

Exploring the Experience of Degree Apprentices and Academics in Fostering Managerial-Level Competencies: A Case of Vocational Degrees within the UK Higher Education

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Abstract: *The paper presents the experience of academic staff and degree apprentices in fostering degree-level knowledge, skills, and behaviour (KSBs) in management fields. Indeed, vocational degrees bring together contemporary academic theory and research with a practical understanding of activities within the sector. A model proposed by Edmund (2007), where a successful work-integrated programme is likened to 'apprentices, employers, and universities' in a training approach. As such apprentices' learning journey begins with (apprentice-employer relationships), followed by education (apprentice relationships with the institution) and codification of knowledge (apprentice, employer and learning provider relationship). To operationalize Edmund's model in this paper, KSBs are acquired by the degree apprentices in the classroom setting (theory) and the application of acquired KSBs in the work environment (practice) to solve real-life issues in management fields. Consequently, a new message is required to reposition the vocational degrees narrative in the public domain as sub-standard degrees that are fit for purpose. To address this issue, the paper established that degree apprentices are well-equipped with advanced methodological and theoretical competencies, they are trained to analyse and manage an ever-changing workplace, and to be self-reliant, adaptable, and confident in their discipline as it develops over time. The paper results confirmed that the vocational degrees pathway is very competent in the development of managerial-level competencies for management professionals. It contributes positively to the management sector in terms of degree-level knowledge, skills, and behaviour. To enhance the credibility of vocational degrees the government needs to do more in the awareness campaign within under-represented communities.*

1 INTRODUCTION

The nation's skill set demands are becoming more complex and multi-layered because of advances in modern technology and environmental concerns. The UK leadership and management sector is not insulated from this global phenomenon (Pius et al., 2023). The required competencies for this sector are advancing, in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to work, and call for constant monitoring, examination, and alignment of the programme curriculum with these realities (Hancock, 2021). Globally, work-based learning is undergoing an extraordinary transformation to make it more aligned with required market skill needs and the impending 4th Industrial Revolution (World Economic Forum, 2020).

An exploratory sequential mixed-method study design was adopted to explore the effectiveness of vocational degrees in the development of competencies and their contributions to the sector, including the challenges and successes so far. The justification for this approach is to explore and gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of vocational degrees in developing knowledge, skills, and behaviours (KSBs) and their preferred pathway (Pius & English, 2023; Roberts, 2021).

It is hoped that the findings will provide empirical evidence and insights into practices, challenges, and successes so far. To achieve this, participants were selected to give a robust account from a qualitative perspective, drawing on each institution partner's specific knowledge and experience to drive the inquiry while offering ample representative differences. Quantitative data collection was undertaken to facilitate the generalization of the study findings.

The papers' findings were discussed and linked back to the paper's objectives:

- To explore the impact of vocational degrees in the development of sector-specific competencies for degree apprentices in the management field;
- To investigate the contributions of vocational degrees in alleviating the shortage of skills in the sector;

- To identify the challenges and successes of vocational degrees so far.

Pius et al. (2023) suggest that there is an ongoing debate about adopting innovative work-based pedagogy for reskilling and upskilling competencies for the existing staff to meet and exceed employer and sector skill needs. A paradigm shift in the sector necessitated a call for the introduction of work-focused courses at a degree level to provide learners with both theoretical and practical competencies while using the workplace as an active learning environment (Pius et al., 2023). The result reveals that the apprentice's decision to embark on this learning journey is a turning point that can affect current and future job roles and also contribute positively to the nation's skills bank (Pius & English, 2023; Roberts, 2021; Hancock, 2021).

An apprentice's work-based learning journey starts with their choice to follow the vocational degree pathway, not embarking on the usual conventional degree route. Pius et al. (2023) argue that those persons from underprivileged backgrounds should be more pleased to sign up for a course like the chartered managers' degree since it provides an opportunity to earn money and study at the same time, as well as gain relevant professional recognition in their chosen field. It is attracting people from different backgrounds including those from deprived communities and groups (Pius & English, 2023).

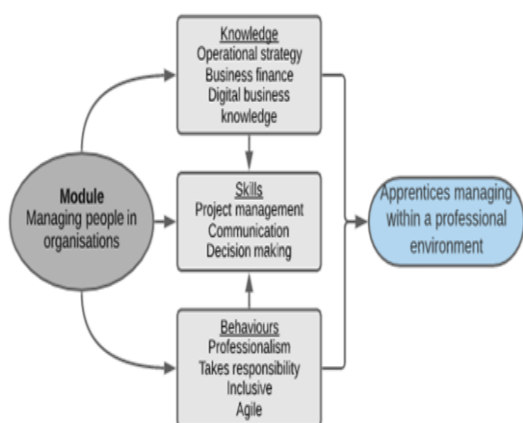
Also, the findings are in keeping with the study by Boudon (1974) on educational opportunity, the model known as rational analysis theory (RAT) was adopted in the study to examine the costs (economic) and benefits (social), it is assumed that actors carry out a cost-benefit analysis before acting (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014).

This might be one of the reasons why people decide to follow vocational degrees as a pathway for a degree course, the model lends credence to the explanations of the educational decision of apprentices, and this may explain why those from underprivileged groups and communities preferred to follow the vocational degrees pathway. This explains the educational preferences of

people from similar backgrounds and what informs their decisions (Pius & English, 2023).

2 FINDINGS PRESENTATION

The introduction of degree-level work-based pedagogy to enhance the nation's knowledge economy was echoed by most participants. The findings suggest that it is needed for the nation to compete effectively in the global labour market and meet the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution while transitioning to a greener economy. The programme is designed and delivered to facilitate the development of apprentice professional/occupational competencies within a specified profession. It is underpinned by three core competencies known as 'knowledge, skills, and behaviours' (KSBs), with end-point assessment (EPA). At the module delivery level, the link between vocational degrees and apprenticeship standards is graphically illustrated in 1.

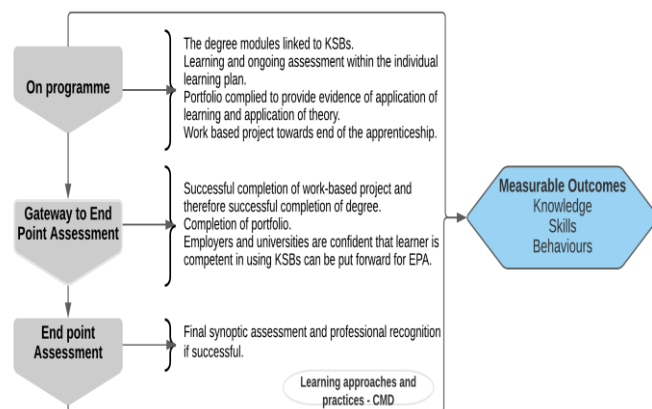


The programme seeks to boost transferability and recognition of the outcomes to improve career development opportunities for learners and provide workforce development goals for organisations. There is a strong alignment between the institution's strategy, standards, and expectations, with a top-down approach led by academic and market needs. On the other hand, the findings revealed that there is a need for the establishment of a central unit by the universities to support the course administrative infrastructure and systems. The proposed central unit will reduce administrative pressure on the teaching staff, for them to focus more on applied paper and teaching responsibilities.

Concerning effective management of vocational degrees, strong leadership and strategic alignment were

recognised by the study findings as two major challenges in the management of work-based pedagogy at the degree level. A call for the employer's participation in the assessment exercise with the nomination of a specialist tutor to coordinate the activities was made by the academics. It reveals that the curriculum's basic design standards are relatively well supported by the tripartite group university, organisation, and professional bodies. A robust system for checks and balances is required, with a structured staff development plan that facilitates the sharing of best practices and effective communication across levels.

The findings revealed that there is an issue in offering higher-level work-based programmes for five years without a degree equivalent certificate, this can reduce vocational degrees' appeal, transferability, and currency; it's worth and image could also be damaged in the long term. This approach can negatively affect professional bodies with a degree qualification as the minimum requirement to join or upgrade to professional status in some professionals. The introduction of stepping-off routes or exit pathways for the vocational degrees programme was supported by most of the participants. A point at which a learner can safely exit with a recognised lower certificate including an option to re-enroll and complete the course. A summary of the vocational degree approaches and practices is illustrated in Figure 2.



As demonstrated in the above figure the vocational degree is a valuable WBL pedagogy for the development of higher-level KSBs for undergraduate apprentices. It accommodates flexible and personalized learning when supported with regular one-to-one and online sessions with supportive department staff. The

findings revealed pre-degree level English, Math, and academic writing lessons for those apprentices without basic learning skills.

Learning providers were urged to regularly review their syllabus, module contents and resources, to ensure relevance and potency in addressing employer and sector skill needs. However, some concerns were raised about course details, narrowness of programmes and increased funding. The idea of programme standardization and sharing of best practices was regarded by the study findings as the best methods and the way forward; unification of quality standards can induce more administrative red tape and continuous process repetition. Conversely, the stakeholders need to appreciate the level of personalization involved in the programme, to better comprehend the challenges. The vocational degree is one of the best quality-assurance programmes, and it is fit for the intended purpose through multiple agencies' interventions and supervision.

The principle of Edmund's (2007) model of stakeholders' level of involvement in this study is to contribute to the debate on the usefulness of vocational degrees in fostering higher-level KSBs for undergraduate apprentices. The model equates a successful WBL programme to learners, employers, and learning providers in a training method, starting with (apprentice-employer relations), followed by education (learner relations-learning providers) and codification of knowledge (employer-learning provider relationship education).

The vocational degrees usefulness in bridging the gap between theory acquired in the classroom and the ability to perform individual tasks in the workplace using the following elements- knowledge (ideas), skills (objects) and behaviours (observables), systematically analyzed and documented in the study to address (Obj 1 & 2).

2.1 Vocational degrees contributing to the sector skill needs

Developing sector-specific KSBs is fundamental to the effective performance of current and future job tasks and career development for the apprentices. The findings showed that employers required certain

competencies from the workforce to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

To this end, vocational degrees are used for reskilling and upskilling existing staff members, particularly those who lack formal certification and to meet the requirements of professional bodies for full or student membership as documented in the study findings. It reveals that the introduction of vocational degrees assists in addressing the fundamental issue in the sector, which suggests that a third of managers are considered inept by their teams and this constitutes one of the reasons for the UK's poor performance in productivity. The results of the study establish that vocational degrees empower apprentices with the relevant competencies to gain a holistic understanding of the tenets, theories, and approaches for organisational management. The acquired KSBs are used by apprentices to evaluate processes and systems in their current jobs to enhance individual and organisation productivity. It suggests that vocational degrees are a beacon of light and hope for thousands of mature staff with no formal qualifications with few or no skills to show over the years.

The results of the study showed that the programme is contributing positively to the employer and the sector in terms of knowledge development for undergraduate apprentices. Although, the process is multi-layered and complex; it comprises both theories and ideas, as well as practical understanding built on the experience of having performed certain duties. The findings categorized the effective delivery of knowledge in this course into four main areas - disciplinary, interdisciplinary, epistemic, and procedural. This is very much in line with apprenticeship degree standards.

Disciplinary knowledge is used by apprentices for data collection, understanding, and evaluation of evidence for dissertations, reports, and capstone projects. Interdisciplinary knowledge enables apprentices to contextualize pertinent issues in the learning journey and the workplace. It also assists the learners in recognizing predispositions, for instance 'what is' and the basis employed to arrive at it, as well as making logical conclusions. This branch of knowledge - epistemic promotes the act of thinking and acting like a professional by the apprentice while increasing the understanding of the profession's core concepts and shared doctrines.

Procedural knowledge accelerates the understanding of systems and structures in terms of thinking and designing among apprentices. It also facilitates a holistic understanding of key procedures and the necessary practical steps that should be followed in a certain field. Engeli & Turner (2019) argued that the different knowledge considered for the study is essential for a successful WBL.

Also, the findings showed that vocational degrees are a useful and effective pedagogy for developing higher-level skill sets for undergraduate apprentices and as such contribute higher-level skills for the employer and the sector. The process of skills acquisition in vocational degrees is grouped into different aspects for effective delivery at this level starting with 'cognitive and meta-cognitive' it is required for carrying out academic tasks by using knowledge gained in a practical way to complete a given work as instructed by the manual or superior. Followed by 'social and emotional skills' which apprentices need to become better people, and excellent professionals and manage themselves to become responsible global citizens in terms of respecting civilisation and the laws that govern both national and international territories. Physical and practical skills are important ones in personal and professional life, they are used for operating machines and carrying out manual tasks as required.

The study found that developing appropriate KSBs at a certain level can change apprentice attitudes to work. A positive attitude to work is regarded as the glue that holds everything together in the workplace; therefore, good behaviour at work cannot be stressed. This approach to work is about a person's thoughts and morals, largely drawn from cultural and societal environments.

It plays a key part in individual life experience and accomplishments, in terms of career, academic, longevity, as well as social well-being. It assists apprentices in navigating themselves towards a career path and the future they desire. The development of basic qualities for a successful work-life depends on the willingness to develop good working relationships with others, be able to manage one's own and others' performance, give and receive evidence-based feedback and listen to other people in the team.

From the employer's perspective, the findings revealed that it is extremely important for apprentices to be able to use inductive and deductive knowledge in the interpretation of theories and ideas in the field, as well

as converting them into accessible information, which is then accessible to the team members.

Employers strongly advised that learning providers must equip apprentices with relevant KSBs to meet their personal and professional needs, for them to gain a better understanding of current developments and practices required to respond effectively to workplace changes. So that they can be able to undertake appropriate strategic decisions that will refocus their management strategies to increase the organisation's productivity and the capacity to compete in the global marketplace. The findings suggest that this has been one of the motivations for organisations to sign up for the vocational degrees programme, with the anticipation of working closely with the learning providers in developing a programme that can address their skill needs effectively.

The results of the study reveal that the programme is currently upskilling and reskilling existing staff members to meet employers' skill needs and to align this group of workers with the organization's strategic development and succession plan. It allows these apprentices to gain a degree-level certificate in management, which increases self-confidence and the drive to progress in their chosen profession and to attain a higher professional membership grade, which can improve the organization's reputation and credibility.

On the other hand, employers are not pleased with the current support arrangement and the communication level, especially with a limited opportunity for employers to contribute directly to the development of syllabus, content planning and the delivery approach this point was reiterated by the study findings. The importance of an inclusive management approach for the programme to enable employees' input in the learning process and build a robust workable relationship that can enhance the programme standards was discussed in the study.

Hughes & Saieva (2019) study found that employers are not just clients, but key players in the vocational degrees learning process, as such their contributions are very valuable for the programme's success. The findings supported the appointment of a senior member of staff as a champion for the development of stable relationships within the parties. Most importantly, appointing someone with an up-to-date sector understanding, and experience of working in the work-based learning setting, to be able to rationalize learning

provider jargon and procedures, while aligning them with the employers' strategic goals.

2.2 The challenges and successes so far

The descriptions of vocational degrees lived experience which participants shared were mostly positive and hopeful for the programme's future, with some applied recommendations offered, except for a few reservations about the local delivery approach. The learning providers normally consider the programme based on how it fits in with the institution's vision and mission to expand access to the higher education system for all. Especially for those teenagers and mature learners from underprivileged backgrounds without a basic entry qualification or the required attitude for the workplace. However, the programme critics continue to question the advantages of these new courses when compared to the existing management degree courses at the same level (Lester & Bravenboer, 2020).

The study findings reinforced the fact that there are some structural benefits, such as providing a purposeful podium for ingenuity to be taught in an organised manner and applied in the actual workplace. It questions the prevailing understanding of the rapport between higher education and the workplace, contributing to the existing practical experience in the sector through hybrid ideas required for the development and sustaining of talent pipelines for the nation's economy and this cannot be overstated. Because this group of workers represents a pool of high-level managerial competencies that can play an active part in resolving organisational skill challenges. Also, acquiring degree-level managerial skills and qualifications, and earning money while studying, with no student loan to pay back, is an added advantage for the programme (Anderson, 2018a, b).

It is evident in this paper that the programme's popularity is rising, and the image issue is gradually fading away. Although more still needs to be accomplished to expedite the developmental process of this pathway, to enjoy public support and gain more labour market confidence, this is necessary to drive the programme formalisation process. The findings called for building a robust synergy with the relevant professional bodies and regulatory agencies will facilitate the addition of a vocational degree as one of the possible compulsory prerequisites for professional recognition in the sector. Better still, reaching an agreement with the employers and the labour market to always state in the person specification section that the vocational degrees qualification is acceptable and

welcomed, in the same capacity as the conventional management degrees.

Creating an impactful awareness campaign with a streamlined official information pack for the programme and advice networks will go a long way to rebranding the programme image and status promoted in the study. To raise and sustain the vocational degrees status and standard for all, as a high-quality degree pathway, with gold standard benefits and excellent career progression opportunities, targeting government and private sector investment in rebranding message is long overdue. However, the study noted that vocational degrees seem to be misconstrued in some quarters, especially by those outside the sector as an inferior qualification, when compared to other management degrees.

3 CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions derived from the paper findings indicated that the UK leadership and management sector is experiencing a remarkable change, fully aligning with the current and future market skill needs while transitioning to a greener economy.

Today's service-oriented workplace is constantly advancing, and it is mostly driven by technology (Powell, 2019). Changing learners' profiles and enhanced marketisation are creating some challenges in the development of competencies for undergraduate apprentices.

It is acknowledged in this study that the UK government has taken some deliberate measures to widen access to higher education for underrepresented groups by launching a programme like vocational degrees. Glaesser and Cooper (2014) argued that the difference in social distribution of educational achievement, and its persistence, is entrenched in social phenomena.

Introducing, the rational action theory (RAT) in this paper is to enthuse intellectual debate around the issue of apprentice decision on when to select from the alternatives with different costs (economic) and benefits (social), as it varies according to social origin. The results of this study revealed that apprentices usually embark on a cost-benefit analysis before they enrol on a work-based learning course like this one.

This might be among the reasons why they chose to follow this pathway and the RAT lends credence to the explanations of apprentices' educational decisions and explains better why apprentices from underprivileged groups and communities.

The findings revealed the educational preferences of apprentices from comparable backgrounds and their motivations to pursue a similar course like this one, especially for the ones from less advantaged families and educational backgrounds. Apprentices from underprivileged backgrounds would be more pleased to enrol on this programme because it has no financial implications for them.

A recent study by Roberts (2021); Murdock (2019); and Kuczera & Field (2018) argues that one would assume people from privileged backgrounds with good social standing will enrol on any conventional degree pathways with an elite price tag since they can afford to pay tuition fees at any university. It is documented that this was not the case in this programme, it attracts people from different backgrounds and communities.

Successive governments have tried to improve intergenerational social mobility, for the new generation at the very least to attain their parent social class standing. The findings acknowledged that the vocational degrees were one of those programmes commissioned to address this purpose and it is imperative to ascertain what motivates apprentices to follow the vocational degrees pathway. To achieve this mission, a conceptual model is proposed for apprentices' educational decisions and pathway choices.

Objective 1 is very much concerned with the practicability of vocational degrees in fostering undergraduate competencies to meet employers' skill needs. To address this issue the findings showed that vocational degrees are a dynamic and useful pedagogy for the development of higher-level competencies, required for the current and future skill needs of employers and the sector, most importantly, where apprenticeship degrees' standards are followed and communicated clearly with the relevant stakeholders. To underpin the discussion lines on the usefulness of

vocational degrees theoretically, Edmund's model was adopted for the expediency of work-based learning within the chartered manager degree context.

The theory is founded on three major Zones (A, B and C), it is affected by different factors. The model likens a successful WBL programme to apprentices, employers, and learning providers in a training method, starting with (apprentice-employer relations), followed by education (learner relations-learning providers) and codification of knowledge (employer-learning provider relationship education). A summary of findings applied to Edmund's model of effectiveness in vocational degrees.

Table 1 Usefulness in the senses of fostering competencies for degree apprentices in the management field

The practical activity is:	In the field of higher-level knowledge (objects and observables).	In the area of advanced-level skills (objects and observables).	In the area of personal conduct (ideas).
Expediency in sense 1	Apprentices can develop the following knowledge in the classroom and workplace: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciplinary • Interdisciplinary • Epistemic • Procedural 	Apprentices have the required higher skill set to manage effectively in a given context regarding their job roles. Be able to make informed decisions, write a good report, think critically, use inductive, deductive, and statistical reasoning, engage in oral and written presentations, be active listeners, be socially sensitive and be able to solve complex issues	Apprentices have an interest in professional development, complete projects once started, stay calm and collected most of the time, function well in high-pressure environments, support people and sympathise with them
Expediency in sense 2	Be able to convert advanced knowledge acquired through theories in the classroom environment into relevant competencies required for daily tasks in the workplace	Be able to identify work-related issues/professional skill needs and use appropriate competencies to solve them, using the ideas intended, or implicit in the process	Be able to reflect professionally on the process using the concepts and competencies developed, or which were implicit in it (and can show understanding of these ideas and skills in the context of their daily tasks)

To enhance and sustain the learning experience of apprentices on the programme. A summary of potential areas of risk was identified and presented as follows:

- Apprentices can concentrate on the vocational degrees component of the apprenticeship at the expense of collecting and documenting evidence against individual 'KSBs' in preparing for the EPA – A failure to complete all the elements as stipulated in the course specification to achieve a full result will result in 20% funding reduction;
- An apprentice disproportionately focussing on the academic report to show competencies in the portfolio of evidence, leaving little time for the application of skills in the workplace;

- It is not all vocational degree apprentices come from traditional academic backgrounds, but they should have a full or part-time job, using 20% of their work time off for the programme, not enough time for study;
- There are different levels of engagement, depending on the employer's understanding of the programme. Some organisations would like to be involved in the whole process from the start, while others just want to read progression reports when published, without attending programme meetings;
- Evidence gathering is throughout the programme, as such an apprentice can struggle to identify and include the best work in the portfolio against each KSB for final assessment purposes.

Lastly, the results of the study contribute to addressing the gaps and concerns articulated in the body of WBL scholarship, concerning the shortcomings of vocational degrees in developing and sustaining higher-level competencies (KSBs) for the workforce (Universities UK, 2020).

The findings reveal that, in recent years, the sector has continued to witness a sustained call for existing work-based programmes to be reviewed and aligned with the employer, sector, and market realities. It is essential to avoid the obvious pitfall by not using the parallel day or block release model that is normally followed in traditional work-based learning and part-time degree courses (Powell, 2019; Baker, 2019). Academic staff should be allowed to use what works for lesson planning and delivery because vocational degrees connect practical and theoretical elements of learning together; as such, it is a one-stop shop for the development of competencies.

The result of the study showed that the vocational degree is a complex and multi-layered pedagogy, often involving confusing fields of paper with contradictory views, meanings, and epistemological stances. To this end, this study has seized the opportunity to present empirical evidence that will assist in mitigating this position in the field. It is evident from the findings that access to the programme needs to be widened further through active promotion of the programme's image.

So far, the programme appears to have recorded some progress in attracting people from different ethnic backgrounds, women, and mature learners, when compared to the pre-vocational degree era. However, there is no conclusive proof yet to support the claim that the programme has managed to alleviate social mobility and diversity concerns in the sector. Some green shoots are starting to develop that need to be nurtured, by adopting an affirmative approach to the recruitment process for women and ethnic minorities to bridge the existing gap. Then again, it may be too soon to draw a firm and generalisable conclusion on vocational degrees learning and practices after barely three years in operations in the case institutions.

This study makes a major contribution in the form of a 'vocational degrees apprentice educational decision model' to the theory and practice of the WBL, which has necessitated revisiting the educational decisions of apprentices and their preferred pathways for degree qualification. It has accentuated the usefulness and contributions of vocational degrees to the skills shortage in the sector, in addition to the challenges and successes of the programme so far. This study has the potential to encourage more employers and learning providers to embrace apprenticeship degree pedagogy and persuade more apprentices to follow the vocational degrees pathway for their undergraduate degree in management. The conceptual model presents potentially valuable evidence and insight to enhance the programme 'pathway, methodologies, and public perception'.

4 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY

The effectiveness of vocational degrees in reskilling and upskilling the existing workforce has been demonstrated in principle by the study. The findings have made several contributions to the WBL field. First, a conceptual model was produced to explain the nexus between an apprentice's educational decision and the choice of vocational degree pathway for a degree in management.

The work by Boudin's (1974) educational decisions model was adapted for apprentice decision and pathway choice at the case institutions. An in-depth exploratory

interview was used to guide the probe of apprentice educational decisions and the reason for adopting the vocational degree pathway, discussion lines were underpinned by the rational action theory (RAT). The application of the RAT model was intended to trigger a debate on why those from underrepresented groups should be pleased to enrol on the vocational degrees programme.

There is no student loan to pay back, they are earning money while studying, but this was not entirely the case with some people in the sector (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2017a, b). Even though it reduces the financial burden and improves the social standing of apprentices within the community, with a possibility of gaining a full degree level qualifications and becoming a full member of relevant professional bodies. Also, a rich and detailed account of the vocational degrees 's usefulness in the development of competencies (York, 2020).

4.2 Implications for practice

The government needs to invest more in the awareness campaign with a positive recruitment message for under-represented groups such as teenagers, mature learners, women, and ethnic minorities. A close working relationship for the three parties (employer, apprentice, and learning provider) to address the current challenges of programme image and standards is recommended by Boudin's (1974) educational decisions model for WBL. The potential of vocational degrees to develop, sustain and stimulate WBL enquiry has been shown in principle by the study.

The negative perception of vocational degrees in some quarters was evident, but the inhibitions to the adoption of the programme still pervaded the study findings. As such any investment by the learning providers should consider a positive recruitment strategy, at the national level the government must make the rebranding exercise a priority to reposition the programme image.

The level of involvement from stakeholders needs to be deepened and must take account of the programme quality and standard fit for the WBL. They are furthermore, establishing regular communication links to enable best practice sharing and standardisation practice across the programme. To promote a shared

purpose, which needs to be fully defined and aligned with the employer's skill needs and apprenticeship standards. The syllabus should be entirely with the employer and sector skill needs so that their specific demands can be met and exceeded, in terms of the development of KSBs.

4.1 Recommendations

This paper's data and findings have offered one view on the vocational degree pathway, its usefulness, and its contributions to the development of competencies and upskilling of the workforce. The findings have unlocked thought-provoking opportunities for further study around apprentice educational decisions, and cost, and benefits analysis of following the vocational degrees pathway for an undergraduate degree level qualification in management.

The vocational degrees have been perceived by many observers as a WBL designed to help those who are well-off and do not need the assistance of this programme, because they have what it takes to enrol on a degree course of their choice, and they can afford to pay the fee (Zuber-Skerritt, & Abraham, 2017). On the other hand, those who need the course cannot enrol on a decent programme for the under-represented groups - the excluded teenagers and mature learners without the basic qualifications. So far, this debate remains open for the stakeholders to develop a template that supports a positive and inclusive recruitment drive that recognises the under-represented groups and communities to change the current narrative in the field.

A study with a larger sample (academic staff, apprentices, and employers) across multiple learning providers (cases) could be conducted to explore further the phenomena of apprentices' educational decisions and the choice of pathway and the impacts on competencies development for postgraduate apprentices in management. Future papers could follow an in-depth longitudinal method to investigate the impacts of vocational degrees on apprentice attitudes at the workplace, and if there are any significant changes.

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