Allied Health Profession Apprenticeships in Rural & Coastal Health Systems

A Multi-Level Systems Perspective

Howe L.,[1] **Patel G.,**[1] **Stevens T.,**[1] **Grafton K.,**[1] **Fowler-Davis S.,**[2] **Willis S.**[1]

[1] University of Lincoln [2] Anglia Ruskin University

FRAMING THE STUDY

Apprenticeships are used as a **lens on how workforce systems operate**, tracing how national policy becomes practice across very different places. The study reads policy, organisational capacity and individual experience as one connected system, informed by multi-level governance and complex adaptive systems thinking *(Touati et al., 2019; May, 2022)*.

KEY MESSAGES

01 AHP apprenticeships are widely valued as a **necessary workforce route** in rural and coastal systems, especially where traditional, full-time university training is hard to reach.

02 Their sustainability depends on alignment across national policy, organisational capacity and individual circumstances. They **behave as a complex adaptive system, not a linear training pipeline**.

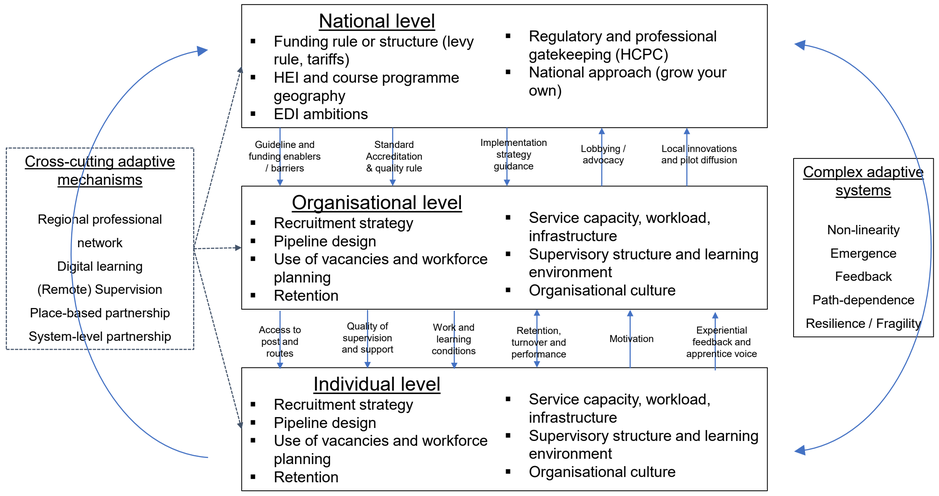
03 Current funding and regulatory design pushes operational cost and risk onto local services, so apprenticeships often become a **substitution decision instead of workforce expansion.**

04 Identical national policy produces **uneven local outcomes**. Resilience and fragility coexist across places, affected by **organisational readiness, leadership and the geography of higher education provision.**

> *Growing the workforce locally is often the **only realistic route** in rural and coastal areas. Apprenticeships make that possible, when the wider system lets them.*

THE THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

A Complex Adaptive System of AHP Apprenticeship



Sustainability is an emergent property *of interactions across national, organisational and individual levels, navigated by adaptive mechanisms and complex-adaptive-system dynamics.*

SYSTEM INSIGHT

Apprenticeships are not simply a workforce solution. They are a response to structural constraint in rural and coastal systems.

Their success depends on alignment across system levels. Without it, they risk adding strain to services that are already stretched.

METHODS - QUALITATIVE

- Secondary qualitative analysis - Band 8+ included
- 20 transcripts from rural and coastal services, England
- Inductive and deductive coding (complex adaptive system)

FINDINGS

A system under constraint

01 NATIONAL

- Policy sets the conditions for feasibility.
- Limited backfill, no placement tariff and levy rules narrow local flexibility, while uneven HEI provision restricts access
- Some professions still lack an apprenticeship standard
- Widening participation and EDI

02 ORGANISATIONAL

- Valued as a grow-your-own strategy,
- Long-term investment competes with immediate vacancies
- Lost posts cut clinical capacity, impacting small teams
- Supervision and protected time cap intake - one at a time
- Readiness and leadership culture drive uptake
- Limited supervision and clinical capacity hinder delivery.

03 INDIVIDUAL

- Local staff train without relocating, contributing to retention
- A route for support workers to qualify
- Travel and hidden costs hinder rural area
- A gradual route builds professional confidence
- Balancing work, study and life can facilitate attrition

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- Make funding reflect service realities
- Recognise apprenticeships as both education and service.
- Coordinate regionally for equity in access.
- Formalise feedback from local practice into policy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Strengthen HEI and service partnerships
- Tackle spatial inequity so access becomes fair.
- Planned mentorship, protected time and intake
- Use digital, blended and regional collaboration

CONCLUSION

- **Real potential** to strengthen rural and coastal workforces.
- **Bounded** by funding, capacity and individual circumstances.
- Strongest where system levels **align** *(Touati et al., 2019)*.
- Clear **pathways** for local recruitment, progression and retention

CONTACT

Dr Louise Howe

Senior Lecturer in Occupational Therapy
University of Lincoln
lhowe@lincoln.ac.uk

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