

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0057

Tue 07 Dec 2021

12:30 - 12:50

How are we Positioning Degree Apprenticeships? Analysis of Adverts

Khristin Fabian¹, Ella Taylor-Smith¹

¹*Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Technical, Professional and Vocational Higher Education (TPV)

Abstract: Degree apprentices are recruited by employers, rather than universities, reflecting their status as paid employees, first and foremost. This study analysed job adverts for IT degree apprenticeship roles to investigate the: skills, attributes, and qualifications employers listed; job responsibilities; and salaries offered. Degree apprenticeship job adverts were scraped, over a year, from English and Scottish official apprenticeship websites and subjected to content analysis (n=290). The findings highlighted a wide range of salaries, with nearly a third falling below the contemporary minimum wage; similar entrance qualifications for HE places, with few mentioning technical qualifications or direct entry routes; required skills and attributes resembled those that employers are seeking (and claiming to find lacking) in graduates and also the same skills that the apprenticeships claim to develop. Few provided good descriptions of what the apprentice would be expected to do. The findings can be used to support apprenticeship providers in influencing employers.

Paper: Introduction

The UK's evolving apprenticeship policy aims to increase productivity and social mobility. Productivity is to be increased by driving up skills levels, thus maximising national competitiveness (QAA 2019). Addressing the digital skills gap is a priority. This gap has three elements: a shortfall of computing graduates, graduates not meeting employers' needs, and lack of training for employees (Shadbolt 2016; Taylor-Smith et al. 2019; Wakeham 2016).

Degree apprenticeships are collaborations between employers and universities, to deliver work-experienced graduates, with skills aligned to industry needs, providing opportunities that "explicitly develop professional competence" (Rowe, Perrin, and Wall 2016, 365). Degree apprentices are salaried employees, spending 80% of their time working, including work-based learning, and 20% studying away from the workplace (e.g., at university).

Organisations with a pay bill of £3 million contribute 0.5% of their salary cost to the Apprenticeship Levy (Powell 2019). Degree apprentices can "Get a job, get paid and get a degree at the same time" (SDS 2020), facilitating access to students from less wealthy backgrounds. As employers fund the

lion's share of the costs (fees plus apprentices' salaries), they influence the standards and frameworks that govern the contents of the degrees (Powell and Walsh 2018) and they recruit the apprentices. With this shift in employer's role, it is important to understand what they look for in prospective recruits and the tasks they aim for these prospective apprentices to do.

This study aimed to answer these research questions:

1. What skills, attributes, experience, and qualifications do employers look for in IT apprentices?
2. What are the job responsibilities advertised?
3. What is the alignment between the advertised job tasks and expected learning outcomes as specified in apprenticeship standards?

Methodology

This scoping research used data from 290 IT degree apprenticeship job adverts to gain insight into employers' strategies for apprenticeship recruitment, especially their expectations of their apprentices. The adverts were scraped from England and Scotland's official apprenticeship websites between March 2019 and March 2020. Using content analysis, information on salary, candidate requirements and job description were identified from the adverts.

Key Findings

- - The adverts contained a wide variation in salary for first year degree apprentices, with an average of £16696. About 49.7% of the adverts offered equal to or above the 2019 national minimum wage of £8.19; 31.6% of the adverts were below this.
 - Entry routes were aligned with the traditional qualifications sought by universities, e.g., specific A Level/Highers marks. Alternative routes, including technical qualifications, were rarely mentioned in the adverts; few adverts mentioned work experience or previous apprenticeships as valid alternatives.
 - Direct entry to second or third year of the degree apprenticeship was not mentioned in the adverts. So, options to progress from previous qualifications were not clear.
 - The skills and attributes being sought at recruitment were the same skills that employers were seeking (and claiming to find lacking) in graduates, and also the same skills that the apprenticeships aim to develop. Communication skills, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal skills are among the skills valued in graduate-level IT roles and these mirror the soft skills/attributes sought, in the adverts, from prospective apprentices (prior to starting undergraduate studies). This raises questions about the extent to which these are personal attributes or skills to acquire; and whether they are acquired before or during higher education and work-based learning.
 - Most of the job adverts focused on the training that the apprentices would be receiving as part of the programme. Their actual work tasks were not always specified, so we were unable to analyse how the adverts were aligned with the apprenticeship standards.

Future research

By exploring the job advertisement data, we identified the requirements employers explicitly specified for their apprentices. Apprenticeship providers could use these findings to influence employers to consider, for example, widening participation goals, as well as initiating discussions

about teaching, learning, acquiring, or innately possessing soft skills and metaskills. This study found a wide variation in the offerings provided by different companies, particularly in salary, opportunities, and clarity of the responsibilities in the job roles that apprentices will be committing to as they also complete degree study. Future research could look at standardisation of apprenticeship programs, explore the marketing aspect of degree apprenticeships, ask employers about recruitment decisions, alignment of employer roles and universities, as well as investigate how the job adverts represent the tasks that apprentices actually do in their roles. The impact of the pandemic on the recruitment, employment, and progress of degree apprentices also needs to be investigated if the programme is to survive.

References:

References

Powell, A. (2019). *Apprenticeships and skills policy in England*. House of Commons Briefing Paper CBP 03052, 7 January. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03052/SN03052.pdf>

Powell, P. and Walsh, A. (2018). Whose curriculum is it anyway? Stakeholder salience in the context of Degree Apprenticeships. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 72(2), 90-106. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12149>

QAA (2019). *Characteristics Statement Higher Education in Apprenticeships*. Gloucester, UK: The Quality Assurance Agency. <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/characteristics-statement-apprenticeships.pdf>

Rowe, L., Perrin, D., and Wall, T. (2016). The Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship: trials and tribulations. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 6(4), 357–369.

Shadbolt, N. (2016). *Shadbolt Review of Computer Sciences Degree Accreditation and Graduate Employability*. London: BIS. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/computer-science-degree-accreditation-and-graduate-employability-shadbolt-review>

Taylor-Smith, E., Smith, S., Fabian, K., Berg, T., Meharg, D., and Varey, A. (2019). Bridging the Digital Skills Gap: Are computing degree apprenticeships the answer? In *Proceedings of the 24th Annual Conference on Innovation and Technology in Computer Science Education (ITICSE'19)*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3304221.3319744>

Wakeham, W. (2016). *Wakeham Review of STEM Degree Provision and Graduate Employability*. London: BIS. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/518582/ind-16-6-wakeham-review-stem-graduate-employability.pdf