenticeships. This research involves interviews with Apprentices, University Staff, and Employers.

This Participant Information Sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why I am doing the study, what your participation would involve, what the benefits and risks to you might be, and what would happen after the study ends. I will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Informed Consent Form to keep. Please make sure you have read and understood the following information.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of students undertaking Degree Apprenticeships. A key part of the policy around Degree Apprenticeships is the importance of universities delivering a new type of education. I am particularly interested in why universities chose to become involved in apprenticeships, and the experience both in setting them up and delivering them. Part of this research will also consider the impact of apprenticeships on employer-university partnerships. The study will also use data published by the Government about Apprenticeships, and interviews with apprentices and employers.

2. What will my participation in the study involve?

The interview will be an informal discussion, where I will ask you questions about your experience of Apprenticeships. The interview will last up to 60mins.

3. What are the possible benefits and risks of this study?

There are no risks to participating in the study. The interview is designed to gather information only – and you can choose to give as much (or as little) information as you are comfortable with. As a member of university staff engaged with Apprenticeships, the interview should be a relaxed discussion where you can reflect on your experience of Apprenticeships so far. The questions will also not require you to provide any commercially sensitive information. There is relatively little research about the delivery of Degree Apprenticeships and this research is therefore an opportunity to increase understanding in this area.

4. Who pays for this study?

I am an employee of the University of Suffolk and am being sponsored by the University in undertaking the PhD.

5. What if I feel uncomfortable with an aspect of the study?

You can tell me that you are not comfortable and can choose to opt-out of the study if you are not comfortable with continuing to participate.

6. What if I don't want to answer a question being asked of me?

Please just tell me that you do not want to answer the question.

7. What are my rights?

You have the right to choose to opt-out of the study between your interview and the point at which data analysis begins. This means that you must inform me before *1 June 2022* if you no longer want your interview to be included in the research. You do not have to provide a reason for making this decision.

8. What happens if I change my mind?

You can choose to end the interview at any time, without providing a reason for your decision.

9. What happens after the study?

If you want to see the final research, please tick the box in the following Consent form, and you will be sent a final copy of the research when it is complete.

10. Who do I contact for more information if I have concerns?

Please contact me (the researcher) Karen Hinton (*email address provided*), my Primary Supervisor, Professor Mohammad Dastbaz (*email address provided*) or the University's Graduate School (*email address provided*)

11. How will my data be stored and for how long?

Your questionnaire data will be anonymised and held for the duration of the research, until up to two years after the Thesis has been completed and assessed. Your interview will be transcribed by me, and the audio file will be stored securely. I will store the transcription file securely, but this will be anonymised. Information from your interview will be identified in the research report by a generic job title (Health Course Leader) and your organisation will be identified by a number as there are more than one university represented within this research. If the flow of writing would be helped by you being identified by a name, you will be ascribed a Pseudonym (a fake name) and will be identified only by the pseudonym with the job title as above. I will hold a separate file that identifies each participant with their pseudonym/characteristics. At the end of the specified time, all audio files and transcriptions will be deleted.

12. How will my data be destroyed?

Data will be held in a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive account, accessible only by me. Up to two years after the thesis has been completed and assessed, your data will be deleted from the accounts.

Appendix 8: Employer and University Staff Interviews: Informed Consent Form

The University of Suffolk expects all research to be carried out in accordance with the following principles:

The emotional well-being, physical well-being, rights, dignity, and personal values of research participants should be secured.

- Research participants and contributors should be fully informed regarding the purpose, methods, and end use of the research. They should be clear on what their participation involves and any risks that are associated with the process. These risks should be clearly articulated and if possible quantified.
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from coercion. Participants have the right to withdraw at any time.

This research has been approved by the University of Suffolk Ethics Panel. Should you have any concerns about the Ethics of this research, please feel free to contact the Chair of the Ethics Panel, (*email address provided*) or the Research Development Manager, (*email address provided*).

Study Title: Widening Participation in Higher Education: Degree Apprenticeships, Policy, and Practice

Main Investigator: Karen Hinton

Academic Supervisor (for Student Research): Professor Mohammad Dastbaz (primary) and Dr Clare Gartland (secondary)

Please initial the boxes below.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated *4 March 2022* explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to end the interview at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.

I understand that my responses will be anonymised and any personal or identifying information removed from published materials

I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.	☐
I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.	☐
I understand that the data I provide will be used solely for the purposes of the research study outlined and will not be used for any other purpose. I also understand how long my data will be stored for.	☐
I understand that if I wish to withdraw my consent to participate in this research, I must contact the researcher before <i>1 June 2022</i> by email.	☐
I would like to be sent the final research report once it has been completed and assessed.	Yes, I would like to see the final research report
	☐
	No, I do not want to see the final research report
☐	
I agree to take part in the above research project.	☐
_____ Name of Participant	_____ Date
_____ Signature	
<i>To be signed and dated in presence of the participant</i>	
_____ Karen Hinton	_____ _____ _____

Researcher Date Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies:

Once this form has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants.

A scanned copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record by the researcher. This must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 9: Survey

Original formatting included tick-boxes

Apprentice Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims to get some initial information for analysis as part of a PhD exploring the experience of Degree Apprenticeships.

Name/Student ID: _____

1. Were you already working for your employer before you started your Apprenticeship?

Yes No

If yes:

1.1 For how many years did you work for your employer before you STARTED the Apprenticeship?

1.2 Did you have to go through a selection process with your employer (e.g. application and/or interview) in order to be put onto the Apprenticeship?

Yes

No

1.3 Did your job title change when you started the Apprenticeship?

Yes No

1.4 Is your contract of employment...

Permanent

Temporary

If temporary, approximately when does it finish? _____

If no:

1.5 How did you find out about the Apprenticeship? (please tick all that apply)

Newspaper

Employer website

Jobs website

Friends/family

Other (please specify) _____

1.6 Did you apply for any other Apprenticeships?

Yes No

1.6.1 If yes, what was the Apprenticeship area (e.g. Health) _____

1.6.2 Were you offered the position on the other Apprenticeship?

Yes No

2. Did you ever *consider* going to University without doing an Apprenticeship?

Yes No

If yes:

2.1 Did you apply for University?

Yes No

2.2 If you *had* gone to University, what year would you have started your degree?

and what course did you want to do? _____

why did you decide not to go?

3. Did anyone give you help or advice when you were applying for your Apprenticeship?
(please tick all that apply)

Parent Friend Someone who works in the organisation
Careers Advisor at School/College Other (please specify)

4. Why did you choose to do a Degree Apprenticeship?

5. Would you be interested in participating in a 60min interview about your experience of the Apprenticeship? Yes No

The following questions will be used for statistical analysis purposes. You can choose not to answer some or all of the questions:

What is your gender? Female Male Prefer not to say
How old are you? _____
What is your home postcode? _____
Do you have a disability? Yes No Prefer not to say
What is your ethnicity? _____
Did your parents or guardians go to University? Yes No Don't know

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Please ensure you have provided your name/student number at the beginning of the survey if you are happy to participate in an interview.

Appendix 10: Interview Topics – Apprentices

Key areas/starting points, with bullet points for additional questions/clarifications

Outlining current Apprenticeship – employer, stage, apprenticeship name

Why this Apprenticeship?

- Specific job role or sector
- Influence of employer (existing employer or applied for apprenticeship)

Outlining personal timeline

- Aspirations/ambitions at school/college
- Family/friends aspirations/ambitions
 - Who in family and friends was significant in early choices re HE?
- School type – experience and attainment
 - FE College vs Sixth Form
- Consider University?
 - Yes – what course? Apply? What happened?
 - No – why? Other plans?
- Mature – career timeline
- Apprenticeship – influencers, IAG (teachers – did they know about Apprenticeships? What advice did they give?)

The Apprenticeship

- Recruitment process – did anyone help
- Friends/family views
 - Who was significant in encouraging application for apprenticeship?
- Any concerns about Apprenticeship?

Learning experience on the Apprenticeship

- Pressure from employer regarding content, assignments, performance
- Relationship with other apprentices
- Relationship with other students
- Experience of learning (preparedness for HE study)

Employer support

- Support network within the organisation

- Application of learning to work – and work to learning
- Employer as an active participant? Apprentice encouraged to be active participant.

Sense of identity

- Employee vs Apprentice (Health – uniforms and lanyards)
- Fitting in – work vs HE
- Perspective of family and friends

Future aspirations

- Definition of success?
- Perspective of family/friends
- How does learning and career progress from this point?
- Experience so far – regrets? Changes?

Appendix 11: Interview Topics – Employers

Key topics/starting points listed with bullet points for additional questions/clarifications.

Key areas: Co-creators and co-deliverers of education; wide skills of graduates versus narrow specific knowledge; expectations of apprentices at the end of the programme (will they stay long-term as they've been trained by and for the company?)

What Apprenticeships at Higher and Degree level do you offer in the organisation?

Why Apprenticeships?

- Influence of policy (*Social Work - is there a push to have Social Workers trained in a different way from traditional UG route or Masters route?*)
- Apprenticeship Levy – has it changed anything?
- Sector/industry developments
- Skills needs?
- Any impact on graduate recruitment?
- How different is apprenticeship delivery now compared to previous experience?
- What factors influence choice of training providers? [Logistics, price, student experience, local?]

Recruitment

- Who are Apprenticeships aimed at (current employees / new employees)
- Advertising and promotion (e.g. any activity in schools/colleges)
- Essential criteria – experience? Attainment?
- Recruitment/selection process
- Attempts to attract diverse applicants / considering increasing access?

Applicants

- Internal interest (family, friends, current employees)
- Level of experience / interview skills
- Who was successful? Why?

The Apprenticeship

- Experience so far...
- Experience/effectiveness of training delivered in workplace by employer vs campus?
- Motivation/progress of apprentices (any struggling?)
- Support for apprentices
- Value to business
- Do you expect them to stay? Is that written into their contract? Temporary contract...
- Learning experience
- University and employer – joint working / power / collaboration / Ofsted / monitoring

Expectation vs reality – for business and apprentice

Quality

- Impact of University name or degree title for business/apprentices
- SW – difference of apprenticeship vs ‘traditional’ routes?
- All - Degree vs Degree Apprenticeship – what does the business think?
- What does quality look like for the business?

Future plans

- Experience so far – regrets? Changes?
- Future recruitment plans
- Impact of policy changes
- Expectations of the relationship with the University?

Appendix 12: Interview Topics – University Staff

Academic Staff and Professional Services Staff that Developed Apprenticeships

Starting questions/discussion as main points, bullet points used for further prompts as required.

Outlining current Apprenticeships offered

- What types of organisations are currently engaged in apprenticeships?
- How many apprentices? Proportion of student population?
- Active plans to grow apprenticeships?

Why Apprenticeships

- When did the University first start delivering apprenticeships
- Did the Apprenticeship Standard fit existing courses that we offer or was much change required?
- Influence of policy
- Apprenticeship Levy
- Local skills needs or working nationally

Partnership with employer

- Which employers do you work with
- Recruitment process
- Relevance of WP or diversity of applicants
- Balance of power – influence of university in decisions re apprentices recruited
- Is there are stronger partner – university or employer?
- Are you worried about the employer leaving? How long is their commitment typically for?

The Apprenticeship

- Experience so far
- Motivation/progress of apprentices (any struggling)
- Learning experience
- Engagement of apprentices with the university
- University and employer – joint working/collaboration
- OFSTED

Expectation vs reality – partnership between employers and university

Future plans

- Structure of app support in the university
- Experience so far – regrets? Changes?
- Degree vs Degree Apprenticeship
- How important are apprenticeships for the University going forward from here?
- Is there anything that you didn't think of at the beginning that has become important as time goes on? (e.g. uniforms, different experiences for apprentices versus student nurses)
- Do you think meeting the requirements of the Standard has affected the quality and breadth of what we're teaching apprentices compared to the traditional degree?
- Future recruitment plans
- Impact of policy changes
- Expectations of the relationship with employers

University Staff with FE Experience

Outline of background

Views on reforms to Standards, Levy, etc

View on universities in delivering apprenticeships?

- What are your thoughts on the appropriateness of existing degrees like Business Management for the CMDA apprenticeship?

Employer involvement in delivering training

Where is the power – employer, university...

- Entry requirements
- English and Maths

Where does widening participation or increasing access to HE fit in this? Does it fit?

Quality of the experience for the apprentices – is the breadth of academic content as good as it is for full-time students? Views on the admin/monitoring? How does the relationship between the university and the employer affect the apprenticeship experience?

The future of apprenticeships in HE?

University Support Staff

Outline your role at the University

Role in preparing for apprenticeships

What support do you offer to apprentices, and does that differ from full-time students?

How do employers and universities work together to support apprentices with disability, mental health, academic support needs? Is that working?

Challenges specific to apprenticeships versus full-time students

Is there parity in apprentices' access to support compared to full-time students?

Appendix 13: Interview transcript coding

The following list of possible codes, with descriptors/more detail, was the initial list of codes generated in the early part of the thematic data analysis process. The codes were synthesised into themes, and many codes were unable to be used. However, the list indicates the significant amount of data within the interviews that could have been of interest and relevant across the exploration of experience.

- Benefits: Positives of apprenticeships
 - Full-time students benefiting from apprentices in the room, positives for the university and employer
- Bureaucracy: Apprentices - meeting Standards and EPA
 - Tripartites, paperwork, EPA, fitting learning themes into work, challenges of paperwork
- Bureaucracy: Degree course and App Standard
 - Making the Degree and the Standard fit
- Bureaucracy: Ofsted
- Bureaucracy: University policies fitting apprenticeships
 - Policies suitable for apprentices? For apprenticeships. Procurement, contracts
- Differences: Apprentices as 'experts' challenging academics or practice
 - Apprentices versus academics (e.g. theory vs practice) or visiting speakers, challenging employer/practice educators
- Differences: Difference in experience compared to full-time students
 - On-the-job learning experiences, access to breadth of study, fitting assignments etc into life, perception of pressure
- Emotion: Giving up
 - A sense that it's too difficult, pushing to complete
- Emotion: Pride
 - Family pride, personal pride
- Emotion: Stress
 - Difficulties associated with completing the apprenticeship
- Experience: Studying
 - What's the studying experience actually like
- Future: Future plans and expectations
 - Careers plans
 - Future of apprenticeships for employer/university

- Identity: Employee vs Apprentice
 - Changes to sense of identity, challenges of identity, uniforms, differences with colleagues
- Identity: How apprentices see themselves then and now
 - Pre-apprenticeship and now on it
- Identity: Student vs Apprentice
 - How apprentice identifies as a student
- New: Guinea pigs, learning as we go
- Partnerships: Bureaucracy
 - Employers and universities managing bureaucracy – tripartites, processes etc
- Partnerships: Employer-led
 - Employers choosing training providers, procurement processes, choices they can make
- Partnerships: Negative
- Partnerships: Positive
 - Employer and universities – positive aspects of the partnership
- Partnerships: Power relationships
 - University and employer; senior members of university over academics
- Process of getting into apprenticeship
- Purpose: Apprentice - why do the apprenticeship
- Purpose: Employer engaging with apprenticeships
- Purpose: University delivering apprenticeship
- Quality: Apprenticeship vs traditional route
 - Reflecting on experience and quality of outcome
- Reflections: Apprentice
 - Was it the right option, what do you think about the experience
- Reflections: Apprentice on students (behaviour)
 - Thoughts on engagement of full-time students with studying, commitment etc
- Reflections: Networking
 - With other apprentices, contact with other organisations
- Reflections: Employer and University
 - Is it working? What needs to change?
- Relationships: Apprentice with employer
 - Support from employer, encouragement, pushing, colleagues
- Relationships: Apprentice and university – voice

- How the apprentice and university engage with one another, listening, academics
- Relationships: Support of family and friends
 - Good and bad
- Relationships: With full-time students
 - Relationships rather than differences
- Widening Participation
 - Likelihood of going to HE anyway, barriers, why they didn't go to HE in the first place

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