

Identity and influence: a comparative analysis of role perceptions among contingent staff employed in two UK higher education institutions

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper presents findings from an exploration of the experiences of staff employed on sessional, part-time or fixed-term contracts (termed contingent staff), focusing on their perceptions and experiences of identity within a UK higher education context.

Design/methodology/approach – A comparative case study approach was adopted within a qualitative, interpretivist framework. Semi-structured interviews were used to facilitate an in-depth comparative analysis of the experiences of 11 contingent staff. Thematic analysis was employed to compare identity and practice across two settings to uncover distinct and shared factors.

Findings – Participants highlight several critical issues within the study units, including identity and perceived value, team dynamics, clarity of roles and the sense of inclusion within the broader academic community. The findings also reveal that the boundaries between educational roles – including educator, facilitator, coach, mentor and those associated with pastoral care – are increasingly indistinct, suggesting a convergence of pedagogical approaches and holistic practice.

Originality/value – This study provides insights into the underexplored area of pedagogic practice and identity among contingent staff in the UK higher education sector. Unlike previous research, which may broadly examine mentoring roles or apprenticeship outcomes, this study specifically highlights educators' identity perceptions and experiences on contingent contracts, providing a lens on their professional landscape. Employing a comparative case study design enhances the findings by allowing an in-depth juxtaposition of experiences across two distinct higher education institutions.

Keywords Contingent staff, Degree apprenticeship, Sessional employment, Identity perceptions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Effective delivery of apprenticeship training requires a robust support system beyond traditional classroom-based instruction, which is often provided by contingent staff. This research draws on the insights of contingently employed staff working on degree apprenticeships (hereafter referred to as contingent staff) within two UK HEIs to examine

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how identity shapes their practice. It identifies key learnings from their experiences to provide practice recommendations.

Literature review

Identity is continually constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through the processes of exploring and understanding our sense of self, our connections with others and the organisations to which we are affiliated (Brown, 2015). Loyalty, commitment, group interrelationships, collaboration and motivation are crucial (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Identity can be affected by changes in the wider external landscape, such as policy changes (Henkel, 2005; Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013). Identity may be social (e.g. gender or nationality), be associated with a role (such as mentor, coach or lecturer) or occupation (Duemmler and Caprani, 2017), and may be self-assigned or assigned by others (Brown, 2015). Academic identity has different meanings depending on institutional and national context but is constructed based on a shared understanding or perception of what an academic and a higher educational institution do (Avramović *et al.*, 2021).

Over recent decades, the increasing corporatisation and marketisation of higher education has forced many academics to re-evaluate their sense of self concerning their profession (Degn, 2018). For example, the development of degree apprenticeships brings new pressures, structures and responsibilities. These programmes tend to be associated with greater regulation, control and scrutiny, which may force staff to reevaluate and relocate their identity in this new environment (Collins *et al.*, 2022). Apprenticeships compel staff not only to fulfil their traditional academic roles but also to adapt their approach to reconcile learners' expectations with workplace experience, employers and professional bodies (Martin *et al.*, 2020). This can leave academics feeling, *inter alia*, powerless, lacking essential skills like they lack the "right" skills, uncertain about their role, overburdened or with a sense of loss (Martin *et al.*, 2020; Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013).

This re-examination of academic identity coincides with a growing reliance on contingent appointments, which offer greater staffing flexibility and industry-relevant expertise, often under precarious employment conditions. In the UK, around one-third (33%) of academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts as of 2021, with many more hired on an hourly, casual basis through "atypical" employment arrangements (HESA, 2023).

While beneficial in some respects, these contingent appointments frequently involve challenges such as job insecurity, exclusion from professional development opportunities, lack of access to basic workplace resources like office space and feelings of being undervalued compared to permanent faculty counterparts (Gottschalk and McEachern, 2010; Hamilton *et al.*, 2013; Read and Leathwood, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2019). There are also concerns about the impact of contingent staff on the quality of student experience and positive student outcomes (Hitch *et al.*, 2018). However, while permanent academics may focus predominantly on publication, contingent staff are often driven by a desire to go above and beyond to support their learners despite their limited time availability (Leathwood and Read, 2022; Loo, 2023).

Many contingent staff are paid only for contact hours, not for preparation or the student support they provide, and while permanent academics enjoy job security with ongoing contracts that provide stability and career progression opportunities, contingently employed staff face uncertain employment, often relying on short-term contracts that may be terminated with little notice (Bryson, 2013; McComb *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, permanent staff are integrated into the institutional fabric, participating in governance, policymaking and strategic planning. In contrast, contingent staff can often be marginalised from these processes, leading to a sense of isolation and lack of voice in institutional decision-making (UCU, 2016). Therefore, in contrast to permanent faculty, contingent staff can find their opinions and input perceived as less valid than their colleagues on continuing contracts

(Mason *et al.*, 2022). Other common themes include feelings of illegitimacy, isolation and being undervalued (Hattam and Weiler, 2022). The issue of illegitimacy affects how contingent staff are willing to describe themselves and their identity to students and employers. They express a fear of disclosing their status to students in case they are not taken seriously or their ability is called into question (McComb *et al.*, 2021; Read and Leathwood, 2020) and that permanent faculty are given more respect (Richardson *et al.*, 2019). Exclusion from wider university communications and meetings can also mean that they are not able to address questions from learners. This can lead to feeling undermined in their ability to do their job effectively or are left looking uninformed, causing embarrassment in front of students (Read and Leathwood, 2020). Overall, this can result in contingent staff adapting their behaviour, even if it is not in line with their personal values, to ensure that they are compliant with what the university wants and, as a result, maintain their employment (Mason *et al.*, 2022). Integration of sessional staff into the wider academic team is vital as it can improve their sense of belonging and value and lead to an improved learner experience (Loo, 2023; Southall, 2016).

The landscape of academic identity, shaped by external changes and internal pressures, suggests a need to better understand the experiences and perceptions of contingently employed degree apprenticeship tutors and mentors. Therefore, the following research aims are proposed:

- (1) Investigate how contingent staff engage in identity work as they navigate their roles within a university setting.
- (2) Assess the influence of perceived academic identity on the mentoring practices, pedagogical choices and interpersonal dynamics established by contingently employed degree apprenticeship tutors and mentors.
- (3) Identify factors within UK higher education settings that might impact identity in contingently employed degree apprenticeship tutors and mentors.

Approach and methodology

Given that this research explored subjective and identity-influenced personal narratives and lived experiences, the study was positioned within a constructivist ontological standpoint, acknowledging that the meanings of experiences are subjectively constructed by individuals (Charmaz, 2014). Accordingly, the research approach was guided by interpretive epistemology, emphasising experience and context in exploring reality (Antwi and Kasim, 2015).

A comparative case study involving two UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) was selected to facilitate an in-depth comparative analysis of the experiences of contingently employed staff working on degree apprenticeship programmes. The study aimed to uncover unique and shared factors affecting identity and practice by comparing findings across the two settings. A comparative case study design was selected to support understanding the complexity and contextual variations in experiences, aiming to understand “how” and “why” questions concerning social processes, behaviours and relationships (Yin, 2018). Accordingly, 11 interviews took place overall: six interviews at HEI1 and five at HEI2. Contextual information on each HEI is provided in [Supplementary file](#).

The comparative case study design allowed for a thorough examination of the experiences of contingent staff within two distinct UK HEIs. This examination offers a comprehensive understanding of the contextual variations and the complexity of identity that influence mentoring practices. By comparing findings across these settings, the study aims to uncover unique factors affecting identity and practice and identify shared elements that may contribute to a broader understanding of effective support in degree apprenticeships.

The study took place between December 2023 and March 2024, with participants all employed, on a sessional or part-time basis or full-time basis but on a fixed-term contract, to support degree apprenticeship programmes within two UK HEIs. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 contingent staff, based on a purposive sampling strategy. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 and 60 min were conducted across both samples, using a common set of questions.

Data collection

All contingent staff working on relevant degree apprenticeships were invited to participate. In both sites, invitations to participate were issued via email, which included information about the purpose of the study and that participation was voluntary and would not affect their employment. Consent forms were attached to the meeting invitations for the interview, and consent was considered obtained from participants voluntarily scheduling a virtual interview. Participants have been given a code to protect their identity, either HEI1 P1, P2 or HEI2 P1, P2, etc.

Ethical considerations

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, and the right to withdraw was communicated to all participants. Electronic consent forms and recording consent were carefully considered to ensure they met ethical guidelines for informed consent in virtual settings (O'Connor and Madge, 2017). Ethical approval was granted in accordance with each institution's protocols.

Data analysis

In line with the research approach, a thematic analysis was undertaken to identify themes in the transcribed interview data. Data analysis was methodical and iterative, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. A conscious effort was made to maintain reflexivity during data analysis, and the researcher's role in interpreting the data was acknowledged (Sirris, 2022).

In the initial phase, the research team familiarised themselves with the data. This process involved establishing the foundations for subsequent analytical stages by reviewing the interview transcripts and manually noting initial observations, considering the participants' experiences and any impact on their identities (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Following an initial familiarisation, interview data were manually coded. Inductive data analysis was undertaken, whereby coding was informed by the research questions using an inductive approach (Saldaña, 2015). Codes were then grouped into potential themes by categorising all coded extracts into clusters (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During this stage, the researchers frequently moved between the data, codes and emerging themes to ensure fidelity to the data. Themes needing more adequate supporting data were excluded from consideration, while others underwent revisions or consolidation following discussions between the research team.

The trustworthiness of the data was evaluated by considering the credibility of the themes across institutions, where the research team reviewed interpretations to test and check accuracy. Dependability was addressed by creating an audit trail detailing the development and changes in the thematic analysis process, reflecting decisions made throughout the study. This process also aided in achieving confirmability, as it provided a transparent method through which conclusions were drawn, making the research accountable and minimising the influence of researcher bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Completing the above process ensured that although data was collected across different sites (using case study methodology), it could be presented meaningfully, compared to the literature, and used as a basis for discussion. The remainder of this paper is rooted in the refined research data.

Results

Higher education institution 1

Identity and value. All participants were seasoned consultants, tutors, coaches or mentors with the necessary expertise and qualifications for the role. However, within HEI1, they are referred to as “Degree Apprentice Facilitators”, which caused some participants to feel uncertain about their status or how others perceived them. Most participants agreed that job titles provide a clear sense of role for them and the wider team, with the findings suggesting that the way job titles were framed could significantly impact the perception of the value of contingent roles within HEIs. Job titles also played a part in the experience and perception of the nature of the work being undertaken:

I think it might need explaining in a different way to different people [HEI1 P2]

I think people see the role as no more than a compliance ticking box that has to be achieved and they [academics] don't particularly see any more value to it than that [HEI1 P 6]

I don't think people understand what's involved in the role [HEI1 P4]

Furthermore, findings highlight that the nature of the role, regardless of the formal job title, may change depending on the needs of the learner.

it really depends on the apprentice, some of them you're just getting them through it . . . ticking the boxes, whereas others, it's more you're actually doing that coaching, helping them reflect a bit more on their role on their role and how they're developing as a leader [HEI1 P1]

Identity and value were important in the interactions between contingent staff and learners; the majority of participants felt valued by the apprentices they supported. Participants noted that apprentices appreciated the additional time spent focusing on their individual needs, suggesting a recognition of the value added by these staff. However, this experience was not universally shared among all participants.

apprentices see more value. . . I feel they welcome the chance to spend a bit more time focusing solely on themselves. [HEI1 P6]

[by providing extra support] the apprentice feels valued, it helps give them a bit more direction and it's a good relationship. [HEI1 P5]

I think they [the apprentices] probably don't realise the efforts we put in in terms of that learning connection [HEI1 P3]

The identity and value of contingent staff were intertwined with and constrained by institutional regulatory demands to ensure compliance with ESFA and Ofsted standards. Findings suggest that these may complicate relationships and potentially influence roles and identities.

Compliance and coaching. Contingent staff roles in HEI1 were created to ensure compliance with ESFA and Ofsted regulations regarding meeting frequency, quality and documentation. As the institution has better understood the requirements, the role's responsibilities have become more detailed and scrutinised. Findings suggest that this has confused the purpose and requirements of the role, with participants noting that the current approach is too restrictive.

to me a mentor is a very two way conversation. It should flow. You asked the questions there or roundabout you know that you can answer those questions, but I just think a little too prescriptive. HEI1 P1

I'm not naturally a detail person, whereas in this, you are actually forced to be a detail person. But I think the fact that this is so rule-bound does limit your ability to do things in your . . . own way. HEI1 P4

the level of prescription they want doesn't actually reflect the conversation you're having with an apprentice or what apprentices really need to help them through the programme . . . I don't like being hemmed in by it [the template], because it feels like it stifles creativity and the ability for the conversation to flow. [HEI1 P5]

This role confusion was not a universal finding; some participants reported being able to adapt and accommodate the constraints and expectations of their given role.

So I just work within the template but add what I see needs to be in there as well. And yeah, there's things like mandatory questions in there that we asked, but I perhaps won't ask them, as per the exact question. I will weave them into the conversation instead. So it feels a bit more natural [HEI1 P5]

Participants strongly conveyed that they are responsible for establishing a connection with their learners, adjusting their methods and providing support. However, in the context of their contingent role, this often necessitates them taking on extra work that goes beyond their designated job role or allocated workload, and this work is often unpaid and unrecognised.

it's talking confidentially [because the line manager is in the formal meetings], sometimes. And I do have those conversations offline . . . that's just been because I build the relationships and I've given them my time. [HEI1 P1]

it's not a core part of our role . . . [but] the Apprentice feels valued . . . it's a good relationship. It's not something we have to do. But for me, it's actually important. And it's important to that apprentice, so yeah, I'll do it. [HEI1 P5]

This dynamic between regulatory compliance and mentoring efficacy also influenced the participants' sense of inclusion and support within the apprentice support team and the wider academic community.

Team identity. Findings demonstrate that feeling valued affects how participants perceive their position within the apprentice support and wider academic teams. Participants expressed a general sense of support, with contingent staff feeling comfortable asking for help and supporting each other.

If I'd wanted something, people have been there to help [HEI 1 P4]

However, more significantly, participants noted that their interactions with the wider team, as contingent staff members, were often transactional and therefore did not facilitate perceptions of integration with the wider academic teams nor support them to engage in collaborative problem-solving as a group of colleagues.

the meetings we've had have tended to be 'this is the process, going to tell you how to do the process', as opposed to let's talk about problems [HEI1 P4]

What would be good is actually to talk about any issues that we've got. Because one person might have an issue, somebody else says oh, that's happening to me. And it's good to share, so okay, so how are we going to rectify that what we're going to do about it and have that opportunity of peer-to-peer, you know, conversations [HEI1 P1]

Moreover, the findings highlight difficulties in establishing a clear communication channel between the apprenticeship support team and the academic team. This was noted as potentially leading to a lack of coordination and collaboration between the teams, which may lead to a suboptimal learning experience for apprentices.

it does seem to feel like there's that separation. [I tried to] contact you by email for more information, but you didn't get any response. You think, is that because I'm not a pure academic, or is it just because that person is overburdened? [HEI1 P5]

It's almost like you have to pick them off one by one and have interactions with people where you know, you can show them you have knowledge of their particular subject area or their matter or academia, but you also have all of this other apprenticeship process policy and knowledge [HEI1 P6]

The participants' experiences highlighted a challenge faced by contingent staff: Initial briefings and planning sessions involve their input. However, despite their involvement in the early stages, the feedback and suggestions provided often do not translate into actionable or visible changes or improvements within the institution. This demonstrates a limited impact on actual practices and decision-making processes and underscores a disconnect between mentor input and organisational responsiveness. As a result, contingent team members are left feeling their contributions are superficially valued but lack substantive influence on institutional policies or procedures.

I'm trying to say this is what we should be doing; I've tried to sort of make suggestions . . . ' and '[the team have said] thanks for that . . . what you've said helped us . . . But I think from what I was told it didn't make a difference to change' [HEI1 P1]

Findings reflect a desire for enhanced communication and integration between contingently employed mentors and the broader university structure. Participants articulated that deeper knowledge about the school and university operations would enable staff to guide learners more effectively, contextualise the support provided and secure recognition for their contributions within the university hierarchy. Participants noted a sense of isolation and disconnection from the broader institutional context, highlighting a lack of awareness about ongoing activities and decisions that affect their roles.

I think more interaction between the academic team and the mentor team would be really helpful also, that the mentor team talking, you know, are aware of what's going on perhaps in terms of their linking and what happens in the in the sessions and what reflection they're doing on the standards, that sort of thing. [HEI1 P3]

on one level it would be quite useful to be more involved in what's happening and get an overview [by coming into campus]. you might be able to get all the people in and say 'this is what the business school are doing and this is how it fits into the broader strategy' [HEI1 P4]

Higher education institution 2

Experiencing and managing identity tension. Analysis of the research interviews revealed two separate but related factors: the staff from HEI2 experienced issues that could be described as "identity tension". However, this was mostly quite close to the surface, so they were aware of and took steps to manage that tension. The source of the tension was always reported as the expansion of the role and the associated need to manage a wider set of boundaries and relationships. The fact that the HEI provided no additional role to act as a buffer or manager of the mentoring aspect was a source of this:

I think the [tutor] roles were very different. Potentially it could really have enriched the learner's experience and their ability to integrate the work they were doing on the programme, and to demonstrate it in the workplace, I don't think on the whole that that happened very much. [HEI2 P1]

The same respondent cited a situation where an apprentice was struggling to make academic progress, and she sought to discuss this with the workplace mentor, but "*. . . the mentor wasn't having any of it, wouldn't allow that question to happen. And I think it was out of her commitment to the learner, but it was misplaced. That's the risk of having work-placed people involved*". This was sub-optimal and illustrated a very conscious tension in managing the different roles they faced at HEI2.

There was also evidence of nuance about these factors. Some of the research participants were clear about the delineation of roles. They had conceptualised it in a way which was based on a collegiate partnership framing but with distinct boundaries:

The work-based mentor is very much responsible for ensuring that the learner develops their portfolio, has opportunities to apply the KSBs, and has a more practical approach than what I would imagine over a standard [tutor] . . . and I would see very much the role of a tutor as the academic part . . . the way I see that triangular relationship, that is a learner mentor relationship and not for me to get in the middle of that triangle. [HEI2 P5]

it's complicated to be a mentor actually as a tutor on the programme because you've got all of these different kind of governance arrangements around the relationship as well. And there are boundaries. You know if I'm supporting people with academic writing and then marking them you know I feel I have to be very disciplined about. [HEI2 P3]

This issue of a nuanced identity was furthered by the consideration that it is not solely the educator who grapples with multiple elements of this, but that inevitably, it is also shaped by the recipients, both as individuals and those in learning groups. Lastly, it was evident that the respondents had a clear, and for the most part shared conceptualisation of what mentoring meant to them and that this was at best parallel to but at worst separate from the tutor role as designed:

So I would not necessarily see myself as a mentor as part of my tutor role for the [apprenticeship] programme. If I was a mentor to somebody, I would specifically contract to do that with them as an individual. But I am very curious about what is that contracting relationship between the work based mentor and our learners . . . I don't feel I've specifically contracted to be a mentor and I'm not there to be a coach either. But definitely there are times when I use the coaching approach with the learners to help them . . . [HEI2 P3]

I distinguish it from the work based mentor role. I think that's much more about equipping learners to be able to access workplace experiences and development to be able to show that they are operating at the level of a senior leader. So there's something about, I think the identity of an apprenticeship tutor to kind of hold all of that . . . I think tutors do default into that kind of area. [HEI2 P4]

The role as mediator. All the research participants at HEI2 cited feeling that part of their role involved mediation: between themselves and the learners, between the learners and their employers, and with the factors regulating or governing the apprenticeship. In some ways, that was seen as unavoidable – “you can't just draw a neat line between the apprenticeship programme, their history and their work life and everything else” [HEI2 P2] – but it was also seen as being distinct to the nature of delivering the programme as an apprenticeship:

I was more of a mediator. My role was to contain the anxiety around the apprenticeship. Reassure learners that they were already doing most of what was needed. I felt like most of the time I was buffering. I think there were two orders of mediation as well. There's one that was inherent in the apprenticeship process combining with the with the [programme], but the other was all the mediation that had to be done with the university and the requirements of the apprenticeship. [HEI2 P1]

Bounded holism. The concept of bounded holism – which for this study related to the level of holistic support that tutors provided to learners within a wide but bounded remit – emerged as a central issue. It was evident that despite the intention of the role design to be holistic, staff were highly attuned to the differences and nuances in their role between what can be described as a traditional academic or personal tutor, some elements of coaching (be that academic skills or in-situ leadership practice) and mentoring, through the lens of apprenticeships:

. . . what intrigues me and make me curious about the role is . . . how you . . . can sort of tap into this kind of hybrid role, it's not a pure academic role, it's tutoring, it's coaching, it's supporting, it's helping with pastoral care. You know the whole package, I think it's holistic. [HEI2 P3]

it's that kind of holistic approach to the leadership development that you get by working with them . . . It's just so interesting. It just feels complete . . . taking people through the whole programme, the modules as well and the dissertation and everything, so it just felt really complete [HEI2 P2]

I think as an apprenticeship tutor, you do a bit of everything . . . and I again, I wouldn't want to kind of label it . . . how we've approached it is that you are a bit of everything and that's OK like I said before, I'm not into labels. [HEI2 P2]

Although it was not without tensions:

It's interesting because we've actually got the work based mentor [role] as well, which I think . . . is interesting . . . if you think about it in a kind of coaching context versus mentorship . . . and I'm not sure that tutors kind of equipped . . . [HEI2 P4]

So, despite there being evidence of a holistic approach, which was broadly welcomed and considered positively, the data also indicated an awareness of the parts, including, at times, the tension within that. However, one of the most striking comments heard during the research interviews was as follows:

I don't believe in singular identity. I once wrote about . . . the parliament of the selves. So, you know, there's all these different parts of you that are always kind of talking together and bits emerge when you need them to. So I'm a great believer in the idea of kind of multiple identities, and actually, whether we call it a mentor or tutor, I don't think it matters. But it is different. [HEI2 P2]

Discussion

Using the model of a comparative case study, the fieldwork was instructive in indicating areas of both similarity and those of difference. Findings from HEI2 indicated that those staff who had experienced former iterations of the taught programme had to consciously de- and then reconstruct their identity, inhabiting familiar spaces but in a new way (Doolin, 2002). This was less pronounced for those research participants who were new or newer to the taught programme, where there was an indication of greater acceptance of the more holistic role. This was a lesser theme at HEI1 but did manifest itself in study participants feeling excluded from consultation on programme or process changes, and this seemed to be strongest in those on sessional rather than FTC contracts, where there seemed to be an underlying frustration. Both experiences seem to connect to the work of Desrochers *et al.* (2002), who state that individuals can experience conflict when holding multiple identities and that an emotional effort is required to do so. This may indicate the identity transition phenomenon (Ashforth, 2000) applied here.

While the language used by staff in both units differed, both groups indicated a conflict between being a tutor, a coach or a mentor and their role as an "apprentice mentor". This expressed itself in the matching and contracting process that would normally be expected of a mentoring relationship (Gettman *et al.*, 2019), the need for the mentor to interact with multiple parties in a way that they may not normally do so or need to adhere to regulations and processes governing apprenticeships. Participants all seem to experience tension in their roles, but some self-managed the process in a way that aligns with their chosen primary identity, which is a conscious process. This contrasts slightly with Mason *et al.* (2022), who found that staff often express feelings of limited agency in what they do or how they do it. However, as Degn (2018) notes, when identity is challenged, the response can be on a continuum, which is broadly congruent with the notion that for practitioners, the ability and confidence to be able to adopt a reflexive stance in a leadership development dynamic is important (Reyes, 2020). This then connects to holism – recognising that educators and developers bring their whole selves to developmental interactions and that it is impossible to hive off aspects of "assessors", "developers", "pastoral care" and so forth. Participants at both institutions fulfil all of these roles in some way, whether formally through the TRM or

informally via additional one-to-one sessions with learners. Here, the interesting concept of “*parliament of selves*” (mentioned by a HEI2 respondent) comes into force. In some ways, the position occupied by mentors in the relationship with apprenticeship learners could be described as a liminal space in that their interactions are time-bound and limited. In this study’s context, staff inhabit a place where they continually hover at the fringes of the leadership development journey. In some ways, this is potentially a healthy place to be, as it allows for a more truly developmental contribution, but that is not to ignore the relational tension it can bring as one party or the other seeks or wants from the relationship.

Both HEI contingent staff appear to take on additional work to further relationship building and for the benefit of supporting apprentices. At the same time, respondents in both institutions reported only an opaque line of sight regarding wider issues that impacted programme delivery, and this would inhibit their ability to adequately support apprentices, especially given the reports of adopting the role of mediator. Furthermore, this could lead to a sense of isolation or concern that they are not offering the best experience they could (Richardson *et al.*, 2019). Establishing a trusting relationship is essential in helping apprentices to achieve the best possible outcomes and career progression (Straus *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it seems crucial that whatever the nature of their contract, HEI mentors, tutors, facilitators and academics are brought together as a team and are not excluded from training, meetings or communication. There may first be a need to develop a shared understanding of what the team is, its purpose, what an effective, holistic apprenticeship team looks like, and how its goals align to those of the organisation (James *et al.*, 2020; Louis and Fatien Diochon, 2018). This may support the sense-making of individuals and the team concerning apprenticeship delivery.

Conclusions

This study provided insight into an emerging field, the interface with which academic staff grapple as they seek to deliver apprenticeships in UK HEIs. Doing so requires inhabiting new roles and redefining existing ones. Contingent staff at both institutions report a deep desire to support the learners they work with, but often find that they must do so through donated labour. They also report feelings of isolation, exclusion, being constrained by the role and being different from a standard academic tutor and a standard coach or mentor. Although the specific nature of an employment contract or job title may not seem to impact these issues directly, the findings of this study indicate that, at the very least, they do influence them.

An important conclusion that can be drawn from this study relates to supervision. Supervision is important for developing the coach and mentor (Hay, 2007). It should ensure that any challenges can be escalated quickly and support contingent staff in further developing their practice and confidence, particularly for those less experienced in apprentice mentoring. However, effective supervision requires psychological safety (Carden *et al.*, 2021); if contingent staff do not feel part of a team, either with one another or the wider academic team, this safety may not exist or be harder to create.

Conflict and tensions associated with being contingent need to be managed. As identified by Martin *et al.* (2020), it is not the degree of apprenticeship that causes this tension, but how the rules or expectations are implemented or explained. HEIs may therefore wish to consider and consult on how academic freedom or professional discretion and coaching/mentoring practices can be best employed while ensuring that regulatory expectations are met around the quality and timing of documentation.

In summary, identity and value, perceptions of teamwork, role clarity and design and perceptions of inclusion in a wider community of educational practice emerged from this study as key issues. Government policy around apprenticeships and the response of UK HEIs continues to evolve, and this challenges traditional assumptions and models of pedagogic delivery, blurring lines between educator, facilitator, coach, mentor and holistic practice around the pastoral role.

The way these issues are framed, delineated and rewarded is highly relevant to policymakers, employers and higher education institutions, and it remains a rich area for further study.

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Supplementary file

HEI1 contextual information

HEI1 is a post-1992 higher education institution. Its focus has always been on the provision of high-quality teaching and on preparing learners for employment. Delivery of higher and degree apprenticeships in management and leadership commenced in 2018. In the authors' school, the delivery of tripartite meetings has been predominantly undertaken by sessional staff. Staff may also provide End-Point Assessment preparation classes, guidance and mentoring. They may also, if there is a need, undertake the Initial Assessment or Gateway meetings. Staff on sessional contracts are employed hourly but with a set number of hours in an annual contract. This is reviewed and updated at the end of each academic year. The contract may be renewed with increased or reduced hours depending on the needs of the School or the sessional staff member. Academic staff provide additional personal tutorial support and deliver the academic content.

HEI2 contextual information

HEI2 is a Russell Group University which has been delivering Level 7 apprenticeships since 2018. The academic programme used for this study was the delivery of a leadership development qualification, which had been running since 2013 as a funded programme and was now being delivered as an apprenticeship for the first time. The tutors in the sample for this study are employed on fixed-term contracts and for teaching delivery only, and were a mixture of those with experience of delivering on the previous (non-apprenticeship) programme model and those newer to the programme and to the institution. The tutor role was therefore familiar and had been established for a decade prior to evolving into an apprenticeship tutor role, but there were some additional, extended activities for the apprenticeship role, the same as those described in the context of HEI1 above. Although using the nomenclature of "Associate Professor", the tutor community in HEI2 is considered to be distinct and at arm's length from the wider educational provision of the HEI, therefore having had little contact with wider University systems previously.

At HEI2, the tutor roles were designed to be all-encompassing, in that there is no third party involved from the University (other than generic academic skills expertise); some of this was because of legacy issues relating to the originating programme, but there was also an intention for tutors to be the single point of access with continuity of educational support. In practice, this meant that the role included traditional tutoring, facilitation of learning, acting as a consultant to process and elements of pastoral care. Successful execution of the role would involve skills and competencies traditionally aligned to coaching and mentoring but was not explicitly framed as such; although, as mentioned above, as there was no additional academic "mentor" role between the learner and their employer, the conduit for those discussions was the tutor.

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