

## [Reconfiguring Higher Education: Developing Vocational Pathways for Graduate Apprentices \(0290\)](#)

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## **Reconfiguring Higher Education: Developing Vocational Pathways for Graduate Apprentices**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the experience of a university in developing a pathway for Graduate Apprentices in light of recent government policy on, and funding recognition of, advanced work-based learning. The paper aims to reflect on the way that this field of education and study is being positioned within, and in relation to, the academy. Previous discourses of vocational and work-based training have cast this strand of learning as mainly training and skills related and questions have been raised about its legitimacy within the higher education sector. Regulators might argue the academy is uniquely positioned to bring wider national economic benefits (as noted for example by both the City Growth Commission (2014) and the 'Northern Futures' initiative). Apprenticeships are recognised to have the greatest economic impact of all workplace based qualifications (BIS, 2011). However, it can be argued these instrumental arguments may not be sufficient to (re)define skills acquisition as HE.

### **Paper**

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### **Introduction**

This paper presents a case study of one Russell Group university that is introducing a new type of study, with advanced work-based learning at its core, supported by novel pedagogies and curriculum. The case study aimed to develop knowledge and understanding of the narratives vocational teachers and learners are creating around their participation in skills training and higher education. This (re)configuration of higher education (HE) to include work based learning and skills acquisition as higher learning is arguably changing the learners and the university. The pathway described helps to reconceptualise vocational learning, presenting new relationships between work place and academic knowledge.

Political forces are reshaping HE. The UK Conservative manifesto stated, 'over the next five years, we will deliver three million more [apprentices] and ensure they deliver the skills employers need' (Conservatives, 2015). The intention is to build educational pathways to Bachelor and Masters levels through Graduate Apprenticeships. The new Graduate Apprenticeships must adhere to standards designed by employer-led 'Trailblazers' (Skills Funding Agency, 2015). An apprenticeship raises an employee's gross productivity by an average of £414 per week in engineering and manufacturing, compared to £114 in the healthcare, public services and care sector (Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2013).

Universities involvement in work-based learning has typically been in response to government policy including, for example, the Employment Department's initiative in the 1990s (Duckenfield and Stirner, 1992.) This paper will show that in anticipation of the policy shift, recognising the demographic downturn and to meet employer's needs, universities are reconceptualising their mission to deliver apprenticeship degrees.

## **Objective**

It was intended through a case study to observe how key stakeholders within -University created narratives for elite vocational training. The leaders of the institution positioned the university as a selective, research intensive institution and it was key to understand how it communicated advanced vocational training to itself, society, the regional economy and to UK HE. Secondly, it was also important to -understand the discourses of the students as work-based learners (who find themselves in a university setting) regarding how they understood themselves and the nature, value and purpose of higher education. The identity of the learners and their motivation to participate was examined; their experience, work context and their community of practice (Boud, 2001.)

The extent to which the development of funding and assessment frameworks provide opportunities for Universities to innovate work based HE curricula, pedagogy and assessment methods was viewed as critical to the success of this learning experiment, but at the same time it has led to challenges regarding the assessment and quality assurance methods used.

## **The Case Study**

The University of Sheffield developed an apprenticeship pathway, launched in 2013, with 150 Engineering apprentices, with a further cohort of 240 students enrolling in 2014. This initiative meant the University won 'Widening Participation or Outreach Initiative of the Year' in the Times Higher Education Awards 2014, with the judges recognising a "real alternative to more traditional full-time study" engaging those who might not otherwise consider HE. The University was supported by the HEFCE Catalyst fund to design an HE pathway that responded to the needs of students and their employers and integrated this alternative mode of study with flexible stepping on and off points and access to higher academic awards.

This suggests the University intends to depart from normal frameworks for university study and use links with industrial partners and employers to tailor the curriculum and find new pedagogies. Trailblazer employer groups are helping to define the curriculum, standards of delivery and assessments of competence. This raises questions about how to avoid learning becoming too specific to particular contexts and engage 'with higher-level skills and knowledge and with the development and use of broad, high-level capability that suggests that it has capacity to be recognised and enhanced through university involvement' (Lester and Costley, 2010.) In the paper, the voices of learners are presented and analysed. The learner perspectives suggest needing to earn while studying which may be a more pragmatic than optimal mode for HE. The intellectual value of combining work and education is reflected on by the

learners. The learners express an inherent or learnt ambition to progress from training to HE. The paper will also reflect on the nature and extent of, employers' support for learner study over an extended period.

### **Wider Impact**

Accrediting bodies are responding with an assessment framework for professional status for those taking advanced vocational routes. The Engineering Council is developing a pathway to professional registration as Chartered Engineer and Incorporated Engineer through work-based learning, enabling students to gain the required competence without needing to leave employment (<http://www.engc.org.uk/education-skills/engineering-gateways>.) Academic rigour is said to be assured by aligning with existing accredited courses. In the wake of the momentum to develop a standardised framework it is apposite to reflect upon the purposes of work-based training and vocational routes through higher education. Critical engagement with the emerging complementary and contrasting discourses around vocational higher education can help to inform judgement about how to secure parity for vocational courses in HE.

Training, where work is part of the learning and assessed, that includes pathways through to degrees and access to the professions is a model that can be replicated in different skills sectors. The University of Sheffield Graduate Apprenticeship programme is offered as one example of how the model works and there are likely to be applications for other institutions in the sector.

### **Conclusion**

The University of Sheffield's approach to advanced vocational education may open forms of HE that are inseparable from world-leading research partnerships, creating sustainable jobs, growth and access to HE for those otherwise least likely to participate.

The new pathway could operate as a template for universities with world-leading reputations for research and the highest-quality technical education to create parity between vocational and academic routes; finding new relationships between work and academic knowledge. By expanding opportunities for greater numbers of learners from a variety of backgrounds to access HE, related to their employment, Universities could enhance their regional connections, encourage participation and drive the economy.

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