

Hackathon

Leading through ambiguity: motivating teams amid apprenticeship policy reform in Higher Education

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Abstract

Apprenticeship policy in England continues to evolve rapidly, with training providers facing ambiguity, and being tasked with maintaining compliance while sustaining quality and motivation among staff. This paper presents findings from a qualitative pilot study conducted at one of the UK's largest providers of higher and degree apprenticeships. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with three apprenticeship leaders and supported by extensive secondary research, the study explores how leaders navigate ambiguity, motivate teams, and sustain organisational performance during policy reform. Findings reveal that transformational leadership, psychological safety, and transparent communication are essential in mitigating uncertainty, while leaders who cultivate a growth mindset and distribute decision-making, foster resilience and autonomy within their teams. The study concludes with practical recommendations for higher-education institutions, further-education providers, and independent training organisations seeking to strengthen agility and morale amid policy-driven change.

Keywords

Apprenticeships, leadership, change management, motivation, higher education

Introduction

The ongoing reform of apprenticeship policy linked to England's higher-education (HE) sector presents persistent challenges for leaders who are attempting to balance regulatory compliance, quality assurance, and workforce morale. Apprenticeships are a complex product due to constantly changing funding rules, external scrutiny, and continuous government reform, which creates ambiguity in leadership decision-making for those attempting to navigate them. The limited research available on apprenticeships policy, such as works conducted by Lester (2020), Lillis and Varetto

(2020), and Bravenboer (2024), highlight this dynamic nature of apprenticeship policy, and collectively note a need for sustainable funding and regulatory conditions; due to implications for programme design and delivery. However, research on leadership specifically within apprenticeship provision within HE, and how these leaders respond to policy shifts, remains limited, with most literature addressing corporate or public-sector change rather than the apprenticeship context (Mintzberg, 1994; Schein, 2010; Armstrong, 2014). This study addresses that gap, asking: *Due to the ever-changing apprenticeship policy, how do leaders and managers lead through ambiguity and change? How do they motivate teams and respond?*

Literature Review

Policy Level; Ambiguity and Strategic Adaptation

Organisational leadership in apprenticeship provision is naturally shaped by external regulation – notably Ofsted’s Education Inspection Framework (2023) which defines quality, behaviour, personal development, and leadership. These elements are central to the intent, implementation, and impact of provision. Frequent updates to funding guidance, coupled with Department for Education (DfE) reforms, require universities to operate within tight compliance frameworks. Pfeffer (2003) conceptualises such ambiguity as decision-making under incomplete or conflicting information a daily reality for apprenticeship leaders. Recent studies further highlight that regulatory churn and intensified accountability cultures are reshaping leadership practice in work-based learning, requiring more adaptive, relational, and evidence-informed approaches (Smith & Phillips, 2023; Jones, 2024). In addition, sector research shows that university apprenticeship teams are increasingly expected to balance compliance, pedagogy, and employer partnership demands in a volatile policy environment (Khan & Armstrong, 2024).

Strategic responses to such volatility are theorised through both classical and emergent models. Chandler’s (1962) top-down model prioritises executive direction, whereas Mintzberg (1994) argues for emergent strategy responsive to context. Pettigrew (1985) and Kabeyi (2019) highlight how political interference and bureaucracy constrain agility. Mintzberg’s adaptive approach aligns closely with HE institutions that must recalibrate strategy with each reform cycle, a position reinforced by contemporary analyses showing that strategic flexibility is now a core capability for apprenticeship-driven universities (Jones, 2024; Khan & Armstrong, 2024).

Institutional Level; Change Management and Organisational Culture

Change management within HE has a cyclical nature, By (2005) and Burnes (2015) suggest that 70 per cent of change initiatives fail due to cultural resistance rather than process design. While Lewin’s (1951) and Kotter’s (1996) models remain foundational, and their linear stages unfreeze, change, and refreeze, struggle to address today’s continuous policy churn. Emergent and agile models (Dumas and Beinecke, 2018) are better suited to iterative adaptation. Schein (2010) defines organisational culture as shared values and norms shaped by external demands. When policy changes are perceived as externally imposed, staff morale and trust in leadership can often decline.

Conversely, learning-organisation cultures (Senge, 2006) enable reflection, dialogue, and resilience. Armstrong (2014) links workforce morale to role clarity, recognition, and inclusion, while Tuckman's (1965) model underpins the disruption of team cohesion under unclear goals. Transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) is therefore critical in restoring direction and purpose.

Team Level; Communication, Motivation, and Resilience

Clampitt et al. (2000) and Daft & Lengel (1986) stress that clear, two-way communication mitigates uncertainty. Where leaders employ open forums, consistent updates, and accessible messaging, teams report higher engagement and trust. Conversely, fragmented channels create noise that impedes alignment (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Deci & Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory emphasises autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the core drivers of intrinsic motivation. Resilience, defined by Masten (2001) as 'ordinary magic,' is not an individual trait but a product of supportive environments. Leadership that balances challenge and support (Schwartz & Porath, 2014) fosters sustainable performance without burnout. The literature therefore positions communication, empowerment, and psychological safety as the mechanisms through which leaders translate policy turbulence into collective learning.

Synthesis

Across these levels, three integrative themes emerged:

- the tension between agility and bureaucracy,
- the centrality of transparent communication, and
- the interplay between compliance and motivation.

The literature underpins that leadership effectiveness depends less on the stability of policy itself and more on leaders' ability to frame ambiguity as opportunity for growth (Kotter, 2012; Senge, 2006).

Methodology

This mini study adopted a pragmatist qualitative design, focusing on actionable insights rather than statistical generalisation (Saunders et al., 2016). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three apprenticeship leaders at UoS who hold responsibility for policy interpretation, compliance, and team leadership. However, there were limitations of this; notably that only three respondents provided some data and wider corroboration and investigation would make it more rigorous. Participants were purposively selected for their direct experience in navigating policy-driven change.

The interviews explored leadership approaches, motivational strategies, communication practices, and perceptions of organisational culture. Data was collected via Microsoft Teams, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Ethical approval was granted through the University's committee and participants received information sheets and

gave informed consent. Anonymity was ensured, and all identifiers removed. Limitations included the small, single-institution sample which restricted breadth but allowed for depth and contextualisation. Findings should be viewed as indicative of trends within HE apprenticeship leadership rather than as generalisable outcomes.

Findings

Strategic Agility vs Bureaucracy

All participants identified tension between rapid external deadlines and a much slower institutional governance. While compliance-driven actions prompted immediate responses, strategic adjustments such as revising curricula or quality systems were delayed by committee structures. Leaders described this as “structured but slow,” echoing Mintzberg’s (1994) critique of hierarchical inefficiency. Interviewees who adopted proactive scanning such as monitoring FE Week, UVAC bulletins, and ESFA circulars demonstrated greater preparedness and confidence. However, this individualised vigilance revealed systemic communication gaps; institutional channels often lagged sector updates, resulting in uneven implementation across departments and inconsistencies.

Communication and Cultural Alignment

Communication emerged as both the greatest strength and as a weakness. Departments with regular briefings, cross-team meetings, and accessible senior leaders reported higher morale. Where communication was sporadic, staff felt excluded and anxious. This supports Kotter’s (1996) emphasis on clear coalition building and Argyris’s (1991) advocacy of open dialogue. Participants highlighted the risk of policy fatigue from constant change announcements without visible follow-through. They emphasised the need for concise, solution-focused messaging that links policy shifts directly to practice.

Motivation, Morale, and Psychological Safety

Intrinsic motivation was sustained when leaders provided autonomy, recognition, and a clear sense of purpose. Interviewees described using small wins such as celebrating Ofsted commendations or apprentice success stories to reinforce team pride. Conversely, heavy workloads and inconsistent resource allocation undermined morale, echoing Armstrong’s (2014) warnings about burnout. Transformational behaviours such as vision sharing, empathy, and trust were repeatedly cited as morale boosters. Leaders who modelled vulnerability (acknowledging uncertainty) were perceived as more authentic, enhancing psychological safety (Schein, 2010).

Personal Responsibility and Wellbeing

All participants acknowledged the emotional labour of leading through constant reform. Echoing Goleman (1995) and McDowall & Kinman (2016), they recognised the need for self-care and boundary management. Modelling wellbeing behaviours such as

protected focus time, and open mental-health dialogue was viewed as critical to sustaining team resilience.

Discussion

The findings affirm that ambiguity in apprenticeship policy is not a temporary disruption but a structural feature of the HE environment. Leadership success therefore depends on cultivating institutional agility and finding the capacity to respond rapidly without eroding quality or morale. At policy level, leaders require mechanisms for rapid sense-making: horizon scanning, scenario planning, and cross-provider networks (Wildavsky, 1979). Universities should institutionalise “policy pulse” updates that synthesise changes and their implications within 48-72 hours. At institutional level, communication infrastructure is decisive. Clear escalation pathways, delegated decision rights, and time-boxed change forums can prevent bottlenecks. A flatter, networked structure supports faster feedback loops and reduces the frustration associated with slow governance cycles (Kabeyi, 2019). At team level, sustaining motivation requires deliberate psychological safety and recognition practices. Leaders should pair challenge with support when balancing performance targets with wellbeing protection (Schwartz & Porath, 2014). Embedding micro-rituals of recognition, for example weekly appreciation notes, and open debriefs will reinforce purpose and belonging.

The study highlights a leadership paradox: compliance frameworks designed to assure quality can inadvertently suppress innovation. Leaders must reinterpret compliance as an enabler of quality rather than its opposite, integrating regulatory requirements into reflective learning processes (Senge, 2016). As a mini study based on three interviews within one institution, the findings offer indicative insights rather than generalisable conclusions. Self-reporting may introduce optimism or defensiveness bias, and the absence of observational data limits triangulation. Future work should expand to comparative, multi-provider samples and incorporate quantitative wellbeing and engagement measures. Longitudinal research would capture how leadership responses evolve across successive policy cycles. Leading apprenticeship provision through continual policy reform requires more than procedural compliance; it demands adaptive leadership that couples strategic agility with empathy and open communication. This study demonstrates that when leaders model authenticity, provide autonomy, and frame change as shared learning, teams sustain motivation despite uncertainty. For universities, FE colleges, and independent training providers, the imperative is clear: embed agility as a cultural norm, not an emergency response. By institutionalising rapid-sense-making routines, transparent communication, and wellbeing-centred leadership, organisations can transform ambiguity from a destabilising force into a catalyst for collective growth.

Conclusion and recommendations

To respond more effectively to fast-paced policy reform, institutions should embed rapid procedures that enable timely action without sacrificing clarity or accountability. Developing fast-lane protocols for policy-mandated updates can help by clearly defining approval steps, ownership, accountability, and communication flows, ensuring

that required changes move quickly and transparently through the organisation. Alongside this, transparent communication processes are essential. Fortnightly two-minute policy summaries can translate national reforms into concise, actionable local guidance, reducing uncertainty and supporting consistent interpretation across teams. This clarity creates the conditions for distributed leadership to flourish. By delegating decision rights for minor curriculum or delivery adjustments to programme leads, institutions can promote responsiveness and agility, while actively celebrating early escalation of issues rather than risk avoidance.

A sustainable balance between compliance and innovation is also critical. Embedding compliance checks within reflective team reviews reframes regulation as a tool for improvement rather than error policing. This approach supports wellbeing and long-term sustainability when combined with coaching-style supervision, rotation of high-pressure policy responsibilities, and visible wellbeing practices designed to reduce burnout. Finally, impact can be amplified through cross-sector collaboration and evidence-informed practice. Establishing communities of practice across HE, FE, and private providers enables shared policy interpretation and more streamlined employer engagement. Extending this work through multi-site, mixed-methods research would allow institutions to identify which leadership behaviours most strongly predict staff motivation and delivery performance, strengthening future reform implementation.

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