How does participant experience of work-based learning shape a professional identity?

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This article explores how professional identity is shaped through experiences on a work-based learning programme. In this context, professional identity is defined as a range of beliefs and attitudes about the professions for which an individual is preparing themselves. Set within the current Higher and Degree Apprenticeships agenda, the research has been framed using a constructivist approach involving the collection of qualitative data. The data draws on an inductive thematic analysis of oral narrative reflections, generated through semi-structured interviews. Research participants were sourced from two work-based learning programmes (WBLP's) over a period of four years.

The development of professional identity was researched within a conceptual framework adapted from Canrinus et al., (2012) and Puurala and Löfströme (2003). Findings show that experiences of professional frustration have an impact on an individual's professional identity. This links with job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation, as experience of professional frustration can contribute to negative feelings towards the organisation.

The study showed that Investment of an organisation into work-based learning can help develop an individual's sense of professional identity. However, if the organisations commitment to the individual is not played out in real terms, their sense of professional identity can be affected detrimentally.

Keywords : Work-based learning, Professional identity, Professional Identity Development, Degree Apprenticeship

Introduction

> *'I felt like more part of the management, deciding how the business is actually run rather than just being a sales assistant with a set of keys' (Sarah, CRM, 2015)*

The above quotation, taken from a participant studying for a Certificate in Retail Management (CRM) whilst in work, highlights the perceived professional change experienced following the completion of a WBLP.

The aim of this research is to explore whether professional identity is shaped through experiences on a WBLP. In this context professional identity is defined as a range of beliefs and attitudes about the profession for which an individual is preparing themselves (Schien,

1978). The development of professional identity involves an understanding about the boundaries of a profession, and the ways in which these may interact with other boundaries, some of which may be external to the workplace, (Adams et.al., 2006; Lingard et al., 2003). The research investigates elements of professional identity development and explores the links between the WBLP and the perceptions of professionals and their development whilst participating on these programmes. The focus of professional identity builds on Puurula and Löfströme (2003) and Canrinus et al., (2012) and forms the basis for the conceptual framework that frames the research findings.

The research uses a constructivist approach (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 2013) involving the collection of qualitative data. Data analysis draws on an inductive thematic analysis of oral narrative reflections where research participants were sourced from two WBLP's over four years, 2014-2018. The research was carried out in two phases; the initial phase involved adult-age participants working within the fashion retail sector who were identified as possessing management potential by their organisation. They completed a Certificate in Retail Management (CRM) over a nine-month period in 2014, whilst at work via a virtual learning environment (VLE). Three of the 24 participants within this cohort were interviewed. The second phase of the research studied professionals employed within the health and beauty sector, studying for a Chartered Management Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA). The CMDA cohort completed their WBLP in 2018 and of the ten participants six were interviewed. The interviewed participants were self-selecting, following a request to the whole cohort to take part in the research. This resulted in a particularly small sample size from the CRM potentially due to the time elapsed since the completion of the programme.

This article will outline the national context in which the research was situated and the literature pertinent to the area of study. A summary of the findings will be outlined followed by a discussion relating to the implication of these findings.

National context

On 12th March 2015, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government announced, the roll-out of nine new industry designed Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). The long-term aim of this initiative is three million new apprenticeships to start by 2020. This will be funded through a new workplace levy on employers introduced in April 2016. Large organisations with a payroll exceeding £3 million are required to contribute 0.5 per cent of their payroll bill to the apprenticeship levy (Rowe, Perrin and Wall, 2016). Initial forecasts indicated a target of 3 million apprenticeships could be funded under the workplace levy by 2020 (Woolcock, 2018). Of these, one million are expected to be degree apprenticeships (Chartered Management Institute, 2018).

The current Conservative Government continues to support the development of new degree apprenticeships for students starting in 2017 through a £4.5 million development fund, (Department for Education, 2016). In response to this, Universities UK (2016) recommend that universities across the UK create degree apprenticeships to further develop employer relationships; these will enable universities to diversify their offers and attract non-traditional students and provide them with opportunities for degree level study. The aim is to produce highly employable degree educated apprentices who have studied on a programme tailored to sector needs, in particular several years of workplace experience. These current policies highlight the priority and importance given to work-based learning and provide significant policy importance to the findings within this research.

Work-based learning

Work-based learning (WBL) has been described as 'what is learned by working – not reading about work or observing work, but actually undertaking work activities' (Helyer, 2010:2). Within the context of WBL at higher levels, Durrant, Rhodes and Young (2009) add to this that WBL is learner managed and driven rather than delivered by the Higher Education Institution (HEI).

WBL at higher education institutions is situated within a tripartite agreement between the HEI, individual learners and their employing organisation. This agreement is at the core of WBLP and is the driver for two further characteristics of WBL; firstly, the combination of academic and conceptual knowledge with work-based skills and secondly, the importance that the assessments are fit for both academic and professional purposes (Young and Garnett, 2007). For WBL to be beneficial to the HEI, learner and employer, the perspectives of all parties need to be considered at the initial stage in the formation of a tripartite arrangement. WBL offers new and challenging learning opportunity for participants that will develop individuals because 'it is project based, grounded in practice and tailored to the requirements of people at work' (Costley, 2013:403).

The role of the employing organisation must be taken into consideration, when developing a WBLP. This is achieved through aligning the WBLP with business needs and linking these to the value of the learner's outputs to the business. Garnett (2009:27) argues that 'if university WBL is to have a major impact on the employer organisation, it must fully recognise and use the structural capital of the employer in fostering performance, knowledge recognition, dissemination, creation and use'. The tripartite WBL arrangement between the HEI, employer partner and learner are crucial to the success of any WBL programme. For example, Garnett (2009) endorses the importance of establishing the academic value of learning held by the employer, providing models for possible partnerships and a framework for the operation of the partnerships to maximise their success. Billet (2001) discussed the dual bases, in terms of the learner and the organisation, and the importance of co-participation. Billet (2001)

summarised this concept as workplace affordances where the workplace enables opportunities for individuals to engage in and be supported in learning within the workplace. In this study the concept of workplace affordances has been observed as being unique to each of the participants' employing organisations. Workplace affordances have also been observed as being impacted by a participant's relationship with their line manager and their attitude towards WBL, both to a positive and negative effect.

Why WBL?

Whilst WBL can be beneficial to the participants (Nixon et al., 2008) the application of WBL within a workforce must enable the employee and employer to fully benefit from the learning. Tannenbaum (1997) argues that the work environment can have a tangible effect on the extent to which newly acquired skills are used on the job. He concluded, based on empirical data, that each organisation has a unique learning profile. He maintains that organisations with a strong learning environment demonstrate greater organisational effectiveness. This is critical to the success of the current apprenticeship agenda (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015), as organisations that exhibit a strong learning environment can maximise the benefit of employee participation in WBLPs. An organisation learning culture and opportunities following completion of the WBLP need to maximise the impact of the learning outcomes for both the employee and employer. A positive learning culture that leads to opportunities for the employees can make a significant contribution to their organisational commitment, (Yang et al., 2012). Fletcher, Alfes and Robinson (2016) examined the relationship between perceived training and development and employee retention. They concluded that during periods of economic instability and organisational change, investment in training and development is important to motivate and energise employees.

Literature review

This literature review will not only review the literature of relevance to the research but will also inform the development of the theoretical framework which the empirical work will then seek to evaluate. Both theoretically and empirically Canrinus et al., *(*2012) and Puurula and Löfströme (2003) is used to frame the discussion of the development of professional identity. The concept of liminality (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016) will be examined to explore the implications of liminality in the development of a participant's sense of identity.

What is identity?

'A sense of identity is never gained nor maintained once and for all. Like any good conscience, it is constantly lost and regained' (Erikson, 1956:74). This implies that identity is not fixed and changes over time.

For WBLPs the implications of fluid identities, which change over time, are that identity can be influenced by participant experiences, for example if there are organisational changes. Whilst the definition of identity cited above illustrate the potential for changing the nature of one's identity, Erikson's work falls short as it does not indicate any contributing factors or elements to these changes. The elements of identity are explained by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) as an individual engaging in forming, repairing, maintaining, and strengthening or revising their identity.

Research which examines the construction of professional identity by social workers considers how such identity can be a collection of traits (Wiles, 2013), for example, a collective sense to convey the 'identity of a profession'. Alternatively, professional identity can be viewed as a process in which all those in a profession come to have a sense of themselves within their profession (Wiles, 2013). External factors such as a professional set of standards and/or behaviours may shape an individual's development of their professional identity. This is because professionals are embedded within the process of attaining professional status e.g. qualified social worker, pharmacist or lawyer.

Development of professional identity

Professional identity development is distinct from the development of an individual's sense of identity. Alvesson and Wilmott (2002:623) define the 'development of professional identity as a general process of identity formation through work and is salient and critical to the employment relationship.' So, the formation of professional identity can be framed within the context of social identity. This is a systematic way of evaluating, identifying and organising the perception of self (Erikson, 1968). Professional identity is constructed through discourse between individuals within a profession where identities are continually being constructed and altered (Bleakley, 2006).

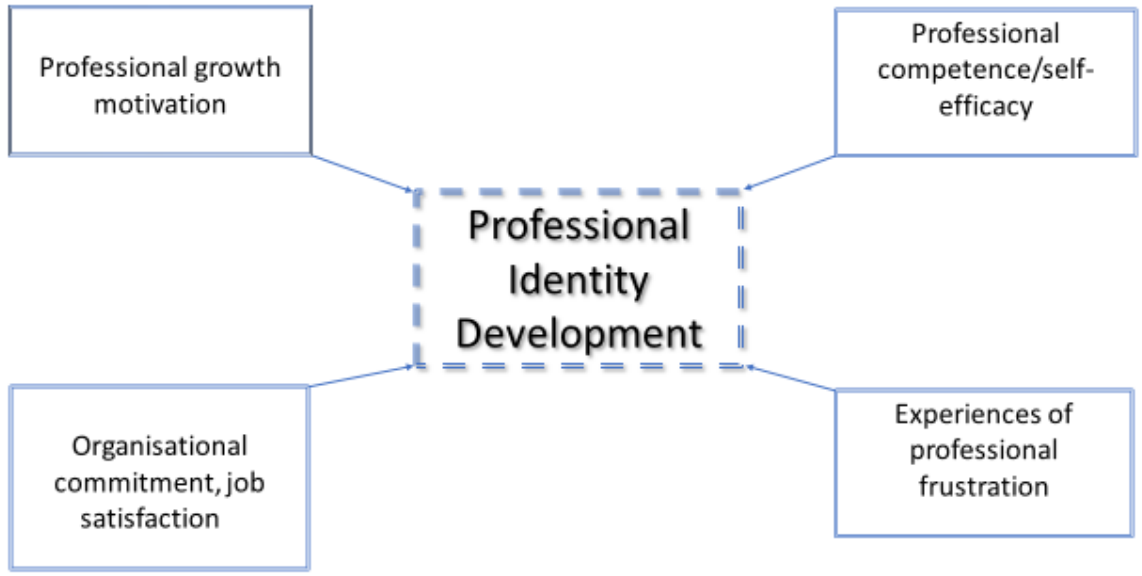
Along their career development journey, individuals develop a range of beliefs and attitudes about the profession for which they are preparing themselves (Ibarra, 2004). They develop an understanding of the boundaries of their profession, and the ways in which they may interact with others. These sets of beliefs, attitudes and understandings about their roles, within the context of work, generally refer to their 'professional identity' (Adams et al., 2006; Lingard et al., 2003).

Professional identity concerns group interactions in the workplace and relates to how individuals compare and differentiate themselves from other professional groups. The development of professional identity consists of exploring the available alternatives and committing to certain choices and goals, (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Individuals are active participants in the formation of their own professional identity and may face numerous challenges associated with professional identity formation. When confronted by contradictory and ambiguous situations and experiences, individuals engage in self-reflection and question their personal view; identity is often re-shaped as a result (Niemi, 1997). Put into the context of WBL, Niemi's work illustrates the dynamic nature of professional identity development that relies on the individual and social interactions in its formation.

An element to consider in the development of professional identity relates to the concept of liminality. This is defined as a state of being 'neither one thing or another: or maybe both: or neither here or there: or maybe nowhere' (Turner 1969:465). Ibarra and Obodaru (2016:47) state that 'liminality, a state of being betwixt and between social roles and/or identities, is a hallmark of an increasingly precarious and fluctuating landscape'. This indicates liminality as a fluid concept and that modern-day liminality is often less finite or even permanent in nature. As professional identity develops, an individual's career may also develop and progress. The importance of career progression post completion of a WBLP is relevant to an individual's sense of agency. Emirbayer and Mische's (1998:970) definition of agency explains that 'it should be understood as something that individuals can achieve in a given context.' The importance of agency within the context of WBL is that it implies that someone is the origin of his or her own actions because he or she can make genuine choices. However, if the individual is unable to make genuine career choices on completion of a WBLP, due to organisational constraints, their sense of agency could be affected. This in turn could have a negative impact on self-efficacy and by association their sense of professional identity.

Research into the professional identity of teachers revealed that its development is linked to a distinct aspect of expertise, (Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt, 2000). This finding appears to be a rather simplistic view (compared to the findings of Canrinus et al., (2012) who focused on the indicators of teacher professional identity and the interrelationship between these indicators). The concept of professional identity has been researched in several other fields including medicine, healthcare (Lingard et al., 2003), the legal profession (Mather, McEwen and Maiman 2001), social work (Wiles 2013) and higher education institutions (Humphreys and Brown 2002). More relevant to this research within the CRM and CMDA is the work of Ibarra (1999), Ely, Ibarra and Kolb (2011), Ibarra and Petriglieri, (2010), Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) and Puurula and Löfströme (2003) who used a business context to situate their research into professional identity. Puurula and Löfströme (2003) studied the development of professional identity in small and medium sized enterprises (SME's). They argue that the influential factors in the development of professional identity are, the individual's professional growth motivation, professional competence, commitment to the organisation, experiences of professional frustration. They go on to suggest that individuals move along a professional identity continuum, influenced by both contextual factors and personal characteristics. Their work resonates with that of Canrinus, et.al (2012) and includes common features as well as the additional element of professional frustration. These two pieces of research will be drawn on to explore the aspects of professional identity development by participants on the WBL programmes under study.

The elements of professional identity outlined by Puurula and Löfströme (2003) and Canrinus, *et al*. (2012) have been amalgamated to form a conceptual framework for the research.



Adapted from Puurula and Löfströme (2003) and Canrinus, *et al* (2012)

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methods

The design of the research methodology and data collection explores changes participants have experienced in their perceived identity over the period of the WBLP. The following tables outline the baseline date of the interviewed participants on both the CRM and CMDA.

The names of the participants have been anonymised using pseudonyms to ensure confidentially of the participants.

Participant	Age at start of programme (2015)	Role at start of programme (2015)	Current role (July 2017)	Education Level (July 2015)	Current Education Level (July 2017)
Samantha	18-25	Supervisor 16-24 hour	PT supervisor Oasis From August 2017 - Newly Qualified Teacher	Scottish Highers	BA (Hons) Business and Philosophy. From August 2017 - Postgraduate Diploma in Primary Education
Mary	18-25	Supervisor 8-16 hours	Allied Irish Bank – customer service advisor	Higher Certificate in Retail Management	BA (Hons) Retail Management
Sarah	26-35	Assistant full time	Branch Concession Manager	BA (Hons) English and History	BA (Hons) English and History

Table 1: Summary of Interviewed Participants - Certificate in Retail Management (CRM)

Participant	Age at start of programme (2016)	Role at start of programme (2016)	Current role (July 2018)	Education Level (July 2016)	Current Education Level (July 2018)
Louise	23	Learning & Development Designer for retail in UJ	Global Learning & Development Designer	NVQ L4 Business and Administration	CMDA BA(Hons) Management & Leadership
Jackie	22	Assistant Brand Manager	Assistant Product Manager	NVQ L4 Business and Administration	CMDA BA(Hons) Management & Leadership
Ali	23	Programme Manager	Planning Manager Global Brands	NVQ L4 Business and Administration	CMDA BA(Hons) Management & Leadership
Kim	25	Assistant Brand Planning & Advocate Manager	Assistant Learning & Development Manager	NVQ L4 Business and Administration	CMDA BA(Hons) Management & Leadership
Kay	22	Lead Assistant Supply Manager EB	Supply Manager – Project	NVQ L4 Business and Administration	CMDA BA(Hons) Management & Leadership
Clare	22	Assistant Supply Manager	Lead Assistant Supply Manager	NVQ L4 Business and Administration	CMDA BA(Hons) Management & Leadership

Table 2: Summary of Interviewed Participants - Chartered Management Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA)

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken following completion of the CRM and two months prior to the completion of the CMDA. The decision to interview the CMDA participants prior to completion was made for logistical reasons and to increase the number of participants being available for interview. The narrative data resulting from these interviews is defined by Carr (1997:16) as 'narrative (stories) in the human sciences which are discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and this offers insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it.'

Semi-structured interviews produce a narrative that tells a 'story' of workplace experiences upon starting a WBLP to its completion. Barthes and Duisit (1975:79) discussed the central role of narrative in social life as follows:

> Narratives of the world are numberless and are present at every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind, and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative.

As an interpretive researcher, the method of data analysis was through reviewing the narratives to generate meaning. This was executed by reviewing the data to devise temporary constructs (Thomas 2013) that appear to be recurring and of importance to the participants. Initially this involved reading and re reading the responses and colour-coding the recurrent

themes. These were further refined to form second order constructs on further reading, which were finalised into themes. These were informed by the literature review and the subsequent conceptual framework to complete the thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The final themes that emerged from the data analysis were:

- professional growth motivation;
- professional competence/ self-efficacy;
- organisation commitment/job satisfaction;
- experiences of professional frustration;

These themes will be used to structure the findings and will build on the literature to address the research question.

Research findings

Professional growth motivation

Under this heading a first finding is that participants on both WBLP's indicated a high level of motivation to both their organisation/job role, career development within their organisations. This is illustrated by Samantha's comment below:

> *...when I started the WBLP course I definitely wanted to progress through retail into management. I was very motivated at the time and very satisfied with what I was doing and felt that I was getting a lot out of it. (Samantha, CRM)*

Samantha suggests a high level of motivation to develop her career at the beginning of the WBLP as well as a sense of job satisfaction and personal achievement.

Evidence of the CMDA participants personal motivations for completing the WBLP are illustrated below:

> *If I moved to another company a degree would be a basic requirement, so to even get through the first stage of an interview you would need a minimum of a 2:1 degree, so I wondered whether that was going to be a barrier to me developing my career. (Ali, CMDA)*

Ali indicated the importance of gaining a university degree and the personal benefits should she choose to pursue her career at another company. This is reinforced by Louise who commented that internally it would help her have a degree of parity with the graduates coming into the organisation.

> *…and that it would put me on a par with the graduates that are coming in. Then I have got the work experience and I have a degree. (Louise, CMDA)*

These observations evidence the complexity of motivation and the contributing factors both external and internal that influence professional growth motivation.

Professional competency /Self-efficacy

The evidence below denotes the positive impact the WBLP had on all participants, in particular, their sense of professional competency where they indicated a greater self-confidence and belief in their abilities to carry out their roles:

> *I probably felt more assured that I did know what I was doing, especially when we were given different tasks, I felt like I had a really well-rounded knowledge - it gave me confidence to do tasks, rather than waiting to be shown how to do it I could step up to the mark and do it. It made you feel valuable in your role and more confident.* (Samantha, CRM)

The feeling of being more valued in the role and subsequently more confident was an observation that was common with the nine interviewees. In addition, the positive internal feelings i.e. increased confidence was apparent throughout the interviews.

CMDA participants reported an increase in their professional competence through their time on the WBLP. However, they did not feel in a position to confirm whether their development was because of the additional work experience they had gained during the WBLP or as a result of the WBLP. Indeed, the likelihood is that both factors contribute to changes individuals experienced in their abilities and professional competency:

> *…it is difficult to say that I have changed because of the WBLP or because of the development I am getting in my role?...I think I have become a lot more efficient in my role at work and I think I am a lot better at doing my job now and I am making the steps in the right direction for a promotion so yes, I can definitely see the difference - I am more confident in the role that I am doing.* (Jackie, CMDA)

To summarise the findings in relation to the participant's professional competency/self-efficacy, there is an indication that all participants experienced increased confidence in their abilities to do their job or an appearance of increased confidence. This has contributed to an acknowledgment that they have a greater contribution to make within their role. These findings also contribute to an increased sense of their individual ability, partly driven by the sense of achievement in completing a WBLP whilst in full-time work. These findings have evidenced a positive link to the participant's sense of agency as defined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and their feelings of increased professional competence through completion of the WBLP.

Organisational commitment/ Job satisfaction

Participants indicated, through their narratives, the impact the WBLP had on their job satisfaction and commitment to their role and their organisation:

> *I was definitely keener to get more involved in the sort of task that my manager was taking on - I was very keen to offer my help and say I have learnt how to do this and would like to try it out. So, I was keen to progress and show her that I was learning more along the way and that I could do it myself. I was still very positive about my job and really enjoyed it and wanted to do well for the business.* (Samantha, CRM)

The factors that have contributed to the participant's sense of commitment to their organisation and job satisfaction are diverse. They range from the sense of recognition from the company, investment in the participants development, and gaining a degree with no associated debt. The importance of these factors to the participants may be governed, to some extent, by what motivates an individual to remain committed to their organisation and feel satisfied in their job role.

Experience of professional frustration

The participants on both WBLP's expressed their professional frustration as a result of a range of different organisational factors e.g. redundancy, lack of opportunity and inadequate support.

This frustration with the organisation manifested itself in relation to Mary (CRM). She completed a retail management degree in addition to the CRM to increase her chance of securing a senior role within retail. However, she was not successful in securing a senior role and subsequently left retail to work in another sector. It is not clear whether there is a link between the feelings of professional frustration evidenced by Mary (CRM) and the fact that the interview with her was difficult. My interpretation of the challenging interview with Mary (CRM) was that the dialogue was overshadowed by the lack of opportunities she had had within retail resulting in her opinion that both her degree and WBLP were a waste of time:

> *…as I feel that my degree wasn't worth it as I didn't get the jobs I hoped I would. Same with the WBLP, I would have liked to stay in retail but they weren't giving me any opportunities and they said that I didn't have enough experience (Mary, CRM)*

This frustration was also apparent when Sarah did not get a promotion she felt she had worked hard for and was ready to take on a further challenge:

> *I really felt like I was top of the game and I was getting the results from the sales figures, so at that point I was extremely happy which is why when I applied for the permanent role and didn't get it I was obviously devastated. (*Sarah, CRM)

Sarah experiences illustrate a feeling of liminality (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). Sarah's lack of promotion appears to have made her question her current role and employment within the organisation.

Despite the variation in the source of the professional frustration, the impact it has on the participant's sense of identity appears to have a major effect on their future. This is shown through the departure of two of the interviewed participants from the CRM and one from the CMDA.

Discussion

The research question was to explore how professional identity is shaped through experiences on a work-based learning programme. The findings from this research indicate that experience on a WBLP does shape the professional identity of the participants in this study. However, the elements of professional identity that contribute to the development of an individual's professional identity, play a part to varying degrees depending on a range of factors. Whilst it is important to note that changes within the professional identity of a participant will not be solely as a result of the WBLP. Rather, the evidence indicates that whilst it is a major contributing factor in its development other themes emerge which are related to the transient state and liminality relating to professional identity. The variable contribution of the research themes (i.e. professional growth motivation; professional competence/ self-efficacy; organisation commitment/job satisfaction; experiences of professional frustration; within professional identity development are illustrated as follows. Firstly, in terms of professional growth and motivation during the CRM WBLP, the impact of the WBLP on Samantha and Sarah's sense of professional identity manifested itself in a positive way, resulting in their career progression. However, for Mary, although feeling motivated and ready to take the next career step, she indicated a lack of job satisfaction and professional frustration in terms of the ability to gain promotion. This appears to have had a negative effect on her professional identity, which arguably, resulted in her leaving retail and entering a different sector.

Sarah highlighted the elements of professional identity that have affected her in a negative manner, e.g. professional frustration and job satisfaction, however these elements did not necessarily impact on her professional competency.

On the second research theme professional competence and self-efficacy, those participants on the CMDA expressed the importance of the qualification in terms of parity within the job market and with graduates employed by their organisation. This impacted positively on their sense of professional identity as it contributed to their increased sense of self-efficacy. Linked to this was the increased recognition from managers and on a personal level a greater confidence to have a voice within the workplace. Both of these factors increased their sense of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

On the third theme of commitment and job satisfaction, the commitment level of the CMDA participants varied, although all had a positive sense of job satisfaction. One contributing factor to commitment levels is linked to the funding of the CMDA. Due to the size of the organization their employer had to pay the workplace levy. This had the effect of reducing the value of the WBLP in terms of organisational commitment for those on the programme. In contrast to those on the CRM programme, whose employer had paid for the programme, commitment to the organization appeared lower. For example, for the CRM participants, job satisfaction and commitment as well as motivation were all high during the WBLP; yet, following completion of the WBLP, this was not necessarily sustained. It was circumstances outside of the WBLP, for example, a new partner, an associated unwillingness to work unsociable hours and a failure to secure a promotion within the company that led two CRM participants to leave the organisation. These points of discussion are also evidence of the fourth theme – professional frustration. Experience of professional frustration on both WBLP's appears to have a disproportional effect on the sense of professional identity felt by participants. Professional frustration was most obvious for Sarah, (CRM) following the departure of the regional manager, when she questions the organisations motives and indicated that they did not align with her own personal motivations.

For participants on the CRM WBLP, external factors occurred that dislocated their sense of professional identity. Professional frustration, organisational commitment and job satisfaction may have been influenced by a de-merger that took place in 2013 which brought with it a new management team and organisational structures. This resulted in job losses and reduced hours for staff. Whilst the health and beauty retail participants were studying for the CMDA, the organisation underwent a re-structure following a company buy-out. The period of transition, following the re-structure, had an impact on the participant's sense of identity. These organisational changes contribute to the participants' experience of liminality in relation to their career development where they responded to this betwixt and between state in different ways. These contributing factors to the development of professional identity illustrate the complex nature of the interactions between the researched elements of professional identity and the external environment. There are also, equally complex factors that may be drawn from the participant's personal life, both past and present, which are beyond the boundaries of this research. However, they have been included as part of the refinement to the theoretical framework to indicate their potential role in the development of professional identity.

The findings within this article when applied to the conceptual framework, the research findings are illustrated through a refinement of the conceptual framework that reflects the relative importance of the elements (see figure 2 below).

Figure 2: A refined conceptual framework

The different sizes of the text boxes convey the comparative contribution of the elements to the development of professional identity. In order of impact, these are, firstly experiences of professional frustration, professional competence/self-efficacy, and commitment to the organisation, job satisfaction and finally professional growth motivation. The research indicates that experience of professional frustration has a greater impact than the professional growth motivations of an individual to their development of professional identity. This links with the job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation, as experience of professional frustration can contribute to negative feelings towards the organisation. Professional competence/self-efficacy are in turn diluted by professional frustration. These findings also show that a reduced sense of agency is detrimental to a participant's professional identity. Accordingly, to accommodate external factors that influence the professional identity journey, both positively and negatively a further revision of the conceptual framework is necessary.

External organisational factors and the national context are outside the influence of professional control and as such can impact on an individual's sense of agency. Professional identity development is closely aligned to the issues of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) as indicated by the findings. Autonomy over one's professional life was very important to the participants in relation to positive development of professional identity. Work- based learning programmes can be a contributor, in a positive way, to a sense of agency over career development. However, when professional frustration is experienced, through circumstances beyond the participants' control, this can have a detrimental effect. Within the fluctuating political and economic climate discussed within the introduction, the need for resilience is a key feature of an individual's professional development, and one which, arguably could be embedded within WBLP to highlight its importance.

The findings from the study illustrate that participants perceive that their professional identity develops when taking part in a WBLP. As highlighted by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), it is a process whereby people engage in forming, repairing, maintaining, and strengthening or revising their identities. This is further explored by Puurala and Löfströme (2003) who argue that professional identity is a continuum that is influenced by both contextual factors and personal characteristics. These concepts have been illustrated through the experiences of the participants on both WBLP's. The impact of changes in professional identity have been manifested in both positive and negative experiences for the participants. However, by the very transient nature of professional identity these changes have not remained static.

In summary, investment by an organisation into work-based learning can help develop a sense of professional identity. However, if the commitment of an organisation to an individual is not played out in real terms, such as promotion or greater responsibility, employee agency and sense of professional identity can be affected detrimentally. The importance of external factors outside the WBLP are important considerations for employers, participants and HEI to ensure the expectations of all three parties are managed realistically.

With limited evidence within the literature regarding the impact of WBL on participants' professional identity within the current apprenticeship agenda, there has been a reliance on research from traditional professions such as education and health, to inform this research. This research takes knowledge forward on the WBL agenda and does so in four ways. Firstly, it shows that employers play a key role in enhancing the WBL experience. Secondly it shows that it is important for employers to invest both time and money to ensure WBL and degree apprenticeships produce maximum benefits for employers and participants. Thirdly, in relation to the current degree apprenticeship agenda, the implication is, that in addition to the investment in the employee through the WBLP, wherever possible, their needs to be a clear career path or long-term benefit for the apprentice. So fourthly it is important to ensure that degree apprenticeships have currency within organisations and are not devalued because of a lack of opportunity for employees to develop their career.

Further research

This research has consisted a small-scale study situated in a rapidly changing political and economic external context. It is an important area given the investment in WBL within apprenticeships. Further studies would be beneficial in a range of organisations and HEI's. This would build on the findings from this research to further explore the development of professional identity through WBLP. Another factor that could be investigated is the importance or otherwise of a professional development framework and/or affiliation with a professional body to an individual's professional identity development.

Finally, future research may involve the examination of the development of professional identity in terms of gender, informed by the work of Ely, Ibarra and Kolb (2011). This may highlight potential considerations in the future development of specific WBLP's.

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