

Degree apprenticeships: higher vocational or vocational higher education?

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Overview

- Discuss degree apprenticeships in the context of the uneasy relation between vocational and higher education in England.
- Demonstrate the challenges of developing higher vocational education in a marketised and historically voluntarist skill formation system
- Draw on research project into the development of degree apprenticeships in construction and aerospace engineering (Funded by Gatsby Charitable Foundation – 2016/7) (Bishop and Hordern 2017)

Tensions between the logics* of ‘the higher’ and ‘the vocational’ in England

Higher

- Limited incentives for institutions to vocationalise
- ‘Academic drift’ demonstrated by former CATs, polytechnics etc. (Pratt and Burgess 1974)
- Prestige associated with research, internationalisation
- Escape from direct state accountability in the post 1992 part of the sector (Pratt 1997)
- Lack of skill formation infrastructure / no tri-partite regulation makes employer engagement resource intensive activity for HEIs
- ‘Subjectification’ and ‘socialisation’ educational purposes still persist, alongside ‘qualification’ objectives (Biesta 2010)

Vocational

- Constant policy change directly affecting vocational qualification offer and programme delivery
- Lack of prestige
- Still comparatively weak apprenticeship system of variable quality (Brockmann et al. 2011; Bishop 2017; CIPD 2016)
- Competence-based approaches prevail
- Narrow ‘qualification’ objectives central – readiness for work

* The notion of ‘logic’ here is informed by sociological institutionalism (i.e. DiMaggio and Powell 1991)

Tensions between the logics of ‘the higher’ and ‘the vocational’ in England

- To understand the vocational logic we focus on the ‘interdependencies’ between the national VET system and the organisation of work in the economy (Ashton et al. 2000)
- The English ‘market model’ – state action only legitimate on the demand side. Education retains a ‘**high degree of autonomy**’ in relation to employer demand (Ashton et al. 2000, 15), but the organisation of work is also subject to high levels of individual employer control (Hordern 2018).
- The market model **relies on an absence of co-ordination** – the vocational education system is compelled to constantly play catch up in an outcome-based system, with limited purchase on the educational character of vocational education.

Tensions between the logics of ‘the higher’ and ‘the vocational’ in England

- Degree apprenticeships involve some stakeholders (higher education institutions and employers) who have become accustomed to a **considerable degree of autonomy and licence** in terms of education and training of students and employees.
- Higher education not used to the policy suppliant role that FECs and WBL providers are familiar with.
- Alignment of objectives may occur between institutions and employer groups – but these may be fragile **contingent arrangements** as only underpinned by self-interest
- This contrasts with the more co-ordinated context in many continental European countries (Brockmann et al. 2011; Pilz 2009)

Degree apprenticeships compared with similar previous initiatives

- Previous similar initiatives have remained peripheral aspect of HE (HEFCE Workforce Development Programme; Higher Apprenticeship Fund projects)
- Progress has been dependent primarily on the contingencies of employer demand, funding and institutional interest (Hordern 2014a; Kewin et al. 2011)
- Systemic differences between VET and HE remain, with consequences for learners (Fuller and Unwin 2012; Keep 2014, 2015b)

Purpose of the project

- Explored whether degree apprenticeships in England should be seen as ‘higher vocational’ or ‘vocational higher’ forms of education*.
- **‘higher vocational’**: a higher tier within an extended TVET system, and the governance, partnership working and programme objectives aligned with the wider objectives of VET / Technical Education policy. **Vocational logic**
- **‘vocational higher’**: aligned with the wider objectives of higher education and the relevant systemic factors that such provision is subject to (i.e. in terms of quality assurance, entry and progression). **Higher logic**

(*distinction between the two developed from Keep (2015a), although we used the ‘higher technical’ and ‘technical higher’ for the purposes of the Gatsby project)

Vocational or higher logic?

Higher Vocational (logic of TVET system prevails)

Degree
Apprenticeships

Vocational

Vocational

Vocational higher (logic of HE system prevails)

Higher
Education

Higher
Education

Degree
Apps

'vocational logic' characteristics

- **Rationale:** meeting sectoral and organisational objectives; concerted efforts to 'open the door' to higher education for L3 apprentices (Fuller and Unwin 2012); or to re-orient HE vocationally.
- Prominent **organisations and institutions:** employers, representative bodies, FE colleges, some professional organisations (universities not taking the lead); other training providers
- **Programme structure:** strong element of employer design; quality assurance not controlled by higher education

'higher logic' characteristics

- **Rationale:** maintaining traditional higher education requirements; recruitment of academically capable students (with A levels)
- Prominent **organisations and institutions:** higher education institutions, sometimes with FE playing a role, some employers, professional bodies
- **Programme structure:** More university control of design, with employer input more specific and more 'traditional' HE characteristics to delivery; quality assurance perhaps controlled by QAA
- Concern with '**higherness**' of the education

Research process

Research activity focused on two sectors – **Aerospace and Construction**. Twelve interviews were carried out in total, with six in each of the sectors chosen.

Aerospace : Three employers, Two HEIs, 1 FEC

Construction: Two employers, Two HEIs, CIOB, RICS

the research was carried out in the context of the upcoming roll-out of the levy (and around the time of the Brexit referendum / Change of government). Summer 2016

Background to degree apprenticeships

- Degree apprenticeships combine university study and workplace learning to enable apprentices to gain a full bachelor's or master's degree.
- An apprentice has full-time employment status rather than student status, and receives at least an apprentice's minimum wage.
- Co-designed by employers and HEIs, FECs – development of standards
- Degree apprentices do not pay for training costs or student fees
- Government and employer sharing costs (approx two-thirds of the cost of degree apprenticeships is contributed by the government (up to a capped amount) and the remaining third by the employer – 2014/5 and 2015/6)

Aerospace and Construction degree apprenticeships

- Aerospace: two degree apprenticeship standards : **Aerospace Engineer** and **Aerospace Software Engineer**.
- Employer - HE institution - FE college partnerships, typically. Length 3-5 years depending on the employer. Most of first year at College or University, and from year two time rebalanced towards workplace activities. FE providers often extend their involvement to delivery and assessment of workplace-based competency.
- Construction: five related standards (we looked at **construction site management** and **construction quantity surveying**) through a consortium that includes over 50 partners (DBIS/PMO 2015).
- Closely linked with the achievement of professional body membership (SFA 2015a,b, 2016). Entry to the level 6 programme can be via a Level 4 Construction Technician Apprenticeship including an HNC (3 years to level 4 and 3 further years to level 6), or via equivalent qualification and experience

Findings: employer involvement

- Primarily it appears to be **larger employers who are dominant in the design of the apprenticeship standards** and plans for delivery in partnership with providers of higher education.
- This may be the most pragmatic approach to apprenticeship design and delivery, as these are the employers most likely to have the time and resources to contribute
- **May neglect the requirements of small and medium sized employers,** some of whom may wish to take on degree apprentices
- With the introduction of the employer levy many small and medium sized employers may fall below the payroll threshold for the levy and therefore may benefit disproportionately from the development of degree apprenticeships in the future.

Findings: government role and standards

- Reservations regarding the approach taken by government and the manner in which the process had been managed.
- **Concern about the nature of the apprenticeship standards** amongst employers in both sectors.
- This related to the requirement that standards are linked very specifically to an occupational role, a requirement that emerged from the Richard Review and subsequent reforms (HMG 2013).
- **Employers noted that a considerable amount of 'core content' is relevant to similar occupational roles**, and therefore apprenticeships could be developed to share a pathway before specialising later on.
- However, a more flexible approach to standard development was not favoured by government.

Findings: professional accreditation

- Employers, higher education providers and professional bodies noted also that **government did not favour identifying a professional body on the apprenticeship standards**, perhaps wary of appearing to support one pathway to occupational competence.
- However, employers in particular stressed the crucial role of key **professional bodies as guarantors of competence**.
- Importance of sectoral context: in construction, surveying and engineering professional bodies are well established with sector-wide buy-in to their objectives and ethos, this may not be so evident within emerging or highly dynamic occupational areas (i.e. IT, Media) (Hordern 2014b).

Findings: roles of HEIs and FECs

- Degree apprenticeships provide **a partial solution to the reduction in employer-sponsored part time student numbers**, which came about largely as a consequence of the increase in undergraduate tuition fees in 2012.
- However, ‘apprenticeship’ is different from ‘employee-sponsorship’
- Certain parts of the further and higher education sector are well-equipped to provide curriculum design and delivery expertise for degree apprenticeships, even though **the balance is tipping further towards employer control** and specification of content and delivery.

Findings: skills demands and recruitment

- In sectors which require sustained periods of skill formation (i.e. construction and aerospace) degree apprenticeships are seen **to offer both a partial solution to skills shortages** and an opportunity **to diversify the intake** of apprentices and graduates.
- In both Aerospace and Construction employers stated that a **substantial volume of degree apprentices would come from 18 year olds school leavers with A levels**
- In construction degree apprenticeships could offer a **vehicle for workforce development**, as many existing employees may be able to take advantage of the two-stage structure of the construction degree apprenticeships.
- Some also may come through level 2 and level 3 trade apprenticeships, although this was **not thought to be a major source of recruitment at this time**, perhaps because of the entry requirements for the higher level academic qualifications.

Findings: vocational logic?

- **Rationale:** Policy objectives; tight specification of standards; commitment to putting employers in control
- **Organisations and institutions:** employers heavily involved, but often not in detail of curriculum design, higher education not dominant
- **Programme structure:** some pressure towards 'closed cohorts' from specific employers for classroom elements – control of apprenticeship experience

Findings:higher logic?

- **Rationale:** tension between highly specified standards and actual occupational practices; recruitment of A level qualified school leavers; concerns about apprentices **missing out on the wider 'HE experience'**.
- **Organisations and institutions:** acknowledgement of role of HE in design and QA; existing relationships between employers, professional bodies and institutions seem predominant, perhaps to the exclusion of SMEs?
- **Programme structure:** some see as replacement for employer-sponsored degrees – just differently delivered; common pathways and core technical knowledge seen as important by employers and institutions but not by government (Young and Muller 2014; Brockmann et al. 2011) – suggests a broader sense of occupation and greater 'higherness' – **prioritising content rather than occupational role**

Developments since the project

- UUK (2017) suggest degree apprenticeships as an opportunity for HE institutions(UUK 2017, 2) and QAA role in assuring quality of degree apprenticeships both indicates a potential further ‘higherness’ – the HE sector is strategically capable of making ‘vocational’ initiatives work to their advantage (Hordern 2012, 2013).
- But then - How connected will the initiative remain to the sub-higher VET system?
- Introduction of Levy in April 2017 and potential for ‘sustained demand’ may stimulate an HE approach that differs with previous initiatives(Kewin et al. 2011; Hordern 2014a)

Development since the report: Remaking Tertiary Education

- Wolf et al. (2016) suggest that the ‘ number of ‘higher’ and ‘degree’ apprenticeships remain tiny and there are no clear mechanisms for developing apprenticeships as a major tertiary-level alternative, although these may emerge in future years.’
- But the **higher technical curriculum** could be at the centre of reform – i.e. what leads to stronger occupational expertise (rather than discussion of systemic funding, governance and qualifications issues – important as they are).
- If questions of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are important then the degree apprenticeship model may have an important role in some occupations, often incorporating the revitalised HNC/Ds that Wolf et al.(2016) advocate.

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