Integrating Higher Degree Education with Practice: Exploring the Value Proposition of Executive MBA Apprenticeships

Abstract

Purpose: To explore how the collective representations of stakeholders associated with an Executive MBA (EMBA) apprenticeship are conceptualised, and what value elements are perceived as relevant for personal, professional, and organisational development.

Design/methodology/approach: Forty stakeholders participated in a mixed method-based Group Concept Mapping (GCM) approach, representing the tripartite relationship of an EMBA apprenticeship. This approach allowed the deconstruction and shared understanding of the value proposition of higher degree apprenticeships.

Findings: Analysis identified seven conceptualised value clusters around an eight central cluster '*Professional Development*'. Two regions of meaning were identified: the personal dimensions of apprentices and their contribution within and to their organisation. Findings showed that a work-based designed curriculum improves confidence and communication skills and that much of the value proposition is personal and self-managed by the apprentices. The tripartite relationship was shown to be incomplete and inconsistent, particularly regarding mentoring and reflective practice.

Originality: The study addresses a gap in the literature by exploring the value proposition an EMBA apprenticeship programme. The interrelatedness of cluster concepts has identified value elements missing from previous apprenticeship delivery. Deconstructing the senior leader apprenticeship enables educators to redesign and refine models of engagement for improving the apprenticeship experience.

Implications for Policy and Practice: The pandemic brought about significant changes in business practice. This study identifies several areas for improving higher degree apprenticeship pedagogy in readiness for the new business landscape, as well as identifying limitations of the tripartite relationship.

Key words: Higher Degree Apprenticeships, Mentoring, Reflection/reflective practice, Work-based learning, Vocational education and training, Executive MBA

Introduction

The introduction of Higher Degree Apprenticeships (HDAs) in the UK represented a new educational model that has disrupted the more traditional approach to higher education postgraduate degrees (Bravenboer, 2019; Fabian *et al.,* 2022). HDAs offer a government funded levy (SFA, 2022) programme of academic learning on a part-time student basis, but where a significant part of the learning and application is undertaken in the workplace as work-based learning (WBL), and where mentorship is provided by the employer (QAA, 2019). This work integrated model represents a new approach and challenges assumptions between academic and professional knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) (Bravenboer and Crawford-Lee, 2020). Furthermore, these degree apprenticeships, are delivered to experienced individuals with management responsibilities, primarily aimed at closing identified skills gaps and increasing social mobility (QAA, 2019). Thus, the audience is frequently very different to the more typical student intake one might expect at this level.

The recent policy update to the HDA structure removed the master's qualification from the programme (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), 2022). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as providers, now offers a Senior Leader Apprenticeship (SLA)

at Level 7 for 120 credits, with an option to top-up at a later date for a master's degree, such as a Master of Business Administration (MBA). The new apprenticeship has required some adjustments to delivery and practice. Aligning this to a WBL approach and meeting the needs and expectation of a tripartite agreement (apprentice, employer and HEI) has been challenging.

Previous research has focused on degree apprenticeships as an alternative to conventional full-time degree models of higher education (Saraswat, 2016). This prompted a stream of research on the benefits and limitations of work-based practice, as well their challenges, opportunities, and sustainability (for example, Bravenboer and Lester, 2016; Saraswat, 2016; Hughes and Saiva, 2019; Mulkeen *et al.,* 2019; Konstantinou and Miller, 2020; Lester, 2020; Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020; Pepper *et al.,* 2022). However, there is little research at senior leaders' level that examines whether the value proposition perceived by the respective tripartite stakeholders associated with HDAs (apprentices, employers and HEIs) is conceptualised in the same way. The integration of on- and off-the-job learning is fundamental to the delivery of high-quality apprenticeships (Hughes and Saieva, 2019; Rowe *et al.,* 2020), so understanding representations and perceptions, as well as their relationships would mitigate any tensions and allow adjustments to be identified for redefining and developing innovative learning opportunities to improve pedagogic practice.

We asked two research questions:

1. How do the tripartite stakeholders (apprentices, employers and HEIs) perceive the value proposition of higher degree apprenticeships for personal, professional, and organisational development?
2. How can these perceptions be used to improve pedagogic practice for the new SLA degree apprenticeship?

Hence, the aim of this paper is to address this gap by examining how the collective representations of the tripartite stakeholders associated with an Executive MBA (EMBA) apprenticeship were conceptualised and perceived as value elements. Our objective is to understand how these value proposition dimensions are conceptualised and what elements are perceived as applicable and relevant for personal, professional, and organisational development, in readiness for supporting delivery of the new Senior Leader Apprenticeship (SLA). Highlighting how this is conceptualised by the key stakeholders (apprentices, employers and HEIs) enables educators to redesign and refine models of engagement that enrich our understanding of the value proposition. With the recent changes made to the structure of the SLA, this approach is especially pertinent, as findings from this study can be used to support professional development and enhance pedagogic practice for improving the apprenticeship experience.

This study is divided into four sections. First, we conduct a literature review of Higher Degree Apprenticeships and key topics associated with this. Second, we explain and apply the method of Group Concept mapping (GCM). Third, we share the findings from our GCM concept maps and pattern matches. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings and make recommendations for future policy and practice.

Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of the origin and structure of HDAs, with a focus on three key topics: work-based learning, mentoring and pedagogic practice.

Higher Education Degree Apprenticeships

Higher degree apprenticeships were introduced in the UK 2015-16, incorporating part-time study and a degree-level qualification, supported financially by a government levy (DfE, 2019). A set of approved standards (IfATE, 2022) establishes the required content and criteria to be taught and assessed. These apprenticeship qualifications have proved to be very popular with employers. Higher degree apprenticeships have accounted for nearly a third of starts in 2021-22 (30.6% or 88,200 starts, ONS, 2022), reflecting the perceived relevance of supporting skills and behaviours development in the workplace. However, a change in the apprenticeship regulations to drop the mandatory master's degree called for some redesigning to the existing model and an opportunity to innovate apprenticeship delivery.

As stated by the government (DfE, 2019), there are clear advantages to this approach. Degree apprenticeships address the challenges facing larger organisations by supporting personal, professional, and organisational development, through an appropriately planned curriculum that incorporates issues of enterprise, policy and practice. For smaller, entrepreneurial SMEs, these degree apprenticeships provide a cost-effective means of undertaking an aspirational programme that makes the workplace a site of learning (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020) and an opportunity for determining skills priorities (Anderson and Crawford-Lee, 2020). This is built around a contractually binding and collaborative partnership between employers and providers (Bravenboer and Crawford-Lee, 2020; Lester, 2020; Rowe *et al.,* 2020), through creative and innovative higher-level learning opportunities and contemporary practice in work-related situations.

Since February 2018, the opportunity for business schools to deliver senior leader degree apprenticeship has allowed companies to fund professional development of key senior managers' strategic and leadership practice. Maximising the training and development through a government-funded levy has supported the development of key employees with minimal cost. It has also allowed HEIs to take existing MBA programmes and redesign these to fit an apprenticeship or creatively develop and design a new programme that will help organisations to become adaptable and agile to changes in the market (Hughes and Saieva, 2019). In addition, for The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accredited institutions, delivery of a high-level degree business curriculum is viewed as a competitive advantage and significant source of income for the university.

However, the change of degree apprenticeship policy, removed the mandatory master's element from the previous degree apprenticeship, following feedback from employers. The apprenticeship standard now allocates a maximum funding cap of £14,000, including delivery and End Point Assessment (EPA) examination for a senior leaders' degree apprenticeship (120 credits) (IfATE, 2022). As a result of this regulatory change, business schools were required to target an audience without the lure of a 'paid for' masters. It has called for some creative thinking, a change of focus to more WBL and pedagogical redesigning of existing programmes. Now sold as an apprenticeship only, business schools are offering a level 7 apprenticeship programme, but with an option to "top up" post completion, funded by the individual or employer, frequently with a reduction fee applied. Hence the value proposition of this new educational model must be fully understood if it is to improve impact and add value to the future landscape.

Work-based learning and collaboration

For businesses to partake in an apprenticeship, there must be a clear perception of what added value and business benefits their employees will gain from acquiring this qualification. Ensuring that the learning process is not over individualised allows businesses to experience the benefits of value added acquired through work-based learning. This is described as "a process for recognising, creating and applying knowledge through work" (Garnett, 2001, p. 103). Business perception of training is dual purpose; to develop theory and to learn by doing, so that their employee can adapt to the changing needs of industry and take a lead role in implementing strategy that facilitates this. As many senior managers are already well versed in industry standard tools and techniques (Makin, 2021), we argue that the application of theory to this practical knowledge is what will facilitate the transformation of practice. However, the collaborate delivery through multiple stakeholders has caused tension in the complex process and co-adaptation of the curriculum for this purpose (Quew-Jones, 2022).

Work-based learning and skill development are the foundation of apprenticeship learning, where experience as part of university education goes hand in hand with this (Konstantinou and Miller, 2020; Boud and Solomon, 2001). However, many employers, providers and learners exhibit biased beliefs and perceived low esteem toward vocational education (Lee, 2012; Saraswat, 2016). Compared to Europe, the UK is poorly positioned on intermediate professional and intermediate skills (Saraswat, 2016). The government increased the number of apprenticeships as a direct route for greater business productivity (BIS, 2015), but despite this, Ofsted has reported that apprenticeships do not provide sufficient, high-quality skills training (Ofsted, 2013/14). In addition, European apprenticeships, are not perceived as a 'second-rate' alternative, as apprenticeship participation has been one of the focal points of EU and national policies on vocational education and training (VET) since 2013 (Cedefop, 2021). Tailored learning with worked-based learning is seen as a key area for upskilling pathways (Cedefop, 2020).

Higher degree apprenticeships exhibit the most integrated work-based learning through the employer's commitment to ensure that at least 20% of the employees' time is available for off-the-job-training and learning (IfATE, 2022; Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020). The SLA standards and tripartite relationships are built around WBL and academic learning, which requires contributions from both HEI and the employer in practice and support, as well as a clear understanding of the learning approach. The acquisition of softer skills and behaviours, such as reflection or emotional intelligence, as well as advancing identity at a professional level (Brockmann and Laurie, 2016) assists advance at executive level. Thus, the acquisition of knowledge develops skills to explore, share and transfer learning into practice, and sits with the members of the tripartite relationship: apprentice, employer and learning provider (Konstantinou and Miller, 2020). Furthermore, recent reflection on EU apprenticeship schemes suggests that the heterogeneity of approaches to apprenticeship design and provision across EU Member States requires a common understanding at national level, of the contractual relationship between learner and provider and a shared understanding of an apprenticeship's specific features, compared to other education and training options (Cedefop, 2021).

Mentoring and work-based manager support

This collaborative arrangement between apprentices and their manager (Quew-Jones and Rowe, 2022) is designed to support the apprentice, aid progress, provided mentoring dialogue, address problems and assist the transfer of theoretical knowledge back 'on the job'. Part of this collaboration is understanding employers' perspectives of the apprenticeship programme, how

this relationship is managed and disseminated, so that both apprentices and mentors can work together in a meaningful manner as they progress through their HDA programme.

There is recognition that workplace mentors require additional training to ensure that this relationship is effective and that universities should provide this, to strengthen the link between organisations (Mulkeen *et al.,* 2017). Educating employers of the value HDAs bring to their organisation (Hughes and Saieva, 2019) is challenging, as the tensions regarding responsibility and ownership may have a negative impact on WBL. Hughes and Saieva (2019) suggest a hybrid coaching and mentoring role may improve apprentice support using an interactive toolkit to support and enrich the mentoring relationship.

The dual identity (Fabian *et al.,* 2022) requires the apprentice to balance the demand of their job and the nature of a part-time student, resulting in a lack of belonging and a potential negative impact on their studies (Fabian *et al.,* 2022). A mentor may encourage reflection on these different profiles in the context of traditional and non-traditional student roles (Hughes and Saieva, 2019), but also encourage self-confidence in their ability to engage both academically and professionally, which helps to transform both personal and professional identities (Hamilton, 2018). As work frequently takes central priority, with learning and learner experience viewed as of secondary importance (Boud and Rooney, 2015), a workplace mentor may understand these constraints, reduce anxiety and negativity about apprenticeship commitment and unrealistic supervision time allocation (Mulkeen *et al.,* 2017), or help to mitigate public sector resource constraints (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020). The perceived value of the apprenticeship from a mentor's perspective helps to shape and form a crucial relationship that is a prerequisite for optimum apprenticeship practice (Quew-Jones and Rowe, 2022).

Pedagogic theory and practice gaps

Acquiring new knowledge for its application in a business environment provides senior leaders with the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) to function at executive level. However, there is potential for conflict between the content of the academic theory aligned to the standards and the apprentices' existing, applied knowledge. Integrating theoretical and practical learning has created tension between what theory is taught and what apprentices do at work (Bravenboer and Lester, 2016; Quew-Jones, 2022). For HDAs, the apprentice is already employed, in a position of responsibility and with a wealth of industry expertise and management practice. In contrast, academics are frequently experts in a narrower field with a focus on research-based teaching. Consequently, the more traditional business disciplines may not necessarily be a best fit with the standards and criteria required for a more practical work-based qualification. According to *Tucker et al.* (2020), the currency of academic research is of limited value in most settings beyond academia and should be used more effectively as a tool to facilitate learning and inform practice. Hence, a co-designed curriculum is much needed to translate academic learning into the workplace (Quew-Jones, 2022).

Prior research suggests there is a problem gap between theory and practice which has been around for many years (Reed, 2009; Laud and Johnson, 2013; Tucker and Lawson, 2020; Rosenbaum *et al.,* 2021; Sarfati, 2021). In the new apprenticeship standards, there are set criteria for assessing these KSBs, as well as occupational duties, so the curriculum is predetermined. The challenge is to ensure that all stakeholders are fulfilling the common objective and singing from 'the same hymn sheet'. Lillis (2018) has identified that an integrated model of teaching and learning is needed to support work-based modules, where educational practice goes beyond understanding alone (Shulman, 2005). In addition, this reflective practice

is a way of supporting apprentices to continually assess their performance beyond the programme (Konstantinou and Miller, 2020; Rowe *et al.,* 2020).

Re-addressing higher degree apprenticeships: the value proposition

The challenge now for business schools is whether the new SLA apprenticeship model has the same attraction as MBA apprenticeships of previous design. We believe that exploring the value proposition of the previous EMBA apprenticeship has allowed us to identify where the perceived added value lies. We argue that understanding these perceptions helps business schools bridge the gap between management education and work-based delivery, allowing them to redesign and improve their educational model to meet the needs of our future senior leaders.

Methodology

Design

Our study was conducted during 2021-2022 in pandemic conditions, using group concept mapping (GCM), a mixed method-based methodological framework (Rosas, 2017). GCM is a stepwise, structured process, where knowledge and stakeholders' representations are the focus of research, converting data on conceptualisations to results that can be shown in a visual format (The Concept System® groupwisdom™, 2021). It combines qualitative data collection methods with quantitative analysis processes and was deemed an appropriate method for applying analytics to different stakeholders' perceptions of the value proposition of a higher EMBA apprenticeship degree. The resulting Concept Maps, Pattern Matches, and Go-Zones visuals facilitate a detailed representation of the stakeholders' conceptualisation.

Our purposive sample included 40 participants involved with the EMBA apprenticeship programme at Leicester Castle Business School and were recruited according to the multiple perspectives they held regarding the value proposition of this programme. The aim was to have the key stakeholders who participate in one capacity or another to the degree apprenticeship, representing the tripartite relationship, between apprentice, employer and HEIs. For example, representatives were apprentices, assessors, compliance, regulation and faculty members, tutors, business mentors and business development managers. Apprentices came from private, public funded and small SMEs. In addition, all apprentices on the programme were from four different cohorts at various stages of their apprenticeship journey, from recently started to final stages. Thus, this sample included the voices of all those engaged in the EMBA programme.

The GCM process

The GCM methodological framework (Kane and Trochim, 2007; Kane and Rosas, 2018) is a bottom-up, participatory and mixed method-based approach comprising five steps.

Step 1 involved joint planning between researchers, affiliated to the UK and Canada, regarding the participant sample and development of the focus prompt to elicit ideas about the research topic. Ethical review board certifications detailing information and consent for participants were obtained at both institutions to which the researchers are affiliated.

Step 2 focused on idea generation comprising of ten (10) facilitated group brainstorming sessions. The participants (n=40) were asked to share ideas using the focus prompt: "A value

proposition element of an EMBA programme for my personal development or my professional development or my organisation would be…" These brainstorming sessions were recorded and then transcribed. At step 2, ideas collected from these sessions were formalised into a final item set of value proposition dimensions. Over 300 ideas were extracted and reduced to a final set of 100 items for sorting and rating. The GroupWisdom™ web platform was used to collect quantitative data (The Concept System® groupwisdom™, 2021).

Step 3 is a data structuring process comprising of three parts: demographic questioning, a participant sorting activity and a participant scale rating activity. A group of participants (n=40) were asked individually to sort the items into piles according to their similarity of meaning or topic described and then to name each pile using a short sentence or keywords based on its contents. The participants were also asked to rate each statement using a five-point Likert-type scale for the perceived relative importance and workplace applicability of each one.

From this, the total similarity matrix was established and used to estimate the (x, y) coordinates of the item and the multidimensional scaling analysis (MDS) (Kruskal and Wish, 1978). This was used to produce the dot map (see figure 1). The stress value, a measure of internal reliability is 0.30 (13 iterations), which falls within the acceptable range for GCM studies (Rosas and Kane, 2012). The *X-Y* coordinates from the MDS output are used to estimate a concept map of non-overlapping clusters using agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis (AHCA) (Everitt et al., 2011). The MDS results also provided a measure of sorting agreement among participants for each item, based on an anchoring and bridging index (ABI) in the interval [0,1] (Cloutier *et al.,* 2017; Jackson and Trochim, 2002). An ABI value indicates the conceptual distance among participants based on the frequency of sorting for a particular item and their similarity (e.g., closer to "0" indicates conceptual proximity, while closer to "1" indicates conceptual distance).

Step 4 used the results from the cluster analysis to determine the number of clusters to be retained for the concept map. The mapping software takes each participant's sorting data and compiles them into a similarity matrix. The software then applies a multidimensional scaling algorithm resulting in a point map (see figure 1). From this, hierarchical cluster analysis group statements that were closest to one another were named, using the pile titles given by participants as guidance from step 3. After this, pattern matches and go-zones were determined at cluster level to show comparisons and differences between cluster ratings.

Step 5 presented the final maps to participants (n=40) during a debriefing session for confirmation of cluster names and emerging themes. Participants were asked to comment on the ratings, pattern matches and go-zones. This provided further insight into important aspects of the value proposition's key themes, supporting the interpretation of results as an abductive inference process for external validity.

[insert figure 1 here]

Findings

The GCM analysis identified eight clusters in total, placed around a key, central cluster '*Professional Development"* as the most important perceived value propositions. The spatial distribution of clusters on the map was interpreted in terms of reinforcement, cohesiveness, and tensions. Clusters located closer to one another reinforce each other and are conceptually

intertwined. Clusters located at the opposite end on the map, express tensions among ideas or actions on the map.

[Insert figure 2 here]

A stylised representation (see figure 2 and figure 3) shows that the clusters **Personal Development and Aspirations**; **Self-awareness and Self-confidence**; **Relationships with Peers and Others**; *and* **Stakeholder Communication and Engagement** were associated with the apprentices' own representation of personal value of the EMBA apprenticeship propositions. On the other hand, the clusters **Understanding of Role Within the Organisation**; **Professional Contribution of Highly Skilled Apprentices to Organisational Benefit**; **Engagement in the Educational Process and in a Network** showed the EMBA value proposition that is brought to the organisation and their community. Thus, two regions of meaning were identified on the map.

The central cluster, **Professional Development** underpins the value proposition of the apprenticeship with a bridging value of 0.21, denoting quite a strong agreement among participants regarding the item sorting on this cluster. Statements, such as *"The development of a more professional approach to the job role"* [item 4] and *"The variety of learning experiences provided as a means of deepening one's business education"* [item 29] suggest the core value proposition of the EMBA programme. However, the clusters associated with a more personal value proposition, **Personal Development and Aspirations** and **Development of Self-Awareness and Self-confidence** also had bridging values of 0.31 and 0.20 respectively, showing a strong agreement among participants for sorting these items together.

In addition, the **Personal Development** cluster identifies a softer skill set, for example *"The development of self-reflection based on the intrinsic benefits gained from the programme"* [item 38] and *"The understanding of the role of emotions in decision-making"* [item 98], whereas the **Self-Awareness and Self-Confidence** cluster recognises other personal skills for development, such as improving confidence and a greater awareness of other areas that impact on relationships: *"The development of soft skills for improving ways to interact with confidence with people and teams"* [item 40] and *"The application of knowledge to support positive and confident contributions in meeting conversations"* [item 8].

[Insert figure 3 here]

Furthermore, the **Stakeholder Communication and Engagement** cluster draws attention to the value of developing professional communication skills for improving and influencing negotiation and outcomes. "The *improvement in negotiation skills for contribution and influencing organisational outcomes* "[item 23] and "*the improved understanding of communication with multiple stakeholders, including those in the organisation*" [item 72].

In contrast to the perception of personal value, the cluster **Understanding of Role Within the Organisation** shows the value proposition in relation to the current job role, demonstrating a more functional purpose. Item statements, such as *"The application of knowledge gained in the various modules to the job role, the organisation, with senior management"* [item 67]; or *"The use of theories and knowledge learnt to improve contribution to strategic discussions with senior leaders"* [item 69] support this. Furthermore, **Engagement in the Educational Process and in a Network** highlighted the perceived value of networking: *"The full self-commitment and attendance to courses that delivers the richness of the learning experience"*

[item 50] and *"The networking with apprentices in the program to learn about different organisations and their businesses"* [item 56].

The cluster **Professional Contribution of Highly Skilled Apprentices to Organisational Benefit** has a bridging concept with a value of 0.76. This means that the value proposition of the EMBA programme to organisations and society underlies the overall cluster set on the concept map, as participants have sorted these items in a larger proportion with other items on the map than with items of this specific cluster. Some of the items are revealing, such as *"The opportunity to serve as a mentor, role model or trainer to help develop others in my job role or in the business"* [item 44] or *"The ability to make a contribution or a difference in the organisation"* [item 54].

We explored the data further using pattern matches. Pattern match graphs report the perception of participants, based on their ratings and allow comparison between two scales.

[Insert figure 4 here]

The first pattern match (figure 4) compares how the participants rated the importance of the EMBA proposition regarding its applicability to the workplace. If the line connecting the two axes is horizontal, there is perfect agreement between stakeholder groups. Across all the tripartite stakeholders, the **Development of Self-confidence**, **Stakeholder Communication and Engagement** and **Understanding of Role Within the Organisation** were seen as highly important and applicable to the workplace. The proximity of these items suggests a dynamic interplay between confidence and stakeholders' communication as softer skill development for understanding one's role in the organisation. Professional development and professional contribution have similar ranking at fourth place, but with a slightly higher consensus of applicability to the workplace.

In contrast, **Personal Development and Aspiration** and **Learning for Career Advancement** were seen as important, but not applicable to the workplace, maybe because many of the apprentices had not yet completed their own programme, so were unable to reflect on job promotion or other intrinsic benefits the apprenticeship may bring post completion. Surprisingly, **Engagement in the Educational Process** showed a similar consensus, but was scored lower, suggesting this is not perceived as a key value proposition for the apprenticeship across the tripartite stakeholders.

[Insert figure 5 here]

The second pattern match (figure 5) looked at the comparison between importance and uniqueness of the EMBA perceived value. There was little consensus between the two axes. This suggests a tension between what is considered important and unique to the EMBA apprenticeship.

Discussion

GCM is an original methodological framework for capturing the conceptualisations and perceptions of multiple EMBA stakeholders. Findings will assist HEIs to improve their responses to the nuances of apprenticeship work-based programmes (Mulkeen *et al.,* 2019). Results identify important value propositions, as viewed by stakeholders in the tripartite relationship (apprentice, employer, HEI). This is pertinent, given the recent changes in the SLA

delivery structure, thus providing HEIs with an opportunity to improve and innovate their programme and delivery.

Results identified seven key value propositions around an eighth core cluster. The first four clusters on the rim represent the personal dimensions of apprentices (commencing at **Personal Development and Aspirations**), whilst the other three are concerned with the apprentices and their progression within the organisation, the contribution to their organisation, leading to career advancement.

The cluster **Professional Development** underpins the core value of the apprenticeship, through the application of models and theories learnt on programme and their integration into the apprentices' job role. This is perceived to enhance and support the development of an executive role by adding new knowledge in the fields of business and management, connecting existing specialised knowledge with new ideas, for example, *"The piecing together of knowledge as previous experience into a coherent whole as part of the programme"* [item 61]. In addition, the centrality of the **Professional Development** cluster shows that the learner-centred approach and off the job application provides positive value added that supports long-term development, agreed by all stakeholders.

However, Quew-Jones's (2022) action-based research study on the higher education curriculum for degree apprenticeships identified the translation of theory into practice as a wicked problem, noting that the apprenticeship degree certification should not be the focus but learning through practice and application. Our findings endorse this. However, as previous research indicates, there is a perceived process for knowledge transfer and practical application that may not be representative across the tripartite relationship. Our findings indicate that there are many different complexities associated with this wicked problem that impact on the perception of value.

The results showed that the importance and applicability of the value proposition to the workplace are significant, as identified in three cluster groups and the top three pattern matches: **Development of Self-awareness and Confidence**; **Stakeholder Communication and Engagement**; *and* **Understanding their role in the Organisation**. These clusters indicate that confidence underpins the application of work-based learning and practice. Self-confidence is needed to engage both academically and professionally (Hamilton 2018). As new knowledge is assimilated and applied back in the workplace, the apprentice's improved ability to communicate and articulate their role supports the development of confidence, which in turn broadens their understanding of how they fit into the organisation, for example, "*The mastery of business language to speak with more confidence at all levels in the organisation*" [item 84]. Although confidence is difficult to quantify, the results and bridging value show agreement across the stakeholder groups.

According to Makin (2021), senior managers come with a well-developed skill set appropriate to their industry sector. Thus, the opportunity and ability of work-based experience, and the inclusion of certain knowledge topics that were not always part of the apprentices' own job role, such as financial understanding at a strategic level, were perceived to be important for developing a well-rounded senior leader. The ability of an aspiring leader to communicate, articulate and challenge strategy is contingent with perceptions of executive behaviour. Our results highlight the importance of confidence building and reflective discussion for progress and performance and softer skill development for exploring, sharing, and transferring learning

into practice (Konstantinou and Miller, 2020). In addition, supported practice increased credibility and capability of the apprentice to improve his or her potential.

Surprisingly, ***Engagement in the Educational Process*** was not seen as an important and applicable value proposition, which suggests some tension between theory content and application (Laud and Johnson, 2013). However, items statements provide future direction for improvement, such as "*the perception that added theoretical knowledge adds credibility to the job role* [item 43], which implies that it is not all about theory and questions the appropriateness of a theory led curriculum. Furthermore, several applicability item statements point toward work-based learning and discussion as being value-added, such as "*the networking with apprentices in the program to learning about different organisations and their businesses*" [item 56] and "*the engagement with a diverse range of public/private sector organisation as case studies to enhance the learning experience*" [item 90]. In addition, the "*the building of relationships…i.e., who can provide advice, work with the business* "[item 87] raises questions about the sufficiency and facilitation of mentoring relationships. For an apprenticeship, we consider these item statements should be rated considerably higher in importance. This may also be indicative of Tucker *et al.'s* (2020) comments that if traditional disciplines are delivered, they may not fit the standards and hence may be perceived of little value by the stakeholders.

Despite the individual nature of personal development, clusters items addressed the social, collective nature of learning (Lave, 1991), represented in the cluster ***Professional Contribution of Highly Skilled Apprentices to their Organisation***. Perceptions emphasised the importance of making sure higher-level learning and improvements in skills and behaviours provided benefits back into the business. We posit that a collaborate approach to learning would utilise differences in work-gained expertise across different business backgrounds, which would act as knowledge exchange. Increase in the use digital communication facilitates this, using practice-based research experts from other institutions to challenge mindsets. Although seeking a mindset change (Quew-Jones, 2022) may not be on the agenda for some employers, or where organisations have historical and culture frameworks to adhere to, encouraging a more flexible relationship between the tripartite stakeholders may help to demystify the perceived differences in knowledge exchange at HEI level and that which is expected back in the workplace. Bridging this gap would enhance the value proposition of the qualification, as all stakeholder groups would benefit from engagement across perceived boundaries. Reflective practice guided by mentors, whereby apprentices challenge the status quo or practice new theory in an unresisting environment would unite collective practice and engagement.

Our findings identified the EMBA as a career progression enabler (Gander, 2015), shown by the concept ***Learning for Career Advancement***. It appears that the completion of the EMBA qualification indicates an ability to 'step up' and a signal that the individual is ready for career advancement (Gander, 2015). However, the pattern matches suggest there may be a time lag in the perception of this benefit. Furthermore, there was little mention in this study of the benefits of workplace support and mentoring, and curiously, it is not represented in any of the cluster items. The absence of this as a perceived value proposition poses some serious questions about collaboration between the tripartite stakeholders, which is a consistent feature associated with best practice (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020). For apprentices to advance in their career prospects, reflective practice is needed to facilitate the ability to think critically and objectively and is linked to improved self-confidence (Rowe *et al.,* 2020). Hence the support offered by the tripartite stakeholders must be consistent throughout the apprenticeship journey, not just on an ad hoc basis. We support Rowe *et al.'s* (2020) comments that regular contact and feedback,

despite its resource intensiveness, are needed to generate a relationship for shaping workplace performance and outcomes (Heyler, 2016) and ultimately professional development for career progression.

In conclusion, our results suggest that much of the value proposition is perceived within the personal dimensions of apprentices, so in effect, is self-managed. We suggest that first, to bring about change, HEIs must act as the key driver and take responsibility for developing a more fruitful relationship with the employer and business mentors. It is crucial for all stakeholders in this relationship to work together and have a clear understanding of their responsibilities and expectations. What is not represented in the cluster groups suggests an unclear role of employers as mentors/managers and that the part that they play for support with work-based learning is missing, so the tripartite relationship is incomplete for successful outcomes.

Second, the educational model must move away from the more typical didactic theory focused teaching methods and incorporate different learning opportunities, based on an appropriate blend of practical and pedagogic experiences. Considering the potential wealth of industry and management expertise of the apprentices, more can be utilised here for knowledge exchange, networking and opportunities for critical discussion. Fresh insights and new practices across previously unconnected sectors (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020) can be utilised. As noted by Rowe *et al.* (2020), an educational model of delivery, whereby academics have both practical and pedagogic experience, called practitioner-academics, (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020) and who have experience, can drive to support work-based learning practice. This is much needed to understand and deliver a curriculum with a work-based focus.

Third, we propose work-based learning and application of reflective practice are managed by both academics and mentors, thus providing opportunity to reflect in both contexts. Our results indicate the value of the development of self-confidence, for improved communication and understanding of the role in the organisation. Prior research by Rowe *et al.* (2020) has emphasised the importance of reflective practice for the development of higher skills required by senior leaders, and our results show the importance and applicability of this in the workplace as a key value proposition of the EMBA. If HEIs consider these three areas, then some of the identified and emerging challenges of higher degree apprentices can be reviewed and improved for future curriculum design.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our findings suggest that the tripartite relationship is incomplete and inconsistent, particularly regarding mentoring and reflective practice. Also, a work-based curriculum is essential for improving confidence and communication skills. This study has identified several areas that would improve the performance, practice and success outcomes of higher degree apprenticeships for the new business landscape. We propose that the HEIs act as a key driver to bring about these improvement changes to the new SLA curriculum, so that the programme can be tailored more appropriately for SME's future growth plans and development as creators of jobs and wealth in the UK's current climate.

In addition, the interrelatedness of cluster concepts has identified areas of tension and value elements that have been missing from the delivery of the previous degree apprenticeship, which can inform policy improvement and practice. Furthermore, deconstruction of a work-integrated approach suggests that equal status must be given to both academic and practical work-based learning (Lester, 2020). Our recommendations and research findings highlight typical changes

and areas of tension that have been raised by other researchers examining higher degree apprenticeship programmes. This must be fed back into UK policy, as it appears, we are all saying similar things. Hence, a closer look at the successful outcomes of work-based learning carried out in other EU countries, such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland, would share best practice for developing high quality training and assessment for UK educators.

In small business, there may be limitations on internal advancement, but enhanced opportunity for career mobility within the sector. Development of skills and knowledge facilitates an increase in management practice and business understanding (Gander, 2015), which assists future growth plans. This knowledge and skill set spillover can only improve the distribution of expertise within the community of practice, which ultimately leads to the creation of new businesses and future senior leaders.

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Figure documents

Figure 1. Dot map derived from the GCM multidimensional scaling analysis
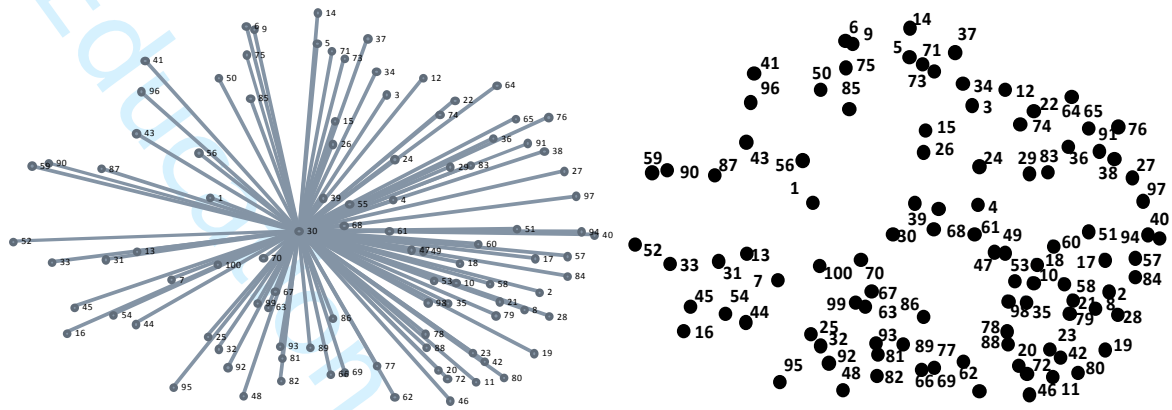

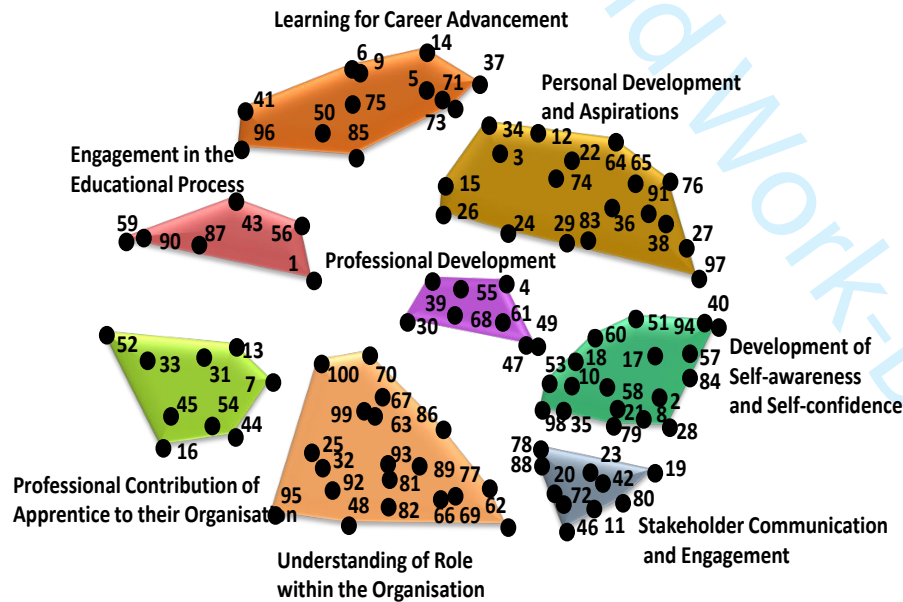Figure 2. Agglomerative Hierarchical Cluster Analysis using GCM methods

Figure 3. Stylised representation of the concept map.

Figure 4. GCM Pattern matches to show average item ratings by cluster using a 5-point Likert type scale for participants' perception of importance and applicability to the workplace
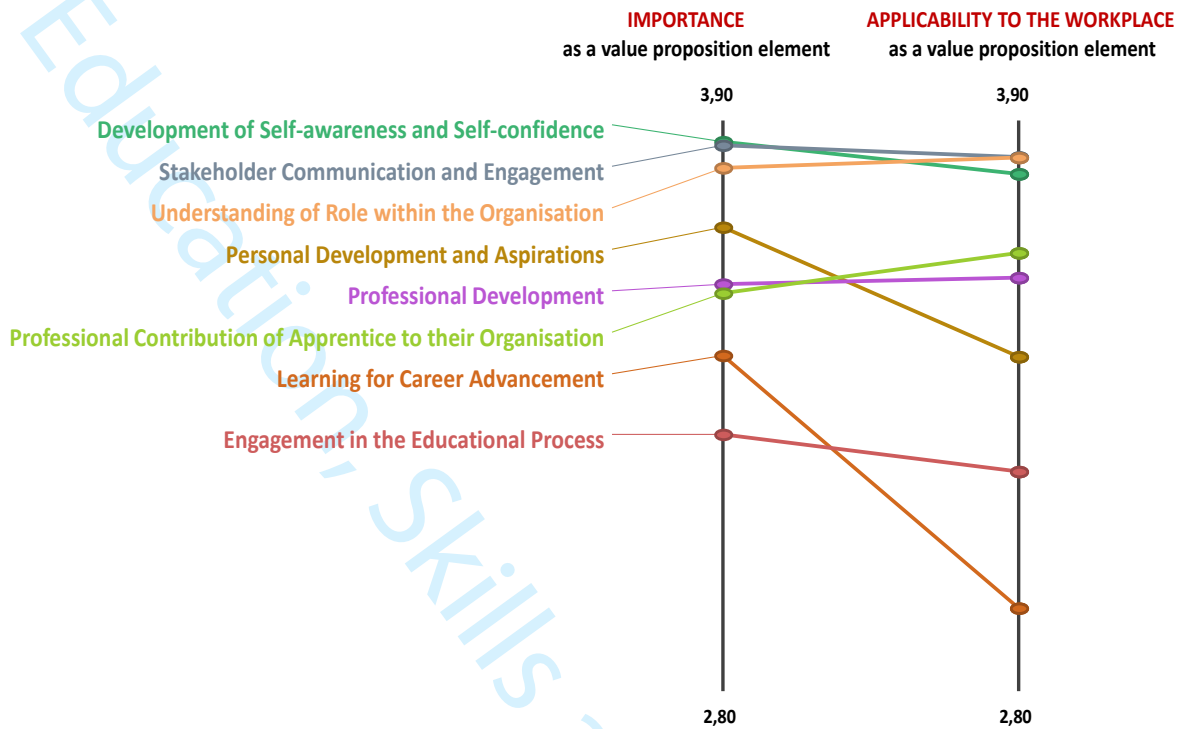

Figure 5. GCM Pattern matches to show average item ratings by cluster using a 5-point Likert type scale for participants' perception of importance and uniqueness to the EMBA apprenticeship