



Higher Apprenticeships: a real alternative to full-time study?

Higher Apprenticeships deliver higher technical skills, higher earnings, increased innovation, improved productivity and greater social inclusion. We explore the contextual requirements for successful Higher Apprenticeships, namely Government commitment, employer support and industry-standard teachers.

1. Introduction

The starting point for this paper is the belief by governments in many countries that the development of higher technical skills (Levels 4 to 5 and higher) is critical to innovation, productivity, social mobility and economic prosperity. Demand for these skills will increase as digitalisation and automation supplant lower-skilled jobs and raise the level of skills required to enter and remain in the workforce.

This paper focuses on the development of the Higher Apprenticeship in England. Higher Apprenticeships:

- Are only available to those in employment
- Usually require “A” Levels or a vocational level 3 qualification or an Advanced Apprenticeship as an entry qualification
- Are funded by an employer and the state – the employee pays nothing towards their qualifications
- Combines and integrates work with study
- Can extend to level 7 (postgraduate)
- Must last for a minimum of one year.

In 2014-15, 19,800 Higher Apprenticeships (HAs) were undertaken, roughly 4% of all apprenticeships. (Delebarre, 2016). English colleges regard HAs as their natural territory, offering progression routes from their delivery of Intermediate and Advanced Apprenticeships.

2. Policy context for Higher and Degree Apprenticeships

HAs are firmly embedded in government Skills policy. They are in use by companies such as Airbus, Rolls Royce, British Telecom and Vodafone (Guthrie, 2012). Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) were introduced in 2015 and extend the span of qualifications to Bachelors or

Master's degrees (levels 6-7). They are delivered by universities and some colleges in partnership with employers. This 'government-led' commitment to higher skills in England reinforces the centrality of apprenticeships to current education policy, reflecting the higher status they enjoy in European countries.

English policy makers perceive a direct relationship between increased productivity and the percentage of the working population with a HE qualification. The premise underlying HE reform is that HE qualifications return significant benefits for individuals over the term of their professional careers, bring higher technical, research and innovation capability to the economy and address long-standing issues of social inequality. Higher and Degree Apprenticeships are part of this reform, aiming to address skills gaps and at the same time draw those who choose not to pursue a traditional full time academic route into higher levels of study.

Against this background, the Higher Education Policy Institute (2015) noted that the English system of designing vocational qualifications was complex, particularly at the FE/HE interface. Employers found this off-putting. The different response times of universities and FE colleges, in terms of reacting to employer demand for new qualifications, added to the lack of progress, as did the seemingly endless changes to the range of qualifications available. This point was also noted by OECD (2013), which commented that employers have confidence in qualifications that are stable and familiar.

With the exception of the HNC/D, English vocational qualifications are neither of these. The OECD noted that in contrast, academic qualifications and the titles offered change only slowly, so there is a temptation amongst employers to recruit from an academic pool and then attempt to make good a skills gap, rather than expend time and energy trying to navigate an overly-complex system that might offer a better fit. Higher and Degree Apprenticeships seek to reverse this trend.

The realisation that the traditional academic experience of HE (three-years, Full Time, ideally at some distance from home) is neither suitable for nor indeed wished for by a large percentage of the population has shaped recent UK policies. DAs were announced by the Coalition government in 2015. They were perceived as building on the existing HA and at the same time encouraging universities to become engaged in the skills debate. By this time, a 50% decline in the number of students attending PT HE in colleges and universities had been noted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2014).

A further consultation paper specifically focused on the role of FE colleges in HE and sought to extend their role in higher technical education. The incoming Conservative administration issued two papers in rapid succession which covered similar ground. 'Fixing the foundations – creating a more prosperous nation' firmly linked productivity with HE (HM Treasury, 2015) 'Reviewing post-16 education and training' (BIS 2015) raised the possibility of some FE colleges becoming specialist Institutes of Technology. The same paper noted that in addition to expanding the apprenticeship programme, government would focus on,

Clear, high quality professional and technical routes to employment, alongside robust academic routes...

In parallel, however, successive administrations have failed to ensure the provision of impartial careers education and guidance in English schools. On-going criticism from professional organisations and the Government's Education Select Committee included

references to the impact of this failure on the numbers of applications for apprenticeships. (Long, R. and Hubble, S. 2016).

3 The case for Higher Apprenticeships

This can be summarised as follows:

- The increased cost of full time study and the replacement of grants with loans for both fees and maintenance
- High levels of student debt, potentially carried forward into middle age, may discourage both poorer young students and those who are older with family responsibilities
- Fees are seen as high by students (£9,000 per annum) whilst not necessarily guaranteeing a “graduate” job. This “value for money” argument discourages many from pursuing a traditional academic course
- Employers are dissatisfied with graduate skills and consider that there is a mismatch between course content and real-world need
- A significant decline has taken place in the numbers pursuing part time study, possibly due to pro-rata fee increases and a decline in employer contributions to course costs, further worsening skill levels in the work place
- The progression routes for Apprentices willing and able to move into Higher Education are unclear
- As reported by UKCES in Growth through people (2014) there is an on-going need for higher level skills at Levels 4 and 5 in England

4. Issues and challenges

The delivery of Higher Apprenticeships has revealed a number of issues. These include:

- The need for impartial advice and guidance. There is a significant disparity between the level of information available to pupils and adults about apprenticeships as compared to traditional academic pathways such as GCE A level
- Perceptions of teachers (school), parents and students. The Commission on Apprenticeships has said that “just less than a third of parents think that an apprenticeship would be the best option for their son or daughter, compared to over a half of parents who think that university would be the best option for them.” (Demos 2015). The Sutton Trust found that 65% of teachers they contacted said that they would rarely or never advise a student to take an apprenticeship if they were likely to achieve the entry grades for university (Sutton Trust 2014.)
- They exist within a culture which has traditionally valued academic achievement over the practical application of skills, unlike, e.g., Germany or Switzerland
- Complex funding arrangements, which now include an employer payroll levy. Details of this were late to emerge, possibly influencing 2016-17 Apprenticeship numbers

- An assumed, but in reality unknown, level of employer commitment to Higher Apprenticeships, including an awareness of their responsibilities as employers of apprentices
- The need for new “non-traditional” apprenticeship disciplines such as housing management, logistics, etc
- Different ways of teaching and learning: new skills have to be learned by academic staff
- A commensurate need for “Industry standard” teachers and dual professionals
- Maintaining standards and “brand value. Agreement is needed on what constitutes a good apprenticeship – this should be more than something that **meets a skills gap, and instead be broad enough to keep the path to HE open**
- Which organisations should deliver Higher Apprenticeships?

These issues are explored more fully in the sections which follow.

5. The college perspective

In early 2016, the Mixed Economy Group of FE colleges (MEG) conducted a largely qualitative survey amongst its members, seeking their views on the delivery of Higher Apprenticeships and Degree Apprenticeships. Most respondents considered that FE colleges are the natural home for HAs, building as they do on a tradition of employer engagement and an existing HE offer primarily at Levels 4 (sub-degree) and 5. However, whilst conclusive data is difficult to find, only 6,000 of the HA starts in 2014-15 appear to be based in colleges. Most are with private providers and a small number (about 60) in universities. If this is the case, it cannot be assumed that with the introduction of the apprenticeship levy employers will automatically continue to work with colleges or move from other providers to colleges.

Most interviewees conclude that DAs (Hons level and above) will be based in universities, given that only one college has the power to award its own Bachelors or Masters degrees. As such, DAs are of limited interest to the respondents. The key factors underpinning the provision of HAs at Levels 4 and 5 are discussed below.

I. Institutional commitment

Some colleges had undertaken a strategic review of their HE provision before deciding to offer HAs. Senior management support for HAs and a “whole college” commitment to developing this provision are considered vital. Without this holistic approach, colleges will be unable to market the concept of HA effectively to their immediate employer contacts or those who know of the college but have not previously worked with it. Where HAs reflect individual staff decisions, they are offered in one or two classroom-based subjects (such as Accountancy) and there is little or no cross-team collaboration.

II. Employer relationships

FE college staff comment that two factors determine if employers are interested in HAs; their need for skilled staff and their need for those staff at the lowest possible price. As previously noted by Parry et al. (2012), staff confirm that employers already working with colleges at FE

(or HE) level are more likely to be interested in HAs and, indeed, are the first targets of college HE marketing teams. Public sector bodies are also seen as a prime market, given that those with more than 250 employees will be expected by government to employ 2.3% of their staff as apprentices (BIS, 2015.) Those likely to be required to pay the levy (and thus seek something in return) are also targeted.

The interviews revealed much that might be expected. Colleges that are proactive in building links with employers and have a reputation for meeting employer demands appear relatively more successful in marketing their HA provision. Those which best understand the funding arrangements surrounding the current apprenticeship structures are also more likely to recruit viable cohorts of apprentices and offer HAs at the lowest price. In some cases this is cheaper to the employer than a PT HE course.

Marketing skills are important in converting interest in HAs into demand. Some respondents consider that colleges aren't always good at marketing their products and that HE marketing, in particular, is a difficult area. HAs and DAs are new and difficult concepts to explain. Colleges must get their message right first time and make the experience easier for them. In the words of one respondent, *"Employers will have to train and will have to find a trainer – this is our opportunity."*

III. College structures and expertise

FE colleges offering HAs are aware that, to ensure high standards, internal communications between Apprenticeship, HE, Marketing and Careers Advice teams must improve. As noted in previous MEG research (King and Ward, 2013), HAs cross over the boundaries which exist in colleges between academic staff teaching vocational students at FE level 3, dedicated Apprenticeship teams and staff specialising in HE and its QAA-based quality system. Underpinning all of these are the teams involved in providing careers advice and guidance and marketing.

The HE managers interviewed agreed that a key component of an employer's decision to fund a HA at their college is the quality, and above all industrial and professional currency, of teaching staff. In many cases, staff teaching HA programmes are employed on a fractional basis with many teaching less than 3 days a week. They remain active in their original professions (Accountants, Engineers, etc.) and maintain a license to practice through their professional bodies. According to one respondent, a local employer commented that *"If X is teaching the course, you can have our business."*

60% of FE staff are PT compared with 37% of the general UK workforce, and 16% of PT contracts are for less than 10% of FT. (ETF, 2016.) In a majority of cases, those teaching HAs also teach on existing Prescribed or NPHE courses.

IV. Quality assurance

Quality is considered to be paramount to the success of HAs. As these are relatively new products, it is important that both the provision and processes of quality control are recognised to be of a high standard by Ofsted and QAA, the two quality assurance agencies in England. (These cover FE and HE respectively.) If employers feel confident in the quality of training, they are more likely to commit to further business with the college.

Most respondents take the view that the QAA approach to quality is appropriate, regardless of whether or not the technical qualification is Prescribed HE. Some comment that when the levy is in place employers may become more concerned about quality, taking the view that “their” money has been invested in the HA. This then raises the question of whose definition of “quality” becomes the most important – that of the employer or the academic.

6. Conclusion

Higher Apprenticeships offer enormous benefits for apprentices, employers, local communities and governments. Work-based learning directly responds to employer demand for highly-skilled workers. It also makes HE available to learners who might not otherwise engage at this level including older students, those who choose an employment-based route for economic reasons and others for whom HE is not a possibility after compulsory education. Importantly, it directly supports government calls for higher levels of qualifications, innovation and productivity in the workforce.

Traditional approaches to HE cannot fulfil the demand for higher learning from all those with the ambition, aspiration and ability to succeed. More flexible routes to higher qualifications, whether in the form of a DA, HA or a more traditional HNC or Foundation degree delivered on a PT basis are more likely to produce the graduates employers need than a narrowly-focused drive to increase university enrolments. But HE providers alone cannot achieve this objective. Employers have a responsibility to educate their staff, both in “soft” and sector skills. In England, this includes avoiding the temptation to design apprenticeships that only fill an immediate skill need rather than maintain the pathway to HE. Commenting on the government’s Post -16 Skills Plan, Keep (2016) noted that “the wider dimensions of learning that serve as the basis for a return to academic study and/or lifelong learning and citizenship in other countries remains as unattainable (and even un-discussable) as ever.” Unlike Germany and Switzerland, in England there is no sense that apprenticeships are of equal standing to an academic education and/or that they contribute to a concept of good citizenship.

This raises the question of what constitutes a “good” apprenticeship. A report by the Skills Task Force in 2013 notes that “The race for places on the best apprenticeship schemes is currently much more competitive than that for the nation’s top universities, which illustrates the dearth of high quality apprenticeships on offer.... For those from less advantaged backgrounds, in particular, they ensure that participants are not burdened with unsustainable debt, and, indeed, are paid an appropriate salary for their work.”

Initiatives such as HAs and DAs offer innovative ways to address long-standing barriers to HE and on-going skills mismatches in England. Colleges can overcome these obstacles and deliver higher technical skills when adequately supported by government and industry. Their applied models of HE and proven experience in co-designing HE courses with employers can realise higher technical skills, higher earnings, increased innovation, improved productivity and social inclusion.

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This paper was produced following research amongst members of the Mixed Economy Group of English FE colleges (MEG.) MEG represents 43 FE colleges which deliver significant volumes of HE¹ in addition to FE. Each college has a minimum of 500 FTE HE students and relies on a partner university or universities to validate all or part of their Prescribed HE offer. A number of other FE colleges deliver HE to smaller numbers of students, bringing the total number of public FE colleges offering HE across England to 244, compared with 160 public universities. Collectively, FE colleges provide just under 10% of English undergraduate HE, or almost 160,000 students in 2016 (AoC, 2016), which is largely delivered by 52 FE colleges. (Parry et al, 2012)

¹ In England, higher education includes both Prescribed and Non-Prescribed HE (NPHE). The former refers to traditional academic qualifications such as Higher National Diplomas (HND), Higher National Certificates, Foundation Degrees (two year courses broadly similar to the Associate Degrees offered by American Community Colleges), Bachelors and Masters degrees. NPHE covers a range of professional body qualifications and National Vocational Qualifications at Level 4 and above on the National Qualifications Framework.