

Degrees of difference: Delivering on the ambition of quality degree apprenticeships in England

Introduction

Degree and higher apprenticeships are a mechanism for bridging the divide between academic and vocational education - a premium option that combines the academic rigour of traditional higher education with practical employment experience and the development of industry specified knowledge, skills and behaviours. The current Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Robert Halfon, has described 'degree apprenticeships' as his two favourite words.

Since their rollout in 2015, a significant number of higher education providers in England - both universities and further education colleges - have begun offering degree and higher apprenticeships, with over 45,000 apprenticeships starting in the 2022-23 academic year.¹ However, building on the laudable aims and success of provision is made difficult by a complex system of oversight that presents obstacles for providers and employers. While degree apprenticeships by their very nature are not intended to reach numbers equal to traditional provision, at present, some of the barriers to more strategic and sustainable growth are unnecessary and, therefore, resolvable.

Thanks to significant efforts across the education landscape in raising the profile of apprenticeships, demand from potential apprentices outstrips supply, making degree and higher apprenticeships extremely competitive. But expanding supply is complex, not least because degree apprenticeships are reliant on the creation of job opportunities, which are both finite and fundamentally not in the control of a higher education provider. Expansion can therefore only be delivered alongside workforce planning and investment in job growth, placing degree apprenticeships at the heart of complex and often slow-moving policy.

Degree and higher apprenticeship provision in itself is complex. QAA has supported quality in degree apprenticeships for a number of years, and in a number of ways. Across the UK, our [Characteristics Statement](#) acts as a reference point for all those involved in delivering higher education in apprenticeships, setting out the distinctive features to include and the design, structure and delivery of the apprenticeship, and highlighting the differences in operational arrangements and policy in each nation. This paper is released alongside a comprehensive [higher education apprenticeships toolkit](#) designed to facilitate good practice for providers. But good practice cannot be facilitated if the overarching system does not support providers of all

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships-and-traineeships>

kinds to deliver high-quality degree apprenticeships. This report considers provider, employer and apprentice expectations of quality, and how the system in England can better facilitate high-quality degree apprenticeships commensurate with the political ambitions held of them.

Whose quality is it anyway?

Quality is not a static, one-size-fits-all entity. QAA's [Definition of Quality](#) recognises that high-quality looks different in different settings and when delivered through different formats, and this is true for degree and higher apprenticeships. Apprentices, because of their status as employees of an organisation, can view their learning experience differently to students and therefore hold different expectations. Employers and the workplace are embedded into apprenticeships and learning is delivered in preparation for a specific role, with apprentices at the end of the programme needing to demonstrate their occupational competence through the end-point assessment process.

Considering this, high-quality in degree apprenticeships can be based on the following overarching principles:

- 1 **Providers** deliver tailored apprenticeship provision that integrates into their wider offering and academic expertise, facilitates good working relationships with employers and can be delivered efficiently and sustainably.
- 2 **Employers** build constructive, symbiotic working relationships with providers to create and deliver provision which successfully tackles skills gaps, improves consistent upskilling and staff retention, and supports recruitment.
- 3 **Apprentices** receive provision that meets their reasonable expectations and delivers a holistic learning experience, recognising the work-based nature of their programmes, incorporating on-the-job training but fostering a sense of belonging within the provider community.

Providers

Many providers have embraced the offer of degree and higher apprenticeships and are enthusiastic about delivering them. They recognise the benefits of working closely with employers and diversifying their provision to provide alternate routes to qualification, in addition to the contribution they can make as a training provider with unparalleled experience in delivering degree programmes.

Case study: The University of Huddersfield

Based on its significant experience in delivering vocational programmes in health, education and business, the University of Huddersfield has established and embedded a successful apprenticeship provision. Our mission is to work with employers to create programmes that support their skills development needs, to inspire apprentices from diverse backgrounds to succeed in their careers, to improve public health, and to inform policymakers on the future direction of apprenticeships in the healthcare, social care, and public sectors.

The local context is important: the Yorkshire and Humber region faces specific challenges, including the third lowest life expectancy, the highest levels of obesity and the second highest rate of deaths in infancy. Apprenticeship programmes provide an important opportunity for health and social care providers to work with the University in addressing these specific challenges and retaining much needed talent in the region.

Our pipeline combines career and academic pathways for healthcare apprentices in Yorkshire. Learners can progress from A Levels or T Levels and Level 2/3 apprenticeships with local colleges to degree apprenticeships with the University, including Registered Nurse, Paramedic, Nursing Associate, Physiotherapist, Occupational Therapist, Advanced Clinical Practitioner, Podiatrist, Operating Department Practitioner, Chartered Manager, Professional Manager, Senior Leader, and Midwife. These career pathways provide learners from disadvantaged or 'non-traditional' backgrounds with the opportunity to achieve their career ambitions and has created a more diverse workforce for NHS Trusts, primary care employers, GP surgeries and hospices.

We also strive to ensure that apprentices are not just becoming occupationally competent. We work with employers to address professional and personal development needs beyond the technical, vocational and academic elements of the apprenticeship. This approach was commended by Ofsted in October 2023 when it rated all aspects of our apprenticeship provision as 'Outstanding'.

Our strategic commitment to apprenticeships, supported by dedicated operational staff, ensures that the University contributes to the wider civic good, by addressing challenges faced by local employers, driving regional economic growth and improving public health.

Degree apprenticeships offer their own challenges and opportunities. But they cannot be divorced from the broader operating environment within higher education where a declining unit of resource, a high level of regulatory burden and new developments - such as the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and artificial intelligence - all compete for and require time and investment. Delivering high-quality degree apprenticeships adds another string to a provider's bow, but the resource and commitment required is another consideration in increasingly difficult times.

Providers are honest about the implications of offering degree and higher apprenticeships. Apprenticeships can be more expensive and complex to deliver than traditional provision, some of the reasons for which are discussed further in the next section. Providers are often pulled in opposing directions of producing tailored apprenticeship provision and successfully delivering this within an environment set up for traditional qualifications. While the revision of apprenticeship standards is welcome in ensuring relevance, it does create another layer of complexity within the system for providers to navigate.

This complexity and the potential constraints it introduces also influence providers' relationships with employers. There are trade-offs involved for all sizes of employers. Some find it more efficient to work with larger employers, as multiple apprentices can act as a cohort and offer economies of scale. But large employers are not available to all providers, particularly those operating in 'colder spots', and building relationships and finalising agreements with larger employers can be more time consuming. Providers need the capacity and bandwidth to work with the most strategically beneficial employers that offer growth potential and sustainable

funding, but also deliver on ambitions to close local and regional skills gaps, and meet the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The quality assurance of end-point assessments, conducted by QAA as the Designated Quality Body between 2022 and 2023, generally found providers had dedicated resource for managing apprenticeship provision, including the quality assurance activities. In some respects, this is unavoidable, as apprenticeships by their nature should not just be rebadged traditional degree provision; but it does highlight the additional resource and cost incurred by delivering apprenticeships. This is because for higher education providers, in addition to conceptualising and delivering a new form of provision, they must accommodate both their existing and new, and additional arrangements.

Employers

Apprenticeships offer a holistic learning experience that, when delivered well, seamlessly revolve between on and off-the-job training, delivered by the employer and the education provider. Apprentices are measured explicitly on relevant knowledge, skills and behaviours; and embedded in the apprenticeship standards is the assumption that these are acquired from both the education and employment settings.

This means that existing degree programmes cannot simply be transplanted onto apprenticeships. Either new programmes must be designed, or adaptations must be made. An example of this is course content. Content in high-quality apprenticeships will align across the training provider and on-the-job training, giving the apprentice confidence and ability in the breadth of knowledge, skills and behaviours they will be required to demonstrate to be considered occupationally competent. This alignment differentiates an apprenticeship from a more piecemeal approach of part-time learning and part-time employment. However, the [QAA evaluation](#) of degree apprenticeships in Wales found 39% of employers surveyed felt they had not been able to influence course content and providers were similarly challenged by what often felt like competing and sometimes contradictory requirements of different employers, apprenticeship frameworks and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements. Employers need to have the time, willingness and expertise to contribute effectively to course content among other demands.

Ofsted's inspection arrangements of training considers the views of the employer in the training activity. But this is just one component of a complicated regulatory landscape of competing demands and different providers will likely seek to interface with these demands in potentially significantly different ways. This potential lack of consistency means the approach to employer coherence risks being similarly inconsistent, and the onus is placed on the provider. This affects all employers, but particularly SMEs, for whom there is scope for targeted support.

Apprentices

A QAA-funded project focusing on teaching degree apprenticeships has explored the experiences of apprentices, and what they need to thrive, on a large scale. The early findings of this research showed that there are a number of specific needs for apprentices that differ from other higher education provision.

This aligns anecdotal evidence from QAA Members and student advisers. More often than not, apprentices see themselves as employees first, and traditional students second. This is perhaps not surprising when 80% of their time is spent 'on the job', but it also presents a challenge for

higher education providers in how they engage with apprentices, as traditional approaches to student engagement may not meet their needs. This challenge is reflected in the National Student Survey results. Apprentices are included, but the questions are geared towards traditional qualifications and students. Free text comments from apprentices often focus on issues outside of providers' control - such as balancing work and study, and the time afforded to complete academic assignments. If large cohorts of apprentices have a negative impact on overall scores, this could also act as a further disincentive for providers.

This has two key implications:

- 1 **Student engagement must encompass a diverse range of learners**, including apprentices. This includes having apprentice representation embedded at all levels, including within the Students' Union, where there is one.
- 2 **Agile quality assurance** that incorporates the various elements of apprenticeship provision, including the employer perspective, and recognises that on-the-job training will influence expectations of quality - for example, having a good line manager or mentor was rated as equally important as high-quality teaching.

How can the policy deliver on the practice?

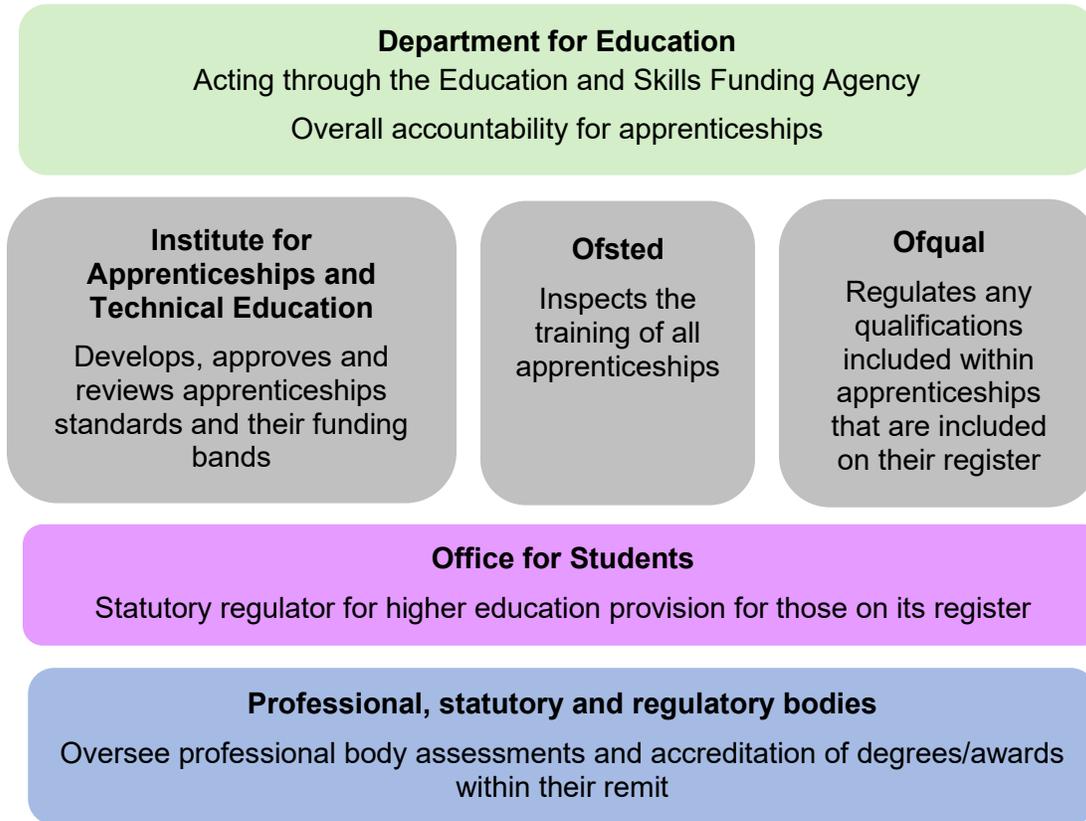
Too much quality assurance spoils the broth

Central to the challenge of delivering apprenticeships is the number of different regulatory actors in the space (see Figure 1). Each of the bodies involved - the Office for Students (OfS), the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), Ofqual, Ofsted, and the Education and Skills Funding Agency as part of the Department for Education (DfE) - all have legitimate claims on the apprenticeship territory. This is an inevitable feature of an environment in which, in many respects, operational delivery (for example, of funding and some aspects of quality assurance) has been slotted into a landscape of existing regulatory activities.

However, this creates significant overlap. The OfS has responsibility for quality and standards of degrees and undertakes the external quality assurance activity in relation to end-point assessments (to some extent separately from their other arrangements in relation to quality and standards), as well as making reference to apprenticeships in the arrangements for Access and Participation Plans and optional inclusion in Teaching Excellence Framework submissions. Ofsted has been given the responsibility for assessing the quality of the off-the-job training. Separately, IfATE manages the process of the development of the apprenticeship standards and has developed the framework that underpins the external quality assurance of the end-point assessments. Apprenticeship funding is managed by the DfE, as well as the Apprenticeship Provider and Assessment Register. Each of the reference points used by these bodies differs, meaning different elements of the same provision will in effect be assessed multiple times by different bodies using different requirements.

For some apprenticeships, providers must also abide by the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). Apprenticeship arrangements helpfully allow these requirements to normally hold precedence, including in the end-point assessment arrangements (for example, if you are offering a Nursing programme, the arrangements put in place by the Nursing and Midwifery Council will be used as proxy for some of the other quality assurance). This represents a helpful approach to streamlining but does add a further point of potential difference and complexity as different apprenticeships have different arrangements.

Figure 1: The regulatory oversight of degree apprenticeships



The system is complicated to describe, and even more complicated within which to operate. There can appear to be limited meaningful coordination of these activities, or any consolidation of the findings. If apprenticeships are to be delivered as a cohesive experience, assessment of their quality must comprehensively consider all aspects of the apprenticeship. More could be done, through a bespoke quality assurance arrangement for apprenticeships that enables a joined-up approach, even if assessment is conducted by multiple bodies. Including employers at all stages of this process could be hugely beneficial - not just for the apprentices and their education providers, but for the apprenticeship system as a whole. The quality assurance system could, and should, then become an effective feedback mechanism on the apprenticeship standards themselves - enabling increased agility in ensuring the standards remain up-to-date and valid, and significantly broadening the opportunity for stakeholder voice to feed into the standard setting processes.

Conclusion

The introduction and growth of degree apprenticeships over the last decade has resulted in a well-meaning, but highly fragmented system of quality assurance that adds unnecessary burden and, ultimately, risks creating a disincentive that could trickle down to negatively affecting the experience of apprentices.

As a UK-wide body, QAA will continue to share good practice from across the nations while recognising that the operating contexts differ by county and region.

In England, we recommend the following:

- Streamline and align the current regulatory landscape to prevent duplication and ensure comprehensive and coherent oversight of apprenticeship provision.
- Any funding review of higher education and/or changes to the apprenticeship levy should consider the full higher education landscape and the ability to continue funding degree and higher apprenticeships sustainably.
- Reconvene the Higher Education Data Reduction Taskforce, reviewing membership to ensure all bodies involved with degree and higher apprenticeships are included, and dedicating a specific workstream to apprenticeship provision.
- As apprenticeship standards are revised and updated, sustainable funding and appropriate lead-in time to their introduction must be embedded.

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