“Just a tick box exercise?” An analysis of work based tutor intervention in supporting work-integrated learning

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

This study explores how Work-Based Tutors (WBTs) operationalise tripartite reviews (TRs) within UK higher and degree apprenticeships (H&DAs). TRs are generally positioned as compliance tools to monitor apprentice progress, however, focusing on the under-researched WBT role, the paper addresses how these practitioners navigate tensions between regulation and personalised support.

Design/methodology/approach

The study adopts a qualitative interpretivist case study methodology situated in a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) business school delivering level five, six and seven H&DAs. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with seven WBTs, and an open-ended survey of 34 apprentices. Reflexive thematic analysis allowed triangulation of tutor and apprentice lived experience to provide rigorous findings.

Findings

Findings indicate WBTs have hybrid roles that extend beyond compliance to apprentice wellbeing, resilience, and professional growth. TRs were found to sit along a compliance–support continuum, with WBTs adjusting their approach based on apprentice needs. Despite facing inconsistent Workplace Mentor engagement, and administrative inefficiencies, WBTs are vital in linking theory to practice, stepping into pedagogic functions not formally recognised in their role description.

Originality/value

Through an in-depth institutional case study of WBTs and TRs, this paper contributes a new “Compliance–Support Continuum” to help characterise the WBT role. The study encourages professional recognition of WBTs, enhanced training, and systemic reforms. It holds value for HE leaders, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to strengthen H&DA provision through more relationally and pedagogically informed TR practices.

Introduction

In the UK context, higher- and degree-level apprenticeships (H&DAs) - work-integrated learning (WIL) programmes at level four to seven (Sevens and Nightingale, 2019) - are governed by Department for Education (DfE) funding rules, which outline that the apprentice must meet with representatives from their employer and training provider regularly to check progress and provide support (DfE, 2025). These tripartite reviews (TRs), and this tripartite relationship, have received some scholarly interest prompted by Minton and Lowe's (2019) findings that the jury remains out on the benefits of this process. Recent studies, therefore, consider topics such as review structure and pedagogy (Barnett and Burrell, 2024; Horackover et al., 2024), and the concept of learning conversations that bridge academic study and WIL (Dermentzi, 2023). While some studies look at the role of the employer representative; the Workplace Mentor (WPM), within this tripartite relationship and review process (Minton and Lowe, 2019; Taylor-Smith et al., 2022), little interest has been paid to the training provider representative: the Work-Based Tutor (WBT). While a study by Power-Mason and Charlton (2025) has provided initial insight into this role, wider case studies across diverse institutional contexts are needed (Rowe et al., 2017). This study aims to address that gap by exploring TR implementation and the WBT's role in a post-1992 Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the Midlands. Subsequently, the research question guiding this inquiry is: *How is the role of the Work-Based Tutor enacted within the TR process at a HEI, and what implications does this have for apprentice support and learning integration?*

Literature review

Tripartite review – compliance or support mechanism?

Current literature uses the terms higher and degree apprenticeships interchangeably, with Sevens and Nightingale (2019) and Mulkeen et al. (2019) noting conflation here. Nevertheless, TRs emerge as a feature in both higher *and* degree apprentice development, serving as a key mechanism for tracking on- and off-the-job learning and a defining feature of the WBT role Rowe et al., 2017; Dalrymple et al., 2014). TRs operate via a three-way agreement among apprentice, employer, and training provider (Hughes and Saieva, 2020), providing a structured, boundary crossing communication channel which facilitates collaboration (Felce, 2019; Andersson, 2018). TRs do, however, remain a point of literature contention, with scholars debating whether it serves as a support mechanism (Obi, 2024; Roberts et al., 2019) or a quality assurance and accountability framework (Lambert, 2016). Comparable tensions between compliance assurance and developmental support are also documented in other apprenticeship systems, such as in Australia (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2023), Canada (Howe et al., 2023; Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2023), and Germany (Urban Institute, 2020; ILO, 2017). In particular, literature on the German dual system (Haasler, 2020; Euler, 2013) shows how structured mentorship roles can achieve balance here, offering a comparative model for hybrid review processes.

Adding to the complexity further is whether TRs are attended by a dedicated WBT or a lecturer acting as Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) (Rowe et al., 2017). Martin et al. (2018) reinforces this concern, noting the differing identity and responsibilities of the nominated individual, with their concern being that combining TR responsibility with lecturer duties is not

feasible because the person cannot maintain their identity due to the stressful ambiguities and uncertainties of a mixed role, not to mention implications for university management in holding such roles accountable. Despite providers facing financial constraints potentially limiting dedicated personnel appointments (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020), WBT roles do require specialised knowledge, such as detailed training on apprenticeship legislation, critical for conducting effective reviews (Riley, 2021). Another layer of complexity is whether TRs are interpreted as performance reviews. DfE (2024) outlines review purpose as monitoring progress against targets, leading some to liken to performance appraisals, particularly if embedding processes such as 360-degree feedback (Ji et al., 2022). While parallels to performance reviews may contribute to a focus on progression (Prasad et al., 2023; Cappelli and Conyon, 2018), potential challenges include subjectivity and bias (Mourao and Miranda, 2015), misaligned organisational goals (Homauni et al., 2021), and ineffective feedback (Murphy, 2020). Norman et al. (2023) notes this may vary by sector, further complicating TR consistency.

Relationships with higher and degree apprentices

Understanding roles of coach and mentor is important in grasping the dynamics of WBTs with H&DAs. While Hussey and Campbell-Meier (2021), and Stokes et al. (2020), argue coaching and mentoring are porous; sharing a foundation in communication and mutual learning, Van Coller-Peter and Cronje (2020) advocate for clearer distinctions. Current literature does not provide consensus on whether WBT roles align more closely with task-focused coaching or personal development-focused mentoring (Keller and Barabasch, 2022), however, Quew-Jones and Rowe (2022) suggested WPMs adopt a hybrid approach. Plausibly WBTs are similar in this regard, performing both coaching and mentoring; including conversations informed by skills assessments, like the skills scan; a mechanism used at application and as a starting point for objective-setting (Hughes & Saieva, 2020). Specifically, in the context of Level 7 business-related degree apprenticeships catering to senior leaders, Aridi et al. (2023) categorise these activities under executive coaching (EC). Dixit and Sinha (2023) highlight the effectiveness of EC in fostering behavioural development, a focus of H&DAs, while de Villiers (2012) correlates EC interventions with improved productivity, communication, and workplace relationships. However, coaching is not without challenges. Passmore (2020) identifies recipient resistance as a common obstacle, while Riddle (2016) highlights coaching process complexity, often relying on intricate psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioural frameworks (Turner and Goodrich, 2010).

In contrast, mentoring literature within H&DA context emphasises relationship significance. Mulkeen et al. (2019) portray mentors as integral members of a supportive community, while Schwartz et al. (2022) link mentoring success to cultivation of strong interpersonal bonds. There are, however, limitations of mentoring approaches - particularly mentor-mentee mismatches (Indroasyoko et al., 2020). Such mismatches may stem from WBTs perceiving interventions as accountability exercises rather than a supportive process, leading to ineffective relationships (Fabian et al., 2022). Furthermore, Obara et al. (2021) identify cultural awareness as a critical factor in preventing mismatch issues, further highlighting importance of cultural competence in mentoring dynamics. International research on cross-cultural mentoring in Vocational Education and Training (VET) (McAdam, 2025), reinforces the role of cultural competence and structured WPM preparation in diverse apprenticeship systems. These findings

suggest comprehensive training necessity for mentors, alongside considerations of mentor readiness and motivation levels respectively (Riley, 2021).

Connecting theory to reflective practice

Connection between theory and workplace practice is often underestimated, yet these elements are deeply interconnected (Romero-Silva et al., 2024). In the H&DA context, WIL is a key mechanism for addressing the divide (Rowe et al., 2017). However, questions remain about how this is best achieved and the WBT's role in the process - literature increasingly links the theory-practice divide to stakeholder relationships, especially between WBTs and employers (Rowe et al., 2017). Hamza et al. (2024) specifically identify research and problem-solving skills which require such collaboration. This is where curriculum design plays a role, with ntegrated project, problem, and inquiry-based learning seen as effective (Chakraborty, 2024), which can be implemented along a continuum from theory and practice side-by-side to fully integrated curricula (Rakhimovna, 2024). These frameworks empower H&DA programmes to bridge theoretical and practical learning, and while WBTs do not typically assess H&DAs, strategies like action research (Quew-Jones and Brook, 2019) and authentic formative assessment (Thompson and Houston, 2024) support theory-practice integration.

Bell (2024) also identifies digital strategies such as e-mentoring and virtual reality (VR) in applying theory in workplace settings. Nguyen et al. (2024) discuss their community-building potential, and Ren et al. (2024) highlight flexibility and cost-efficiency. However, Nouman et al. (2024) note these tools often lack personalisation. The WBT's role in managing these tools is unclear, requiring further research. Overall, bridging theory and practice requires a multi-pronged strategy, relationship-building, curriculum innovation, and digital tools. WBTs play a key role, but further exploration is needed to understand and maximise their impact. Reflective practice is also essential in H&DA programmes, enabling tacit knowledge and self-analysis (Rowe et al., 2017). It enables integration of theory, experimentation, and reflexivity (Cropley et al., 2023; Ansart and Sanseau, 2020). Despite this, debate persists around the effectiveness of reflective approaches (Smith and Trede, 2013). Recent studies emphasise regular reflective dialogue with apprentices to surface evidence of KSBs often through unpicking workplace challenges (Quew-Jones and Rowe, 2022). Reflection is encouraged during TRs using targeted prompts, though it may also occur independently of employer input (Rowe et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2022). Barriers such as limited coachability hinder its effectiveness, prompting calls for further research into mentoring models that support reflection and influence apprentice development, resilience, and satisfaction (Rowe et al., 2017). Meanwhile, studies in international WIL contexts (Dean et al., 2012; Hughes & Kelly, 2023) indicate that structured reflective scaffolds and diagnostic tools can enhance both coachability and the depth of evaluative thinking, offering potential transferability across national apprenticeship systems.

Facilitating reflection in WIL, however, is complex. Current approaches rely on surface-level prompts designed to meet assessment criteria rather than promoting deeper evaluative thinking (Gerhardt and Kelly, 2024). While reflective tasks are often embedded in curricula, Mastenbroek et al. (2024) recommend a more integrated journey, from initial mission statements to reflective journals capturing critical incidents. Innovations include VR-enabled group reflection (Mulders et al., 2024) and game-based learning within flipped classrooms (Dermentzi, 2023). However, effectiveness depends on the roles of WBTs and PATs. PATs may carry greater academic responsibility, including TRs, whereas WBTs often operate more

practically (Rowe et al., 2017). This raises important questions about when and how WBTs facilitate reflection, and the success of such interventions (Rowe et al., 2017; Smith and Trede, 2013).

Methodology

Design

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative case study design focused on H&DAs within a Business School at a single UK HEI. The school has delivered the Operations or Departmental Manager Apprenticeship (ODMA), Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA), and Senior Leader Apprenticeship (SLA) since 2017. The case study approach enabled close examination of the WBT role and the TR within its real-world context, with meaning viewed as co-constructed by researchers and participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Given that the case is bounded to business and management related programmes, transferability is necessarily limited to similar contexts. Trustworthiness was prioritised through thick description and attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Participants and sampling

The case study institution supports circa 3000 apprentices across all departments. The business school makes up around 18 percent of this, consisting of approximately 14 apprentices on ODMA, 385 on CMDA, and 133 on SLA. A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was used. All ten WBTs attached to ODMA, CMDA, and SLA at the HEI were invited to interview, and seven participated. Afterwards, from an eligible pool of 200, 34 apprentices completed an open-ended survey. Eligibility for apprentices required enrolment on ODMA, CMDA, or SLA and experience of at least one completed TR, since familiarity with the process was central to the research focus. We did not collect apprentice level or year in the survey - this decision followed a data minimisation approach to protect anonymity in small programme cohorts where open narrative responses could combine with level or year to increase identifiability. Furthermore, the survey was designed to be concise to support completion by working learners and to maximise the richness of open responses, thus prioritising depth of narrative over stratification by level. We note this as a limitation since a first-year apprentice's lived experience may be different to a final year apprentice who has had more TRs. We recommend stratified sampling by level in larger future studies to address this. While employers, specificallyWPMs, are a core stakeholder in TRs, they were not included as participants in this study. This was a deliberate scope decision to focus on the pedagogical, relational, and compliance-oriented enactment of the WBT role and the apprentice experience.

Rationale for methods, data collection procedures, and sequencing

Two complementary methods were chosen to balance depth and breadth. Semi-structured interviews with WBTs were selected to surface process detail and examples of practice. The results informed an open-ended online survey which was used with apprentices to reach a large and working cohort efficiently to minimise burden alongside employment and study commitments, also reducing the power imbalance that may accompany staff-led interviews, and

to allow participants to reflect and respond asynchronously. This multi-method design supports triangulation and enhances credibility of findings (Flick, 2018). WBT interviews were conducted during January 2025 via Microsoft Teams and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interview questions were piloted to check comprehension, elicit deep responses, and support procedural consistency (King and Horrocks, 2010). Apprentice surveys were distributed during February 2025, through Microsoft Forms using authenticated institutional emails. The survey comprised eight open-ended questions, informed by interview results and piloted to ensure understanding, designed to elicit reflective accounts of the TR experience. Recognised risks with online surveys, including nonresponse and invalid contact details, were mitigated by drawing on a current institutional database, sending introductory communications, and issuing reminders (Lefever, Dal, and Matthíasdóttir, 2007). The HEI first deployed WBTs to support TRs in 2017, which is noted because approach refinements over time may have shaped participant experience. Both instruments were derived from the literature on WIL and quality assurance in apprenticeships, and from institutional guidance for TRs. Domains included the intended purpose of reviews, roles and responsibilities, goal setting, feedback practices, and perceived value. Items for apprentices and WBTs covered aligned domains but were worded for the audience and mode. Interviews used probes to elicit concrete examples and mechanisms, whereas the survey used open prompts and space for narrative responses.

Data analysis

Data driven qualitative analysis was undertaken to preserve an inductive orientation (Garvey and Jones, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis was used in line with Braun and Clarke (2016). Both researchers reviewed transcripts and survey narratives independently, generated initial codes, and wrote reflexive memos before meeting to compare and refine the coding. Visual mapping and code frequency counting were used in a traditional, manual way to support sensemaking, without treating counts as inferential. This dual-coding strategy sought intersubjective consistency while avoiding rigid applications that are less appropriate within qualitative paradigms (Nowell et al., 2017). Methodological triangulation drew together the breadth provided by apprentice survey data and the depth of WBT interviews, and was complemented by triangulation with the literature (Denzin, 2012). ChatGPT was used after human coding and initial theme development were complete, and solely to conduct the triangulation with the literature. Human verification checkpoints followed which aligns with calls for human validation and review in the use of such tools in research synthesis (Kondo et al., 2024). No raw transcripts or identifiable material were entered into ChatGPT - instead the process involved sharing short, de-identified theme labels and descriptors, requesting peer-reviewed sources and theoretical linkages, and then manually verifying each suggested source through publisher databases before incorporating any reference into the review matrix. This step functioned as a pointer system, with human synthesis and critical appraisal retained throughout, reflecting documented strengths and limitations of such tools in scholarly workflows (Olajide and Lawal, 2020; Kondo et al., 2024). Data privacy concerns identified by Shah et al. (2025) did not apply because only anonymised theme summaries were used and no personal data were shared.

Ethics, researcher positionality and reflexivity

Ethical approval was granted by the HEI research ethics committee. The study conformed to the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2018) and to the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) Code of Conduct. Participation was entirely voluntary and unrelated to contractual or academic requirements. All participants received a Participant Information Sheet and provided informed consent prior to data collection. Confidentiality was protected through anonymisation of survey responses and the use of respondent numbers for interview data. Data was stored on encrypted, password protected systems in compliance with UK GDPR, and reporting followed the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence (Bell and Bryman, 2011). The research team comprised a practitioner-academic with experience in work-based learning at HEI A and a researcher at HEI B with apprenticeship expertise. We recognise that proximity to the field and familiarity with the setting can shape assumptions and interpretations. To mitigate power dynamics and to reduce risks associated with workplace hierarchies, WBTs were interviewed by the researcher employed by HEI B, a different institution. Reflexive diaries were maintained throughout design, data collection, and analysis to make decisions and assumptions explicit.

Findings and discussion

Tripartite review – compliance or support mechanism?

**Note: apprentice quotes are referred to as A, e.g., A1, and tutor codes WBT, e.g., WBT1.* WBTs often described TRs as compliance-led in nature but generally accepted that some level of compliance was necessary to maintain quality and structure *"there is a compliance element to it but there has to be" (WBT6)*. The word compliance appeared regularly in apprentice responses: *"feels like a compliance exercise" (A1), "to... ensure compliance of apprenticeships" (A19), "monitors your off work hours to ensure compliance" (A30).* We do, however, acknowledge this may not represent a shared understanding of the term due to competing conceptions described by Kingsbury (1998) - organisations shape compliance focus, so staff in an industry do not follow a single set of rules, but follow internal levels of concentration (Edelman and Talesh, 2011). There are different defined modes of compliance in HEIs, such as symbolic, formal, over-compliance, and strategic (Imbulgoda, 2019), which means apprentic perception may be a different mode to that actually executed by WBTs. WBTs viewed compliance as the core basics upon which support could be built. As one tutor explained, *"its a quick tick list to make sure they [the apprentice] are progressing which then lets us get on with the conversations that really matter (WBT2).* This aligns with Felce (2019) and Andersson (2018) who position TRs as structured accountability mechanisms that also enable collaboration when implemented effectively. Through repeated coding of WBT interviews, two contrasting patterns emerged: one in which TRs were described as *"a quick tick-box event for apprentices who are thriving" (WBT1)*, and another in which they were seen as *"well an essential intervention point for the ones [apprentices] who are at risk" (WBT2).* These patterns were identified by clustering all instances of 'tick-box' language in the transcripts and contrasting them with accounts of deeper TRs, revealing a continuum of purpose that was consistent across multiple participants. This distinction suggested a shared understanding among WBTs that the purpose of TRs shifts according to learner context - with four WBTs independently using terms such as *"flexible"* or *"tailored"* when describing their ideal practice. This mirrors Obi's (2024) and Roberts et al.'s

(2019) descriptions of apprentice-led, adaptable mentoring and also reflects Barnett and Burrell's (2024) findings on the relational value of personalised reviews.

Apprentices generally recognised this balance too. Some viewed TRs as repetitive, noting *"it can feel like a box ticking exercise at times, especially when we go over the same things like safeguarding and Prevent again and again" (A12)*. Others valued the accountability aspect, explaining that *"the reviews help make sure I'm on track. It holds me and my manager accountable" (A9)*. This dual perception reflects the literature's ongoing debate over whether TRs are primarily support mechanisms (Rowe et al., 2017; Hughes and Saieva, 2020) or compliance frameworks (Lambert, 2016). Apprentices' descriptions also echo concerns in performance appraisal literature (Prasad et al., 2023; Ji et al., 2022; Murphy, 2020; Cappelli and Conyon, 2018) that overly procedural reviews can reduce developmental impact. We reached this interpretation by comparing apprentice accounts of repetition with those emphasising accountability, noting that differences aligned with their performance levels and perceived need for intervention. We interpret these perspectives as shaped by each participant's position in the learning process - for high-achieving apprentices, the compliance approach was more likely to be seen as an unnecessary surplus; while for those facing challenges, it offered reassurance and direction. Reflexively, as researchers with experience in apprenticeship delivery, we were aware that our interpretations may lean toward valuing supportive over compliance-focused approaches. To counter this, we ensure that, in this section, positive accounts of compliance were equally represented alongside critiques.

Work based tutor – coach or mentor?

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that WBTs occupied a hybrid role combining elements of coaching and mentoring. The metaphor of *"wearing different hats"* emerged repeatedly during coding. As one tutor put it, *"it's important for us to kind of be able to adopt a different hat… to signpost them effectively… person to listen" (WBT3)*. This adaptability echoes Hussey and Campbell-Meier's (2021) suggestion that coaching and mentoring often operate on a continuum, and aligns with Van Coller-Peter and Cronje's (2020) emphasis on situationally responsive practice. From apprentices' perspectives, the mentoring aspect often defined the quality of the relationship. One apprentice stated *"I feel I can talk to my WBT about anything. They get it, both personally and professionally" (A2)*, while another highlighted the motivational impact: *"they always encourage me, even when I'm doubting myself. It makes a big difference" (A5)*. These views reinforce the mentoring literature that positions trust and rapport as fundamental to successful outcomes (Mulkeen et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2022). The interpretive link between these perspectives is that WBTs' legitimacy in the eyes of apprentices depended on their ability to shift between roles appropriately: *"(WBT) needs to cover certain topics but they also provide the freedom to cover other issues / challenges" (A32)*. Coding showed that this role-shifting was often triggered by an apprentice's emotional or professional state. We established this by cross-referencing transcript segments tagged 'emotional state' with those tagged 'WBT strategy,' which revealed that changes in WBT approach consistently followed shifts in apprentice mood or confidence: *"motivation and support when times are challenging" (A34)*. In instances where apprentices expressed uncertainty or frustration, WBTs tended to adopt a more directive, coaching style, whereas in moments of confidence, they shifted toward open-ended mentoring. This pattern emerged through repeated co-occurrence of emotional language in apprentice responses and descriptions of role adaptation in WBT

transcripts:*"it [TR] does feel… adapted to suit mature students" (A10)*. This supports Stokes et al.'s (2021) argument that the boundary between coaching and mentoring is porous, with effective practitioners adapting style to suit the moment. It also reflects Lillis and Bravenboer's (2020) discussion of the identity complexity in apprenticeship support roles.

Connecting theory to reflective practice

WBTs frequently identified a gap between apprentices' academic learning and their workplace practice. They described intentionally creating *"safe spaces" (WBT7)* during TRs to help apprentices connect the two: *"engaging in reflective practice as this is something that is often missed in the busy work place" (A17)*. One tutor explained, *"I'm always asking… have you thought about that?... deep challenging questions... for them to make links" (WBT4)*. This approach aligns with Cropley et al. (2023) and Ansart and Sanseau (2020) who highlight the role of targeted reflection in deepening learning integration. Apprentices valued these discussions, though it sometimes results in confusing the WBT role with that of academic staff: *"they help with tracking assignments... I thought was the lecturer's job" (A8)*. However, other apprentices had perspective of the role which more accurately reflects its official description, with some describing WBTs as facilitators of applied learning: *"we talked about what I've learned in the last module and how it applies to my job" (A19)*. This echoes Rowe et al. (2017) who emphasise the WBT's bridging role in WIL. This process also connects to flipped learning models in Mastenbroek et al. (2024), Mulders et al. (2024), and Dermentzi (2023). Our thematic coding revealed that both WBTs and apprentices saw reflection as central, but the depth and regularity varied. We determined this by coding for evaluative language *('I realised…', 'I learned…')* and cross-checking its presence against references to challenge or feedback, which showed that higher reflective depth correlated with greater openness to being challenged: *"[WBT is] someone who can challenge me" (A22)*. We identified this variation by comparing frequency and depth of discussion around reflective accounts across survey responses and transcripts. Apprentices who used more evaluative language *('I realised…', 'I learned…')* also described being more open to challenge, suggesting a link between self-assessed growth and willingness to engage in reflective dialogue. This variation appeared linked to coachability; apprentices who were more open to challenge reported greater benefits: *"It's not always easy, but it helps me grow" (A23)*. This reflects Gerhardt and Kelly's (2024) argument that readiness for reflective dialogue influences its effectiveness. As researchers, we noted our own tendency to interpret *"challenge"* as positive, so we revisited data where apprentices described it as uncomfortable to ensure those perspectives were not diminished.

Tripartite relationships

Both WBTs and apprentices commented on the role of WPMs in shaping TR effectiveness. WBTs described proactive WPMs as crucial to strong tripartite relationships, stating *"the mentors are telling us what impact the [apprentices] have had" (WBT1)*. This supports Taylor-Smith et al.'s (2022) and Obi's (2024) view that engaged workplace mentors strengthen the bridge between academic and WIL. However, there were also experiences with disengaged WPMs that reduced the developmental potential of TRs: *"my [workplace] mentor doesn't really get involved, so it's just between me and the WBT" (A24)*. Apprentices sought consistency from their WPM, but also their WBT: *"I've had three different WBTs. It's hard to build trust when they*

keep changing" (A30). Others described how engagement could be amplified: *"It would be great if we could meet in person more. It's hard to build a proper relationship just online" (A16)*. These findings echo Fabian et al.'s (2022) and Obara et al.'s (2021) warning that low mentor engagement can result in relationships becoming performative rather than developmental. Linking these perspectives, reinforcing Roberts et al. (2019), we interpret WPM engagement as a mediating factor that can either enable or constrain the tripartite relationship. Without WPM support, WBTs may be more likely to adopt a compliance-heavy stance simply to keep progress on track. We reached this interpretation by aligning low-engagement TR accounts with our engagement typology, which showed that absence of WPM input corresponded with focus on compliance tasks, while high engagement facilitated richer developmental dialogue.

Emerging themes

The analysis of WBT interviews showed that prior experience in education or training shaped their confidence and approach: *"been round the block a few times with working for [independent] training providers before" (WBT6)*. Those with a background in Further Education (FE) and Skills (independent training providers) tended to emphasise structured interventions, while those from industry backgrounds prioritised coaching and mentoring: *"drawing on my own industry experience at a high level to provide a sort of executive coaching" (WBT5)*. This link was identified by mapping mentions of WBT career background to coded excerpts describing preferred TR strategies, which showed a consistent pattern between prior sector experience and approach. This diversity contributed to an informal exchange of practice within WBT teams, with several tutors noting they shared ideas through *"informal networks and WhatsApp" (WBT3)* rather than formal meetings. This suggests that in the absence of structured training, WBTs draw on peer-led solutions, reinforcing the idea that professional identity in this role is shaped as much by collegial exchange as by institutional guidance. Informal peer networks have similarly been identified in the literature as important channels for professional knowledge-sharing (Quew-Jones and Rowe, 2022). The absence, however, of formalised training was viewed as a missed opportunity. One tutor summarised the ideal preparation for the role as *"training should be the three 's' – subject matter, (apprenticeship) standard, and systems" (WBT4)*. This reflects Riley's (2021) argument that WBT effectiveness is contingent on both pedagogical expertise and technical knowledge of apprenticeship standards respectively.

Conclusion and recommendations

Implications for policy

This study provides new insight into the WBT role within H&DA provision through the TR process. While often perceived as a compliance exercise, our findings indicate that a light-touch tick box format can actually be beneficial when aligned with targeted, needs-based interventions. We therefore recommend amending the 2025–2026 funding rules to allow flexibility in review frequency, enabling more frequent input for apprentices requiring intensive support and fewer, brief 'tick box' interventions for those progressing well – this amendment could come in paragraph 95, where the rules state: "during the practical period, the provider must undertake a progress review… at least every three calendar months." The study also shows that WPM engagement is pivotal to WBT effectiveness, yet accountability for apprenticeship outcomes

rests disproportionately with training providers. Some accountability by Ofsted of employer contributions could redress this balance. Finally, the administrative demands on WBTs, whether from compliance requirements or inefficient provider technology, restrict the time available for valued pedagogical and pastoral support which stretches and challenges. Streamlining these processes would directly enhance the learner experience. These findings also have salience for international apprenticeship systems where similar tensions exist between compliance assurance and developmental support, such as in Australia, Germany, and Canada. Policymakers in these contexts could adapt the compliance–support continuum outlined here to suit differing regulatory structures while still enhancing learner-centred practice.

Implications for practice

The absence of a consistent job title, career pathway, and structured induction leaves the WBT role fragmented. We recommend establishing a national Community of Practice, shared professional standards, and a dedicated apprenticeship standard for new WBTs to undertake, incorporating professional recognition such as Advance HE Fellowship or suitable FE and Skills equivalent. Training providers should address technological inefficiencies that increase administrative workload, explore AI-driven solutions to release WBT capacity for supportive conversations; and, in the HE context, ensure WBTs sit within academic schools to strengthen disciplinary alignment. Mentoring models that pair new WBTs with experienced practitioners and academic colleagues could enhance both role integration and interdisciplinary collaboration. These recommendations align with global debates on professionalising WIL facilitators, suggesting opportunities for cross-national Communities of Practice, shared competency frameworks, and technology-enabled collaboration that transcend national boundaries.

Implications for theory

The analysis yields three contributions. First, that a compliance–support continuum exists, reframing TRs as a dynamic process that shifts in emphasis according to apprentice performance, confidence, and workplace engagement; offering a framework for future studies to see how policy and practitioner discretion interact. Second, the identification of the WBT as a hybrid, boundary-spanning professional extends mentoring and coaching theory by showing how legitimacy arises from balancing relational trust with formal accountability. Third, the observed link between reflective readiness and coachability suggests potential for diagnostic tools that assess apprentices' reflective maturity to tailor developmental interventions. These theoretical insights, while specific to the HEI context, invite future studies across FE and Skills to verify transferability. Moreover, the theoretical models proposed here, particularly the compliance–support continuum and hybrid professional identity, are adaptable for examining international vocational education and training (VET) landscapes.

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