

Hackathon

Learning alone: how isolation and peer absence weaken Degree Apprentice identity

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Abstract

This reflective paper examines how being the sole degree apprentice within my organisation shaped the development of my Degree Apprenticeship Identity. With no internal peers, the social component of this identity had limited opportunity to develop, while my professional identity dominated through daily workplace reinforcement. The reflection explores three interconnected themes: the fragility of social identity under peer absence; isolation as a fluctuating condition that intensified around assessment deadlines and required greater reliance on emotional intelligence; and the influence of organisational micro-cultures, where employer-based groups strengthened belonging for some but positioned me on the periphery. Online learning reduced visible grouping yet provided fewer opportunities for informal peer connection. The paper concludes by recommending cross-organisational study structures, purposeful use of in-person learning, and strengthened peer networks to reduce isolation and enhance belonging. These insights illustrate how relational conditions shape identity formation for degree apprentices navigating academic and professional demands.

Keywords

Degree Apprenticeship Identity; Social Learning Identity; Peer Learning; Belonging; Isolation; Micro-cultures; Work-Integrated Learning

Introduction

Degree apprenticeships place learners within two concurrent systems of meaning: academic study and workplace practice. Navigating these spaces requires apprentices to negotiate multiple identities, shaped by belonging, collaboration and recognition (Weyns et al., 2018; Taylor-Smith et al., 2023). Peer learning plays a particularly key role in sustaining engagement and confidence, as shared effort provides motivation and emotional reassurance (Ghimire and Singh, 2025). Belonging

further supports identity development, particularly for apprentices balancing work and study commitments (Ahn and Davis, 2020).

Quew-Jones (2022) conceptualises these dynamics as a Degree Apprenticeship Identity comprising three interconnected components: a personal identity informed by background and values, a professional identity reinforced through workplace performance and recognition, and a social learning identity developed through peer interaction, group reflection, and collaborative learning. These components strengthen when apprentices can align their academic and professional selves within a supportive peer environment. However, the development of the social learning identity depends on access to peers who share the apprenticeship experience.

My experience diverged from this model. As the sole apprentice within my organisation, I had no immediate peer group to anchor my learning, compare progress with, or draw shared motivation from. This paper reflects on how isolation, course structure and my approach to university study shaped the fragility of the social learning component of my Degree Apprenticeship Identity. By integrating personal reflection with current literature, the paper offers insight into how belonging, recognition and peer access influence identity formation for degree apprentices, and what this means for programme design.

Fragility of Social Learning Identity under Peer Absence

Social identity is built through peer belonging and shared academic practice, while professional identity is grounded in organisational roles and performance validation (Quew-Jones, 2022; Weyns, 2018). Literature highlights that peer belonging is central to the development of social identity, with researchers emphasising affiliation, collaboration, and peer acceptance as the key influences (Quew-Jones, 2022; Taylor-Smith, 2023; Weyns, 2018). My experience diverged from these findings. I had a manager who was my mentor, a work-based education officer who met with me after each assignment, and a supportive team at both the university and workplace, which is shown to foster engagement and belonging (Taylor-Smith, 2023). Yet, while this support ensured I remained on track academically, it did little to shape my social identity in the way Quew-Jones (2022) describes because it lacked the relatability of peers sharing the same journey, so I therefore gravitated more into my professional identity.

My professional identity was further reinforced daily in the workplace by delivering new outcomes through the skills-based components of the university programme, where I was required to evidence competencies developed in my role. However, these assessments reinforced my professional identity, since they were drawn directly from tasks I had already undertaken, which is a risk noted in apprenticeship research, where workplace-based assessments can embed professional rather than social identities (Chadwick et al., 2024). By contrast, the more traditionally academic elements of the programme such as reading literature, preparing assignments, and writing reflections often felt isolating due to limited peer connection. Peer contact enhances motivation and buffers stress in these moments, yet I had no opportunity for shared study sessions, exchanging research ideas or checking in with other degree

apprentices within the organisation (Derbyshire, 2024; Jiang and Zhu, 2024). Their absence meant there was no sense of collective effort or shared momentum, which left my social identity comparatively fragile (Clarke, 2025). Meanwhile, the workplace offered a constant flow of recognition and praise, anchoring my professional identity and making it far more attractive, showing how isolation can weaken social identity and pull apprentices further into their work role.

Isolation as a Fluctuating Condition

Research often treats isolation as a continuous state that runs across the whole duration of an apprenticeship (Clarke, 2025; Fabian, 2022). My experience partly supports this, as I did feel isolated when study and work demand collided. However, isolation was not constant; it peaked in the weeks before assignment deadlines, when clashing responsibilities created the greatest pressure, and receded during ordinary teaching weeks where I remained in my work identity. This reflects Chadwick et al's, (2024) observation that upskill apprentices often face simultaneous work and study demands without adjustments to workload, which limits opportunities for reflection and support.

In my case, the absence of peers within my organisation on the same programme made this worse. I had no one locally who could share the experience, reflect on work-integrated learning tasks, or reassure me that the stress of deadlines was normal. This is significant because research shows that apprentices typically rely on peers for reassurance, shared understanding, and emotional support, with these relationships often developing into friendships that buffer pressure and enhance engagement (Taylor-Smith et al., 2023; Weyns et al., 2018). Although I had access to university peers in theory, these relationships did not develop in a way that enabled regular discussion or shared momentum, removing an important source of comparison and belonging during more demanding phases of study. During peak workload weeks, feelings of frustration and lower motivation made study more difficult, and at times it felt as though I was carrying the apprenticeship alone. Peer support is known to reduce burnout, feelings of inadequacy and emotional strain through interaction engagement, yet none of these mediating benefits were available to me (Liu, Zhou, and Guo, 2023; Gómez, 2024).

However, isolation did not necessarily cause me to disengage. Instead, it pushed me to adopt coping strategies, drawing on emotional intelligence, and using self-awareness and regulation to manage frustration, alongside exercise and routines to maintain focus and balance between studies and work (Goleman, 1995). These strategies became necessary because I lacked someone who could validate my experience or normalise the pressures of balancing work and study. Without this local anchor for my social identity, the learning role became less visible in my daily context, and reassurance had to be generated internally. This suggests that isolation does not inevitably erode participation but shifts the work of persistence from shared peer spaces to the individual apprentice.

Micro Cultures and Belonging

In shared classroom settings at the university, apprentices were always sat with colleagues from their own organisation. This created micro-cultures where tacit knowledge flowed naturally: shared stories about internal systems, managers and challenges were understood instantly, and apprentices within these groups reinforced each other's belonging (Derbyshire, 2024). Schein's model provides a useful lens here. The artefacts, such as seating patterns and rituals about who speaks to whom, the values linked to loyalty to the employer, and the assumptions that professional talk was most relevant, combined to sustain organisational identity within the classroom (Taylor-Smith, 2023; Schein, 2017). For those in these groups, this strengthened both trust and confidence. However, for me, these conversations created tacit barriers as my input rarely aligned with their organisational context, and while I was not deliberately excluded, my participation felt peripheral (Idrees, 2024). As the only apprentice from my organisation, there was no natural group for me to join, and this often left me observing rather than contributing.

The outcome was that the outer-core social identity component of my Degree Apprenticeship Identity, which Quew-Jones (2022) associates with peer affiliation and group belonging, was weakened. Yet this exclusion was not entirely negative. Listening in allowed me to absorb diverse organisational practices that broadened my professional awareness. I observed that micro-cultures fostered cohesion and strengthened belonging for many apprentices, bringing their groups closer together, yet simultaneously creating boundaries that excluded others. At times, it felt as though I was present in the space but not fully part of the learning community, which highlighted how social identity can depend on subtle cues of shared experience.

Online lectures and breakout groups removed the physical clustering of organisational peers and muted the side conversations that had previously reinforced exclusion. Interactions often became shorter, more task-focused and more formal. In this environment, apprentices, me included, carried their professional identity directly into the classroom. Joining meetings during working hours, often from the same desk, meant that the tone of discussion leaned towards efficiency and problem solving rather than informal bonding. Literature often frames the absence of tacit language in online settings as a loss, warning that it restricts the richness of collaboration and weakens social cohesion (Mahajne and Alhuzail, 2024). My experience diverges from this view. The reduction of informal, context-specific talk gave me more equal space to contribute, and the continuity of my professional identity sharpened my focus. I felt more confident, less distracted, and more able to link learning directly to my role.

Conclusion

My degree apprenticeship experience was shaped by the interplay between the three components of Degree Apprenticeship Identity. The social identity component, which relies on peer belonging and shared learning, remained fragile because I entered the programme as the only apprentice in my organisation. Without peers to provide comparison, reassurance or shared momentum, this component surfaced around deadlines and formal teaching spaces, which aligns with research on the importance of peer belonging for engagement and confidence (Quew-Jones, 2022; Derbyshire, 2024). In contrast, the professional identity component was reinforced daily through

workplace recognition, validation, and the immediate relevance of applying new skills, which created a more stable and rewarding anchor. This imbalance pushed me to rely on personal strategies such as emotional intelligence and resilience, yet it also highlighted how institutional and digital structures could not replicate the motivational force of peers.

By situating my experience within existing literature, I have shown both alignment and divergence from the DAI model. Isolation limited the growth of the social identity component, but it also acted as a catalyst that drove greater adaptability, self-regulation, and deeper reflection. This illustrates that identity formation for degree apprentices is negotiated across competing spaces, with isolation functioning as both a barrier and a stimulus for development.

Recommendations

Reducing isolation and strengthening the social learning component of Degree Apprenticeship Identity requires changes that embed belonging within existing structures across universities, employers, and professional bodies, without adding additional burden to already time-poor apprentices (Quew-Jones, 2022).

For universities, the priority should be redesigning how contact time and campus resources are used to strengthen the social learning component of DAI (Quew-Jones, 2022). Cross-organisational group work should be embedded into assignments and case tasks, with apprentices rotated multiple times across the programme, ensuring exposure to diverse workplace practices and preventing silos from forming (Hutton, 2025; Schein, 2017). In-person days should be deliberately structured around collaboration rather than delivery, supported by optional study groups where apprentices can come together informally to work side-by-side (Hutton, 2025). Student Unions can also create light-touch opportunities for social connection, such as offering a free drink after timetabled teaching once per term. These moments require no additional travel yet allow relationships to develop organically. Remote delivery must remain central due to apprentices' competing responsibilities, but in-person contact should maximise its social and academic value (Clarke, 2025).

For employers, strengthening identity means reinforcing the professional component of Degree Apprenticeship Identity by protecting study time and formally recognising academic progress through performance reviews and internal communications (Northey et al., 2018; Quew-Jones, 2022). Establishing internal apprentice and alumni networks would further support the social learning component by normalising the apprentice role and creating accessible peer support within the workplace (Quew-Jones, 2022).

For professional bodies, engagement should begin at induction to strengthen the personal component of Degree Apprenticeship Identity by validating apprentices' confidence and connecting them early to a wider professional community (Chadwick et al., 2024; Quew-Jones, 2022). Bodies such as CMI should also provide resources on balancing work and study, including guidance on self-management, stress recognition, and emotional intelligence strategies. These tools reinforce the personal

component of identity and help apprentices regulate workload and wellbeing across the programme (Goleman, 1995; Quew-Jones, 2022).

Together, these amendments embed peer connection, recognition and self-management into structures that already exist. They strengthen the social learning, professional and personal components of Degree Apprenticeship Identity while reducing the isolation that weakens belonging (Quew-Jones, 2022).

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