

WP3. Policy Implementation and Impact. Research Design

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Theoretical approaches and research questions

WP3 will investigate the way policy implementers (regional stakeholders, employers, teachers/trainers) and beneficiaries (apprentices) interpret and enact dual apprenticeship programmes within concrete training and learning practices; and it will elucidate the mechanisms that explain the different impact of dual apprenticeships on inequalities of access, learning and labour market transition among young people in different local contexts.

The evaluation of the enactment and impact of dual apprenticeships will draw on the analytical contributions of two theoretical approaches: the realist evaluation approach (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) and human capabilities theory (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Each theoretical approach will inform different research questions for WP3.

Realist evaluation understands policy programmes as hypotheses about social betterment that need to be unpacked and tested through the analysis of the operating social mechanisms and the contextual conditions that trigger them (Blamey & Mackecznie, 2007). Focusing on the interaction between context-mechanisms-outcomes permits evaluations to go beyond the simplistic question of ‘what works?’ and to interrogate ‘how dual apprenticeships work, for whom and why they generate different impacts in different contexts?’ The research questions that the realist evaluation allows us to address are:

- How are dual apprenticeship programmes anticipated to operate within each country and how is context understood as integral to success?
- How do education and business actors interpret and strategically react to the introduction of dual apprenticeships?
- What context-mechanisms-outcomes configurations explain the different impact of dual apprenticeships on diverse populations and contexts?

Human capabilities theory has placed ‘agency freedom’, the capacity of individuals to pursue the life that they value, at the centre of development debates. Contrary to the ‘productivist’

¹ To cite this document: Maitra, S., Valiente, O., Jacovkis, J., Maitra, S., Fuentes, H., Kumar, M., Aramburu, V., Roy, A. and Cervantes, J. A. (2021) WP3 Policy Implementation and Impact. Research Design. Documentation. Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).

view of TVET as skills for employment and economic growth (Anderson, 2009), the 'agency freedom' view of TVET focuses on supporting students' development of their autonomy and their ability to make choices (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011; Tikly, 2013; Powell & McGrath, 2014). The research questions that human capabilities theory allows us to address are:

- How information, guidance and selection processes shape inequalities of access to apprenticeships?
- What inequality factors affect the capacity of apprentices to benefit from the learning opportunities in the programme?
- What inequalities of opportunity exist between apprentices in their transition to formal employment, decent working conditions and the continuation of their studies?

Analytical framework

As in other theory-driven evaluation approaches, the first requirement of the realist approach is to establish the theory of change (or programme ontology) of the intervention in the form of general hypotheses that need to be tested. Realist evaluations reconstruct the theoretical assumptions underpinning programme interventions to problematize to what extent the causal mechanisms that are supposed to lead to the expected outcomes are actually triggered by the social actors involved. The assumption is that the outcomes of programmes like dual apprenticeships are affected by the way individuals enact and react to the regulatory frameworks introduced by the intervention (Ball, 2011). This process is affected not only by the characteristics, motivations and rationalities of actors that are enacting the policy, but also by the context in which they develop their activity.

To reconstruct the theoretical assumptions behind dual apprenticeship programmes, we rely on the analytical efforts of Paul Ryan (2012) to synthesize the advantage of apprenticeships over full time vocational schooling in terms of employment outcomes for young people . He identifies three distinctive causal mechanisms that can explain the superior outcomes of apprenticeships: situated learning, skill content and institutional contact. The three mechanisms and the contextual conditions for their activation are explained below.

1. **Situated learning:** Pedagogical literature has pointed out that for some learners, apprenticeships are both more motivating and easier to undertake than the less situated learning that characterises classroom-based provision (Unwin and Wellington, 2013). For those students, the theoretical elements of knowledge are better acquired when learned through their practical application. However, this mechanism is not homogeneous among the whole student population. Some learners, particularly those with a theoretical inclination, will be more motivated and learn more effectively when dealing with abstract learning (Rauner, 2012).
2. **Skill content:** The skill content of apprenticeships will be more updated and relevant for the demands of employers because students will be exposed to the production methods and work requirements of actual workplaces (Streeck, 1989). However, the activation of this mechanism will depend on the quality of training opportunities at the workplace and the smooth integration of theory and practice by the school.

Companies offering apprenticeships just as a source of low-cost labour can result in exploitative experiences for apprentices and limited skill learning (Wolter and Ryan, 2011). Also, the integration of theory and practice into a coherent learning programme is challenging for schools, which may disdain the workplace component of apprenticeships and privilege the academic approach in their practice (Achtenhagen and Grubb, 2001).

3. **Institutional contact:** Apprenticeships offer an institutional link with the professional world that allows young people to acquire superior information and contacts in the labour market (Ryan, 2001). However, these contacts will only be effective in the adequate sectoral and macroeconomic context. Depending on the economic cycle and the dynamics of skill supply and demand in each sector, apprentices may not be attractive to employers. Also, in the screening of candidates by employers (Spence, 1981), practices of discrimination during the selection process may emerge, thus generating unfair employment inequalities between the candidates (Fuller and Unwin, 2013; Imdorf, 2017). Furthermore, depending on the quality of the working conditions in a given labour market, the offer of jobs may not be attractive to the apprentices and they may decide to continue their studies or remain unemployed (Raffe and Willms, 1989).

As we have outlined before, for these mechanisms to be activated, certain contextual conditions (or assumptions) need to be in place. We will test the underlying assumptions of the policy in relation to how actors interpret and react to the intervention. The assumptions corresponding to each mechanism are explained below.

1. **Apprentices decide to participate because they are intrinsically motivated in practical learning.** Pedagogical literature has pointed out that, for some learners, *apprenticeships are both more motivating and easier to undertake than the less situated learning that characterises classroom-based provision* (Unwin and Wellington, 2013). The activation of this social mechanisms requires students participating in apprenticeships to be intrinsically motivated in the practical learning opportunities offered by the programme. We want to test to what extent this assumption holds on in the case of students taking part in DA. We need to investigate the real motivations of students, their decisions-making, the role of influencers and the selection process.
2. **Companies prioritise training over production aims & schools are willing and able to adapt their offer to the dual model.** The literature suggests that *the skill content of apprenticeships will be more updated and relevant for the demands of employers because students will be exposed to the production methods and work requirements of actual workplaces* (Streeck, 1989). The activation of this social mechanism lays on two assumptions: on the one hand, companies will prioritise training aims over production aims in the daily activities of their apprentices and, on the other hand, vocational schools will integrate the workplace component of apprenticeships into a coherent learning programme. In order to test the assumption about companies, we will have to investigate the motivations of companies to participate, their capacity to provide technologically updated training, availability of qualified trainers, practices of training/exploitation, etc...Likewise, in order to test the assumption about schools, we

will need to investigate the motivations of schools and teachers to participate, their level of knowledge of the programme and its objectives, practices of adaptation of the curriculum to the needs of the apprentice, etc...

3. **Dual companies are willing to hire the best apprentices & their job offers are attractive to the candidates.** The literature suggests that *apprenticeships offer an institutional link with the professional world that allows young people to acquire superior information and contacts in the labour market* (Ryan, 2001). Under this mechanism, students would signal their abilities to employers during their apprenticeship and they will be offered a job because external recruitment would be more costly for the dual company. There are at least two assumptions underlying this hypothesis that should be problematised. Firstly, that the dual company is always recruiting and has a job to offer to the apprentice. Secondly, that the job at the dual company is going to be attractive to the apprentice. In order to test these assumptions, we need to investigate the employment status of apprentices, the offers that they received, how they made their transition decisions, how employers made decisions on job offers, etc...

One important element of our research design is the **integration between realist evaluation and human capabilities approaches**. The underlying idea is that every policy assumption poses some expectation on human agency, either from implementers or beneficiaries, and it is precisely through the manifestation of human agency in socially structured contexts that inequalities are generated/reproduced/transformed. In our case there are three key moments of agency and variability of experiences that can potentially affect inequalities among young people:

1. **Access:** Inequalities in the access to the programme occur because of lack of information, poor guidance or inadequate selection processes. Inequalities among young people can reproduce or even amplify in the access to the programme, for example, through the selection of most academically able students, students completely relying on information from their informal networks, or selection for the post based on the gender of candidates.
2. **Learning:** Inequalities in learning will occur when the quality of the learning spaces and experiences is not guaranteed for all the students or when students are not supported through the adaptation of training processes to their learning styles and needs. Individualised support to the apprentice needs to be available and also basic quality standards for learning processes in diverse work environments.
3. **Transition:** Inequalities in the post school transitions occur when graduates are not able to pursue their life plans because there are no decent jobs available, personal circumstances do not allow them to choose, they are discriminated or simply cannot pursue further education or training due to barriers to access HE.

The table below tries to show how policy explanatory mechanisms, assumptions and capability inequalities among young people are analytically connected in our study.

Table 1. Realist capability evaluation framework

	Mechanisms	Assumptions	Inequalities	Capability
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Access	Situated learning	Apprentice intrinsic motivation	Information Guidance Forced enrolment Adverse selection	Accessing the programme in their desired field or sector
Learning	Skill content	Companies prioritise training Schools adapt to dual	Exploitation Disengagement Learning styles Work environment	Completing the programme acquiring the learning they want to achieve
Transition	Institutional contact	Companies are hiring Job offers are attractive	Precarity Discrimination Bargaining power Migration Access to HE	Using this education to transition to next stage in their career plan

Methodology

Mixed method approach

This is the WP that is more demanding in terms of time, material and human resources and the one that will combine quantitative and qualitative methods in the collection and analysis of primary data. WP3 follows a fully mixed concurrent equal status design (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). In this design, the quantitative (national apprentices survey) and qualitative phases (in depth interviews with implementers and beneficiaries) occur in parallel with both elements given approximately equal weight in the analysis. The objectives of the quantitative and qualitative components are described below:

- **Quantitative apprentice survey:** The national apprentice survey will generate data about the impact of the programme on the labour market outcomes of a representative sample of young people. The survey will also collect data on background characteristics of participants and programme processes that can potentially explain the unequal impact of the policy on apprentices' labour market outcomes.
- **Qualitative interviews with implementers and beneficiaries:** With the in-depth interviews, we will analyse the enactment of the programme through the reflexivity and strategic behaviour of the actors; which implies capturing actors' reasoning, interpretations and strategies, as well as those social norms framing actor's reflexivity and choices (Ball 2012). Specifically, we want to investigate how the different actors interpret the objectives and their role in the policy and how they strategically re-act to the policy.

Longitudinal design

Evaluating a policy intervention like DA from a human capabilities angle require some level of understanding of the goals and aspirations of its beneficiaries. From a human capability

perspective, policy interventions should expand the freedom of beneficiaries to achieve their own personal goals. Longitudinal research designs are the only ones that will allow us to evaluate this kind of impact. There are two reasons for the superiority of longitudinal over cross-sectional designs in capabilities research:

- **Adaptative preferences:** You need to compare the programme outcomes with the initial aspirations of the apprentice. In cross-sectional studies you will measure the outcome and will ask the apprentice about its previous aspirations. The problem with retrospective questions is that the apprentice may not remember the aspirations or may have adapted its initial aspirations and preferences to its current circumstances and constraints. For example, apprentices may not get the job opportunities that they wanted but may be reporting satisfaction because already adjusted their aspirations to the limited labour market opportunities.
- **Capability to aspire:** Interventions can have an impact expanding the opportunities of beneficiaries to achieve their goals, but they also can have an impact expanding the capacity of beneficiaries to aspire to more ambitious goals. It is reasonable to expect that interventions like DA, that give access to new spaces of socialization (work) and are expected to enhance the self-confidence of beneficiaries, will also have an impact on the capacity of young people to aspire to educational and career goals that they had not considered before. Cross-sectional studies will not capture the process of aspiration formation, change and realization.

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