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Getting in, getting on, going further: Exploring the role of employers in the degree apprentice to graduate transition

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Abstract

Transitions from education into work, or as part of career change and development, are increasingly central to policy debate and academic inquiry. However, the role that employers play in shaping transition is often overlooked. In this paper, we examine this issue through the experiences of a graduating cohort of 'degree apprentices'. We present original analysis of new empirical data from what we believe to be the first substantive qualitative longitudinal research conducted with those experiencing this new vocational pathway in the English Apprenticeships system. Through analysis of repeat semi-structured interviews with 22 degree apprenticeship graduates (44 interviews in total), we provide early empirical insights into experiences of this new pathway and add to existing theoretical conceptualisations of transition within the educational literature and the employer's role within it. We show that the degree apprentice to graduate transition can be broken down into three key stages: 'getting in', 'getting on' and 'going further', and that employers—at both strategic and relational levels—shape experiences at each stage.

KEYWORDS
apprenticeships, employers, graduates, transition

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?
The paper addresses the issue of transition, based on the experiences of graduating degree apprentices. It focuses on the role of employers in shaping the experiences of transition for this new type of graduate.
What are the main insights that the paper provides?
We show that the degree apprentice to graduate transition can be broken down into three key stages: 'getting in', 'getting on' and 'going further', and that employers—at both strategic and relational levels—shape experiences at each stage.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'transition' is central to empirical and theoretical developments in educational research (Bimrose & Brown, 2013; Clarke, 2009; Ecclestone, 2009a,b; Schlossberg, 2011; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). How individuals navigate into, through and out of education, and how this interacts with other socioeconomic characteristics, events and life chances has been an important concern for educational researchers focused on education of all forms and at all stages. Transitions from education into work, or as part of career change and development, are increasingly central to policy debate and academic inquiry within a context of rapidly changing labour markets, wherein working lives have become less stable and predictable (Furlong et al., 2017).

Strong vocational pathways are often touted as a potential solution to smoothing transitions. Apprenticeships in particular have been identified as a key contributing factor to better labour market outcomes (Abrassart & Wolter, 2020; Furlong et al., 2017). Through combining study and work, they can both equip learners with the skills needed in the workplace, alongside an opportunity for progression through higher levels of study and qualification. Policy debates have centred on the relative merits of academic or vocational education pathways. However, in England, degree apprenticeships (DAs) are now available, which combine vocational and academic learning at graduate level.

Here, alongside Higher Education Providers (HEIs), employers play a direct role in shaping educational experiences and outcomes of this new kind of graduate. However, longstanding theoretical debates about transitions have tended to overlook their significance (Roberts, 2018). Leading theories used to explain the transition from higher education to employment tend to emphasise either 'supply-side' factors like employability activities (Tomlinson, 2017), the role of economic or symbolic capital in determining outcomes (Bathmaker et al., 2016), or the importance of personal agency and motivation in the process (Ecclestone, 2009b; Roberts, 2018). Common theoretical assumptions about the nature of the transition in the educational literature offer little guidance for understanding how employers may alter the quality and character of employment transitions.

Our paper explores experiences of educational transition and employers' roles within it through original analysis of data from what we believe to be the first substantive qualitative longitudinal research conducted with 'degree apprenticeship graduates'. Alongside adding to an emerging empirical evidence base on DAs (Mulkeen et al., 2019; Rowe et al., 2016), we contribute to the literature on educational transitions and employability, especially that centred on issues of relationality of employers and employees as learners (Dalrymple et al., 2021). Our research evidences the important role of employers at different stages—pre- ('getting in'), during ('getting on') and post- ('going further') DA in the degree apprentice to graduate transition. Second, it highlights the role of 'employers' at both strategic and

relational levels for employability development, and adds to calls for external factors such as employer culture and actions to have greater prominence in discussions about student and graduate employability (Behle, 2020; Green et al., 2013).

The paper is underpinned by two key research questions:

1. How do degree apprentices experience the transition from apprentice to graduate?
2. How do employers shape the experience of transition for this group?

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section outlines how we conceptualise transition. We then present an overview of the policy context within which DAs have developed. Our methodology is outlined, followed by new empirical findings and analysis. We discuss this in relation to existing transitions literature before concluding with policy and practice implications.

CONCEPTUALISING TRANSITION

Much of the existing transitions literature from the fields of career development and graduate employability focuses on theorising individual transitions, illuminating the scope for individual agency in varied contexts. Drawing from international comparisons of young people and adults, Bimrose and Brown (Bimrose & Brown, 2013; Brown & Bimrose, 2014) have written extensively about different types of decision-making processes that influence transition. They summarise these as aspirational, strategic, opportunistic and evaluative. In contrast to what Bimrose and Brown (2013) might more negatively view as 'reactive opportunism', Hodkinson's (2008) work on 'horizons for action' uses the notion of 'pragmatic reality' which suggests that, for many, individual decisions are much more pragmatic with regard to available opportunities. Krumboltz (2009) also debates the role of 'opportunism' and 'happenstance', highlighting that individual transitions are influenced by context and how individuals interact with the structures around them. Other influential writing about transition has come from both Schlossberg's (2011) work for employment and career counselling, and adaptations of Blustein's (2013) psychology of working theory. Both recognise the role of social support and how this shapes individual transitions.

In the graduate employability literature, concepts of capital are also central to analyses of transition (Tomlinson, 2017). Research consistently illustrates that those with higher levels of human, social and cultural capitals are often better able/equipped to manage life transitions (Tett & Maclachlan, 2007). Sociologically oriented writers illustrate the inequalities that are associated with individual characteristics such as gender, class and ethnicity influencing transitions and the inequalities therein. Findings from the longitudinal Futuretrack study (Purcell et al., 2013) indicate that socioeconomic background may have a greater significance than age, gender or ethnicity in likelihood of participation in activities and lifestyle that can enhance career prospects and subsequent chances of securing graduate-level roles. Those from less advantaged backgrounds are more at risk of difficult transitions (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Roberts, 2018) and much existing literature has centred on those failing to make successful transitions (Bloomfield et al., 2020; Ecclestone, 2009a; Gaona et al., 2019).

While the conceptualisations outlined above typically acknowledge meso- and macro-level contextual influences, the specific role of other actors and support structures, and *how* these shape transitions, is often underexplored. As Ecclestone et al. (2010) explain, individuals experience multiple transitions, which are the product of the interplay between identity, structure and agency and are 'influenced by elements of a person's whole life, rather than merely through their involvement with education systems' (Ecclestone, 2009b, p. 13). Transitions are shaped by different actors, including families and peer groups, education

providers, employers and policymakers (Ecclestone, 2009a). Christie and Burke (2021) and Gaona et al. (2019) have explored the role of family members in supporting transitions, and Stevenson and Clegg (2011) addressed how universities contribute to successful transitions. Bathmaker et al. (2016) explore the experiences of undergraduates 'getting in', 'getting on' and 'getting out', with analysis in the later stage centred on their preparations to move on from higher education. They explore the extent to which different HEIs expand or restrict opportunities open to graduates in different local labour markets, and how this interacts with social class.

More generally, McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005) influential conceptualisation of employability highlights the complex interaction of individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors that impact on transitions. Their work has been built upon by Green et al. (2013) in research about public employment services and Behle (2020) in theoretical work on universities. They argue for a greater exploration of employers' role in fostering employability. Relatedly, Green et al. (2013) also argue for a broader conceptualisation of employability, which encompasses not one single movement into work (as the graduate transition is typically conceptualised), but instead a process which involves accessing, sustaining and progressing in work.

Despite acknowledging the need to explore the role of different stakeholders in shaping transitions and employability, employers have received little attention in the educational literature. The employer's role regularly emerges in policy literature as important in supporting careers education and employability activities (Mann et al., 2017). Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) also explored employer perspectives, identifying what potential is sought by them from new graduate hires. However, existing literature has been criticised for not exploring the interaction between employers and graduates to any meaningful extent (Holmes, 2013a). Holmes (2013b) has stressed the importance of employers as graduates become confident in affirming their status as productive employees. Indeed, educational research into more in-depth and enduring relationships between employers and employees in the transition experiences for new workers is sparse. This is an important gap in educational literature, as while institutions are increasingly concerned with improving the 'employability' of their students, scholars have critiqued an over-emphasis on the 'supply side', preparing students for work, yet neglecting issues relating to employer demand and job quality (Tholen & Brown, 2017). Roberts (2018) argues that supply-side policies are 'bankrupt', lambasting the over-emphasis in public policy on education's ability to prepare young people for the labour market without paying more attention to the role of employers in education to work transitions.

Our research responds to this critique, by illuminating in new ways the role of employers in individual transitions. Borrowing and adjusting the language of Bathmaker et al. (2016), and recognising the importance of broader conceptualisations of transition (Green et al., 2013), we explore the role of employers in the degree apprentice to graduate transition as they 'get in', 'get on' and 'go further', and demonstrate that employers shape this transition dynamically at both strategic and relational levels.

RESEARCH CONTEXT: DEGREE APPRENTICESHIPS IN ENGLAND

This section provides an overview of the DA policy context, with an emphasis on the role of employers in the development of work-based higher education in the United Kingdom. Since education and skills policy is a devolved matter in the United Kingdom, it relates to policy developments in England only. DAs were announced in the 2015 Conservative general election manifesto, along with a commitment to support three million new apprenticeship starts in England by 2020. The subsequent case for apprenticeship reform (BiS, 2015) envisaged employers, universities and relevant professional bodies co-creating apprenticeships that

combine working with part-time study resulting in either a bachelor's degree (Level 6) or a master's degree (Level 7). DAs represent a new higher education route to employment in England, and the initial policy intended to target DAs in the priority industry sectors of digital, automotive engineering, banking and construction.

The number and frequency of recent changes to skills policy in the United Kingdom make it the single fastest-changing policy environment in the developed world (see Higgs, 2021 for a recent review of policy related to DAs; Keep, 2015). An enduring orthodoxy, however, underlies much of the reforms over the past 20 years—namely, persistent government concerns related to economic competitiveness, lagging productivity, employment, social mobility and more prosaic matters like improving the United Kingdom's standing in international league tables measuring skills levels (Keep, 2017; Leonard et al., 2018). The language of 'getting on' highlighted in the last section has also been taken up by policymakers in relation to social mobility. The Cabinet Office (2008) published 'Getting on, getting ahead', a discussion paper on social mobility, the contents of which were later addressed in a 2009 White Paper (HM Government, 2009), which was about opening up fair access to the professions through expanding both apprenticeships and higher education.

While Keep and Mayhew (2010) argue that skills policy tends to be used as a substitute for other economic and social measures like welfare reform, Fuller and Unwin (2009) suggest that the state's appropriation of apprenticeships as a policy vehicle since the 1960s has undermined their effectiveness as a model of learning. More recent commentators regard government justifications for DAs as little more than 'neoliberal belief' (Konstantinou & Miller, 2020), but an obvious weakness of this critique is the general and longstanding agreement in the literature that increasing educational attainment does increase economic growth and productivity (Holland et al., 2013), whilst also resulting in higher earnings for individuals (Walker & Zhu, 2008). However, these views should be qualified with findings that the ability of higher education to influence absolute or relative rates of social mobility appears limited (Tholen & Brown, 2017).

A few general observations can be gleaned from these policy trends. First, DAs should be understood as the latest innovation in a long tradition of work-based higher education in the United Kingdom. This tradition includes the introduction of sandwich degrees that combine traditional academic study with work placements, courses that have roots in the attempt to establish higher-level technical education in the post-war era (Field, 2018). Foundation degrees—which are equivalent to the first two years of an undergraduate degree and can be 'topped-up' into a full honours degree—were launched by the Labour Government in 2001 in response to recommendations in the Dearing Report (1997) aimed at addressing the needs of the intermediate-skilled labour market and finding new means of delivering apprenticeships (Guile, 2011). Higher apprenticeships—which combine work with degree-level study but may not result in a higher education qualification—were introduced in 2010 by the Coalition Government partly in response to calls from professional bodies for additional work-based pathways to professional qualifications (Williams & Hanson, 2011). Critics maintain that the reality of higher apprenticeship policy means that the concerns of government and professional bodies often take precedence over the needs of learners and employers, especially the move towards replacing traditional apprenticeship concerns of vocational competence and knowledge with academic grading and assessments (Hordern, 2015).

The development of DAs has led some to claim that 'the academic/vocational divide is dead' (Bravenboer, 2019, p. 82) in the United Kingdom, but others argue that achieving parity of esteem between academic and vocational education is being undermined by political rhetoric that favours achieving social mobility through mass higher education and not vocational routes (James Relly, 2021). In a recent study of stakeholder perceptions of DAs, Mulkeen et al. (2019) argue that achieving parity of esteem between DAs and traditional academic qualifications requires educating employers about what DAs are (i.e. an academic

qualification with work-based training), as well as the benefits of the qualifications to both individuals and organisations.

Secondly, there has been a general trend to reform skills policy by making it more responsive to employers' skill needs and by addressing skill shortages in certain industry sectors and regions (Johnson & Green, 2015). Harvey (2000), commenting at a time when the higher education provision was being expanded under New Labour, suggested the 'employer–higher education interface' connecting employer priorities with learning and the needs of graduates is one of the defining new realities of education. In the context of evolving apprenticeship policy, this interface has included the Coalition Government's aim to put employers 'in the driving seat' of apprenticeship reforms, or employer-led 'trailblazer' groups developing today's apprenticeship standards and assessment plans.

The role of employers in the apprenticeship funding system was expanded in May 2017 with the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, which is charged at 0.5% of an eligible employer's pay bill and restricts employer spending of levy funds on apprenticeship training costs (Foley, 2021). Leonard et al. (2018) argue that the expansion of apprenticeship provision means, in practice, that levy-paying employers are financially incentivised to recruit new apprentices (often young people) or convert existing employees (often older workers) into apprentices. Some have suggested that an initial 'start-up phase' of DAs came to an end in 2019, a phase which involved many of the initial teething issues resulting from the sometimes conflicting goals of employers, HEIs, professional bodies and learners (Welbourn et al., 2019). The 'second cycle' phase of DAs, according to these same commentators, will likely involve more strategic alignment between employer goals and programmatic elements of DAs (e.g. project work tied to organisational priorities), achieving greater operational efficiencies and employers looking to HEIs to provide end-to-end solutions for their training and development needs.

Finally, although it is early in the life of DAs, a small but growing body of empirical evidence provides some indication of performance against policy goals. For example, despite policy goals of using DAs as a vehicle to improve the employment outcomes of school leavers with low skills, nearly two-thirds of DA starters in academic year 2018–19 were aged 25 or older and had already been in their job for more than 12 months (Hubble & Bolton, 2019). This trend has added to claims that school leavers are being 'crowded out' of access by mid-career workers in secure employment (Henehan, 2019). This poses the greatest risk to those school leavers most at risk of contributing to the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), the third of students who leave school each year without a full Level 2 qualification (Ofsted, 2018), a trend which the Augar review of post-18 education (Augar, 2019) discusses more broadly in relation to its recommendations for improving apprenticeships.

Relatedly, DAs are increasingly seen as part of organisational talent management and retention strategies (Hughes & Saieva, 2019), which may contradict the public policy aims of social mobility. The growing integration of the higher education and talent management literatures means that DAs may increasingly be evaluated through the lens of organisational justice and the move to a two-tiered workforce where the majority of employees are excluded from career development opportunities and only the select few enjoy fast-track careers (see Lacey & Groves, 2014 for a discussion of talent management and organisational justice).

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents new analysis of qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) based on repeated semi-structured interviews with a cohort of graduating degree apprentices. A longitudinal research design is valuable for exploring educational transitions (Warin, 2011), as it

enables an exploration of people's changes in fortune over time, rather than just a 'snapshot' (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003). Exploring and analysing transitions in this dynamic way can generate new theoretical insights through helping to uncover the underlying processes behind transition and change and the role of both constraining and enabling factors (Corden & Millar, 2007).

A purposive non-random sampling technique was adopted (Mason, 2002), with all members of a graduating cohort of degree apprentices from a university in the northwest of England invited to take part. In total, 22 graduating apprentices participated. All had completed or were about to complete a Digital & Technology Solutions DA at the time of our first interview. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 50. 15 were aged under 25, 7 were aged 25+. 13 identified as female, 9 as male. All except one was White. Three had caring responsibilities. Immediately prior to starting their DA, four were in full-time education/training, 13 were employed by their DA employer, 5 were employed by another employer. Seven reported that either or both of their parents/guardians had a degree. Two reported receiving Free School Meals while at school. All had achieved Level 3 qualifications prior to commencing their degree apprenticeship. The sample was drawn from across eight different employers, representing a range of industries (pharmaceutical, finance, higher education, automotive, research and logistics). The majority of the participants' employers were large, however three were small and medium enterprises.

Following ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan University's Ethics Committee (EthOS), fieldwork took place between April/May 2019 (wave a interviews) and April/May 2020 (wave b interviews). Whilst attrition is often a key challenge for QLR researchers (Corden & Nice, 2007), all 22 of the original participants were interviewed a second time. Thus, 44 interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were undertaken in total. Most interviews in the first wave were conducted face-to-face either on the university campus or in apprentices' workplaces. Where this was not possible, telephone interviews were conducted. The second wave of the research took place during the Covid-19 lockdown, thus all interviews were conducted virtually. With participants' consent, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Our status as researchers at the university at which the degree apprentices studied aided our access to participants. However, none of the research term were involved in the delivery of apprenticeships and our position as independent (albeit 'insider' to the DAs' university) researchers was stressed to participants at each interview (Mercer, 2007).

The first wave of interviews provided a baseline to establish a comprehensive picture of people's experiences of work and education to date, alongside other aspects of participants' lives that featured as part of their transition experience. Alongside retrospective biographical material concerning previous experiences of learning and work and routes into DA, they also explored future plans and aspirations. In the second wave, we asked explicitly about their experience of transition from apprentice to graduate. Participants were also asked to reflect again on future aspirations. The longitudinal research design enabled us to compare data collected on 'intentions and expectations… with actual events, behaviour and outcomes' (Millar, 2007, p. 538; Thomson, 2007).

Interview data were analysed thematically using NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software. A coding framework was constructed based on the key themes of focus in the interview topic guides combined with additional themes identified through a careful reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts. This process was repeated at each wave before a first layer of cross-sectional thematic analysis was undertaken at each wave (i.e. repeat cross-sectional analysis) (Thomson, 2007). In this paper we focus on how participants experienced the apprentice to graduate transition, and identify the ways in which this was shaped by employers.

FINDINGS

While the transition from DA to working life as a graduate was the key focus of this research (and making the transition from education to work tends to be the focus of graduate transitions research more generally), interviewee accounts made it clear that it is more helpful to consider multiple points of transition throughout their apprenticeship journey and beyond. The DA to graduate transition was clearly not something that occurred at one point in time, but was rather an ongoing process of learning, development and career progression which had started well before the end of their apprenticeship programme—as one participant described when asked to reflect on their transition from apprentice to graduate: '*There almost wasn't any transition… it was just like* [a] *continuum of me growing*' (Participant 10, male, 28, wave b). This sentiment was echoed across our interviewees:

> *I think really, the transition from apprentice to a normal working person actually happened after those first two years… the only difference between me and another normal colleague was that I wasn't there for one day of the week*. (Participant 15, female, 22, wave b)

Borrowing and extending the language used by Bathmaker et al. (2016), through our analysis we identified three key stages in the degree apprentice to graduate transition: 'getting in', 'getting on' and 'going further'. This lends support to the work of Green et al. (2013) and Behle (2020), who both argue that employability should be conceptualised in broader terms than simply whether individuals are able to secure work entry.

Below we explain these stages in more detail and explore the role played by employers at each, given the gap in the educational literature highlighted above. We interpret employer influence through the accounts of the apprentices and throughout distinguish between employer actions at (a) a strategic or organisational level (i.e. pay and rewards, training culture, progression pathways) and (b) a relational level (i.e. direct interactions and support from line managers and mentors). Throughout we consider how employer actions interact with other factors identified in the literature as shaping graduate transitions.

Getting in: Providing the opportunity and shaping who gets it

As apprenticeships combine both work and study, their transition into graduate employees began well before graduating from the programme. Whereas existing research on graduate transitions tends to focus on work entry, our participants had already made the transition in to work. Thus, 'getting in' to a degree apprenticeship programme represents the beginning of the DA to graduate journey.

In terms of the employer's influence at this stage of the DA to graduate transition, objectively they clearly play a role in providing these opportunities. They also shape who gets them. At a strategic level, their decision to participate in DA programmes in the first place determines the availability of these opportunities. While, in focusing on apprentice experiences, our data do not provide direct insights into the motivations of employers, we interpret employer involvement in the programme as a signal that they saw value in it. This perhaps vindicates policymaker efforts to deliver training programmes which reflect the priorities and needs of both employers and graduates (Harvey, 2000) (note that these employers were all engaging in the DA programme prior to the introduction of the apprenticeship levy).

Having established the opportunity, employers also shape who gets to take it up via their recruitment practices. Here we can infer several insights from accounts of interviewees alongside the characteristics of our sample. Firstly, participants' experiences and

achievement prior to undertaking their DA suggest that those recruiting were clearly selecting from a strong and competitive field (e.g. all were qualified to Level 3, and many had prior work experience). It was clear from our first interviews that while for a small number, DAs had been the only option available to them to obtain a degree, this was not the case for most.

Second, there was an apparent bias on the part of employers towards giving the opportunity to those already employed by their firm: just over half of the participants already worked for their employer prior to undertaking their DA (and several had undertaken apprenticeships at lower levels with their employer). While reflective of a particular quirk of the English apprenticeship system highlighted above, this may also reflect caution around introducing a new training pathway, partially offset by working through it with tried and tested staff members. Third, while our sample provides evidence of gendered diversity in terms of who 'gets in' to digital DAs, there was a notable lack of diversity in other respects (e.g. ethnicity, disadvantaged NEET groups). Thus, it is possible that setting demanding recruitment thresholds may have undermined more diverse recruitment practices needed to deliver on policy objectives such as social mobility.

Participants drawn from one employer in particular had commonly viewed a lower-level apprenticeship (i.e. Level 3) as a worthwhile 'gap year'—an opportunity to gain valuable experience before undertaking a traditional undergraduate degree.

> *I was always planning on actually doing a degree…* [I thought] *it will just be a year work experience have under my belt and then I'll go back to the normal degree. Then a year in they said, 'We're opening up this degree apprenticeship. Do you want to take part in it?'* (Participant 21, female, 23, wave a)

However, as the opportunity to undertake a degree apprenticeship arose, they had been keen to pursue this work-based learning route to achieve their higher education qualification.

Whether or not these findings can be explained through the actions of employers either at a strategic or a relational level is difficult to ascertain. However, the relational role between individuals and their employers (i.e. line managers and mentors) appeared significant from the accounts of our interviewees. Here, in addition to creating and offering the opportunity, the encouragement of managers—combined with some participants' privileged position and familiarity with the business as a 'business insider'—helped to ensure participants applied and were successful for the DAs:

> *There's a lot of influence from managers here, so most managers were giving the whole thing around, you know, why would not you do it? Look at the benefits. Think about your career. Think about the progression*. (Participant 5, female, 23, wave a)

Several participants described an element of 'happenstance' (Krumboltz, 2009) and a sense that they had been 'lucky' to have had the opportunity. However, for many this luck appears to have been generated by not only being in the right place at the right time (i.e. currently working for their employer), but being able to submit a strong application, being able and willing to take up opportunities that arise, and being further supported and encouraged by mentors and line managers to do so. This relates strongly to Tomlinson's (2017) notion of graduate capitals (particularly social and cultural), while also demonstrating the pivotal role of the employer as gatekeeper in granting access to the opportunity. Here we can also see how employers can be critical in expanding the 'horizons for action' described by Hodkinson (2008). Employers are therefore central to 'getting in' to DA.

Getting on: Supporting apprentices to develop and progress

A second stage of the transition was 'getting on'. Participants explained that through combining work and study over a 4-year period, they had completed their degree apprenticeship both qualified and experienced. Furthermore, many had experienced career progression during the apprenticeship, and as such were some way along career pathways rather than starting in 'entry-level' graduate roles upon completion:

> *I've not had to put my career on hold for years and earn no money or little money. I've been able to absolutely progress my career to nearly senior management*. (Participant 10, male, 28, wave a)

All were in full-time employment at both waves of the study, 18 of the 22 were in permanent roles at the time of our first interview, and the median salary of our graduating degree apprentices at wave a was £29,000. These headline measures of job quality compare favourably to those observed in the wider graduate labour market. For example, the security of a permanent contract for most of the DAs contrasts with the norm across graduate schemes in which a permanent contract generally follows successful completion of a 2 to 3-year graduate scheme (Graduate Prospects, 2022). According to HESA (2021), median salaries for computer science graduates are also lower, varying from £18,000 (low-skilled) to £27,000 (high-skilled). Alongside these extrinsic measures of salary and security, overall participants spoke enthusiastically about their jobs, skills use and wider career prospects (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2013) and felt in a secure position despite the Covid-19 pandemic that coincided with the second wave of interviews.

In addition to playing a significant role in shaping who gets in to a DA, employers also clearly shape apprentices' experiences *during* it—both in relation to sustaining and progressing, or 'getting on', in work. At a strategic level, organisational practices, including the decision to give apprentices permanent contracts (not a requirement for employers involved in apprenticeship programmes) and the existence of progression pathways, appeared to contribute to high levels of job satisfaction. Most were on a permanent contract and in many cases had been so well before the end of their DA. The existence of progression pathways and opportunities to start a 'career' while undertaking their DA within a company were also important features in participants' positive assessments of their working lives during their DA. One participant had been promoted three times prior to completion of their apprenticeship. This perhaps helps to explain why most emerged from their apprenticeship with better jobs than typical new graduates.

While all had worked hard and taken new opportunities open to them (Hodkinson, 2008; Krumboltz, 2009), the existence of these opportunities relies on the employer and the working environment they provide. Progression pathways and wider development opportunities are not a given.

Conversely, a small number felt that, while they had experienced some progression over the course of their apprenticeship, their status as an 'apprentice' had previously limited further progression to higher-level roles. However, we were able to see through the longitudinal approach adopted for this study that this had quickly changed upon completion:

> *I know I'm at a level, probably two or three higher than where I'm paid now, but because I have the apprenticeship or the apprentice label, it's very difficult within an organisation for them to justify… on the flipside, we have had promotions… I'm earning more money than I did before, so it's good*. (Participant 1, male, 31, wave a)

Overall, a strong commitment to the apprentices' learning and development was apparent. At a relational level, many participants cited the importance of supportive managers who helped them to manage and where possible reduce workloads when they were aware of important assignment deadlines. Having built up trust and rapport, these actors were often key when it came to thinking about working life beyond DA. The employer's role in shaping the DA to graduate transition in this respect is further underlined by participants' apparent indifference about—and reluctance to engage with—careers advice and support provided by their university. Participants reflected that university careers provision was geared more to helping students find their first job, rather than advising and supporting those already in work. Instead, participants often opted to seek the advice readily offered by a combination of line managers, mentors and wider business contacts.

> *I have a couple of mentors at* [employer] *so I'd probably go to them. I have always been quite open with my manager to say, 'Look, this is where I'd want to get to. How can I get there? What do I need to do to get there? They're probably the people that I would look to for advice.* (Participant 21, female, 23, wave b)

Some appeared better positioned in this respect than others—those in large companies with well-developed mentoring and line-management arrangements were clearly benefitting from this arrangement. However, whereas employers appeared pivotal at the stage of 'getting in' for widening participants' 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, 2008), and the combination of relational capital and organisational progression pathways arguably helps to explain our participants' positive experiences and outcomes following completion, there is a possibility that employers may actually work to constrain those horizons *if* careers advice accessed via the workplace has been focused on how to progress in a single firm. The decision of many to stay with their businesses may be interpreted as limiting further progression.

Going further: Providing security and opportunities for progression beyond apprenticeship

Returning more specifically to focus on experiences following graduation post-DA, our data provide insights into an additional stage—'going further'—as participants were catapulted to a status of high-earning graduates with responsibility and job security in a relatively short space of time. At wave b the median salary of our participants had risen to £37,000, with a median increase of £9000 over the interview waves. All except one was on a permanent contract by the time of our second interview.

Again, the significance of the employer's role was apparent, as the way in which roles and progression were managed post-apprenticeship clearly contributed to this experience. At a strategic level, and perhaps reflecting teething issues in the 'start-up phase' of DAs (Welbourn et al., 2019), employers' approaches to managing this transition appeared underdeveloped in some cases. Whereas some participants reported that there were clear processes for progression post-DA, others had to instigate and push for negotiation concerning their role post-apprenticeship.

A small number of interviewees described 'cliff edges' and a period of anxiety as their apprenticeship came to an end. However, following their experiences over time demonstrated that such cliff edges had relatively soft landings—as most had secured a permanent role prior to apprenticeship completion, uncertainty centred on whether they would be able to access specific roles, or work in particular teams or preferred departments:

> *I wanted to stay in the department I was in, and I was kind of getting worried. It was kind of, 'We've got a role for you. Everything's going to be fine. You do not need to apply for anything or work it out', which was absolutely great until kind of a day before your last day in the department, and I still had not heard*. (Participant 8, male, 24, wave b)

Employers appeared pivotal at this stage through providing both security (permanent contracts) and further progression opportunities post-DA. This contributed to the smooth and 'seamless' apprentice to graduate transition described by many of our participants, and is perhaps reflective of a high degree of complementarity between job roles and apprenticeship content. High levels of satisfaction with both their jobs and employers also appears to have played an important role. While a small number of apprentices wanted change, seeking distance between their apprenticeship role/employer and subsequent working lives, most wanted (and were able to) continue working for the employer with whom they completed their apprenticeship. This was the case in both large and small companies. However, our data suggest that progression in smaller companies may feel more difficult if the apprentice label is more difficult to shake. One participant, for example, had left his apprentice employer because he felt like he '*was still seen as the apprentice rather than the graduate with the experience*' (Participant 12, male, 23, wave b).

Reflecting on their experiences in our second-wave interviews, it was clear that for many, an emphasis on progression post-DA had continued. Thus, 'going further' emerged as a key stage in the DA to graduate transition for this group. Here, supportive teams and line managers again appeared an important component. Indeed, for most, their transition from apprentice to graduate involved the continuation of a working role in which they were being supported to develop, often through taking on new tasks and responsibilities. In most cases this involved promotion (both pay and job title).

> [I] *graduated in July and I was already in the role that I wanted to be in… Then finished the degree and I basically just got stuck into the role. I was given initiatives that I own and kind of drive within the department that I work for, which was really good because it gave me a lot of responsibility*. (Participant 20, female, 23, wave b)

Particularly compared to existing evidence on education and work transitions, risk and uncertainty appeared minimal (most were in permanent positions prior to completion of their DA). Even where risk was perceived (engendered in part by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated economic turbulence), participants felt protected by the '*resources that they are able to call upon to deal with these*' (Millar, 2007, p. 534), explicitly referencing human capital (i.e. through having skills and experience in high demand) but also likely to have been bolstered by social capital (links with employers and broader networks) and economic (financial) capital associated with years of paid work and no student debt:

> *If I got made redundant, I feel like I'm in a really strong position to go out there and get another job*. (Participant 6, female, 22, wave b)

The high level of job security reported by participants may also in large part be explained with reference to the 'demand side' rather than specific employers per se—due in part to the sectors they were working in (e.g. pharmaceuticals and financial services). In fact, some identified new opportunities as a result of the pandemic, as they needed to take on new responsibilities and new technologies were being utilised. In addition to these sectoral advantages, participants were confident that their skillsets were in high demand—noting no shortage of opportunities for

those with digital skills. Here the employer's role at a relational level emerged once again as this sense of security was further bolstered by reassurances from managers.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have presented original analysis of new empirical data from what we believe to be the first substantive qualitative longitudinal research conducted with graduating degree apprentices. Our study provides some of the first insights into how this new educational pathway and the 'apprentice to graduate' transition has been experienced, adding to an emerging empirical evidence base on DAs (Mulkeen et al., 2019; Rowe et al., 2016).

In addition to this empirical contribution, we contribute theoretically by exploring the role of employers at both strategic and relational levels, and at different stages of transition. From the accounts of our graduating DAs, we borrow and adjust the language of Bathmaker et al. (2016), extending this to incorporate broader conceptualisations of transition (Green et al., 2013). Our analysis shows that DAs experience the transition from apprentice to graduate in three core stages: 'getting in', 'getting on' and 'going further', and that employers appear to shape the experience of transition at each. Specifically, we show that employers play an important role in (i) facilitating original participation, (ii) supporting apprentices to develop and progress over the course of their apprenticeship and (iii) providing continued opportunities for progression for the graduates upon completion of their apprenticeship.

Our paper evidences the importance of employers as key actors when it comes to understanding employability (Behle, 2020; Green et al., 2013) which has not typically been emphasised in research on education to work transitions (Bimrose & Brown, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). We therefore respond to critiques advanced by Holmes (2013a) and Roberts (2018) that research typically neglects to consider the role of employers and the quality of labour market opportunities they are providing.

While not dismissing the role of individual agency, our findings suggest that employers played an important role in the positive transitions experienced and outcomes observed for our participants. Longitudinal analysis illustrates how degree apprentices' self-perceived employability is affirmed through interaction with their employers, both in relation to the objective success represented by role changes and salary increases as well as more subjective success in terms of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Furthermore, in a context in which there are many fears about the erosion of decent work even for graduates, our research has discovered good practices amongst employers in creating dignified and high-quality work environments for workers. While our sample is skewed towards those employed by larger employers, our findings show that such markers of job quality are not limited to their domain.

However, in terms of 'getting in', our findings echo concerns about who can access these more positive opportunities (HEC, 2019; Henehan, 2019; OfS, 2019). While our study suggests that DAs may be proving helpful in terms of gendered diversity in the digital sector, there are question marks over ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, a limit to the scalability of DAs and a tendency to take on existing employees as DAs raises concerns that they can exclude a significant proportion of people who lack the various capitals to take advantage of them. Career progression (and, relatedly, social mobility) for DAs is shown to be mediated by employers, which problematises the purely meritocratic and individualistic conceptualisation of social mobility through higher education.

This research demonstrates a need for clear advice and guidance about DAs to be more widely available, so that those not connected with employers are not denied the opportunity. As noted earlier, while our participants seem to be thriving in the labour market, there are important concerns about the emergence of a two-tiered workforce where the majority of

employees are excluded from career development opportunities and only the select few (such as our DAs) enjoy fast-track careers (Lacey & Groves, 2014). There is therefore a strong argument to find ways across the labour market to make 'good' or 'decent' work more widespread for the benefit of individuals, employers and society as a whole.

The interpretation of these findings requires caution: the participants were some of the first to graduate from a DA during a period of profound uncertainty. While this study provides some important insights into the experience of such programmes, this educational pathway is likely to have undergone change as providers and employers adapt as we enter the 'second cycle' phase of DAs (Welbourn et al., 2019), and the labour market context adapts to a post-Covid reality. There may also be something unique about this group of 'pioneers' who chose to pursue a new and untested educational pathway, and some bias may have been introduced through our position as researchers based in the university at which apprentices completed their DA, despite our best efforts to stress our independence and invite all to share their experiences—whether good or bad. Further research with later cohorts, a more diverse group of DAs and DAs studying different subjects and at different HEIs could fruitfully examine the 'degree apprentice to graduate' transition and the employer's role within this. It could also explore the experiences of DAs who have more problematic interactions with their employers, including who do not complete their apprenticeship programme.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

Ethical approval was obtained for this study from Manchester Metropolitan University's Ethics Committee (EthOS).

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