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Exploring collaboration in the implementation of a national assessment strategy: perspectives of advanced practice educators

ABSTRACT

Background: Despite an increasingly competitive market, collaboration on course design between higher education institutes (HEIs) is still relatively under-researched, particularly in the UK. With the implementation of advanced clinical practice apprenticeships, this study focused on a series of workshops facilitated by the Association of Advanced Practice Educators UK (AAPEUK). These workshops aimed to ensure that faculty staff of HEIs, who were intending to deliver the advanced clinical practitioner (ACP) apprenticeship end-point assessments (EPAs), were informed and provision met the requirements of the EPA assessment plan.

Method: This study used a mixed methodology to explore perceptions of the UK's collaborative community of practice, which has been developed in relation to a national assessment strategy, the ACP Apprenticeship EPA (Institute for Apprentices and Technical Education 2018). The survey used open and closed questions, and data and results were analysed separately. The participants of this study were all members of the End Point Assessment Organisation Network (EPAO). **Results:** The study collected both quantitative and qualitative data from 16 participants to understand their experiences in the EPAO Network. The thematic analysis of the data resulted in three key themes: collaboration, support, and quality and consistency. **Discussion:** The respondents found creating an environment where sharing experiences in an honest, open and generous group and supporting each other were valued. Gaining professional growth and empowering educators in the implementation of the ACP EPA. **Conclusion:** The study's findings demonstrated the benefits of learning communities working as a community of practice, and the positive impact that collaboration had on individuals and faculties in higher education settings.

Key words

apprenticeship, assessment, advanced practice, collaboration, community of practice

While apprenticeships have been in existence in the UK since the medieval era, their popularity has waned since the 1960s (Macarthur, 2023). However, in 1993, a new apprenticeship scheme was introduced, where apprentices were considered

employees, paid a salary and required to work towards a UK National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3, equivalent to UK A level/Scottish Highers, or an American advanced placement (AP) qualification. In 2010, higher apprenticeships were introduced, which were comparable to foundation degrees and above. The advanced clinical practitioner (ACP) apprenticeship, an MSc level 7 or graduate-level programme, was launched in England in 2018.

Every apprenticeship, regardless of the academic qualification it contains, has an end-point assessment (EPA) (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2018). The purpose of the EPA is to assess whether the learner is occupationally competent to perform the role that they have been in training for during the apprenticeship. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education sets out the requirements of an EPA in an apprenticeship-specific EPA assessment document. The ACP EPA is integrated within the MSc programme and, as such, the higher education institution (HEI) acts as the end-point assessment organisation. The end point assessment organisation (EPAO) is responsible for developing the EPA materials and administering the EPA in accordance with the EPA assessment plan.

It was quickly appreciated by early adopters of the ACP apprenticeship that a collaborative approach would be beneficial in producing the materials required and ensuring a consistent approach across England. It is also a stipulation in the EPA assessment plan that EPAOs participate within an EPAO network, to share and discuss areas of improvement and to report on best practice. To this end, the Association of Advanced Practice Educators in the UK (AAPEUK) hosted a series of workshops in 2019 for HEIs delivering the ACP EPA. The EPAO network now has over 50 HEI members and has evolved into a 'community of practice'. Communities of practice are defined as 'groups of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger et al, 2002).

Much of the literature regarding collaboration in higher education in the UK tends to focus on international collaboration, employer-university collaboration or research collaborations. Literature about collaboration on course design is sparse and there is next to nothing in the UK context.

Newell and Bain (2020) used a qualitative case study approach to explore 8 Australian academics' perceptions of collaboration in higher education course design within one mid-sized multi-campus regional university, rather than between HEIs. They found that while

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respondents recognised the importance of collaboration and were willing to engage, a lack of understanding of required processes and skills, along with insufficient organisational leadership and support, hindered effective collaboration. The authors concluded that there appeared to be a reliance on individuals having the goodwill and skills to collaborate in the absence of organisational support and capacity for building collaboration at scale.

McGraw et al (2021) used a self-study methodology to explore factors and processes that enabled teacher educators from 10 Australian universities to collaboratively design a high-stakes national assessment task that impacted multiple stakeholders. Similar to this study, the authors focused on collaborative universities. In this case, the universities had designed teaching performance assessments for pre-service teachers (PSTs), known as 'Assessments for graduate teaching'. Collaborative leadership, social processes (dialogue, storytelling, humour, respectful debate) and personal dispositions (openness to learning, appreciation for change, care and commitment, respect for diversity and optimism with a critical lens) were found to foster teamwork. They particularly noted that despite a culture supporting individualised, hierarchical and competitive practices, the collaborative efforts achieved success.

This study focuses on collaboration on course design in the UK. It explored the views of members of the EPAO Network in England who worked collaboratively to implement the EPA for the ACP apprenticeship.

Method

This study used a survey-research methodology, which was underpinned by the positivist paradigm (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). A mixed-methods approach utilised quantitative and qualitative data about the participants' experience of the ACP EPAO network. In order to apply this method, the survey consisted of open and closed questions, data was simultaneously collected, and the results were analysed separately and then integrated into the conclusions (Shorten and Smith, 2017). While the qualitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, the qualitative data underwent thematic analysis.

All 63 members of the ACP EPAO network were sent an email inviting them to participate in an online survey, which consisted of 17 closed- and free-text questions. The survey was estimated to take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. Participants were free to withdraw their answers at any time. In order to maximise the number of participants in the study, reminder emails were sent each week for the 1-month duration that the survey was open. The data were collated on the Qualtrics platform, where participants were asked to provide their consent to the use of the data. All anonymous data was stored securely on password-protected devices, in accordance with the academic integrity policy, and kept securely in an electronic form in Arkivum for a period of 10 years after the completion of the research project, in line with Oxford Brookes University Ethics guidelines. A total of 16 participants responded to the survey (Table 1).

The results from the demographic questions were descriptively analysed to measure variability within the sample. This collated information on role, teaching experience and clinical background. The three closed questions were analysed in the Qualtrics platform using net promoter scoring, which indicates those who were satisfied (promoters), those who were dissatisfied (detractors) and those who were neutral (passive) (Figure 1). Thematic analysis was used to interpret the

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY POPULATION

Characteristic	Variation	Number of participants
Current primary role	Lecturer/senior lecturer	4 (25%)
	Programme/course lead	9 (56.25%)
	Work based learning tutor	1 (6.25%)
	Apprenticeship manager/team	1 (6.25%)
	EPA unit lead	1 (6.25%)
Professional clinical background	Physiotherapist	1 (6.25%)
	Nurse	13 (81.25%)
	Paramedic	1 (6.25%)
	Podiatrist	1 (6.25%)
Time employed in teaching/supporting role in higher education (years)±SD		11.86±8.21
First end-point assessment conducted	2021	3
	2022	6
	2023	6
	2024	1
Length of attendance (months)±SD		11.75±9.69

data from the free-text questions. Thematic analysis allowed for the development of themes by identifying patterns in the data (Braun and Clark, 2006). The researchers utilised the Braun and Clark (2006) 6-step approach to reviewing the data as cited in Maguire and Delahunt (2017):

- 1 Become familiar with the data
- 2 Generate initial codes
- 3 Search for themes
- 4 Review themes
- 5 Define themes
- 6 Write-up (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

To increase reflexivity and sense check the themes developed, both researchers independently analysed the data and came together to discuss their outcomes. This ensured a rigorous analysis process to ensure consistency in results. From this process, three key themes emerged from the analysis: collaboration, support, and quality and consistency.

Research governance

The proposal for this study was developed by the primary researcher with the second providing peer review. Ethical approval was then gained from Oxford Brookes University ethics committee (UREC reg no L22284), the principal researcher's institution. The project was also registered at Sheffield Hallam University.

In line with ethical governance of research projects, the participants all provided their informed consent at the start of the survey. The study was undertaken in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki 2013, autonomy, beneficence, non maleficence and justice.

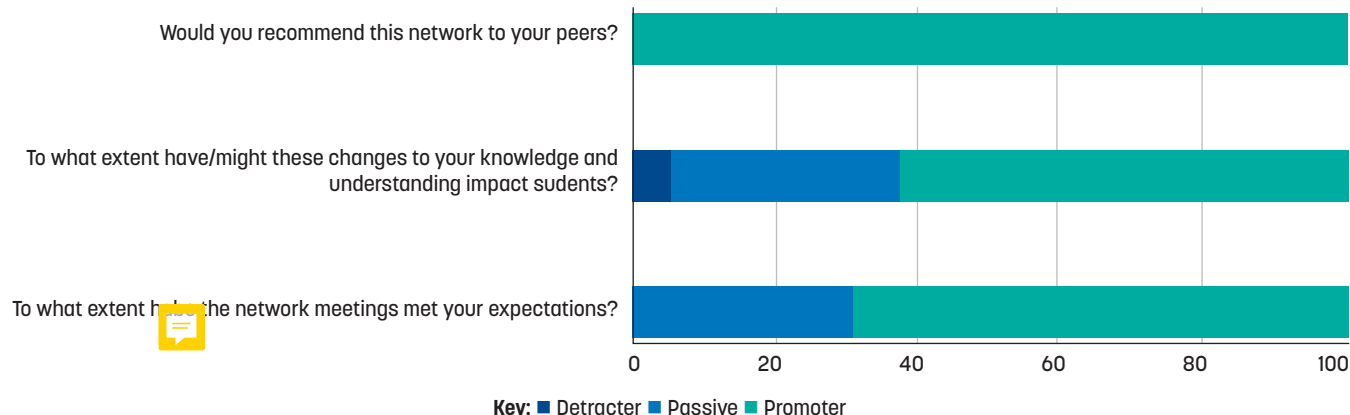
Results

Descriptive analysis

A total of 16 participants responded to the survey. Most respondents were programme/course leads and nurses, although the study population reflected the diverse makeup of the EPAO network. The majority had extensive educational experience in teaching or supporting roles in higher education. While most respondents had already delivered the EPA, a number

FIGURE 1

Response to quantitative questions



of respondents were yet to deliver their first. The closed questions indicated high satisfaction with the network, its potential positive impacts on members, and students' knowledge and understanding of the EPA (Figure 1). Thematic analysis of the free-text responses revealed three key themes: collaboration, support, and quality and consistency. Collectively, the three key themes showed a positive impact on the members of the collaborative group. Considering these in more detail shows further positive elements of working in a community of practice.

Thematic analysis

Collaboration

Several respondents mentioned that the collaborative nature of the group was a positive aspect. Collaboration is defined by Chrislip and Larson (1994) as a: 'mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties who work toward common goals by sharing responsibility, authority, and accountability for achieving results ... the purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party'.

The benefits of collaboration can be summed up as providing cost savings and efficiencies. In the specific context of higher education, Walsh and Kahn (2009) outline particular benefits:

- A greater resource than just the individual on which to draw
- Several, rather than one, potential leads to maintain the momentum of the project and refresh the initiative with new ideas and energy
- Cross-fertilisation of ideas and enthusiasm
- The satisfaction of realising a significant project that would have been unthinkable, and less enjoyable, without the support of others.

The respondents' motivation for joining the network was reported to be able to share best practices, experiences and resources for the EPA. The EPA is a complex assessment with several parts each requiring various elements to be designed and validated (MacArthur, 2023). This perhaps represents the 'unthinkable task' referred to in Walsh and Kahn's (2009) above list. Respondents reported that being able to hear from other HEIs about their real-life experiences of delivering the EPA, gaining ideas and tips, and learning what

worked well helped to give them a better understanding of the requirements. This assisted members with the practicalities of setting up a new predetermined assessment and supporting colleagues and students better. Two respondents commented:

'Attending the meetings had a very positive impact on me, as I found that my understanding and knowledge of the modules and the assessment requirements were enhanced. Moreover, I felt that I gained new ideas on how I could best structure the module's timetable and facilitate my students' learning.'

'I went from understanding what the abbreviation means, to understanding and developing an EPA module—I could simply not have done this without colleagues sharing their experiences.'

These findings and comments concur with the benefits of collaboration outlined above by Walsh and Kahn (2009).

In the context of secondary education, Hargreaves (1994) discusses the importance of teacher collaboration in understanding how teachers can work together to improve student learning. He draws a distinction between collaboration, which tends to be spontaneous, voluntary and development-orientated, and contrived collegiality, which is administratively regulated, compulsory and implementation-orientated. He argues that collaboration with the characteristics of contrived collegiality does not tend to lead to meaningful or sustainable change. This may help to explain why the EPAO network was a positive experience. Members joined voluntarily, with the expectation that working together would be a productive and valuable exercise.

This collaboration is significant, as changes to UK higher education over the last 15–20 years mean that universities are finding themselves in an increasingly competitive market. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (HESA, 2023) data from 2014–15 to 2021–22 reveals that tuition fee growth has become the primary source of income for universities, emphasising the shift towards treating students as customers. This is one of the six conditions required to support competition as described by Adcroft et al (2010); any buyer in a given marketplace has the option to buy the same


product from a rival seller. A competitive orientation is associated with certain activities and behaviours summed up by Adcroft et al (2010) as: improvements to relative performance, in order to secure a competitive advantage. Research on the impact of competition on research collaboration in higher education is extensive, highlighting the tension between collaboration and individual achievement evaluations. However, limited research exists on the effect of competition on course design collaboration, particularly involving educators from multiple universities (McFarlane, 2016). Less is known about the effect of competition on collaboration for course design and even less about collaborations involving educators from multiple universities. It might be expected, therefore, that a competitive environment such as that created in UK higher education would be less conducive to collaboration. This was not the experience of respondents in this survey.

When asked to identify what had facilitated the beneficial experience, respondents commented on the positive and constructive discussion and the honest, open and generous collegiality of the membership. Newell and Bain (2018), in their review of the literature on team-based collaboration in higher education, explored the success factors required for effective collaboration and identified the role of attitudes, dispositions and interpersonal skills as key. Attitudes such as valuing and choosing collaboration, trust, respect, reciprocity, commitment to shared work, self-awareness and adaptability, and an openness to others and tasks, were described as important prerequisites that predispose individuals for collaboration. These prerequisites would appear to be evidenced in the EPAO network members. One respondent said that the benefits they had experienced by being part of the network were due to:

'Generosity of others to share experiences, to be honest, and open about what they have done, even if something had not gone to plan.'

Another commented:

'...sharing pitfalls and concerns, refreshing for competitive organisations. It has a "we are all in it together" feel.'

The respondent ed the network to share best practices, experiences and resources related to the EPA assessment. This collaboration helped them with the practical aspects of setting up the assessment and supporting colleagues and students. The benefits reported by the respondents align with the advantages of collaboration outlined by Walsh and Kahn (2009). The EPAO network experience was positive because members voluntarily joined with the expectation of and disposition to productive collaboration. The respondents attributed the beneficial experience of collaboration to positive and constructive discussions, as well as the honest, open and generous collegiality within the group, which created an environment where sharing experiences, even when things did not go according to plan, and supporting each other were valued.

Support

Another common theme among responses related to the support offered by the network. While collaboration was seen to provide practical support in delivering the EPA assessment and driving professional growth, respondents also reported gaining personal benefits

from being part of a supportive network leading to personal growth.

Many noted that they had gained personal confidence. One respondent commented:

'The EPA is very detailed and specific, as someone who is new to academia, I don't think I would have the confidence to implement it without support from the network.'

Another commented:

'The discussions and feedback that I received from colleagues from various institutions across the country was very positive and useful, and I found that my confidence was boosted.'

This, in turn, enabled them to support others:

'More confidence in being able to articulate this EPA to the wider ACP team, and apprenticeship lead.'

'I felt reassured to support colleagues and students doing their EPA.'

'I have felt confident to become a buddy and an IA (independent assessor for the EPA) thanks to this group.'

McGraw et al (2021), in a very similar study, also found that membership of a collaborative group produced personal gains and increased confidence brought about by the group's willingness to be open and reflective. Chang (2018) considered three studies about university faculty communities from a relational perspective, using Confucian relationality as a lens. She considered collegiality as a form of personal cultivation and, therefore, a goal in itself rather than purely as a means to achieving the aims of the group. Chang (2018) would argue that the fact that many respondents reported these personal benefits should be considered as much a measure of the success of the network as the achievement of the groups' original aims related to the EPA. In fact, it is clear that the impact of the network on the successful delivery of the EPA across multiple HEIs in England is as much to do with empowering educators as with providing practical resources.

This may be a significant benefit of collaborative work in the current climate, as UK surveys of staff wellbeing revealed that 47% of participants described their mental health as poor (Dougall et al, 2021). This study was carried out during the pandemic, but pre-pandemic studies also found that university staff documented higher levels of stress and burnout compared to the general population (Morrish, 2019). Among other factors that might contribute to this, Jayman et al (2022) cite extrinsic pressures such as high-stakes external audits, which are a feature of the apprenticeship system with the EPA coming under specific scrutiny by the office for students since 2021. Many respondents in this study said that they joined the network specifically to gain support with one respondent saying that 'hearing that others feel as stressed as me' was one of the most useful aspects of the meetings, indicating that implementation of the EPA was a source of stress for educators. Jayman et al (2022) point out that there is evidence of an association between teacher and learner wellbeing and that efforts to improve staff wellbeing will ultimately benefit students. It was heartening to get the following response:

'I really enjoy these meetings—there aren't many meetings I feel that way about!'

Quality and consistency

Many respondents reported that a motivation to join the network was to ensure quality and consistency in delivering the EPA. Through the collaborative and supportive environment, members have been able to learn from each other and share best practices and ideas. This has resulted in improvements to their provision in line with other HEIs:

'I have reviewed the number and the structure of the required tutorials for each cohort based on the suggestions made by the members of the network.'

'I have listened to the experiences of others and have developed my EPA module on the back of HEIs shared experiences.'

It is clear to see how this activity would result in consistency among those HEIs who are members of the network.

The existence of a collaborative professional community is associated with enhanced teaching methods and academic success among students (Newell and Bain, 2018). Collaborative work has been linked with high-quality courses in teacher education for example (Zundas-Fraser, 2014). Newell and Bain (2018) argue that successful programme design in higher education relies heavily on collaboration as a crucial element particularly as student populations become diverse, societal expectations of education increase, and external drivers mean academics cannot meet these demands alone.

Discussion

Collaboration helped members of the network with the practical aspects of setting up the assessment and supporting colleagues and students. Through the collaborative and supportive environment, members have been able to learn from each other and share best practices and ideas and this has resulted in improvements to the quality of their provision in line with other HEIs. This activity has resulted in consistency among those HEIs who are members of the network.

This study is the only study on the impact of collaboration on course design outside of Australia, with most of the literature about collaboration in higher education concerned with research collaboration. It supports many of the findings in previous studies on collaboration for course design. While this was a successful example of collaboration, as found by Newell and Bain (2020), it too relied on the goodwill and existing skills of the community of practice for its success. Many of the social processes and personal dispositions identified by McGraw et al (2021) were also found to be important in this study including respectful debate and openness to learning in an increasingly competitive environment.

Limitations

Throughout the process, the researchers tried to limit an unconscious bias of their opinions of the group, as they were also members of the EPAO. Although all efforts were made to minimise this, completely eliminating it is likely to have not been possible.

The themes that emerged in this study can be used to inform more specific research questions in order to deepen the understanding of the processes and practices

that lead to successful collaboration for course design in higher education. The insights into participant experiences of the community of practice can guide the development of effective strategies to promote HEI collaboration in an increasingly competitive market, including professional development needs for developing the skills and providing support for engaging in collaborative practices.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that collaboration has the potential to produce benefits to the design of programmes, the personal growth and empowerment of educators, and the quality and consistency of provision. The network has enabled academics from a diverse range of HEIs in England to engage in professional development towards improved teaching and learning in a safe, non-competitive collaborative and encouraging space.

What is evident from this study is the passion for the successful implementation of assessment. The community of practice allowed a safe space to discuss challenges and learn from others to ensure consistency and rigour of the assessment. **IJAP**

Ethical approval: Ethical approval was gained from Oxford Brookes University ethics committee (UREC reg no L22284), the principal researcher's institution. The project was also registered at Sheffield Hallam University. In line with ethical governance of research projects, the participants all provided their informed consent at the start of the survey. The study was undertaken in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki 2013, autonomy, beneficence, non maleficence and justice. The data from the study was collated on the Qualitric platform, where participants were asked to provide their consent to the use of the data. All anonymous data was stored securely on password-protected devices, in accordance with the academic integrity policy, and kept securely in an electronic form in Arkivum for a period of 10 years after the completion of the research project, in line with Oxford Brookes University Ethics guidelines. A total of 16 participants responded to the survey.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest

Data sharing statement: Data is available on request, please contact authors.

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KEY POINTS

- Implementing the end-point assessment (EPA) plan held challenges for educators acting as the EPA organisation. These challenges have been collaboratively addressed through the end point assessment organisation (EPAO) network, which has been hosted by the Association of Advanced Practice Educators UK (AAPEUK)
- This study demonstrates that collaboration has the potential to produce benefits to the design of programmes, the personal growth and empowerment of educators, and the quality and consistency of provision
- Key to realising these benefits were the positive and constructive discussions and the honest, open and generous collegiality of the membership.

CPD / Reflective Questions

- Why is collaboration an important activity in advanced practice education?
- To what extent might a more competitive environment inhibit collaboration?
- How might educators work more collaboratively across higher education institutions?