

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

Higher education tripartite practitioners as an emerging role in UK higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emerging role of higher education tripartite practitioners (HETPs) in English business schools, who are crucial in bridging academia, regulation, and industry within higher and degree apprenticeships. In the absence of historical models, diverse approaches to this role are evolving. Using a mixed-methods study, we highlight HETPs as boundary-spanners between institutions and workplace learning. Although they are vital to successful higher and degree apprenticeships (HDAs), HETP role structures and caseloads vary significantly. Nevertheless, common responsibilities emerge, alongside recurring tensions between compliance-driven tasks and developmental support. Further research would help to formalize HETP roles to promote professionalization, recognition, and vocational education outcomes.

Key words: higher education tripartite practice, UK higher and degree apprenticeships, academic identities

INTRODUCTION

The role of higher education tripartite practitioners (HETPs) has emerged following the introduction of higher and degree apprenticeships (HDAs) to UK higher education (HE). These work-aligned learning programs offer structured qualification framework combining on-the-job and academic training, at levels 6 and 7 (undergraduate and postgraduate). They represent a novel development, as the UK vocational education and training (VET) context has traditionally focused on lower-level provision. HDAs are supported by levy funding, a tax on larger employers, and are available in 12 occupational routes (IfATE, 2025). In 2022/23, business, administration, and law HDAs represented 47% of all HDA starts (Chartered Association of Business, 2024).

HDAs rely upon the "tripartite relationship" between apprentice, learner and training provider. While HDAs research has expanded, the role of the training provider

tripartite representative has, to date, received limited recognition. This activity includes facilitating apprentices' academic and professional development, monitoring regulatory compliance, and acting as a conduit in the tripartite relationship. We use the term "*Higher Education Tripartite Practitioners*" to distinguish it from similar roles in other UK educational settings, from other workplace or classroom roles, and to recognize this emergent professional identity. While related roles have existed in further education in the UK, they are new to HE, and institutional support structures for them are still taking shape. Consequently, HETPs now occupy a diverse range of professional and academic roles, with varying levels of professionalization and expertise. In part this is because while quality and funding requirements set out what a higher education institution (HEI) must do to support apprentices, they do not stipulate how this is done. As a result, diverse approaches to support the tripartite have emerged.

Our role in this emerged from our shared experiences of

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Received: 27 March 2025; Revised: 15 May 2025; Accepted: 19 May 2025

<https://doi.org/10.54844/vte.2025.0939>

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managing HDAs within our respective institutions. Having identified an absence of suitable professional development opportunities to support HETPs, we initiated an online Continuing Professional Development (CPD) event. Following the event's success, we subsequently approached the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC, a UK HE membership body focused on the policy and operational requirements of HDAs) to propose the creation of a dedicated knowledge network, resulting in the most successful launch to date.

This study therefore sought to understand the nature and extent of the role of HETPs, specifically in English business schools, as this represents our disciplinary home and is the largest sector of HDA delivery (Chartered Association of Business, 2024). We consider how HETPs roles are evolving, and outline some of the implications for the apprenticeship workforce.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We investigated HETPs roles within the English business schools, by gathering data around a one-day CPD event. We used surveys ($n = 2$) and focus groups ($n = 16$). An initial registration survey garnered 76 responses across 25 institutions, primarily capturing job titles, while a subsequent attendance survey collected role descriptions, caseloads and demographic data for 32 participants across nine HEIs.

During the CPD event, participants took part in a total of 12 hours of focus groups. We structured these around the three apprentice journey stages mandated by English apprenticeship regulatory frameworks: (1) Initial Skills Analysis (ISA), which measures learners' prior learning and training needs; (2) Progress Review Meetings (PRM), which monitor apprentices' development against their training plans, and provide pastoral support such as safeguarding and wellbeing; (3) End Point Assessment (EPA), the final, independent evaluation of occupational competence.

We also included a program enhancement stage to capture other interventions that occurred on program, beyond regulatory requirements.

We analyzed these data using template analysis (King, 2004) organized around the four stages, to provide insight into how HETPs experience their role. We are currently extending data collection across additional disciplines to build on these findings.

RESULTS

Finding 1: multiplicity of roles and responsibilities

Of the 76 respondents in the initial survey, 54 distinct

job titles were recorded across more than 30 HEIs. Many institutions lack a clear role definition, evidenced by multiple job titles for similar roles within the same institution. Most titles included descriptors like coach, tutor, or academic/educator (each around 30%) along with references to workplace, employer, or professional practice (60%).

Despite varied descriptions, the attendance survey revealed a core focus on development and compliance (Table 1), with some roles also covering onboarding and offboarding.

HETP caseloads vary widely, with participants reporting a full-time equivalent (FTE) between 30 and 100 apprentices. Based on stated working hours, the average was 1.7 learners per hour (FTE). Such workload pressure may account for some of the tensions experienced, discussed below.

Therefore, HETPs operate under a wide array of job titles and responsibilities, demonstrating a marked lack of standardization in their roles across institutions. This variability reflects the absence of unified pedagogical expectations and formal recognition for HETPs, which in turn is likely to complicate both their professional identity and any associated recognition of their contribution.

Finding 2: pedagogical tension

Focus group analysis revealed tensions between developmental support and compliance-driven responsibilities.

Participants described engagement in ISA as underpinning the apprenticeship journey, building relationships between learners, employers, and providers, and enabling program customization.

"I do think there is a beauty in this if we do it well, it can actually make the learner journey individualized and also very supportive for them."

"... if that initial process of ISA is done centrally and the learners aren't really involved with a coach ... that might lead to disconnect ... they don't really understand that they're coming in on an apprenticeship."

However, unclear explanations of the purpose of ISA lead apprentices to overestimate their abilities, creating duplication and inefficiency.

"The way that it's perhaps presented ... is very counter-intuitive because they think they need to prove that they're wonderful, and we actually want them to demonstrate their gaps."

"We had discussions around the challenges of learners being a little optimistic and trying to impress us with

Table 1: HETP responsibilities

Responsibilities	Always/regularly involves	Occasionally involves	Infrequently involves
Onboarding	Induction activity	Initial skills assessment	Recognition of prior learning Recruitment
On program activity	Developmental related activity, including knowledge, skills and behavior interventions Development/compliance bridging activity, such as PRM and safeguarding Compliance related activity, such as "off the job" record management and "RAG" ratings	Mentor training Group coaching Portfolio development activity	Liaison with academic teams Academic feedback support
Offboarding	-	EPA support activity	-

HETP, higher education tripartite practitioner; PRM, Progress Review Meetings; RAG, red, amber, green; EPA, End Point Assessment.

their skills. And then the challenge of that conversation—having to talk them back down ... that needs to be carefully handled."

Different apprenticeship management structures influenced task division; onboarding involvement strengthened mentor-learner relationships, while absence from pre-program activities left HETPs feeling disconnected.

"What we found is that when we're part of onboarding, we start the relationship off really well. [It] makes a huge difference to engagement down the line."

"[Our] first real touchpoint is months into the apprenticeship. That's too late to build a strong relationship, and it can be hard to get the apprentices to see us as a key part of their development rather than just a compliance check-in."

PRMs also play a pivotal role, but are constrained by time pressures, limited mentor engagement, and concerns around confidentiality. Although PRMs should support both retrospective and forward planning, compliance requirements are felt to limit opportunities for deeper conversations.

"I get a bit overwhelmed with how much I've got to cover in an hour. I just feel like the list is getting longer and longer that we've got to be responsible for and to be compliant with and to check this and check that ..."

"... sometimes it feels like we are just ticking boxes rather than really getting into the meaningful discussion."

The use of rating systems, such as red, amber, green (RAG) ratings for off-the-job hours, can also inhibit trusting relationships between HETPs and apprentices, and mentor engagement was noted as key here.

"We have a particular system where if the off-the-job learning is below target, it just highlights in red, red, red.

So, it looks really negative even though they might just be a few hours below ... it makes them feel like they're failing."

"RAG ratings sometimes feel like a compliance exercise rather than a development tool ... I'll be saying to the mentor, 'Look how much green there is!' and I wonder if that's the right approach. Does that really show development, or just the fact that they've ticked all the right boxes."

To move beyond compliance, HETPs often organize supplemental sessions that focus on developing apprentices' skills. They appreciate these opportunities, lamenting the lack of time to do more.

"We introduced group activities on campus, such as writing days, which have become one of our most popular activities ... [They] allow us to put personal development at the heart of what we do but in a more varied way, moving beyond just compliance."

"[We're] spending so much time on compliance that we're not focusing on meaningful engagement. We'd love to do more development activities, but it feels like we're just ticking boxes rather than actually supporting learners to grow."

Finally, EPA discussions highlighted tensions between regulatory requirements and developmental goals, particularly between achieving timely completion and the best outcomes for apprentices. As a summative assessment largely outside HETPs' control, this contributed to a sense of anxiety.

"[T]he other curiosity is the sort of timeliness element, which is something that's been a bit of a pressure for us in terms of coaches wanting their portfolios to be at a particular standard and quality."

"We have had a handful [of learners] who haven't done as well as we thought they probably could have. And we're just wondering—did they just have a bad day. It's

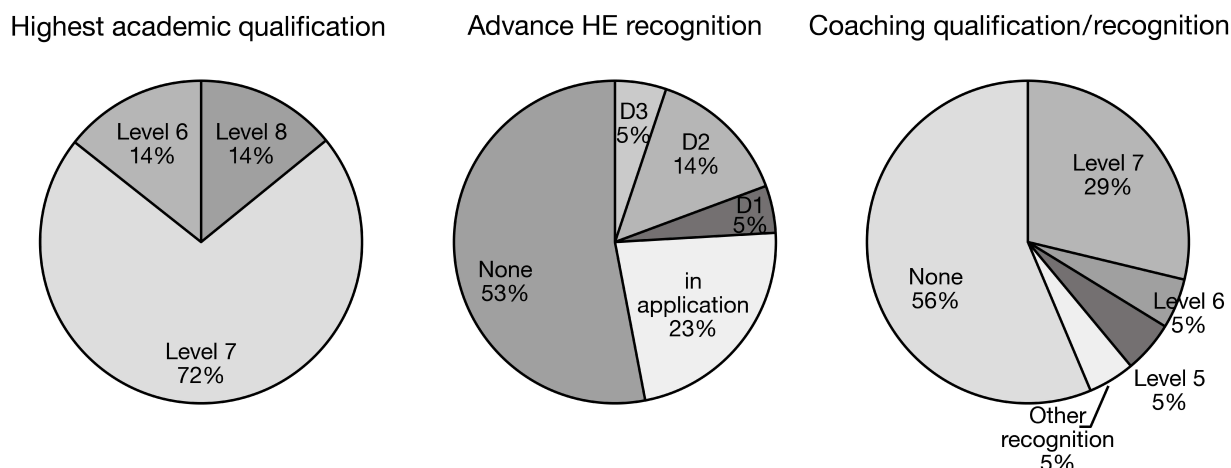


Figure 1. Contractual types and HETP role holder qualifications. HETP, higher education tripartite practitioner; HE, higher education.

an intensive assessment. You don't know how they're going to walk into the room, and it's like a job interview. You can prepare them all you like, but it's down to them in the room."

Finding 3: boundary-spanning

Detailed employment information from the attendance survey, covering both HETP role holders and their line managers, revealed that HETPs are almost always directly employed by the HEI. There was just one example of a self-employed practitioner delivering services across multiple institutions. HETP posts were evenly split between "academic" and "professional support" contracts, and most were held part-time (71%).

While HETPs were highly qualified academically, few held recognized pedagogic (as measured by Advance HE recognition—the UK HE membership and accreditation body) or coaching qualifications, suggesting that training specific to their boundary-spanning role is lacking (Figure 1).

So, whilst HETP roles transcend traditional UK HE boundaries, formal training and recognition to support this appears limited. Despite this, their teaching practices bridge workplace learning and academic education, enabling apprentices to develop a holistic praxis-informed understanding of business subject disciplines.

CONCLUSION

Vocational learning has traditionally been seen as a further education remit in the UK, limiting HE engagement in apprenticeship development (Anderson *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, there has been little coordinated development of HDA supporting structures. This parallels wider structural challenges within HE apprenticeships, where the lack of sector-

wide coordination has led to fragmented, reactive responses to policy shifts (Power-Mason *et al.*, 2025).

HETPs occupy a central position, providing the 'responsive facilitation' (Dalrymple *et al.*, 2014) necessary for HE apprenticeships. This stands in contrast to conceptualizations of such posts as "sub-altern" roles (Esmond, 2020). Despite this, their professional identity remains ambiguous in the context of UK HE.

Operating within uncertain structures, lacking clear recognition, standardized training, or well-defined career pathways, HETP status within institutions is undermined.

Given the tensions experienced between compliance and meaningful developmental work, HETP roles straddle intrinsic and instrumental aspects of the tripartite role, reflecting the expansive-restrictive conceptualization of apprenticeships (Fuller & Unwin, 2003).

Establishing a sector-wide framework to recognize HETP roles could enhance consistency, accountability, and impact. Defining role descriptors, workload expectations, competencies and development pathways would strengthen professional identity and reduce isolation. Supporting HETP engagement with recognized HE teaching accreditation could reinforce legitimacy and pedagogic expertise. Finally, further research is needed to fully surface the experiences of role holders, and to assess how professionalizing HETP roles influences learner outcomes, institutional practices, and employer engagement.

DECLARATIONS

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to express their gratitude to the

tripartite practitioners who contributed to this research.

Author contributions

Both authors have contributed to conceptualization, data curation, methodology, formal analysis, writing, review and editing, and project administration. Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Source of funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical approval

The study protocol was approved by University of Hertfordshire (BUS/SF/UH/05870) and University of Northumbria (Charlton 2023-4256-3269)

Informed consent

The participants were informed that the interview data were only used for research purposes, and their information would be anonymized when presenting the research result. Moreover, they were able to withdraw their data.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

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