

Methodology

This qualitative multi-case study examined degree-level apprenticeship (DLA) experiences in England and Scotland through 27 interviews with apprentices, academics, employers and policy makers across six case studies.

Bridging University and Work? The Conditional Success of Degree-Level Apprenticeships

Theoretical Lens

This study combined Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and Skill Ecosystems to interpret how DLA success is shaped by programme design, relationships, resources, context and shared understanding across systems.

Research Topic

DLAs are promoted as a way to connect higher education and work, develop skills, widen participation and meet employer needs. However, their success is not automatic. This research explores stakeholder views of their purpose, value, benefits and challenges, and what shapes whether programmes work well in practice.

'It's about relationships... If you don't make it work, if you don't have strong relationships, then it will fall apart.'
Academic

'I don't think everybody gets as good support as what I am getting.'
Apprentice

'Sometimes I have to skip my study day to work on pressing matters for the company. That is definitely a challenge.'
Apprentice

'So, we had two different organisations pulling largely in the same direction, but occasionally not really understanding what each other did.'
Employer

Research Findings What shapes success in DLAs?



Fitness for purpose

One size does not fit all: DLAs are most effective where the model fits the occupation and the learners, rather than being treated as a universal policy solution.



Alignment and collaboration

Strong collaboration between stakeholders is essential. Shared goals, clear communication and aligned expectations strengthen DLA programmes.



Clearly defined roles

DLA programmes need clear roles for support, study time, mentoring, communication and training; without this clarity, responsibilities can become contested.



Dedicated time and resources

Successful delivery depends on protected study time, academic capacity and employer resources; without these, workloads can become unsustainable.



Support and stability

Apprentices thrive when support is consistent, expectations are clear and programme structures are stable. When these are lacking, apprentices absorb most of the burden.

