

**The final hurdle or a meaningful milestone? Evaluating the educational value of the end-point assessment in advanced practice education**

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3 **The Final Hurdle or a Meaningful Milestone? Evaluating the Educational Value**  
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5 **of the End Point Assessment in Advanced Practice Education**  
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## The Final Hurdle or a Meaningful Milestone? Evaluating the Educational Value of the End Point Assessment in Advanced Practice Education

### Abstract

#### *Purpose*

To evaluate educator and apprentice perceptions of the educational value of the End-Point Assessment (EPA) within the Level 7 Advanced Clinical Practice (ACP) apprenticeship.

#### *Design/methodology/approach*

A **convergent parallel** mixed-methods design was used, **underpinned by a pragmatic paradigm**, combining quantitative and qualitative data from questionnaires distributed to educators (n=16) and apprentices (n=18). **The integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches objectively evaluate educators' and apprentices' perceptions of the EPA in the ACP apprenticeship.**

#### *Findings*

Findings revealed mixed opinions on the EPA's educational value and fairness. Thematic analysis identified seven core themes: structural burden and assessment burden and learner vulnerability; redundancy and overlap; educator role tension and reward; valued yet demanding experience; pedagogical integration and skill consolidation; and inconsistency and subjectivity in assessment. Results suggest the EPA provides a meaningful summative experience but requires reform to enhance proportionality, reduce duplication, and align more closely with authentic professional

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3 practice. While apprentices viewed the EPA as relevant and an opportunity to  
4  
5 consolidate learning, both groups highlighted substantial duplication with existing MSc  
6  
7 assessments, excessive workload, and emotional strain. The EPA was described as  
8  
9 administratively burdensome, disproportionate in scope, and inconsistent across  
10  
11 assessors. Nonetheless, many apprentices and educators acknowledged its reflective  
12  
13 and integrative value, seeing it as a professional milestone that consolidates clinical,  
14  
15 leadership, educational, and research skills. These findings align with current  
16  
17 government reforms aimed at simplifying apprenticeship assessments and ensuring  
18  
19 they remain rigorous yet proportionate to purpose.  
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### 23 24 25 *Originality*

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28 This study provides timely evidence on the educational impact of the EPA in advanced  
29  
30 clinical practice, offering insights that align with national policy changes. It highlights  
31  
32 tensions between summative assessment and authentic professional practice,  
33  
34 contributing to ongoing debates about proportionality and integration in apprenticeship  
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36 assessment design.  
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41 **Keywords:** Apprenticeship policy, authentic assessment, capstone projects,  
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43 competency-based education, continuing professional development, higher and  
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45 degree apprenticeships.  
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### 48 49 50 **Introduction**

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53 Higher apprenticeships, equivalent to foundation degrees and higher qualifications,  
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55 were first introduced in England in 2010, followed by the launch of degree  
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57 apprenticeships, equivalent to full bachelor's or master's degrees, in 2015, as part of  
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3 a broad reform agenda influenced by *The Wolf Report* (2011) and the *Richard Review*  
4 *of Apprenticeships* (2012). These reforms aimed to strengthen the connection  
5  
6 between academic learning and occupational skills, providing a new model of work-  
7  
8 based education.  
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12  
13 The Advanced Clinical Practice (ACP) apprenticeship at Level 7 (master's level) was  
14  
15 launched in England in 2018 as part of this reform, marking a significant milestone in  
16  
17 the education and training of advanced healthcare professionals (MacArthur, 2023). A  
18  
19 key feature of all apprenticeships, including the ACP, is the end-point assessment  
20  
21 (EPA), which provides a summative, independent evaluation of an apprentice's  
22  
23 competence against nationally recognised occupational standards (Ofqual and IFATE,  
24  
25 2024). The EPA is supported by a specific assessment plan for the standard,  
26  
27 undertaken by an end-point assessment organisation (EPAO).  
28  
29 (Apprenticeships.gov.uk, no date). Apprenticeship standards can incorporate either an  
30  
31 integrated or a non-integrated EPA into their design, meaning the EPA is included in  
32  
33 the academic award (for integrated standards) or not (for non-integrated standards)  
34  
35 (Apprenticeships.gov.uk, no date). There are benefits and drawbacks to both  
36  
37 assessment methods, which are beyond the scope of this project. In integrated  
38  
39 programmes, such as the ACP degree apprenticeship, the higher education institution  
40  
41 (HEI) delivering the master's degree and embedding the apprenticeship standards  
42  
43 may act as the EPAO. However, it must appoint an independent assessor who is not  
44  
45 involved in the on-programme teaching to undertake the EPA  
46  
47 (Apprenticeships.gov.uk, no date).  
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55 The EPA includes a synoptic assessment, which requires apprentices to synthesise  
56  
57 learning from across the programme to demonstrate a holistic understanding and  
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3 professional capability. Although synoptic assessment, often termed 'capstone  
4 projects' in the United States, has long been embedded in American higher education,  
5  
6 it has been less prevalent in the UK. However, it is now a mandated component of all  
7  
8 academic and vocational programmes in England (Macarthur, 2023).  
9  
10

11  
12  
13 The original ACP EPA consisted of two parts and three elements, all of which must be  
14 passed to pass the EPA. Part one is an open-book exam with eight questions to be  
15 answered using three pre-prepared case studies, to be completed in two hours. Part  
16  
17 two consists of two elements: a 1,500-word practice change report and a 35-minute  
18 presentation (Skills England, 2018/2022). A recent dispensation, pending a full review  
19  
20 of the standard, aimed to reduce the workload of the EPA by removing element one  
21  
22 of part two, the practice change report, but extended the remaining presentation  
23  
24 element to 60 minutes (Skills England, 2025). Both versions of the ACP EPA are  
25  
26 currently being used by EPAOs in England, while apprentices whose programme pre-  
27  
28 dates the dispensation are going through the EPA process.  
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37 In 2024, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) announced  
38 plans to 'simplify and strengthen' apprenticeships for those with a statutory regulator  
39 and an established competency test (for example, the Therapeutic Radiographer  
40 standard). IfATE stipulated that apprentices who meet the requirements for  
41 professional registration will also be deemed to have met the end-point assessment  
42 requirements and achieved their apprenticeship (Skills England, 2023). This change  
43  
44 raises the question of the value of the end-point assessment as a separate process,  
45  
46 whether it adds value or merely increases the burden for providers and apprentices.  
47  
48 More recently, in a government press release on the 13th of February 2025, the  
49  
50 government announced further changes to apprenticeship EPAs to simplify and  
51  
52 enhance the system's flexibility, with key recommendations including ensuring that  
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3 assessment is proportionate to the assessed competencies, removing duplication of  
4  
5 assessment, allowing assessment to take place during the programme, and permitting  
6  
7 training providers to deliver and mark elements of the assessment with appropriate  
8  
9 oversight. Rob Nitsch, CEO of the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB), is quoted as  
10  
11 saying: *“Seven years into apprenticeship standards, it is right and natural that we*  
12  
13 *should be stepping back to see how end-point assessment can be optimised for the*  
14  
15 *benefit of apprentices, employers and those involved in delivery”* (Department for  
16  
17 Education and the Rt Hon Baroness Smith of Malvern, 2025).  
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23 During the planning phase for this project, the UK government announced its intention  
24  
25 to withdraw levy funding for Level 7 apprenticeships for individuals aged 21 and above  
26  
27 (DfE, 2025d). This decision adversely affects the ACP apprenticeship, which requires  
28  
29 candidates to be registered practitioners (typically aged 21 or older) and to have  
30  
31 accumulated several years of post-qualification experience (NHS England, 2025). The  
32  
33 authors continued with plans to examine the perspectives of apprentices and  
34  
35 educators involved in the Level 7 ACP apprenticeship EPA, aiming to gather  
36  
37 translational data to inform future policy and practice for all healthcare  
38  
39 apprenticeships.  
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44 In this paper, the term ‘learner’ will be used interchangeably with ‘apprentice’.  
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46

#### 47 **Aims**

48  
49 To explore educator and apprentice experiences on the purpose, impact, and  
50  
51 implementation of the EPA as an assessment method within advanced practice  
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53 apprenticeships.  
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#### 56 **Methods,**

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3 A **convergent parallel** mixed-methods design, underpinned by a pragmatic paradigm,  
4  
5 integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches to objectively gather and evaluate  
6  
7 the perceptions of educators and apprentices concerning the EPA on the ACP  
8  
9 apprenticeship, supporting both the breadth and depth of understanding in the  
10  
11 collection and analysis of the collated data (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). This  
12  
13 approach enabled standardised data collection across the population, supporting  
14  
15 generalisability and helping to identify trends and differences (Cohen *et al.*,  
16  
17 2018). **Participant characteristic data were not collected to minimise time burden and**  
18  
19 **maintain focus on perceptions of the assessment process.** The questionnaire used a  
20  
21 mix of open and closed questions: closed questions provided a snapshot of  
22  
23 perceptions, while open-ended questions offered a more detailed exploration of  
24  
25 experiences and thoughts. **A 4-point Likert scale was also used, with the middle option**  
26  
27 **omitted to reduce central tendency bias.** To quantify the different perceptions, the  
28  
29 authors developed one for educators and one for apprentices. **Data was collected in**  
30  
31 **parallel, with a separate questionnaire for each group. Both questionnaires were open**  
32  
33 **for 6 weeks from April to mid-May 2025.**

### 41 *Sample*

#### 42 *Educators*

43  
44 The Association of Advanced Practice Educators UK (AAPEUK) hosts the End-Point  
45  
46 Assessment Organisation (EPAO) network, which comprises 118 educators and  
47  
48 assessors from over 50 institutions across England, all involved in delivering the ACP  
49  
50 EPA. A convenience sampling approach was adopted, with all members of the network  
51  
52 invited via email to participate in the evaluation. Although this could be considered  
53  
54 consensus sampling, the limited sample size was insufficient to achieve a true  
55  
56 consensus among **participant respondents** (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). An email with a link to  
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1  
2  
3 the online questionnaire, hosted on Microsoft Forms, was circulated via the network  
4  
5 to invite participantrespondents to participate.  
6

### 7 8 *Apprentices*

9  
10 For the apprentice participantrespondents, the authors employed a snowball sampling  
11  
12 method, where the network lead shared a separate email with EPAO network  
13  
14 members to extend invitations to apprentices who had completed the ACP EPA at  
15  
16 their institution. Since this would be a hard-to-reach population, this method was  
17  
18 considered the most suitable for sampling (Geirczyk *et al.*, 2024).  
19

20  
21 Based on previous response rates to participation requests, the authors aimed for a  
22  
23 sample size of approximately 60 educators and 30 apprentices.  
24  
25

### 26 27 28 *Data analysis and storage*

29  
30 The results from the online questionnaires underwent 1) preparation, 2) descriptive  
31  
32 analysis (quantitative), coding and thematic analysis (qualitative), and 3)  
33  
34 Interpretation, which were conducted separately by the authors and then integrated  
35  
36 and embedded the data to draw comparisons and conclusions. The principal author  
37  
38 stored the data from Microsoft Forms in accordance with institutional guidance on the  
39  
40 ethical principles of collating and storing data. The questionnaires collected no  
41  
42 personal data; the principal author saved the questionnaire data on the institution's  
43  
44 password-protected SharePoint site.  
45  
46

### 47 48 49 *Ethical approval and considerations*

50  
51  
52 The principal author gained ethical approval from one of the authors' institutions  
53  
54 (Ethics application 2430). The authors received no financial support for this evaluation.  
55  
56 Each questionnaire included participantrespondent information and consent  
57  
58 questions; participantrespondents were required to accept the consent before  
59  
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1  
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3 completing the questionnaire. If they declined, participantrespondents were directed  
4 to a thank-you message at the end of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was  
5 completed anonymously, with no personal details collected; as a result, submitted data  
6 could not be retrieved or deleted once the participantrespondent completed the  
7 questionnaire.  
8  
9

## 15 Findings and discussion

### 17 *Educators*

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19  
20 A total of 16 educators responded to the questionnaire. The majority (75%) reported  
21 having assessed between one and ten cohorts for the EPA, suggesting that the  
22 sample represented an experienced group in undertaking the EPA. Only one  
23 participantrespondent had delivered the EPA under the new dispensation format,  
24 indicating that the data primarily reflect experiences with the original format.  
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29  
30 When asked to rate the educational value of the EPA on a 5-point scale (1 = not  
31 valuable, 5 = very valuable), educators gave an average rating of 2.56. Notably, six of  
32 the 16 participantrespondents assigned the lowest rating, reflecting a predominantly  
33 negative view of its educational worth.  
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40 To further explore this perception, educators rated their level of agreement with six  
41 statements regarding the value and appropriateness of the EPA (see chart 1). Overall,  
42 responses revealed a wide divergence of opinion.  
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49  
50 Educators' views of the EPA were mixed, with most statements attracting both  
51 agreement and disagreement. A slight majority (56.3%) agreed that the EPA  
52 effectively measures apprenticeship learning outcomes, though a notable minority  
53 (43.8%) disagreed. Similarly, 62.6% felt that the EPA aligns with the ACP curriculum  
54 and competencies, while more than a third (37.6%) disagreed.  
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3 Opinions were more negative regarding the EPA's contribution to apprentices' overall  
4 learning and professional growth, where fewer than half (46.7%) agreed compared to  
5 a majority (53.3%) who disagreed. The most critical perceptions related to fairness  
6 and comprehensiveness of the assessment ~~were those~~ with only 37.6% agreeing that  
7 the EPA provides a comprehensive and fair assessment of the apprentices' knowledge  
8 and skills, while almost two-thirds (62.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly,  
9 views on the appropriateness of the level of challenge were more negative than  
10 positive, with just 37.5% in agreement compared to 62.6% in disagreement.  
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23 Taken together, these findings indicate that although many educators recognised  
24 aspects of value in the EPA, many expressed concerns, particularly around its  
25 fairness, educational contribution, and alignment with educational and professional  
26 standards.  
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33 Educational value refers to the usefulness or benefit of a learning activity or process  
34 in contributing to a learner's knowledge, skills, understanding or personal  
35 development. The value of the EPA lies in its ability to confirm that an apprentice has  
36 achieved occupational competence, applying the knowledge, skills, and behaviours  
37 developed in a programme to a job role (Morris, 2017). Therefore, while the EPA may  
38 have value in assessing occupational competence, ~~due to the absence of new learning~~  
39 ~~as specified in the EPA plan~~, the EPA requires that no new learning should take place  
40 (Department for Education, 2025b). Some may view the EPA as having less  
41 educational value in contributing to the apprentice's knowledge, skills and  
42 understanding, whereas the synthesis and application of learning required of a  
43 synoptic module may in fact hold educational value.  
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**Table 1 Educators' perception of the EPA**

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3 **(table 1)**  
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6 *Apprentices*  
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9 A total of 18 apprentices responded to the questionnaire. Of the 18  
10 participant respondents, one had undertaken the ACP EPA in 2019, while the  
11 remainder reported more recent experience, indicating that most  
12 participant respondents' experience was within the past two years. None of the  
13 participant respondents had taken the EPA under the new dispensation format;  
14 therefore, the data only reflects experiences with the original format.  
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23  
24 When asked, 61% said they would recommend the EPA process as a learning  
25 experience to others in their role. Reasons for not recommending the EPA included  
26 the disproportionate workload and emotional stress of the process, as well as the  
27 assessment not adding to their overall learning.  
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33  
34 Apprentices were invited to rate their level of agreement with six statements regarding  
35 the value and appropriateness of the EPA (see chart 2).  
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40 Responses indicated that most apprentices viewed the EPA as broadly relevant and  
41 reflective of their training and workplace practice, though with variation in the extent of  
42 agreement.  
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46  
47 A large majority (83.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that the EPA reflected the skills  
48 and knowledge required for their role, with only 16.7% expressing disagreement.  
49 Similarly, 77.8% reported that completing the EPA improved their confidence, though  
50 a notable minority (27.8%) did not share this view.  
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3 The majority (77.8%) agreed that the EPA was relevant to their workplace experience,  
4 while 22.2% expressed disagreement. The strongest positive consensus emerged  
5 around the EPA as an opportunity to demonstrate acquired skills and knowledge, with  
6 88.9% agreeing or strongly agreeing, compared to just 11.2% who disagreed. 77.8%  
7 felt the EPA aligned with apprenticeship learning objectives, although 22.3%  
8 disagreed.

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11 Views were more mixed regarding the EPA's contribution to professional and personal  
12 growth. While 61.1% reported that preparing for the EPA enhanced their development,  
13 a substantial minority (38.9%) disagreed.

14  
15  
16 Apprentices showed stronger agreement on how much the EPA encourages them to  
17 reflect on and apply their learning, with nearly two-thirds (62.6%) in agreement, while  
18 over a third (37.4%) disagreed. This is similar to the educators' views on this aspect  
19 of the EPA.

20  
21  
22 These findings suggest that apprentices generally perceived the EPA as relevant,  
23 reflective of their skills, and an opportunity to demonstrate learning. At the same time,  
24 its contribution to broader growth and confidence attracted more divided responses,  
25 the latter aligning with the perceptions of educators.

### 26 **Table 2 Apprentices' perception of the EPA**

27  
28  
29 (table 2)

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31  
32 When asked about gaps or overlaps between the EPA and their MSc studies, 61% of  
33 apprentices identified issues. The primary concern was extensive content duplication,  
34 with many describing EPA material as an "exact replica" or "complete repetition" of  
35 previously completed modules. This overlap was particularly notable in service

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3 improvement modules and modules which used case study components as part of the  
4 assessment that had formed part of their MSc coursework. Some also noted  
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8 curriculum gaps, reporting that required content, such as educational models, had not  
9  
10 been taught during their MSc. In England, the Centre for Advancing Practice runs a  
11  
12 programme accreditation process for education providers to demonstrate they meet  
13  
14 the capabilities across the 4-pillars (Clinical, leadership and management, education  
15  
16 and research) of the Multi-professional framework for advanced practice in England  
17  
18 and the Standards for Education and Training (SET) (Health Education England,  
19  
20 2022). It is unlikely that an accredited programme would have such gaps in its  
21  
22 curriculum. It may be that this content was integrated across programme modules and  
23  
24 therefore wasn't as visible to apprentices as other pillars.  
25  
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29  
30 However, the feedback was not entirely critical. Some apprentices recognised several  
31  
32 benefits of the overlapping content. Many acknowledged that the repetition between  
33  
34 programme content and the EPA served as helpful preparation for EPA assessments,  
35  
36 consolidating their learning at a crucial stage of development. The EPA also provided  
37  
38 a valuable opportunity for apprentices to evidence and apply the knowledge and skills  
39  
40 they had developed during their MSc studies, allowing them to showcase their  
41  
42 research capabilities, ethical understanding, and professional standards in a practical  
43  
44 context.  
45  
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48  
49 While the EPA successfully enables apprentices to demonstrate competency, the  
50  
51 significant overlap suggests that the EPA could be improved to allow apprentices to  
52  
53 experience genuine advancement rather than merely repeating previous studies.  
54

55  
56 The reforms announced by the government in February 2025 appear to acknowledge  
57  
58 this concern, stating that there will be '*no duplication of assessment*' (Department for  
59  
60 Education, 2025c). However, where mandatory industry-recognised qualifications that

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2  
3 provide a licence to practise (e.g., those approved by Professional, Statutory and  
4  
5 Regulatory Bodies [PSRBs] for statutory regulation) already exist as part of the  
6  
7 standard, an EPA will not be required. As ACPs are not regulated by a PSRB currently,  
8  
9 this will not solve the problem for this apprenticeship standard.  
10  
11

12 When reflecting on the EPA's value in consolidating knowledge and skills, apprentices  
13  
14 provided mixed but generally positive feedback. Many recognised the EPA as highly  
15  
16 valuable, with one describing it as "*the most valuable module*" that effectively brought  
17  
18 together three years of learning and provided opportunities to reflect on personal and  
19  
20 professional growth.  
21  
22

23  
24 However, the EPA experience was characterised by resistance, followed by reflection  
25  
26 and appreciation. Several apprentices admitted to "*hating*" the EPA while completing  
27  
28 it, describing it as feeling like "*extra hurdles to jump*" or "*writing for the sake of writing.*"  
29  
30 However, many of these same individuals acknowledged its value upon reflection,  
31  
32 recognising that it had consolidated their knowledge in ways they had not initially  
33  
34 appreciated.  
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39  
40 Regarding the four pillars of practice, the EPA helped boost professional confidence,  
41  
42 with apprentices reporting growth in their roles as clinical leaders. Many especially  
43  
44 valued applying change management theories to their ongoing practice, reflecting  
45  
46 development within the leadership and education pillars.  
47  
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49  
50 Overall, while the immediate experience was often challenging and frustrating, most  
51  
52 apprentices ultimately recognised the EPA's value in consolidating their learning and  
53  
54 validating their professional development. This suggests the assessment achieves its  
55  
56 intended purpose despite initial resistance.  
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Thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed many similarities between educators' and apprentices' experiences of the EPA, enriching the quantitative results.

### *Theme 1 Structural and procedural burden.*

Educators described the EPA as overly complex and administratively burdensome.

*'Additional administrative and organisation work related to this module far exceeds that of other modules on the programme.'* (educator 12)

*'The EPA requires a lot of administration, and there are a lot of Quality and Compliance requirements behind the process, which takes a significant amount of resources.'* (educator 3)

*'It is a cumbersome assessment for [apprentices], HEIs and markers.'* (educator 5)

Responses from apprentices reflected a sense that the workload of the EPA was disproportionate compared to other modules.

*"Writing up the practice change report. It felt like a second dissertation."* (apprentice 6)

Many universities recommend that 20–30% of an apprentice's time for a module should be devoted to assessment preparation, with much of the sector leaning toward the lower end of that range. A 20-credit module is generally assigned a notional 200 hours of apprentice effort, with around 40 hours dedicated to assessment preparation. These figures are, however, approximate rather than exact, as it is challenging to separate independent study time from assessment-related activities (Cheethan *et al.*, 2023).

Institutions generally seek to maintain parity of assessment loads across modules of equal credit value, often by considering the expected effort required of apprentices. To support this, many universities guide the design of assessments, including equivalence measures across different assessment types. These benchmarks are strikingly consistent across the sector. For a 20-credit

1  
2  
3 module with assessment constituting 100% of the output, the following are generally deemed  
4  
5 equivalent: an open-book examination of up to three hours, an individual presentation of up to  
6  
7 20 minutes, or a 15-page report—all comparable to a 4,000-word essay (e.g. University of  
8  
9 Birmingham, 2025).

10  
11  
12  
13 The ACP EPA, in its pre-dispensation format, incorporates all three forms of assessment,  
14  
15 suggesting that concerns about apprentice workload are well-founded. The dispensation  
16  
17 introduced in 2025 removed the report component but doubled the presentation duration to 40  
18  
19 minutes. According to sector guidance, this adjustment does not necessarily reduce the overall  
20  
21 workload associated with the assessment, which further supports the need for a governmental  
22  
23 review of EPA requirements to ensure they are proportionate to the assessment.  
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### 30 *Theme 2 Assessment burden and learner vulnerability*

31  
32 Learner strain and vulnerability emerged as a prevalent theme, strongly linked to the  
33  
34 previous theme of workload. It highlights how apprentices found specific tasks (e.g.,  
35  
36 presentations, exams) stressful, with high emotional and cognitive load and reflects the  
37  
38 emotional labour of the EPA, where participant respondents navigated high-stakes academic  
39  
40 requirements under the constraints of real-world clinical responsibilities.  
41  
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43

44 *“I found the EPA to be more stressful than my dissertation!” ~~“The presentation was~~*  
45  
46 *probably the most stressful part for me.” (apprentice 5)*

47  
48  
49 *“The workload, with reduced study time, made it overwhelming.” “I found the whole module*  
50  
51 *very confusing and stressful ... I think there is a lot to do in a short period of time”*  
52 *(apprentice 9)*

53  
54 Educators made similar observations, noting that support for managing stress sometimes  
55  
56 exceeded academic support requirements.

57  
58 *‘Over-assessed. [Apprentices] are extremely stressed about EPA. (educator 2)*  
59  
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3 *'It is largely about coaching the apprentices to manage their stress in relation to the end of*  
4 *the MSc, hinging on these two assessments and their anxiety about how they meet all the*  
5 *KSBs.'* (educator 7)

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11 *'Supporting [Apprentices] on the EPA is as much about managing their stress and anxiety*  
12 *as it is about supporting them in developing their assessment skills.'* (educator 7)

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15  
16 The use of synoptic and capstone-type assessments is effective in fostering graduate  
17 capabilities and enhancing employability, making them particularly appropriate within  
18 apprenticeship programmes (Thomas *et al.*, 2014). However, assessment design also has  
19 significant implications for the well-being of apprentices (French *et al.*, 2023). Jabin and Bahar  
20 (2025) define high-stakes assessments as those carrying serious consequences for learners,  
21 such as progression or promotion to the next level. For many ACP trainees, successful  
22 completion of the programme leads to advancement. In the authors' experience, in many  
23 programmes, the EPA is the only module that does not permit a retake if an apprentice is  
24 unsuccessful at resitting, framing the EPA as a high-stakes assessment. Both the experience of  
25 the test itself and the extensive preparation it demands can negatively affect mental health  
26 (Jabin and Bahar, 2023). Paradoxically, the anxiety generated by such assessments can impair  
27 critical cognitive function, such as memory retrieval and problem-solving, thereby  
28 undermining the validity of performance evaluation (French, *et al.* Dickerson and Mulder,  
29 2023).

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50 A review of the EPA process to ensure the assessment remains proportionate to its purpose  
51 while reducing unnecessary workload. Allowing elements of assessment to take place during  
52 the programme, rather than solely at its conclusion, could mitigate these adverse effects. Such  
53 adjustments are likely to alleviate apprentice stress and support more accurate demonstrations  
54 of competence when undertaking the EPA.

### Theme 3 Redundancy and overlap

This theme highlights a structural concern within the design of the apprenticeship. When assessments are seen as redundant, learners may disengage or feel that the EPA is a bureaucratic exercise rather than a capstone of advanced clinical education. It questions the EPA's legitimacy as a final, integrative assessment.

*"There was too much duplication—I felt like I was repeating assignments I'd already done."*

*"Additional work on top of the MSc which seem to be at times a duplication of tasks already assessed." (apprentice 18)*

*"Some parts of the EPA were almost identical to what was submitted previously, which felt frustrating." "As part of my course we had already completed a "Preparation for service improvement" and a "service improvement" modules, so repeating this for the EPA didn't really make sense." (apprentice 13)*

*"It would be helpful if the EPA didn't feel like a second version of what we've already written in other modules." "Case studies had been observed and studied in the MSc and it seemed this was repeated." (apprentice 18)*

Educators also highlighted this.

*'The 'presentation of practice' is repetitious and causes problems for [apprentices] who have presented similar work earlier in the programme and who are not able/have limited opportunities to be involved in multiple practice changes.' (educator 6)*

*'Apprentices can struggle with the requirement to also demonstrate the achievement of the KSB when they have done it throughout the programme, and very few find it beneficial.'*  
*(educator 1)*

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3 *'Over assessment at the end point of a programme in which [apprentices] have been*  
4 *continually assessed. pointless exercise.'* (educator 6)

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9 As already noted, another objective of the governmental review of the EPA process is to  
10 reduce duplication by permitting assessment to occur during the programme itself. ACP  
11 apprenticeship programmes already assess apprentices against the standard throughout the  
12 course, often by mapping the standard to module learning outcomes and requiring  
13 apprentices to compile a portfolio of evidence from work-based learning. This practice  
14 creates a perception of duplication. Removing the requirement for a separate assessment  
15 would address this issue without compromising the assurance of occupational competence.  
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#### 25 *Theme 4 Educator Role Tensions and Reward*

26  
27 This theme demonstrates the emotional and professional push-pull. Educators want to help  
28 but, due to their role in the EPA, feel dispondent, yet still find the process rewarding.  
29  
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32  
33 *~~'It's hard not being the marker, but very rewarding seeing [apprentices] succeed.'~~ 'Not*  
34 *being the marker. Giving direction but not being the one who assesses* (educator 2)  
35  
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38  
39 Apprentices highlighted the importance of social and institutional support systems in  
40 facilitating positive EPA experiences, even when the process is challenging.  
41  
42

43 *~~"I had very good support from the University, especially from my supervisor."~~ "Without the*  
44 *guidance and support of the uni I'm not sure how it would have gone. My tutors definitely*  
45 *made a huge difference, and helped make this an overall positive experience."* (apprentice  
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51 10)

52  
53 *~~"From what I recall, whilst the EPA was helpful, it could have been better supported."~~ "I*  
54 *had a very good support from the University, who was approachable and guided me*  
55 *appropriately. Thank you!"* (apprentice 6)  
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3 The need for apprentices to have personal and constructive relationships with members of their  
4 course team is emphasised by Advanced HE's (2023) Student Needs framework. The  
5 comments provided illustrate the value placed on support from programme staff in the EPA  
6 assessment process.  
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12  
13 The recommendation permitting training providers to deliver and assess elements of the EPA  
14 (Department for Education and the Rt Hon Baroness Smith of Malvern, 2025) is likely  
15 to be well received by both educators and apprentices. It could be argued that the caveat 'with  
16 appropriate oversight' is unnecessary in a sector where quality assurance of assessment is  
17 already well established.  
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#### 25 *Theme 5 Valued Yet Demanding Learning Experience*

26  
27 This theme demonstrates that for a significant proportion of participant respondents, the EPA  
28 was not just an assessment, but a reflective and professional milestone that enhanced their  
29 identity as advanced practitioners.  
30  
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35 *"This was the most valuable module—I think if the programme didn't have this it would*  
36 *have been hard to consolidate learning."* *"Preparing for exams was very intense and time-*  
37 *consuming; however, it provided a valuable opportunity for me to reflect on my learning and*  
38 *my professional and personal development as an ACP."* (apprentice 6)  
39  
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44  
45 *"I hated it when I was undertaking it, but I now recognise how valuable it was."* *"At the*  
46 *time it felt like extra huddles to jump but on reflection now it did consolidate knowledge and*  
47 *skills."* (apprentice 18)  
48  
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52  
53 *"It was a motivating and empowering experience that validated all the hard work I*  
54 *put into my apprenticeship."* (apprentice 15)  
55  
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58 Educators made similar observations.  
59  
60

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3 *'Good [apprentices] have really excelled, and some of their presentations of practice have*  
4 *been inspirational. [Apprentices] with higher ability have also been evident during the*  
5 *assessment and have also fed back that whilst the process may have been stressful, they are*  
6 *proud of the high standard and range of work they have produced, which evidenced their*  
7 *advanced practice range.'* (educator 12)

14  
15 *'I don't think they find any of it enjoyable, and it is definitely not straightforward! I think*  
16 *they derive some satisfaction from its completion.'* (educator 8)

17  
18 *'Positive opportunity for the apprentice to celebrate their achievement and 'show off'.'*  
19  
20 (educator 9)

### 26 *Theme 6 Pedagogical Integration and Skill Consolidation*

27  
28 This theme highlights the importance that apprentices place on aligning assessments with  
29 authentic practice scenarios, thereby reinforcing experiential learning and professional  
30 applicability.

31  
32 *~~"The case studies were enjoyable—they reflected my clinical work accurately."~~ "The case*  
33 *studies were a useful way to show consolidation of learning"* (apprentice 5)

34  
35 *"It brought all the knowledge and skills from the apprenticeship together."* (apprentice 3)

36  
37 Educators also recognised the value of the authenticity of the assessment methods.

38  
39 *'Presentation of Practice - Specifically the report, several [apprentices] felt that this was a*  
40 *different writing style but crucially one they would be required to use in practice working in*  
41 *leadership roles, presenting business cases, etc.'* (educator 12)

42  
43 *'Once it was over, many can reflect back on the experience and would cite the practice*  
44 *change as they go on and implement this in practice.'* (educator 7)

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2  
3 The principles of authentic assessment emphasise tasks that integrate the development of skills  
4  
5 apprentices will need in real-world contexts (Koh, 2017). In higher education, growing interest  
6  
7 in authentic assessment is closely tied to concerns about graduate employability and the rising  
8  
9 expectations of employers, making it well-aligned with apprenticeship programmes. These  
10  
11 results align with those of Sokhanvar *et al.*, (2021), who found in their systematic review that  
12  
13 authentic assessment improved apprentices' satisfaction, particularly among career-driven  
14  
15 programmes. Similar to the participant respondents into this questionnaire, Sokhnver *et al.*,  
16  
17 (2021) found that apprentices perceived authentic assessment as a true reflection of relevant  
18  
19 knowledge and job skills, motivating learners to put more effort into their tasks.  
20  
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22

### 23 24 25 *Theme 7 Inconsistency and Subjectivity in Assessment*

26  
27 This theme was perhaps unsurprisingly only highlighted by educators. It demonstrates an  
28  
29 underlying concern about ensuring fair, consistent, and reliable assessment of ACP candidates  
30  
31 regardless of who conducts their evaluation. It suggests that apprentices are unaware of any  
32  
33 inconsistencies, either internally or externally.  
34  
35

36  
37 *'IA [internal assessor] variability and approach to marking assessments and agreeing what*  
38  
39 *type of clinical change is ACP level.'* (**educator 4**)

40  
41  
42 *'I feel there should be a national exam to assess the clinical competence of the ACP.'*  
43  
44 (**educator 5**)

45  
46  
47 When asked, apprentices and educators identified several similar areas for  
48  
49 improvement. The most frequently mentioned concern was the timing and structure of  
50  
51 the EPA, with many suggesting it should be integrated throughout the three-year  
52  
53 program rather than added as intensive additional work at the end. Several  
54  
55 apprentices proposed spreading the EPA over a more extended period or  
56  
57 incorporating it into the MSc alongside existing modules to reduce the concentrated  
58  
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1  
2  
3 workload burden. Educators felt that this would provide broader, more robust evidence  
4  
5 of knowledge, skills, and behaviours while reducing the concentrated burden after  
6  
7 completing demanding dissertation modules.  
8  
9

10  
11 Many apprentices called for earlier introduction of EPA expectations and format during  
12  
13 the MSc to reduce anxiety about the unknown requirements ahead.  
14  
15

16  
17 The assessment format itself drew criticism, particularly the online open-book exam,  
18  
19 which apprentices felt was unnecessarily repetitive and did not effectively test  
20  
21 appropriate competencies at this level. Alternative suggestions included just case  
22  
23 study submissions or viva examinations. Some questioned whether the exam  
24  
25 component was necessary at all. Educators also suggested that the format could be  
26  
27 improved by including professional conversations between academic staff, work-  
28  
29 based supervisors, and apprentices, and by offering a choice between presentation  
30  
31 and written assessments to accommodate different learning styles and strengths.  
32  
33 Many educators questioned whether a separate 20-credit evaluation was necessary,  
34  
35 suggesting that the on-program assessment strategy should suffice.  
36  
37  
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41 Workload concerns were prominent, with apprentices requesting either reduced  
42  
43 requirements or higher credit allocation to reflect the significant effort involved. There  
44  
45 were also calls for more flexibility in presentation formats, allowing apprentices to  
46  
47 showcase their actual roles and innovations rather than adhering to rigid EPA  
48  
49 requirements.  
50  
51

52  
53 Apprentices identified needs for better support throughout the process, including  
54  
55 consistent portfolio guidance with standardised expectations across different  
56  
57 programme staff, and more detailed information about presentation requirements to  
58  
59 help them prepare effectively.  
60

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3 Educators placed strong emphasis on ensuring the EPA operates at an appropriate  
4 academic level, with calls for level 7 descriptors and assessments that genuinely  
5 reflect growth throughout the program rather than repetitive content. They also  
6 suggested simplifying assessment briefs, reducing administrative burden, and  
7 developing more streamlined processes.  
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### 15 **Limitations**

16  
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18 Unfortunately, during the data collection period, the UK government announced that  
19 funding for level 7 apprentices would be restricted to those under the age of 21. Thus,  
20 it effectively removed funding for the ACP apprenticeship (UK Parliament. Education  
21 Committee (2025), which may have affected the response rate to this questionnaire.  
22  
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28 Using questionnaires as a research method has several limitations. They tend to  
29 produce broad information rather than detailed insights, which can hinder the  
30 exploration of complex issues. Fixed-response questions may limit  
31 participant respondents' ability to express their entire thoughts, and the phrasing of  
32 questions can introduce bias. Questionnaires rely on self-reported data, which can be  
33 inaccurate due to memory errors or social desirability biases. Additionally,  
34 participant respondents may misinterpret questions, thereby affecting the validity of  
35 responses. Sampling issues can affect the accuracy of results in representing the  
36 broader population. This is especially true since low response rates are common in  
37 online questionnaires, and longitudinal questionnaires often encounter attrition,  
38 reducing the sample size and representativeness. While useful for quantitative data,  
39 questionnaires are limited in capturing context and depth, so that results may show  
40 correlations but not causation.  
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3 Upon reflection of the questions used within the questionnaires, it would have been  
4  
5 more helpful to have a more consistent design of the questions to support the analysis  
6  
7 of the data. Although there was a need to request slightly different data from each  
8  
9 group, considering the designs and their similarities would have been helpful.  
10  
11

12  
13 The sample size obtained for the study does not allow for generalisability of the results.  
14  
15 The lack of participation from the network, may have been affected by the uncertainty  
16  
17 surrounding the continuation of apprenticeship funding for advanced clinical practice.  
18  
19

20  
21 The questionnaires reflect the opinions of educators and apprentices. Another area of  
22  
23 interest, recommended as a future research priority, is the employers' interpretation of  
24  
25 the value of the EPA and how this impacts the learner and the wider service.  
26  
27

## 28 29 **Conclusion.**

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32 Overall, the feedback suggests the EPA concept has value but requires significant  
33  
34 restructuring to better integrate with existing programs, reduce unnecessary burden,  
35  
36 and ensure assessments genuinely add educational value. This would prevent  
37  
38 creating additional hurdles for apprentices who have already demonstrated  
39  
40 competency through their main program.  
41  
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## 43 44 **Recommendations.**

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47  
48 The **government's** announcement in February 2025 of its intention to simplify and  
49  
50 **strengthen** the EPA process for **apprenticeships** is to be welcomed, in particular,  
51  
52 addressing issues of disproportionality in assessment workload, duplication, and the  
53  
54 involvement of training providers in the assessment **process, all of which have**  
55  
56 **emerged as issues for the ACP EPA in this study. Based on our findings, the**  
57  
58 **following are identified as** recommendations for the planned review of the ACP EPA.  
59  
60

The review should consider whether a separate 20-credit evaluation is necessary, or whether the on-programme assessment strategies could suffice to demonstrate occupational competency through the achievement of the standard KSBs. This could involve incorporating elements of the EPA into the MSc to retain those aspects that apprentices found valuable.

Alternatively, allowing some elements of assessment to take place during the programme might mitigate against the adverse effects of a final high-stakes assessment on apprentices' well-being.

The review of the EPA process should consider removing the requirement for two different assessment methods (GOV.UK 2025) to bring the assessment in line with the sector guidance for assessment loads.

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| Reviewer's comment   | Response/action  |
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| Reviewer 1   |  |
| <p>It is not clear whether the educators came from a number of institutions, or how many cohorts of EPA they had administered. Both of these factors are relevant to the reliability of the findings.</p>  | <p>It is not possible to confirm that the educators came from a number of institutions due to the anonymous nature of the survey. On page 9 it states "The majority (75%) reported having assessed between one and ten cohorts for the EPA, suggesting that the sample represented an experienced group in undertaking the EPA".</p>   |
| <p>page 10 para .5 makes assertions about concerns around fairness and alignment to professional standards- it is not clear how this analysis is reached given the results outlines in paras 3 and 4.. This evaluation needs clarification and justification</p>   | <p>P.9 Reworded and clarified: The most critical perceptions related to fairness and comprehensiveness of the assessment were those with only 37.6% agreeing that the EPA provides a comprehensive and fair assessment of the apprentices' knowledge and skills , while almost two-thirds (62.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.</p>   |
| <p>page 11 para 1 suggests that because there is no new learning in the EPA it is of less educational value, in contributing to the knowledge , skills and understanding. Earlier in the paper there is a comment that the PA is a synoptic module that enables the learner to draw together their learning in previous modules and apply this in context- thus the educational value is in the synthesis and application of learning in context..Indeed it could be considered that the recall and recap of learning, in context is a n extremely useful, and valid pedagogical approach to supporting deep learning and supports learns to commit knowledge to their long term memory.</p> | <p>P.10 Reworded - Therefore, while the EPA may have value in assessing occupational competence, due to the absence of new learning as specified in the EPA plan, the EPA requires that no new learning should take place (Department for Education, 2025b). Some may view the EPA as having less educational value in contributing to the apprentice's knowledge, skills and understanding, whereas the synthesis and application of learning required of a synoptic module may in fact hold educational value.</p> |
| <p>Repetition and overlapping content is a somewhat confusing phrase- as previously stated the purpose of the EPA is the synthesis and application of previously encountered knowledge- no new knowledge can be taught within the EPA, so this statement is confusing. Course design is the key to ensuring that there is coverage of the required curriculum to address the KSBS, so that learners feel appropriately prepared for the application of the knowledge in the EPA and assessments should be designed that</p>  | <p>P.12 Clarification - This overlap was particularly notable in service improvement modules and modules which used case study components as part of the assessment that had formed part of their MSc coursework.</p>  |

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| 1<br>2<br>3<br>4<br>5              | whilst preparing learners for the EPA they do not repeat the assessment.   |   |
| 6<br>7<br>8<br>9<br>10<br>11<br>12 | It could be contended that educators have a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of EPA in the context of an apprenticeship, when complaining about the workload caused by independent assessment of the acquisition of the KSBs and the compliance requirements. | The purpose of the EPA in assessing occupational competence is arguably a duplication of activity that is built into the ACP MSc upon which the apprenticeship is based. Many regulated healthcare apprenticeships now use the graduating exam board process to replace the EPA in recognition of this. The ACP is not yet regulated by a PSRB, which is why the EPA in its current form still exists. This may be why educators feel that the workload involved is burdensome. |
| 13<br>14<br>15<br>16               | Take care with your analysis to ensure that it reflects an objective view from the research findings. On occasions, your analysis appears subjective with a potential for bias.  | We have added more detailed quotes to better reflect the findings.  |
| 17                                 | Reviewer 2   |   |
| 18<br>19                           | Clarification: Are the two formats of EPA currently being used?  | p.5 added - Both versions of the ACP EPA are currently being used by EPAOs in England.  |
| 20<br>21<br>22                     | The gaps in the literature are presented. However, additional recent literature sources are encouraged.  | Noted   |
| 23<br>24                           | Follow the Journal's prescribed format of citation and referencing (intro)   | done  |
| 25<br>26                           | Specify the mixed methods research design used in the study  | Added Convergent Parallel Design and further information. Updated the abstract  |
| 27                                 | Discuss the phases of the data collection.   | Added   |
| 28<br>29                           | Discuss the process of treating both the quantitative and qualitative data.  | Added   |
| 30<br>31<br>32<br>33<br>34<br>35   | The process of instrumentation must be comprehensively discussed.  | The results from the online questionnaires underwent 1) preparation, 2) descriptive analysis (quantitative), coding and thematic analysis (qualitative), and 3) Interpretation, which were conducted separately by the authors and then integrated and embedded the data to draw comparisons and conclusions.   |
| 36<br>37<br>38<br>39               | If Likert scale was used for item responses in the questionnaire, discuss the interpretations of the range of results.   | Added   |

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| 1<br>2<br>3<br>4<br>5<br>6<br>7<br>8<br>9<br>10 | Specify the percentage of the samples from the population  | See earlier point It is not possible to confirm that the educators came from a number of institutions due to the anonymous nature of the survey. Therefore we can not say if more than one person from one institution answered and what the total population is. On page 9 it states "The majority (75%) reported having assessed between one and ten cohorts for the EPA, suggesting that the sample represented an experienced group in undertaking the EPA". |
| 11<br>12  | Specify the characteristics of the samples.  | Participant characteristic data were not collected to minimise time burden and maintain focus on perceptions of the assessment process.  |
| 13<br>14  | For how long was the data collection conducted?  | Included   |
| 15<br>16<br>17                                  | Use "participants" instead of "respondents" to refer to the research participants.   | Done   |
| 18<br>19<br>20<br>21<br>22                      | In the study findings, it was mentioned that "only one educator delivered the EPA under the new dispensation format" and "none of the apprentices had taken the EPA under the new dispensation format" How do these findings influence the results of the study? | This has been addressed on page 16 under theme 1.  |
| 23<br>24<br>25                                  | A minority of the apprentices (27.8%) did not share their views if EPA improved their confidence. What does this entail? It would have been excellent if this was explored.  | Unfortunately, this was not explored as part of the qualitative part of the survey   |
| 26<br>27<br>28<br>29<br>30                      | The sample responses quoted from the qualitative data should at least specify the codes of sources. For instance, "Additional administrative and organization..." (Educator 1)...<br>" _____ " (Apprentice 2)  | Done. Some quotes have been changed to reflect a wider range of the participants' responses.   |
| 31<br>32<br>33                                  | Joint displays are encouraged to map qualitative findings alongside quantitative results for better interpretation and analysis.   | Notes  |
| 34  | Specify recommendations based on the findings of the study.  | added  |
| 35<br>36<br>37                                  | Review citations and references and follow the Journal's prescribed format.  | corrected  |

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| The EPA effectively measures the learn   | 18.8                 | 37.5  | 31.3           | 12.5 |
| The EPA aligns well with the curriculun  | 18.8                 | 43.8  | 31.1           | 6.3  |
| The EPA contributes to the apprenitce:   | 20                   | 26.7  | 33.3           | 20   |
| The EPA encourages apprentices to rel    | 18.8                 | 43.8  | 18.8           | 18.8 |
| The EPA provides a comprehensive an      | 6.3                  | 31.3  | 31.3           | 31.3 |
| The level of challenge in the EPA is app | 12.5                 | 25    | 43.8           | 18.8 |

Table

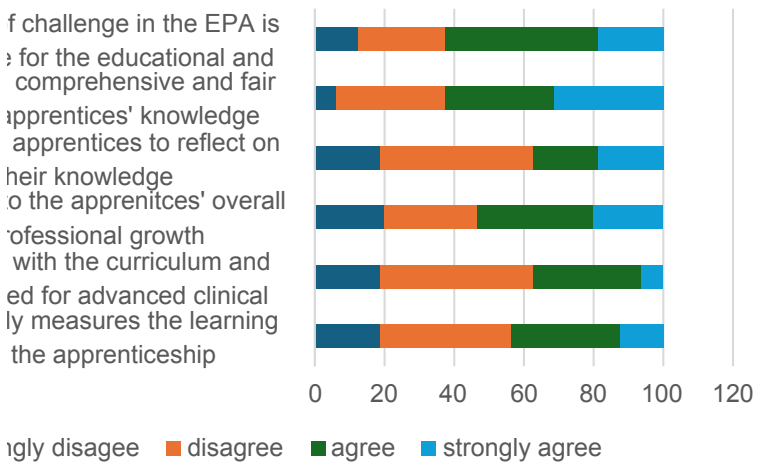
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### 1 Educators' perception of the EPA



Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning

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|   | strongly disagree | disagree | agree | strongly agree |
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| The EPA reflected the skills and knowledge required for my role.                  | 5.6               | 11.1     | 61.1  | 22.2           |
| Completing the EPA improved my confidence in my role.                             | 11.1              | 16.7     | 55.6  | 16.7           |
| The tasks or questions in the EPA were relevant to my workplace experience.       | 11.1              | 11.1     | 61.1  | 16.7           |
| The EPA provided an opportunity to demonstrate the skills and knowledge I gained. | 5.6               | 5.6      | 61.1  | 27.8           |
| Preparing for the EPA enhanced my professional and personal growth.               | 5.6               | 33.3     | 33.3  | 27.8           |
| The EPA aligned well with the learning objectives set during my apprenticeship.   | 5.6               | 16.7     | 55.6  | 22.2           |

Table 2 App

The EPA aligned well with the learning objectives set during my apprenticeship.

Preparing for the EPA enhanced my professional and personal growth.

The EPA provided an opportunity to demonstrate the skills and knowledge I gained.

The tasks or questions in the EPA were relevant to my workplace experience.

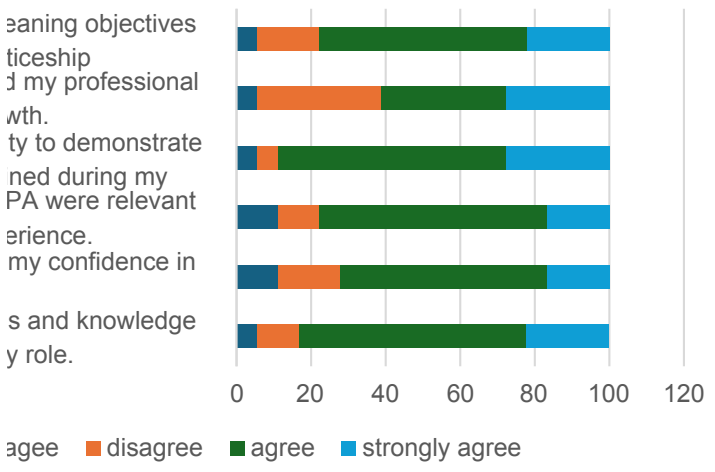
Completing the EPA improved my confidence in my role.

The EPA reflected the skills and knowledge required for my role.

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### apprentices' perception of the EPA



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