

# 245 Degree Apprenticeships in England: What can we learn from the experiences of apprentices, employers and HE providers?

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## Research Domains

Technical, Professional and Vocational Higher Education (TPV)

## Abstract

Degree Apprenticeships (DA) were introduced in 2015 as an alternative route to obtaining a degree. Their number has been growing over the years. DAs offer a debt-free, vocational pathway into higher education, through the integration of off-the-job (university-based study) and on-the-job training. Most degree apprentices have been existing employees rather than new recruits, that is young people just finishing their level 3 qualifications. There have been clear expectations of DAs such as skilling, re-skilling and up-skilling young people and existing employees, supporting the local and national economy, and supporting social mobility of the disadvantaged groups. This paper aims at revisiting these expectations and reporting through the lens of apprentices, employers, HE providers and policy makers.

## Full paper

Degree Apprenticeships (DA) were introduced in England in 2015 as an alternative route to obtaining a degree (UK Government, 2015). DAs offer a debt-free, vocational pathway into HE, through the integration of off-the-job (university-based study) and on-the-job training. The rationale behind DAs is to support national economic growth, address levels of low productivity and, meet higher-level skills shortages by establishing a pipeline of skilled entrants into the workforce (DfE, 2020). DAs include Level 6 programmes, leading to bachelors' degrees, and Level 7 programmes, leading to masters' degrees. However, it is important to distinguish between other Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships often described as 'degree-level'. Such courses may involve equivalent levels of training but do not lead to the awarding of full degree qualifications. This paper focuses specifically on degree awarded apprenticeships.

In 2023 there are 161 apprenticeship standards approved for delivery at L6 and L7 (IfATE, 2023). An evaluation into the Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund (a £8.8 million fund designed to support the HE sector in developing internal infrastructure) suggests DAs will expand as institutions develop capacity, but also as employers gain greater clarity and familiarity with the process of spending levy funding (OfS, 2019a). DAs are noted to provide a pathway for recruiting, retraining or upskilling staff with skills tailored to specific industries.

However, concerns have been expressed that DAs focus heavily on future skills shortages and less on current skills (Policy Connect, 2019), while HEIs may develop courses that fail to meet the pace of change within employer's skills needs (Mulkeen et al., 2019). DA courses are in theory developed through collaborative partnerships between HEIs, employers and professional bodies. Although research has highlighted issues around employer engagement in programme design. Some employers expressed discomfort in taking the lead, often deferring to academics, or generally lacking experience in academic course development (Mulkeen et al., 2019).

DAs are argued to offer a route towards improving levels of upward social mobility. It is suggested that DAs may attract disadvantaged school leavers who may have previously been deterred by university study because of concerns related to the cost of studying as a traditional HE entrant (OfS, 2019b, 2019c). However, there is currently less evidence to assess whether DAs are a mechanism for social mobility amongst marginalised groups (Lester & Bravenboer 2020) and whether DAs are widening participation. It is suggested (OfS, 2019b) that in general apprenticeships attract lower proportions of disadvantaged learners the higher their level, with the majority of Level 6 and 7 apprentices being from areas with higher levels of HE participation already (Polar 5 and 4).

Given the potential benefits and opportunities DAs may offer in theory, it is necessary to investigate the claims made in relation to economic growth, skills development, and social mobility. In addition, the perspectives of apprentices,

employers and HEIs on the opportunities and challenges in recruitment, delivery and experience are necessary to capture as the pathway is expected to expand. More specifically the research aimed to answer the following questions: What are the motivations of different stakeholders for engaging with DAs? How do DAs align with the needs of local employers and the national economy? How do DAs support social mobility, widening participation and diversity in the workplace?

To answer the research questions we conducted semi-structured interviews with 99 stakeholders, including employers, university representatives, degree apprentices and policy makers. Each interview was transcribed and anonymised. We used thematic analysis to develop themes and sub-themes and entered all interview data into NVivo. Discussion of data has started early and has been an on-going activity for the research team. The project started in February 2022 and the findings are being finetuned now.

Examples of findings: Analysis to date indicate that each stakeholder group had specific reasons to engage with degree apprenticeships. This included institutional reasons, such as someone recognising that '[DAs] was going to be a big thing' (Provider\_B1) and saw both development and business opportunity in DAs. For employers, DAs offered the opportunity to use the levy and simultaneously further develop their existing staff. Some interviewees had their personal motivation to engage and promote DAs. These individual reasons linked to social values are included, such as supporting a young person from disadvantaged backgrounds or opening up education and training opportunities to local residents. In addition to the well-known reasons, apprentices expressed learning preferences a motive for taking DAs, some found the work aspect motivational, and existing employees noted professional development and gaining a degree in their locality. The presentation will cover selected themes.

## References

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