

Understanding the role of learning communities of practice within a Degree Apprenticeship to enhance inclusive engagement

Abstract

Purpose Building on the concepts of learning communities of practice, the paper evaluates their application within degree apprenticeships (DAs) to support pedagogic engagement and inclusive education within a university setting.

Design/methodology/approach A case study of an existing B2B sales degree apprenticeship reviewed relevant programme documents and evaluated apprentice learner experience through an anonymised online survey.

Findings The study found that sales apprentices had a reflexive awareness of how learning communities operated within this context and raised some valuable insights about their perceptions of inclusive education. These communities have differing dynamics that value engaging with workplace professionals, peers and university. Apprentices prefer tuition that accommodates their shared interests as employee learners within an occupational role. Issues surrounding inclusive education are seen as integral to the experience of being an apprentice.

Originality This research indicates that B2B sales degree apprentices see themselves as operating within distinctive learning communities of practice that support their work-integrated (WIL) studies in higher education. The paper recommends programme teams provide more collaborative engagement within learning communities to support inclusive education goals.

Practical implications Post-Covid engagement could be used to frame more effective social learning for work-integrated practice and programme teams could advocate for a greater integration of DAs within institutional settings.

Keywords

degree apprenticeship, work-integrated learning, communities of practice, case study, British values, student experience, inclusive education

Paper type Research Paper

Introduction

A challenge for academic practitioners who deliver work-integrated learning (WIL) is finding ways to evaluate learning communities that support an inclusive study experience. Practitioner research into existing programming offers a means to explore how current learning communities are operating and to discover the means to bring about meaningful change that benefits the learner. The intention of this case study was to gather evidence that could frame existing practice and provide recommendations for inclusive WIL learning approaches after the Covid-19 isolation. These include providing more inclusive elements for quality education internationally at all levels (UN, 2015).

This paper focuses on the role of learning communities within degree apprenticeships using a small case study within a university business school setting in England. The degree and professional qualifications associated with apprenticeships relate to international WIL pedagogic principles that are used to design and assess learning that is associated with workplace experience. Apprenticeships were introduced in the United Kingdom (UK) as a form of employer-funded programming within specific occupational job roles. While the

presence of learning communities are an established feature within higher education provision and are recognised as being a key performance indicator for the student experience (OfS, 2021), this study is to explore their significance within the newer standards-based Degree Apprenticeship (DA).

A stimulus for the research came from two questions about learning communities that were a part of the government initiated National Student Survey (NSS) given to final year undergraduates in the UK including those taking DAs. The questions are listed under the heading of *Learning community* and ask students if they feel like they are a part of a community of staff (Question 21) and if they have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course (Question 22) (OfS, 2023). In the Phase One report, (OfS, 2021), the term *learning community* is described as a concept to which students can respond about their experience and provide a student perspective.

The research gathered data about the lived experience of a small sample of DA learners studying during Covid-19 and examined community building online (Ardichvili, 2008; Abedini *et al.*, 2021) and as a part of a formal learning environment that could be associated with other WIL and vocational education training (VET) internationally (Chan, 2019). There was the added expectation that the development of inclusive education skills and behaviours would be relevant to overcoming local barriers like diversity or inequality in the workplace (CIPD, 2018). The complexities of delivering WIL learning are important to ‘vocational’ education worldwide, where education goals are linked to social and economic trends and expansion of workforce development. The findings and analysis provide new data about existing practice to recommend authentic (QAA, 2022) steps that could enhance the development of more inclusive education practice within the WIL learning community context.

Practical elements of degree apprenticeships

In the UK, work-based learning programmes are said to be central to a university academic strategy because of the perceived commitment to a partnership with regional and local employers (Basit *et al.*, 2015). DA students are viewed as employees in the workplace, and as such the concept and application of *learning community* for these apprentices can be more complex. Their pedagogic framework includes the participation of the apprentice, the provider and the employer as a tripartite or workplace learning interrelationship (Nixon *et al.*, 2006). The DA provision also involves a range of workplace professionals such as human resource managers, learning developers, apprenticeship coordinators, business customers, and members of professional organisations.

The standards-based DAs are a fairly recent phenomenon that are paid for through a UK government Employer levy (Powell, 2023) where occupational competence is assessed within a specific employment context using standards of practice (IfATE, 2022). DAs in England have been formally set for 20% *off the job learning* hours where tuition is based in the workplace that becomes a site for knowledge acquisition as well as application (QAA, 2022). The pedagogic principles for DAs include teaching disciplinary content that enables apprentices “to develop professional/occupational competence within a defined occupation and apprenticeship pathway” (QAA, 2022, p.4). The newer Standards curriculum concentrates on knowledge, skills and behaviours and values (KSBs) that are related to apprentices’ professional job role. KSBs are key components of learning on the DA in England, and directly related to the degree programme outcomes. Integrated degree

apprentices are assessed over the three years of the programme on academic achievements and competencies with two qualifications gained concurrently.

Each apprenticeship has areas of practice that define what is being taught, but the way in which they are delivered has a pedagogic legacy from work-based learning (Nottingham, 2017). Policy for DAs is found in the Quality Assurance Agency descriptors of higher education that are related to a broad range of work-based studies (QAA, 2020). Apprenticeship provision aligns with vocational and occupational provision worldwide and has long-standing connections with European vocational learning (CEDEFOP, 2015; EU 2018) and the VET traditions from Germany (Protsch and Heike, 2016).

Learning communities and communities of practice

The expectations of learning communities for apprentices are both significant and problematic as apprentices are *students* or *learners* based primarily in the workplace. The term *student experience* is used in policy literature to measure higher education practice (QAA, 2020) but the term can be ambiguous as it denotes a variety of meanings for various actors as well as being present in policy and practice (Pötschulat, *et. al.*, 2021). In this case study, experience relates to that which is interpreted “to contain a fixed set of ideas about what it means to be a student and where these practices should be enacted” (Pötschulat, *et. al.*, 2021, p. 17).

A review of education literature found that often the framing of *learning communities* was limited to include only those directly involved in the exchange, such as the teachers and students. However it is an important concept within inclusive education. Lenning *et al.* have said that the concept developed naturally over a period of time as “an intentionally developed community that exists to promote and maximise the individual and shared learning of its members. There is ongoing interaction, interplay, and collaboration among the community’s members as they strive for specified common learning goals” (2013, p. 7). Jessup-Anger (2015) refer to Meiklejohn and Dewey as providing the structural foundation of contemporary learning communities in the United States and credit Dewey with envisioning the pedagogical foundations to be student-centred and promote active learning.

For an apprentice, belonging to a learning community may incorporate a wider set of stakeholders that relate more to the notions of engagement, imagination and alignment (Wenger, 2008) with the world of work outside of the university. This difference presents distinctive challenges for evaluating communities. Concepts for communities of practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) that represent broader inclusion have been an important planning element for work-based learning curriculum. Learning interaction emphasises cultivating “a social theory of learning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 12) with elements that relate directly to the job role and study projects being undertaken within the workplace. As Wenger points out “membership in a community of practice translates into an identity as a form of competence” (2008, p. 153). For an apprentice, who is an employee learner, this underlying principle is key for engagement.

A long history of organisational and practice-based theory speaks to the evolving notions of CoPs (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020). Fuller *et al.* (2005) discussed the Lave and Wenger concept of peripheral participation and engagement within apprenticeship CoPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and pointed out that newcomers bring to CoPs existing identities that can add to the community as well as being

changed by it. This notion resonates well with the positioning of younger professionals in a fast-paced and post-Covid digital environment. CoPs form in practice as mutual engagement (interaction and shared meaning), joint enterprise (working toward a common goal), and a shared repertoire (common reference points) (Wenger, 1998). Newer variations of CoPs encompass digital stewardship and online practice engagement (Wenger-Trayner *et al.*, 2015). Social learning theory surrounding CoPs has evolved to accommodate more directed engagements (like projects) within social practice settings (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020) and these shorter engagements relate well to the way in which online tuition is delivered on the DA.

The use of CoPs present some contested areas of practice, for example Handley *et al.* (2006) pointed to the distinction between the use of CoPs and the preference for more robust conceptual structuring within organisations. Literature for the use of CoPs within higher education and vocational learning include a theoretical framework for value creation that can be seen in global contexts (Higgs, 2022). The application of these notions within the DA provides a good way to investigate inherent pedagogic boundaries that incorporate teaching disciplinary content and competence-based applications. WIL relates strongly to a practice-based curriculum, with threshold concepts such as: environment, material mediation, relationality, situatedness, emergence, co-construction (Boud, 2012). Conceptualising boundaries can be a source of learning with new insights and radical innovations that consider issues of power aligned to mutual negotiation. Wenger-Trayner clarified the conceptual scope of CoPs as local and “occupying a mid-level between moments of individual experience and broad social structure...” (Farnsworth *et al.*, 2016, p. 11). While there is an extensive body of literature using social learning frameworks to evaluate WIL that are beyond the scope of this paper, the use of CoP associated learning theory provides a framework to examine existing degree apprenticeship tuition.

New problems and new solutions for inclusive pedagogy

Internationally, educational policy makers have shown that there is the intention to develop greater integration between learning and work (lifelong learning) and to support a greater use of vocational education that could enhance and sustain professional practice. This research exploring learning communities was undertaken amidst a University initiative to introduce more inclusivity into the curriculum and was influenced by the DA requirement to deliver learning associated with *British values* (Ofsted, 2021), a government policy originally linked to minimising risks that might affect social cohesion (Lockley-Scott, 2019) and support active citizenship. While many international educational programmes refer to collective social values, it has been suggested that in the UK there is a need for careful monitoring of the teaching of *British values* to feature a greater consideration of the democratic ethics of care (Jerome *et al.*, 2021).

Hockings referred to inclusive education as “the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. It embraces a view of the individual and individual difference as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others” (2010, p.1). An inclusive curriculum features the embedding of principles involving equality, diversity and might be understood in terms of themes such as social justice (Thompson and Brewster, 2022) that extend into higher education as preparation for learning in the workplace (Blanchard *et al.*, 2018). Hanesworth (2015) recommends creating an inclusive educational environment through belonging and engagement, establishing a collaborative space where

power differentials are managed and enabling potential. Lester comments that the aims of social mobility, widening participation and increasing diversity are supported by apprenticeship providers (2020). Teaching *British values* could include considering internal employer policies, conflicting imperatives within job roles and the need to learn and abide by government employment practices in the workplace (SMS, 2021). While social mobility and widening participation are central factors for DAs (Crawford-Lee, 2019), there may be gaps in how DAs are delivered to engage learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Battiston *et al.*, 2020). Approaches to exploring intersectionality include a focus on highlighting the texture and consequences of inequalities experienced by individuals and groups (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016). Concepts such as intersectionality present a greater amount of complexity for educators working with DAs.

Research methodology

The main aim of the research was to undertake a small case study that included primary research with apprentices to explore existing framing of learning communities within the curriculum using notions of inclusive education, analyse this in relation to current pedagogic practice, and develop practical recommendations. The main research questions were: How do learning communities operate within the DA? and What inclusive principles and practice already play a part in the university apprenticeship provision as a part of these communities?

Research was conducted within a large city-based university using a Business to Business Sales (B2B) DA as an intrinsic case study, to investigate a particular case that might be significant to the university provider (Stake, 2010). Case study methodology allowed the pragmatic consideration of multiple issues within the complex context of higher education in which WIL occurs, both qualitative and quantitative (mixed) methods were used to look at emerging issues (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The researchers included past and present institutional programme leaders, based in Education and Business, as insider-researchers (Fleming, 2018) to create a cross-faculty approach. The research was undertaken as a part of an internal Enhancing Education Award that supported learning and teaching innovation within the University. As a case study, it was also hoped that some of the broader aspects of practice would have relevance for other WIL programmes as vocational education continues to expand within European Union policy (EU, 2018).

A literature review was carried out with relevant policy and practice literature related to DA learning, international WIL practice and policy, and issues surrounding learning communities and inclusive education within higher education. With the broad considerations of the research questions, a selective review of course documents was limited to those relevant to understanding the issues surrounding the design and delivery of the programme as they related to learning communities and inclusive education. In this case, the DA has a very active sales education partner that leads fifty percent of the programme teaching and co-programme leads the DA. In this research, no distinction was made in the survey to separate the partner and the university provision. Data gathered from the apprentices alluded to stakeholders, but names have been anonymised. Ethics approval and permissions were obtained by the University and participants gave informed consent.

Primary research with apprentices in the form of an anonymised questionnaire explored the apprentices' perceptions and lived experience regarding their learning communities within the University setting. The questionnaire was sent to apprentices/alumni (N = 161) in a four week period by administrative staff in the Business School. Returned questionnaires were

only directly accessible to the researchers. The qualitative data gathered were analysed using an interpretivist approach (Mason, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2022) where the anonymised perceptions and lived experience of the participants was coded and thematically analysed. Findings focussed on identifying important aspects about learning communities of practice and understanding how inclusive principles could be applied in this context. Limitations to the case study included the insider-researcher element which allowed access and familiarity for a pragmatic review but needed to be considered carefully for ethics and bias. The apprentice sample was exploratory and small, so qualitative findings would have been considered as indicative rather than representative of the apprentice student population, however this smaller sample does have precedence within research guidance (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Review of case materials

As a part of the case study, a literature review was undertaken using keywords within the University's Library Search system that related directly to the project aims involving learning communities, CoPs, DAs, and inclusivity/inclusive education. Relevant policy documents and institutional reports and strategic plans were examined. A limited case review of materials and datasets related to the provision was undertaken in order to evaluate the context as the research was a part of a small funded institutional project about improving DA implementation within the university setting. Programme documents that directly related to the research questions included two main-module handbooks that were reviewed in terms of the practical curriculum about CoPs and inclusive education principles. One module called *Learning and Studying at Work* asked apprentices to map their own CoPs using Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) CoP theories. Another module centred on a development portfolio that introduced reflective theory and included *British values* as required curriculum for the DA. These documents were cross-referenced with the KSBs from the programme outcomes and DA standards, similar to more general WIL provision. As well as displaying more transdisciplinary graduate attributes, University-based modules focus on enabling apprentices to reflect on and display their sales KSBs. Within the sales-specific modules for the DA, the specialist partners introduced sales models and theory to apply to the sales job role. Interpersonal sales communication competence in business to business sales are highly rated as needed in the contemporary international sales context (Koponen *et al.*, 2019). Both the generic and the specific learning from this review was later referred to by apprentices when describing their understanding and approach to learning communities and inclusive education. As comparison documents, the central Apprenticeship team provided two yearly Apprenticeship Learner Satisfaction Surveys. The case study also included a qualitative document review of the bi-annual Programme Voice Group meeting minutes which act as formal student experience feedback twice a year. These minutes had acted to inform the research project aims as one voice leader pointed out that younger apprentices would like more information about University events so that they can feel more included in University life.

Findings from survey

Anonymised online questionnaires were completed by sixteen participants (n =16), which was approximately 10% of the total in the ten cohorts for the sales DA (total 161). The limitations of this sample size may have come from conducting the survey within a shorter timeframe which was a busy one for academic studies and work practice. A range of cohorts participated with 4 from Cohort 1-2, 2 from Cohorts 3-4, 4 from Cohorts 5-7, 5 from Cohorts

8-10 and 1 non-response. Cohorts in this programme were generally around 20 apprentices, but this could vary dependent on the cohort. Overall demographic information showed that the sample had the Generation Y and Z age ranges that would be expected for undergraduate study (McCrindle, 2014).

Survey participants' definition of a learning community of practice

As an initial question, apprentices were asked to suggest their own definition of a learning community. Responses showed a good understanding of a shared experience (Lenning *et al.*, 2016) within the university teaching context:

A group of people that come together to talk about a common interest and learn from each other's experiences (DA4).

This interpretation worked well with social learning spaces that are of shorter duration and where practitioners sharing is more centred around projects and shorter term engagement. In this framing of the CoP as value driven interaction, there is a focus on participants “caring to make a difference engaging uncertainty” (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p. 17).

Other responses included study within a particular role (DA8, DA13) which is appropriate to purpose of the DA, applying learning in a practical manner (DA8) and studying within a “network of people you can learn from” (DA9). Some participants favoured a synchronous experience with peers:

A learning community of practice is an environment where learning and work can take place at the same time with peers. Be this on campus, video calls or in a work space (DA5).

Participants also responded that there was more involvement outside of the immediate *learning community* study sessions to include a wider community of practice within the workplace:

I feel that this is primarily my cohort and tutors that I interact with through the course workshops and learning, and extends to other students in other cohorts that I have met at wider events and other academics and professionals that I have learnt from in talks/workshops. I would also include my work colleagues in this definition, especially those that I have worked with closely for assistance with assignments and learning (DA16).

There are also some unknowns within this complex community identity. Net Promoter Scores are often used in the sales apprentices' jobs to evaluate new customers where a business case is needed to pursue contact. While in differential scales a score of 6 out of 10 might mean a positive response, this is not the case when using the Net Promoter Score. Using this method, participants were asked if they felt that they were a part of a larger community of practice using their own definition of what that meant to them. Some responses strongly agreed as 4 *promoters* (9-10 on a 10 point scale) with 6 *passive* (7-8) and 6 *detractors* (1-6), so overall the Net Promoter Score (-12.5) showed the affective realisation that this sense of larger community may not have been strongly felt or the definition of community is still not clearly defined for apprentices.

Participants referred to sense-making at work using *local* significance (Wenger-Trayner in Farnsworth *et al.*, 2016) in their own places of work (DA5) and working with peers could increase engagement in academic study and support for assessments (DA8). This could be directly related back to the WIL learner using a social learning framework to develop their approach to creating and applying situated knowledge (in the sales professional context). There could, however, be a lack of participation outside of the formal teaching sessions that led to some dissatisfaction because broader mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998) was not forthcoming because of lack of application:

The cohort I am in does not seem to want to engage outside of the designated workshops- I guess they are all very busy people... Our employer does not encourage this either - they leave it up to the individuals to engage. There is a small amount of engagement on Whatsapp, but usually only to check on submission dates (DA4).

To enable a comparison with the mainstream NSS question (21): Do you feel like a part of a community of staff and students? (OfS, 2023) participants were asked if they felt like a part of the community. The main mean score was 58.13 which can be compared to the University Marketing Department mean score of 52; so a little bit higher but similar. Another NSS question (22) asked if people have the right opportunities to work with others on the course (OfS, 2023). DA participants responded with a mean of 64.69 compared to the Department mean of 75, compared the whole University overall mean of 76. This could indicate that apprentices wanted more opportunities to work with others on the course.

A final comment spoke to the essential elements for the provision as a reminder that the apprentices value working together as a larger community and wanted to engage in social learning:

...where we can meet our module leaders and other apprentices from the same cohort from other companies has been the best thing I have taken from learning communities so far on this course (DA12).

Participants' perception of a larger learning community of practice

DA participants perception of a learning community included a wider interpretation that embraced their workplace community of practice. Participants said that within their CoPs they received help from both work colleagues and managers who were willing to offer information (DA9) within their workplaces. Managers roles were seen as key to learning by offering continuous development reviews to monitor progress (DA8, DA3), provide feedback, sign-off tasks, accommodate scheduling (DA13) and discuss assignments (DA2).

My manager gives me space and time to complete modules and is there for any questions or advice I may need. My work colleagues show interest in some of my work, especially if I am learning framework tools that will help them with their roles (DA4) .

DA12 mentioned that the 3-way university/employer/apprentices tripartite reviews “ensure my manager is in-the-loop.” This manager/mentor formative feedback is one of the hallmarks

of the DA working more as a CoP because of its focus on the broader exchange rather than the more narrowly defined taught sessions.

The importance of the University as a site of learning became apparent with responses that confirmed that apprentices could sometimes have a marginal experience of being a university student. DA13 said they “Didn't really feel like I went to uni.” More interaction within the wider community was suggested (DA16) with noted difference that the interaction not involve confidential business information (DA7).

Responses to questions about the possibility of more interaction with other University students were mixed, but many participants indicated that more interaction was of interest: with definitely yes (6) and probably yes (7) (13 out of 16 responses). A number of apprentices saw the benefits, DA1 saying “the more students bounce off each other, who are studying the same thing, can only be good.” Others pointed out the reservations, “As our degree course is niche and delivered much differently than an average degree- i think there would be a disconnect” (DA12). Apprentices were interested in links to the University Marketing students as well as wider engagement such as University/Partner events (10), Programme website page (8), Career Development (7), University social gathering (7) Speakers various topics (4) and Freshers Week (3).

Shared repertoires and perceptions

Concepts from the professional practice apprenticeship modules did add some elements of learning practice theory to the curriculum that supported social learning in communities. Tuition studied in Year 1 of the DA introduced *Learning and Studying at Work* (DA4) and portfolio journaling introduced the “process of reflection” (DA8). Participants perceived that there were *shared repertoires* (Wenger, 1998) that related to the practical nature of their studies. Apprentices appreciated learning from other people’s experience (DA11). Some participants felt that in person workshops were more effective than remote sessions as they provided a more active learning style that brought out shared interests within similar sales roles (DA14).

The latest thinking from Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner speak to individuals entering social spaces (in person or virtual) with a focus on ‘value creation in social learning spaces’ (2020, p. 6) as mutual engagement. There was an interest in topics being transferable. DA13 said that “Everything I have learnt at uni has directly applied to my practise/ informed my practise.” The benefits of speaking with people in differing business sectors in smaller groups contributed to conceptualising sales work practice.

There had been various amounts of exposure to sales, with some participants new to sales and experiencing peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Participants did not always have a sales background (DA8, DA3) but said they benefitted from working with other who did (DA12). DA16 found the experience of starting the course at the same time as starting their first role in sales “a little daunting” but they had “learnt to feel more comfortable with this and embrace my fresh perspective and learn from the experiences of others.”

Inclusive education within the degree apprenticeship

While there is a requirement to cover *British values* as personal development for active citizenship (Ofsted, 2021), the extent to which this tuition made a difference to the

apprenticeship community experience was not clearly known. For many, demonstrating inclusive concepts was seen as integral to professional practice. Many of the participants felt that *British values* were embedded within the existing programme and their apprenticeship practice (DA14, DA4, DA8, DA12) although not always explicitly referenced (DA13). Apprentices could align these values with organisational values (DA16) and extend to their larger CoP as employees in sales (DA13). The focus on sales as an area of study suggests a reflexive approach to occupational considerations. DA16 felt that “the wider B2B Sales learning community is the untangling of the traditional, established, status quo of the industry and what that brings with it.... I feel that many of these seemingly intangible stereotypes are still present in elements of theory and anecdotal learning....”

Several of the participants did not like the concept of *British values* due to the terminology (DA3) and the perception that it was politically motivated and thus linked to issues of power within the English social-cultural context and the Prevent policy (DA8).

Apprentices were asked to suggest how the programme could be made more inclusive. DA1 suggested: “There shouldn't be a quiet student in the room, and if we are uncomfortable, we are learning. Students want to be challenged, as do professionals in their working life.” Others included more engagement during face to face modules (DA7), addressing positionality into assignments and creating product presentations that considered accessibility (DA12).

Practice post Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic actively required *meaningful* participation (Handley *et al.*, 2006) in a different way as tuition went exclusively online. For example, there was evidence of engagement and sharing knowledge with remote learning and participation in smaller groups online. While a number of apprentices responded that Covid had affected learning, overall participants did not feel as strongly about the effects of Covid at this later point in time (as indicated with a low Net Promoter Score of -13.33). This collective response might indicate that apprentices felt that they continued to learn throughout the pandemic or were now concentrating on future learning.

A number of participants wanted to move beyond Covid with more face to face sessions (DA7). Discussing the practical ways in which DAs carried out their interaction with a professional sales networks and their professional sales body, participants in the study said that LinkedIn, email and face to face were used most (DA11). One question asked specifically about further University preparation for events like Covid-19. Apprentices appreciated that staff had acted to “mitigate the impact of Covid-19” (DA16). The larger context of the Covid was seen as a joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998) as “everyone was in the same boat” (DA1). Practical suggestions included more online lectures (DA15) and workbooks (DA2) making the student portal easier to navigate (DA3) and ensuring regular calls (DA12). Other suggestions included more connectivity to join in Teams groups (DA5) and for the University to host bi-weekly or monthly video calls (DA4).

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper considers some of the practical implications involved in framing learning communities within a small DA programme and how the greater use of social learning principles within CoPs address the challenge of engaging with inclusive education in these

contexts. Learning communities provide a participatory way to think about teaching subjects such as *British values* as human values that go beyond national borders as well as the appraising the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on group dynamics. O’Shea *et al.* (2021) pointed out that equity implications have risen as a result of Covid adding to issues like the risks of campus study, the digital divide, student mental health, study/life balance and the future of work.

This case study has shown that complex issues are difficult to address for WIL learners and there may be a lack of in-depth knowledge about specific groups of students to support their learning. In the current university context, the consideration of inclusive principles (Battiston *et al.*, 2020) within the tuition of apprenticeships is a requirement for the degree and standards of the DA qualification. As WIL programmes worldwide tackle real-world problems using international sustainability goals, the use of social learning theory to embed inclusive education will continue to motivate academic practitioners to enhance their curriculum. There is now a pressing need for ensuring the further integration of social mobility principles that build on systematic collaboration and collective responses (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020). This support points to the function of more divergent *learning communities of practice*. Lester points to creating ways for DAs to fully realise their dual aims of contributing to social mobility and economic development through “providing effective learner support that bridges between the institution and the workplace” (2020, p. 711). Similarly, Masika and Jones noted “sustained engagement between teachers and students and facilitation of peer-to-peer interactions to enhance student CoP” (2016, p. 147) could be used to enhance belonging. In this study, the degree apprentices wanted to be involved in shaping their engagement with inclusive education.

This study began with some comparative notions about learning communities and the need to understand the particular issues that DA learning communities face at university. The dynamics that include a broader range of workplace managers and colleagues is different than a learning community that is just composed of academics and students. The work-based boundaries (Wenger 1998) that exist between individual learning and organisational learning present challenges to university educators, with staff ‘juggling hats’ (Martin *et al.*, 2020) to lead and manage improvements to the apprentice experience. This was further complicated by the compulsory remote learning required during Covid.

As these findings present an exploratory sample, larger in-depth practitioner research that includes direct reference to inclusive practice would be useful as a way to further understand the connections and layers (Mason, 2018). Further research could include smaller international case studies tackling the introduction of inclusive education within complex WIL settings might shed further light on creative solutions to national policy restrictions. For example, with apprentices from New Zealand, Chan has talked about the sense of vocation that is developed through a deep commitment to work which leads to this sense of belonging (2019). This type of insider-research could enable institutions to support WIL student learning communities on campus and virtually. A more nuanced view of inclusive practice within DAs could add vibrancy to the curriculum while supplying required compliance measures for the institution.

There is now an opportunity to develop post-Covid teaching/facilitation practice that addresses common threads for community involvement and promotes intersectionality (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016). While academic practitioners are being asked to ‘teach’ inclusive practice, what does that look like and how can the learners have a say in this tuition? While

this research focussed mainly on the DA within the university setting, future research exploring the complexities of working with employers could widen the conversation to include organisational settings and employer stakeholders sharing community outreach and interventions. For this case, a recent addition of an Employers Forum, championed by the specialist sales partner, could provide a useful context for further research.

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