

'Addressing policy misconceptions about mature learners and university approaches.'

Exploring how situated lifelong-learning, through a degree apprenticeship, directly impacts organisational growth through the lens of the mature learner.

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Introduction

Government misconceptions



Situated learning pedagogy within practice



Examples of the benefits from organisations and mature professionals



Case study



Breakout discussions



Feedback, questions and wider discussion

Manchester Metropolitan University

Partnered
with
25%
of the top 100
apprenticeship
employers 2025
gov.uk

92%

distinctions and
merits at end-point
assessment

**Top
University
in the UK**
for degree
apprenticeships
RateMyApprenticeship
Awards 2019 - 2023


**Ofsted
Outstanding**
Provider 2022


3,300+
Degree
apprentices
on 17 apprenticeship courses

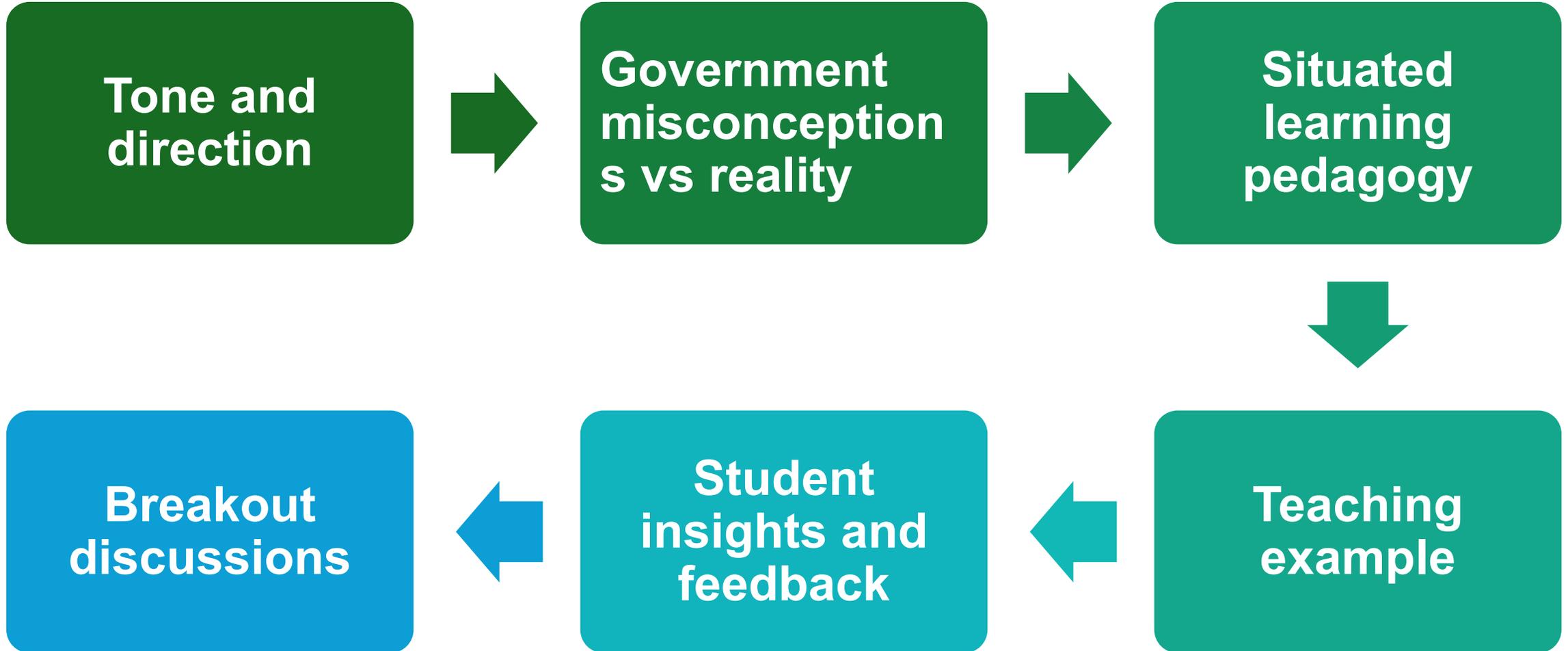
180+
Apprentices
recognised at regional
and national awards

700
Employer
partners


42%
STEM
apprentices
are women
National average 22%

Conference theme- **CHANGE: *creating and adapting to apprenticeship and skills policy, past, present and future.***

- Recent ministerial announcements emphasise the crucial role of higher education (HE) in aligning with post-16 education and skills strategies, particularly in areas like higher technical and **professional education**, apprenticeships, HTQs, **lifelong learning** and **progression into HE**.
- However, the Government is not always clear on its understanding of the **purpose of HE** so nothing can be assumed.



Government Direction

The government's stated goal is to rebalance the apprenticeship system and focus on providing training opportunities for **younger people**.

Funding for Level 7 apprenticeships removed for **ages 22 and older**.

Funding restricted to **ages 16 to 21**.

Government perceptions – an observation of tone

- Three common Government perceptions of degree apprenticeships are seeming to drive policy.

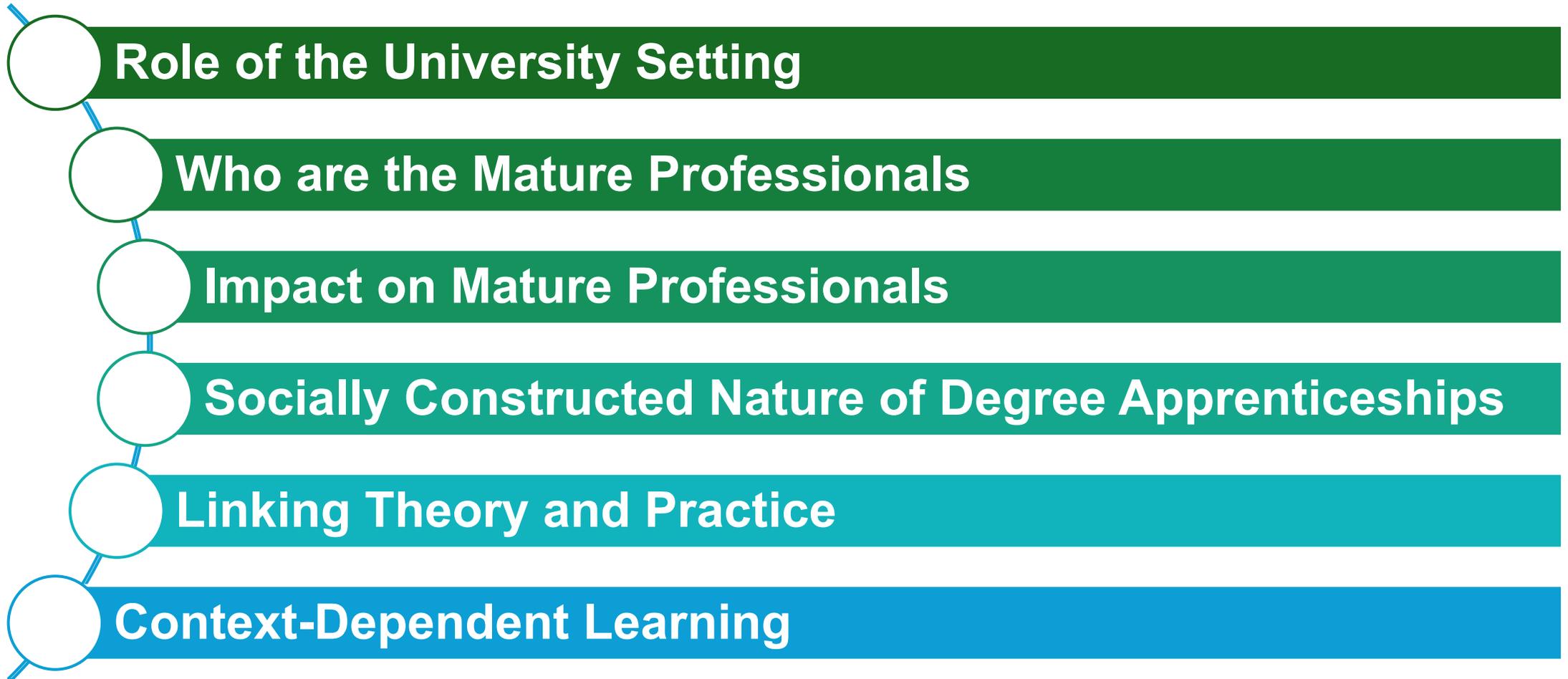
These are:

The degree element delivers separate, theoretical knowledge that exists in a bubble.

Apprentices are for the young.

Experienced, established professionals, do not need further development.

Government Misconceptions vs Reality



1. The Role of the University Setting

The university environment fosters **deeper critical theory and analysis**.

It provides the **foundations necessary** to understand an individual's social or organisational context.

The level 6 nature of a degree is not a “**nice to have**” but the **minimum** level required by professionals operating social businesses.

Functional, descriptive, uncritical thinking does not meet the needs of a working professional.

2. Who are the Mature Professionals

There is often an assumption that experienced, established professionals do not need further development.

But who do we really mean by this?

An impression that it is business executives seeking a funded MBA.

At MMU, we work with:

- Mature professionals with limited or no formal Level 3/4/5/6 development.
- Individuals who are experts in their job but have hit a ceiling without a formal degree.
- People who are dedicated and driven, yet often find entering higher education daunting and intimidating.

3. Impact on Mature Professionals

The **greatest impact** of this model occurs when teaching **mature professionals**.

These individuals already understand the **context and nuance** of their organisation's operations.

They can therefore derive the **most benefit** from applying aligned theory and critical thinking in their real-world contexts.

Higher level, meta thinking opens up understanding and supports new approaches to problems and operations.

These professionals gain significant value from applied learning, connecting theory directly to their workplace practice.

4. The Socially Constructed Nature of Degree Apprenticeships

Degree apprenticeships are **socially constructed** forms of teaching.

They involve:

- **Teaching within a context**, and
- **Theory embedded in a real-world setting**.

This stands in contrast to traditional academic teaching that often uses **generic, decontextualised case studies** (e.g., a standard Coca-Cola case study / assignment).

This approach reflects the **socially constructed nature of apprenticeships** as forms of **situated learning**.

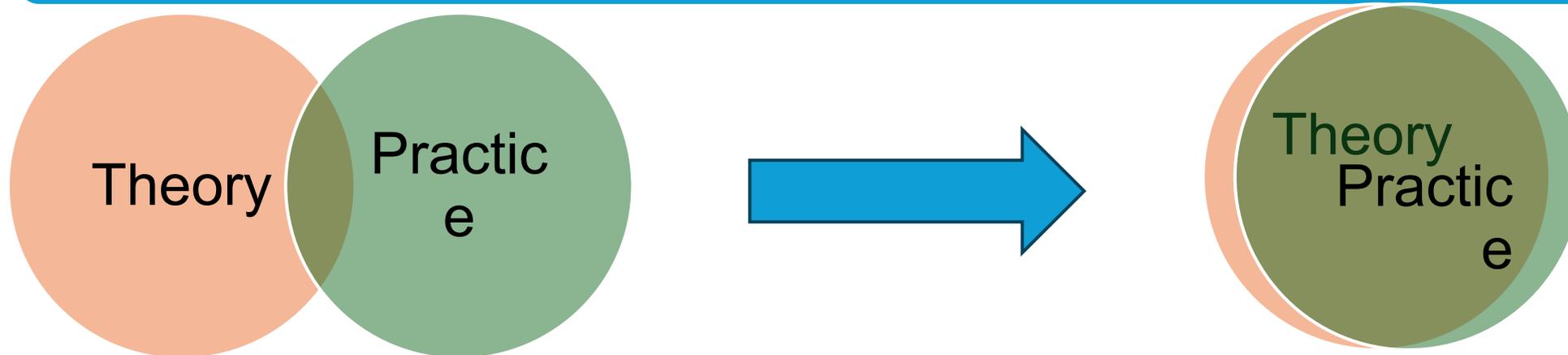
5. Linking Theory and Practice

Within an apprenticeship theory and practice are inseparable and codependent.

This is a theory in context approach. Not generic.

A **practice/theory integration** benefits all apprentices, encouraging reflective and applied learning.

Applying and framing thinking and action within the workplace is **good pedagogical practice**.



6. Context-Dependent Learning

The apprentice brings their workplace as a living case study into the learning process.

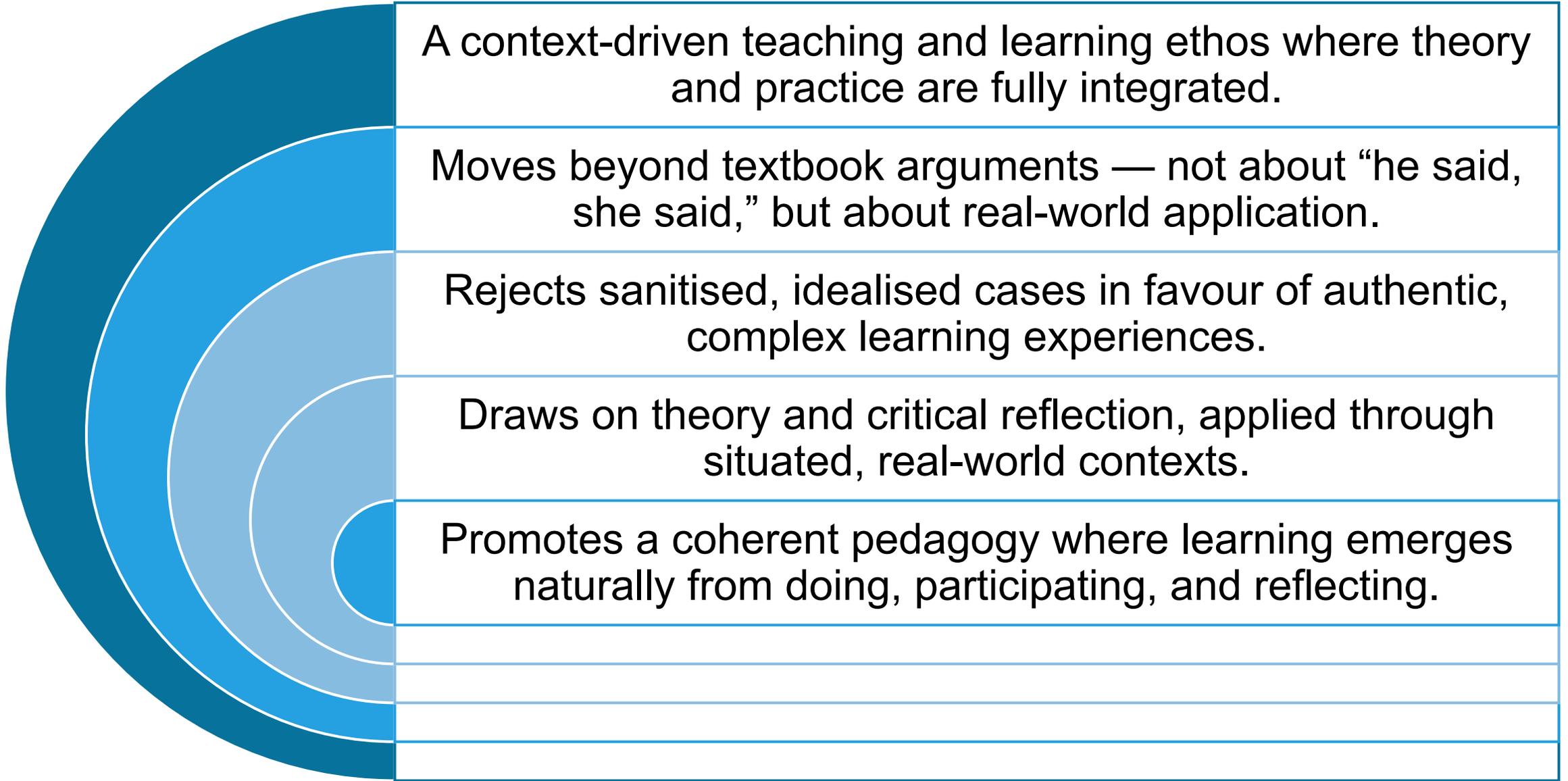
Learning in this model is **context-dependent**, not abstract.

Effective apprenticeship teaching therefore **uses the apprentice's workplace** as the foundation for:

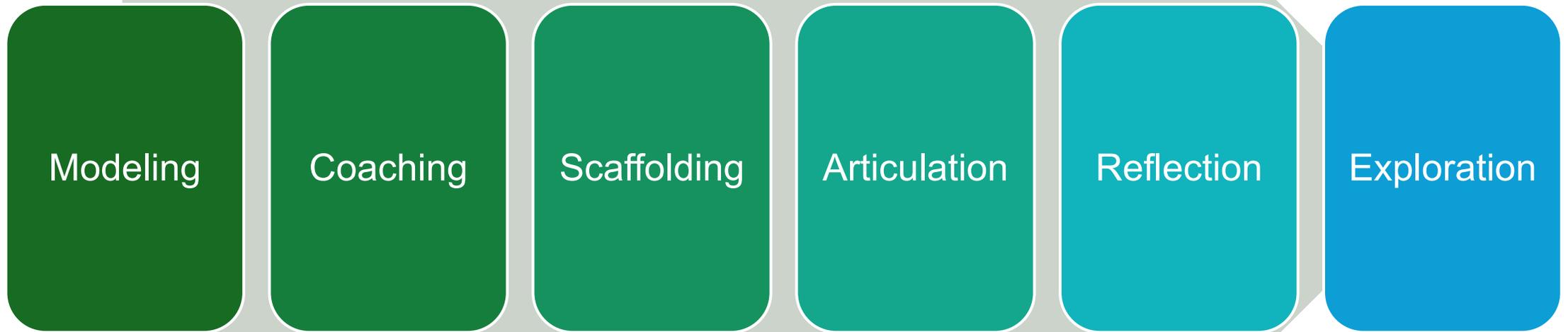
- All teaching, and
- All assignments.

Delivering workplace improvements concurrently and within learning

Situated learning pedagogy



Cognitive Apprenticeship



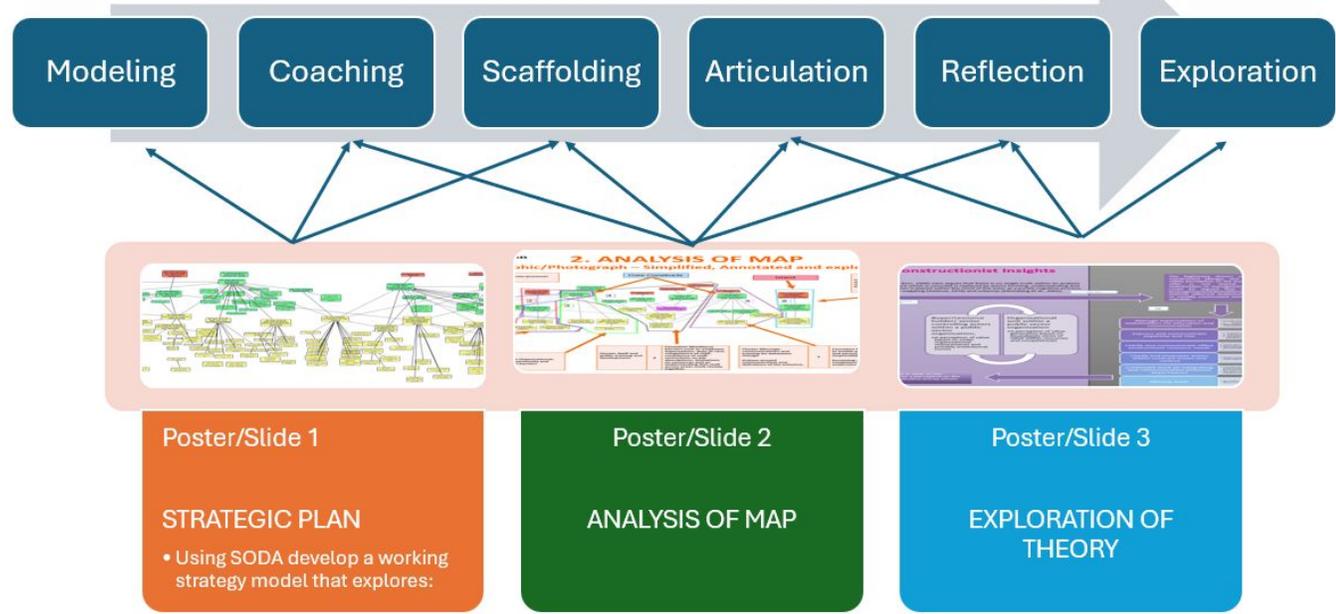
Cognitive apprenticeship

- Engage a novice and mentor in authentic work
- Related practices and social interactions
- Involving specific cognitive processes
- Work related skills and tasks resulting in a mutually beneficial collaborative working relationship



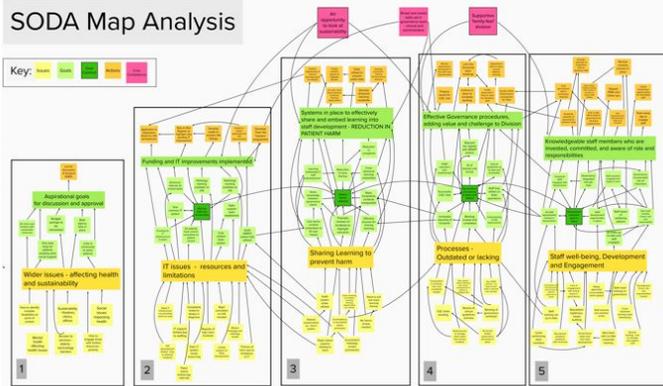
- SODA
 - Real / situated
- Themes Insights
- Theory to explore influences on you and your organisations strategic thinking.

Example

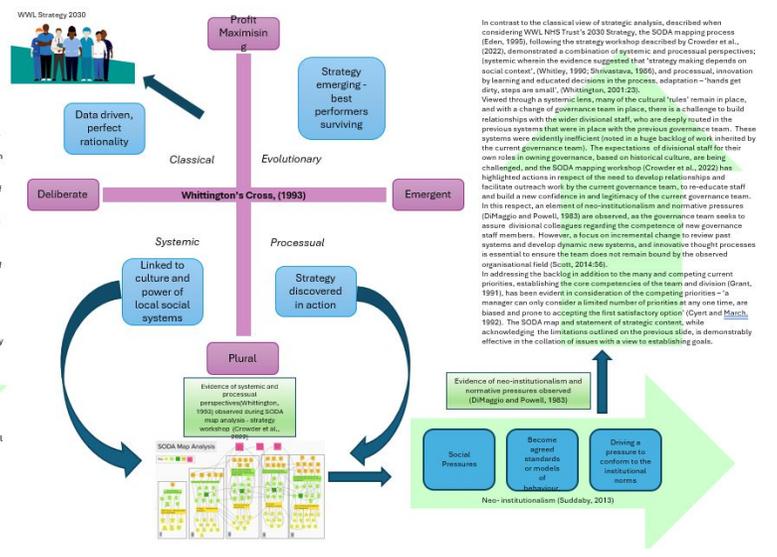


- Cluster 1: Whole system effective health and sustainability**
Cluster 1 encompasses all system elements connected to IT Service, Linked to future to patient safety, improved patient and staff experience, reduced costs, better clinical outcomes, improved patient and staff experience, and system for our patients (patient safety) and staff. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation.
- Cluster 2: IT Service Resilience and Availability**
Cluster 2 encompasses all system elements connected to IT Service, Linked to future to patient safety, improved patient and staff experience, reduced costs, better clinical outcomes, improved patient and staff experience, and system for our patients (patient safety) and staff. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation.
- Cluster 3: Operational Excellence in the Business**
Cluster 3 encompasses all system elements connected to IT Service, Linked to future to patient safety, improved patient and staff experience, reduced costs, better clinical outcomes, improved patient and staff experience, and system for our patients (patient safety) and staff. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation.
- Cluster 4: Employee Experience and Well-being**
Cluster 4 encompasses all system elements connected to IT Service, Linked to future to patient safety, improved patient and staff experience, reduced costs, better clinical outcomes, improved patient and staff experience, and system for our patients (patient safety) and staff. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation.
- Cluster 5: Staff Well-being, Development and Engagement**
Cluster 5 encompasses all system elements connected to IT Service, Linked to future to patient safety, improved patient and staff experience, reduced costs, better clinical outcomes, improved patient and staff experience, and system for our patients (patient safety) and staff. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation.
- Core Organisational Competencies**
Cluster 6 encompasses all system elements connected to IT Service, Linked to future to patient safety, improved patient and staff experience, reduced costs, better clinical outcomes, improved patient and staff experience, and system for our patients (patient safety) and staff. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation. The IT infrastructure is the backbone of the organisation and is critical to the success of the organisation.

Observations.
A cognitive causal mapping exercise (Avelrod, 1976; Huff, 1990; Luukkainen, 1994) was undertaken to create 'visual illustration of relationships between elements within a system', (Burgess et al, 1992). Buzan and Buzan, (1996) described a similar process with mind mapping. A 'freemind' approach (Hodkinson et al, 2004) was appealing, with so many 'issues' to address. Edén's Strategic Options Development and Analysis (SODA), (Edén, 1995), suggests the method as useful in examining complex problems facing an organisation, with a view to making decisions on actions to achieve goals. The evidence presented suggests limitations with this process as the view, although correct, is from one point of view. Had another individual completed this process, it is likely that they would have a very different set of issues, goals, and actions identified. The affordance (Ivanakowski and Kaplan, 2015) in this instance leads to a prediction towards negative issues, whilst overlooking the many strengths of the organisation. It is proposed that this process, with these limitations, would have had more value if completed with a wider group of individuals in the form of 'off-site awaydays', 'meetings', or 'workshops', (Henry and Seid, 2003). Johnson et al., 2014, note that these 'strategy away days' or 'task groups' are accepted as a credible in respect of strategy development (Hodkinson et al., 2004). Having a wider group of colleagues complete the causal mapping exercise, would prove beneficial to problem solving abilities as the range of issues and goals would be generated from a wider source of different perspectives. It is notable that the core constructs (Edén et al., 1992:131) are all linked, with the central core of all being patient safety, and they are bound in the success or failure of any strategic intent.



Clusters (Ackermann and Eden, 1992) were generated during the process, based on a strategy workshop proposed by Crowder et al., (2022). This process was beneficial to understand the collection of issues within the clusters.



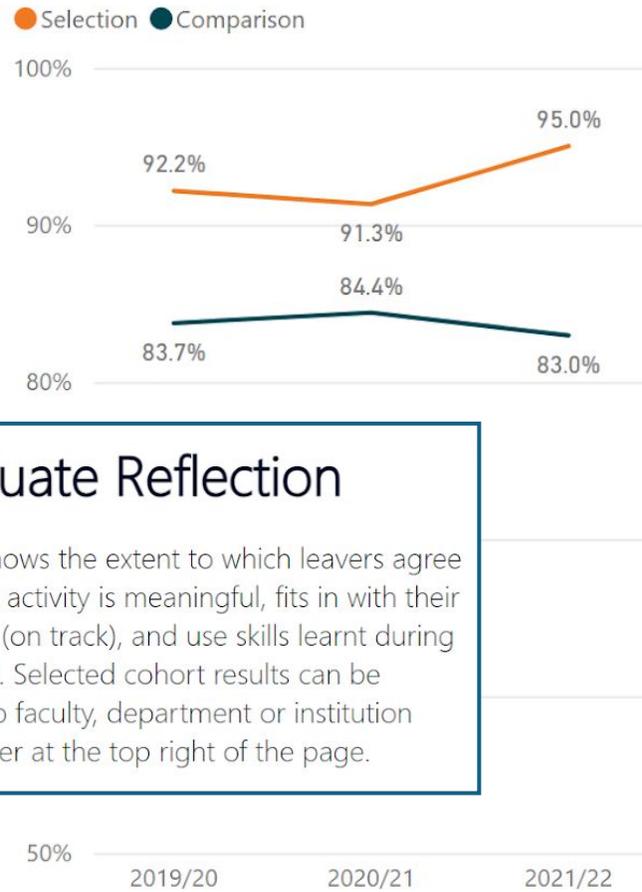
WVW NHS Trust's 2020 Strategy clearly states four key areas of focus: Patients, People, Performance, and Partnerships, with strategic ambitions for each that form the focus of the annual corporate objectives. It is a 'long term plan, with perfect rationality to maximize economic advantage' (Hollis and Nell, 1975). In a corporate, hierarchical document, that demonstrates links between internal and external environments (Ansoff, 1965). However, there is no indication of how and with whom the strategy was developed. A central principle of the strategy is consultation with 'all stakeholders' and the 'golden thread' which runs from the strategic vision to the individual. The implication of this is that all staff and other stakeholders are aware of the strategic objectives, however there are limitations in this, as from a simple straw poll, it is evident that the staff surveyed were unaware of the strategy's existence. In considering this, the evidence is that a classical approach (Whittington, 1993), was taken. Key strengths of the strategy are the aspirations, bound up with biases and hopes, and in a large NHS organisation it is reasonable to assume that the senior leadership team do strive for a perfect NHS Trust. The limitations to this are that the strategy is bound up by political, financial, organisational, demographic, and municipality influences, that are varied and changeable...the detached assessment of strengths and weaknesses may be unreliable, all bound up with aspirations, biases and hopes', (Mintzberg, 1990:182). It can be argued that the NHS is an institutionally different organisational field (Scott, 2014:56). In practice, the evidence suggests that the Trust itself is driven by societal pressures, and both coercive and mimetic isomorphic forces, and a level of homogeneity (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), presenting a similar type of strategy to other NHS Trusts, for assurance of legitimacy (Scott, 1982B). This is common practice for large organisations, and although it could be viewed as necessary to have the corporate strategy comply with wider shared expectations, the argument is that an alternative approach of innovation

In contrast to the classical view of strategic analysis, described when considering WVW NHS Trust's 2020 Strategy, the SODA mapping process (Edén, 1995), following the strategy workshop described by Crowder et al., (2022), demonstrated a combination of systemic and processual perspectives; (systemic wherein the evidence suggested that 'strategy making depends on social context' (Whitley, 1990; Thwaites, 1996), and processual, innovation by learning and educated decisions in the process, adaptation - 'hands get dirty, steps are small' (Whittington, 2001:23). Viewed through a systemic lens, many of the cultural 'values' remain in place, and with a change of governance team in place, there is a challenge to build relationships with the wider divisional staff, who are deeply rooted in the previous systems that were in place with the previous governance team. These systems were evidently inefficient (noted in a huge backlog of work inherited by the current governance team). The expectations of divisional staff for their own role in driving governance, based on historical culture, are being challenged, and the SODA mapping workshop (Crowder et al., 2022) has highlighted actions in respect of the need to develop relationships and facilitate outreach work by the current governance team, to re-educate staff and build a new confidence in and legitimacy of the current governance team. In this respect, an element of neo-institutionalism and normative pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) are observed, as the current governance team seeks to assure divisional colleagues regarding the competence of new governance staff members. However, a focus on incremental change to review past systems and develop dynamic new systems, and innovative thought processes is essential to ensure the team does not remain bound by the existing organisational field (Scott, 2014:56). In addressing the backlog in addition to the many and competing current priorities, establishing the core competencies of the team and division (Grant, 1991), has been evident in consideration of the competing priorities - 'a manager can only consider a limited number of priorities at any one time, are based and prone to accepting the first satisfactory option' (Owen and March, 1992). The SODA map and statement of strategic context, while acknowledging the limitations outlined in the previous slide, is demonstrably effective in the collation of issues with a view to establishing goals.

Graduate Reflection - Internal Comparison

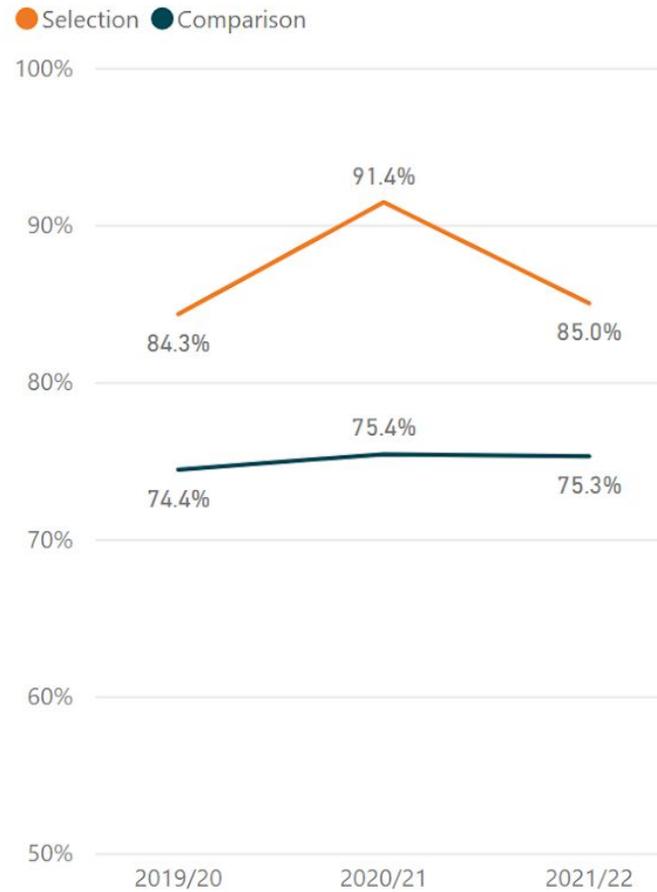
Activity meaningful?

5S Strategy, Enterprise and Sustainability vs Manch...



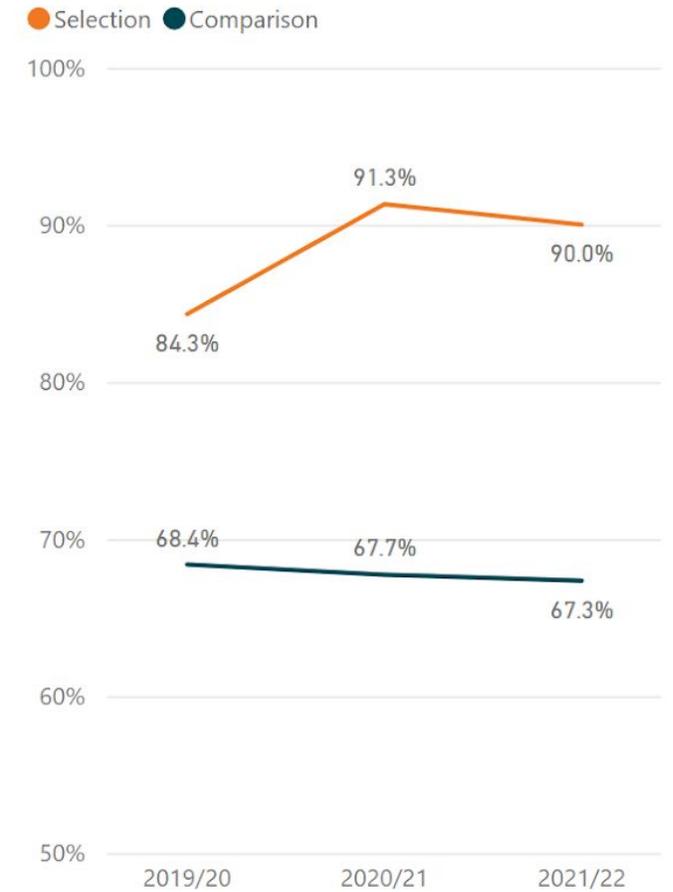
Activity on track?

5S Strategy, Enterprise and Sustainability vs Manche...



Using degree skills?

5S Strategy, Enterprise and Sustainability vs Manch...



Graduate Reflection

This page shows the extent to which leavers agree their current activity is meaningful, fits in with their future plans (on track), and use skills learnt during their degree. Selected cohort results can be compared to faculty, department or institution using the filter at the top right of the page.

Apprentice Salary by Stage and Course



Student examples and feedback

Reflections on practice

Dismissing Government Perceptions

Such as: experienced,
established professionals, do
not need further
development.

- “After presenting the PID to the project sponsor and CEO at *FT*, they were impressed that I had a well-planned, structured approach to managing the product trials, considering the scope, cost, risks, and stakeholders. Although **I found it difficult to write the PID as *FT* lacks structure and project planning**, I found the tools useful to progress through each stage. Effectively the PID provided clarity on the project aims and deliverables to **enable *FT* to achieve the desired sales targets**”.

Dismissing Government Perceptions

Such as: experienced,
established professionals, do
not need further
development.

Themes which emerge from this
preliminary analysis are:

Adoption of Learning

Value within the workplace

The Cognitive Apprentice 'Making thinking visible'

- Author 7:
 - **Value in Workplace:** "I will continue to apply my learnt knowledge in the workplace, aligning with Kolb's statement that the process of learning is creating knowledge via the transformation of experience".
- Author 12:
 - **Adoption of Learning:** "Using Borton's model and Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, this unit has significantly deepened my understanding of project management, particularly in structuring complex operational solutions".

Supporting the Degree Apprenticeship as a Cognitive Experience

Dismissing Government Perceptions

The degree element delivers separate, theoretical knowledge that exists in a bubble.

- Author 1: Demonstrates the direct application of lean six sigma principles learned during the course to workplace projects, highlighting the **practical value of theoretical knowledge**.
- Author 4: Shows how the degree apprenticeship has **improved confidence and skills over time**, emphasizing continuous professional development.
- Author 5: Illustrates the integration of project management tools and frameworks, **enhancing team collaboration and accountability**.
- Author 7: Reflects on the **transformation of experience into knowledge**, aligning academic learning with workplace application.
- Author 9: Highlights the **commitment to further professional development** through additional courses, showing the ongoing impact of the degree apprenticeship and a behavioural shift to lifelong learning.

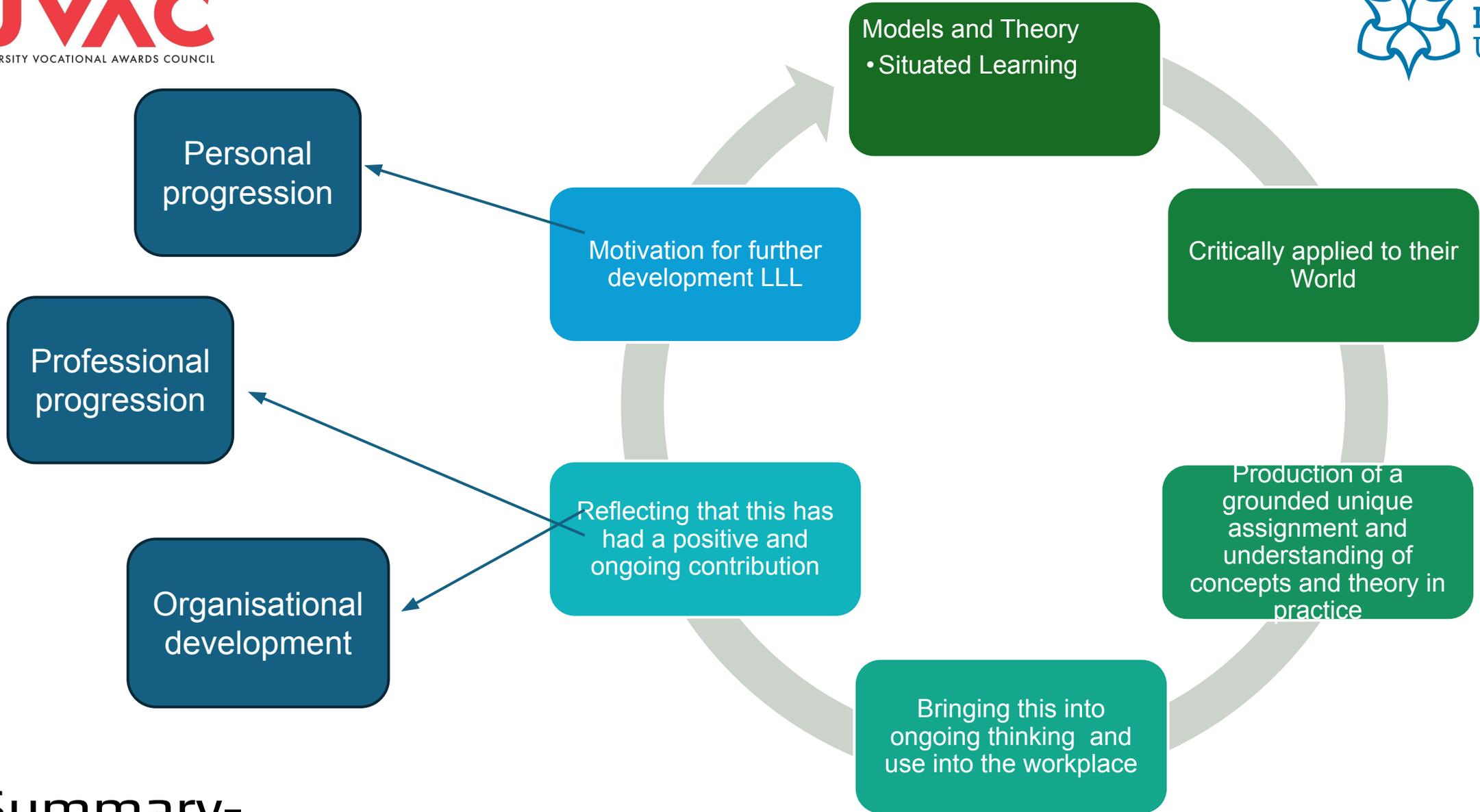
Situational Learning and the Cognitive Apprenticeship

We support apprenticeships that address and correct government misperceptions.

That the degree element delivers separate, theoretical knowledge that exists in a bubble.

That experienced, established professionals, do not need further development.

- **Analysis:** Navigating Amazon's complex stakeholder, approval and process's structure has proven challenging, however, through identifying correct tools I was able to create a clear plan. The **necessity of adapting methodologies** also became apparent, leading to adapting AGILE methodology to suit the project needs and Amazon's expectations, while also combining it with waterfall methodology to **create the hybrid method** used for this project.
- **Conclusion:** Despite the initial challenges and the existing time constraints, **learning throughout the unit** has **significantly improved my** project management **capabilities**. The practical application of theoretical concepts has provided me with a strong toolkit for future projects. That being said, I recognise that there is still a great deal to learn about project management.



Summary- Cognitive Apprenticeship Learning and Development Loop

Breakout discussions

Topic 1

Situated Learning and
the cognitive
apprenticeship

Topic 2

Messages and themes
for influence and
action

Questions / feedback?