

HE Commission
Call for Evidence: Degree Apprenticeships Inquiry
Submission by Yorkshire Universities
October 2018

1. Background

1.1. The Higher Education (HE) Commission's seventh inquiry is examining how Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) are being implemented.¹ In 2015, the Government committed itself to overseeing the creation of three million new apprenticeships by 2020, and the development of DAs is seen as an important element of this policy. The reforms surrounding DAs, which combine workplace experiences with HE study, offer the opportunity for an apprentice to gain a full degree by the end of the apprenticeship.

1.2. The Commission's inquiry is examining the challenges involved in implementing DAs. The specific questions of concern to the inquiry are:

- How do DAs fit into the overall structure of tertiary (post-level 3) education and training, and are their formal relationship with other awards and pathways clear?
- What have been the major challenges establishing DAs for providers/employers?
- How far are DAs, on the basis of developments to date, providing an effective contribution to meeting the economy's skills needs, and doing so in a way that offers value-for money?

2. Respondent Information

2.1. This submission represents the response of Yorkshire Universities (YU) to the Commission's inquiry, and has been prepared by Monika Antal, YU Executive Manager. YU gives permission to the Commission to quote the submission, attribute the evidence to YU and the named contact. YU would be happy to engage further with the Commission as the inquiry progresses.

3. About Yorkshire Universities

3.1. Since 1987, YU has been the regional voice for HE in Yorkshire and The Humber. YU is a partnership that is based on a shared interest in place and the contribution that universities and HE Institutions (HEIs) make (both individually and collectively) to the prosperity and well-being of people and communities in the region. YU members contribute £3.7 billion per annum towards Yorkshire's GVA, and together they employ 34,000 people and attract 192,000 students from more than 120 countries.

3.2. YU members cover a diverse range of HEIs and provision. Our members are the universities of Bradford, Huddersfield, Hull, Leeds, Leeds Beckett, Leeds Trinity, Leeds Art, Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam, York, and York St John, as well as the Leeds College of Music.

¹ HE Commission (October 2018) [Call for evidence - Degree Apprenticeship Inquiry](#)

3.3. The mission of YU is to widen and deepen the collective role of universities and HEIs in place-based development, with a specific focus on the national and local industrial strategies. We regard skills development, driven in part through DAs, as a key tool in which to build and sustain more productive and inclusive economies within and across Yorkshire. This paper synthesises the experience collated from our member institutions and outlines a series of policy recommendations.

4. Summary of evidence

The rationale for DAs

4.1 The rationale for our members, in relation to developing DAs, has been to meet local and regional skills needs, and address the current and future skills demands of individuals. The strongest earlier adopters of DAs are the HEIs with the most developed links with local and regional employers, including collaboration on CPD-accredited training provision. Some CPD provision is being translated into DAs while elsewhere new DA programmes are being validated to help facilitate wider individual participation in HE, and to diversify institutional income.

Key challenges

4.2 Some of the main challenges facing providers in developing DAs have centred on the nature of regulation, and the recent institutional changes that have taken place at national level. Other specific problems include:

- The system established to date has been relatively bureaucratic and unresponsive.
- The scaling back of financial support for developing DAs, principally from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).
- The increased costs of rolling out DAs, particularly for smaller institutions.
- The difficulties in ensuring broad(er) geographical provider coverage.

4.3 DAs are very different to conventional degrees, which means that aligning the new functions required to develop and deliver DAs and integrate the programmes into existing HE quality processes has, at times, presented a significant challenge. A key requirement has been to ensure there is effective workplace mentoring in place for the student, as well as portfolio support and production and individualised learning plans and contract schedules. Other features include, monitoring progress, achievement, and attendance, in most cases for four or more years, running mock-endpoint assessments, and learning how to use new databases to collect and report data back centrally on a quarterly basis.

4.4 In DAs, there is a more resource-intensive, three-way partnership between provider, student and employer, but the contractual relationship exists with the employer, not the student. In practice, this has meant delivering additional training and development for the employer on how best to support and help to achieve the successful delivery and positive outcomes for both students and employers.

4.5 The Ofsted inspection regime for Level 4 and 5 apprenticeship provision delivered by HEIs also represents a duplication of oversight and regulation. It results in the inefficient use of public resources when the provision (including level 4 and 5 apprenticeship provision) delivered by an institution on the OfS Register is also subject to separate OfS regulation. Having two separate and incompatible quality assurance systems, coupled with the

bureaucracy, time and additional expense this entails, is more likely to result in HEIs questioning the viability of operating in the DA market, at precisely the time when we need an increase in DA programmes and provision, especially in regions like Yorkshire.

4.6 The processes connected to the role of the Institute for Apprentices (IFA) – in setting standards, recommending a funding band for the training and assessment component and the end-point assessment – lack transparency and consistency. Decisions appear to have been taken in an opaque manner and there have been major delays to HEIs starting their DA programmes. This in turn has had a negative impact on learners and employers alike. Engagement with the IFA has, at times, been problematic. According to our members there has been little direct communication between providers and the IFA, and the relationship between the IFA and various agents remains unclear.

4.7 The House of Lords Economics Affairs Committee has called for the IFA to be abolished. Under a new regulatory structure proposed by the Committee, the quality and outcomes of Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships should be the responsibility of the new further education (FE) regulator; the quality and outcomes of Level 4 and above apprenticeships should be the responsibility of the OfS. While the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills would provide oversight of both.²

Degree Apprenticeships and skill gaps in the UK economy

4.8 DAs represent a significant opportunity to widen participation in HE, address poor skills and bridge the gaps in educational attainment between the richest and the poorest students. They offer valuable choices and alternatives from the learner's perspective, while supporting wider training needs, closing skills gaps in key industrial sectors and helping to create and sustain more productive and high-value jobs in regional and local economies. Crucially, they have the potential to reverse the significant recent decline in HE in part-time and adult study.

4.9 DAs may be attractive to non-traditional students, thus providing an opportunity to support widening participation goals. There is a perception that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may view tuition fees and personal debt as barriers to studying for a traditional full-time degree, and that combining study and employment, through DAs, could be a more attractive option for many.³ DAs are seen as a tool to attract potential students into HE and also help meet targets to around apprenticeships leading to a skilled workforce. Key findings from an independent evaluation carried out by the New Economic Foundation include:⁴

- Flexible, adult apprentices are an untapped workforce, and there is a strong business case for employers to create opportunities to access them.
- Part-time, flexible apprenticeships are a way of bringing vulnerable groups who are currently under-represented into the labour market and HE.

² Lords Economics Affairs Committee (June 2018) [Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education](#)

³ UUK (2016) [Future Growth of Degree Apprenticeships](#)

⁴ Learning and Work Institute and Timewise Foundation (2018) [Exploring models for part-time and flexible apprenticeships](#)

Progression pathways toward Degree Apprenticeships

4.10 Progression from Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships to higher-level apprenticeships is not yet fully-embedded and there are concerns that DAs may become the preserve of people who have pursued an academic route. Improvements could be made to enable transportability, to undertake work or study-based modules and provide clearer progression routes to post-graduate-level achievement. Organisational development planning can help identify routes which align with career pathways, succession and replacement demand.

Policy recommendations

4.11 The government should set out a clearer strategy for DAs within the broader HE policy landscape. The government should consider ways in which they and other actors promote progression routes from entry-level apprenticeships through to university level and locate them within the wider HE technical and vocational offer.

4.12 Promotion and information for employers about DAs has largely been led by providers. There is no national campaign targeted at employers to explain what apprenticeships are and how they benefit business, and so behaviours are being directed in part by the funding (i.e. apprenticeship levy payments and subsidies). The government should reconsider clarifying this within their strategy for DAs.

4.13 Better alignment of DA public policy across the UK's nations and regions would be helpful as part of the UK government's DA strategy for England, and its relationships with the devolved administrations. Working with companies operating at a UK level can be complex when DA funding arrangements in Scotland and Wales are significantly different to those in England.

4.14 The Social Justice Fund, which has been proposed by the House of Commons Education Select Committee⁵ could help the young and disadvantaged climb the ladder of opportunity. A kitemark system would also identify good employers, as it enables and encourages best practice to be shared, and it helps apprentices choose the most appropriate course and employer. Ultimately, the candidate needs to succeed in getting the job, therefore careers education, information service and guidance needs to adopt to these new options.

4.15 Alongside the growing policy focus on place, public and private investment is being directed towards addressing the grand challenges identified in the UK industrial strategy. Mechanisms designed to improve skills, including DAs, should be central to both the national industrial strategy and the emergent local industrial strategies, which are expected to be underpinned by decentralised arrangements. This would help to overcome the short-term, tactical fixes of existing infrastructures and funding streams, and provide the meaningful and ambitious vision and framework that DAs deserve.

4.16 While we support the ambition to increase the number of apprenticeships, at all levels, the three million apprenticeship target is problematic, and should be reviewed. First, it is unclear where the methodology underpinning the target comes from, and who is responsible for delivering it.⁶ Second, measuring the target is problematic and could invite

⁵ Education Select Committee (October 2018) [The apprenticeships ladder of opportunity: quality not quantity](#)

⁶ Lords Economics Affairs Committee (June 2018) [Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education](#)

and encourage poor practice from employers who may be tempted to rebadge existing training schemes simply to access apprenticeship levy funding. Third, the focus of the target is on starts rather than completion, which gives a distorted view of the volume of training delivered. Fourth, the target prioritises quantity over quality.

4.17 Currently, pressure on funding is resulting in cuts being made to DA rates in a series of programmes, as a way of keeping the cost of the overall system ‘under control’. Some programmes will be cheaper to run than others, so the top funding bands for DA should be (re)considered in order to ensure that providers can meet the full cost of delivery across a range of standards, whilst also ensuring that the quality of programmes is not compromised. Anything that reduces financial viability is problematic – posing a risk that some provision will be cut and fuelling the emergence of ‘cold spots’ in specific professions, sectors or localities.⁷ This could also lead to provision being restricted to a small number of providers rather than supporting a more universal offer.

4.18 The apprenticeship levy should not be viewed as a sacrosanct, untouchable policy. If the levy is not targeting investment where it is needed, then it should be amended. The proposal to allow the levy to be extended into supply chains is a welcome step forward in theory. However, the practical impact of any change will only be realised if there is accurate information that helps employers understand how best to access and utilise a more flexible resource. There also remains the risk that some organisations see the levy as a business cost, rather than a long-term investment.⁸

5. Comments on provider and related bodies

Future FE and HE relations

5.1 FE colleges play a critical role in transforming the lives of individuals, communities and local and regional economies. Throughout Yorkshire, universities and other HEIs are working closely with FE colleges to deliver tertiary education. The government should consider what additional support is required to enable greater collaboration between FE and HE providers to develop pathways that allow students to access post-18 education at the same time as balancing other personal and professional commitments.⁹ Colleges have an important role to play, alongside universities, in delivering the post-18 education system, as the Russell Group submission recognises:

“A rich and diverse mix of qualifications and providers, combining technical education as well as academic training, is essential to the country’s long-term economic health...The debate around funding should not be seen as funding either universities, or colleges, but rather a chance to look across the system and ensure we are ambitious for both. There is, for example, an opportunity to consider how the apprenticeship levy might be broadened out and used by colleges in delivering a wide range of valuable courses, and to help ensure that they also have a sustainable funding base for the future.”¹⁰

⁷ Liz Bromley (7 Oct 2018) [Apprenticeships for our children](#)

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Sheffield Hallam University (2018) [An Effective, Sustainable and Credible Post-18 Education System: Sheffield Hallam University response to the ‘Review of post-18 education and call for evidence’](#)

¹⁰ Russell Group (2018) [Submission to ‘Enhancing post-18 education and funding’](#)