

Education Committee: The quality of apprenticeship and skills training

Response from the Chartered Association of Business Schools

6 April 2018

The original consultation document is available at:

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news-parliament-2017/quality-of-apprenticeships-and-skills-launch-17-19/>

Written evidence submitted by the Chartered Association of Business Schools

1. *Executive Summary*

- 1.1. This response is submitted by the Chartered Association of Business Schools¹, the membership body of the UK's business schools which represents over 120 business schools and higher education providers, as well as affiliate stakeholders, corporate members and international partners. The UK's business and management education sector has been one of the most enthusiastic sectors to offer degree apprenticeships.
- 1.2. Degree apprenticeships are just beginning to gain traction from a very low base and more students are seeing them as an alternative to the standard route to a university degree.
- 1.3. Data has yet to be collected on the widening participation impact of degree apprenticeships, and this should be a priority once sufficient data is available.
- 1.4. It is important that a degree apprenticeship is not seen as a poor relation of standard degrees and that funding is made available at the standard rate. To lessen these would prevent apprenticeships being seen as a viable alternative to the traditional degree route.
- 1.5. Further, Degree Apprenticeships contain all the costs of a degree course, with additional costs related to employer interaction, end point assessments, etc.
- 1.6. Degree apprenticeships also provide opportunities to upskill existing staff, especially those who previously, and for whatever reason, did not have the opportunity to undertake a degree when they left school.
- 1.7. It has been noted that the number of apprenticeships has declined rather than increased. This may be able to be explained by numerous factors, but emphasises the need to encourage and promote apprenticeships at all levels.
- 1.8. The Institute for Apprenticeships should not look to cut degree apprenticeships by imposing new restrictions on the approval of degrees as part of an apprenticeship. This will only serve to tarnish all apprenticeships with the "lower quality" brush. It would be appalling for this to happen just as parents, schools and young people are accepting the benefits of apprenticeships.
- 1.9. The IfA should not expect universities to discount prices for degrees that form part of apprenticeships and they should not expect fee paying students to subsidise apprentices taking the same course. The thought of a student taking the traditional route to a degree having to take out a loan to subsidise the education of someone going through a degree apprenticeship would be morally wrong.

2. *The impact of degree apprenticeships*

- 2.1. Most recent statistics show that less than 15% of all levy funded apprenticeship starts are at Higher level². This includes Foundation degrees. Therefore, there can be no claim that degree apprenticeships are causing there to be insufficient money available for apprenticeships at lower levels.
- 2.2. Degree apprenticeships are being promoted to students as an alternative to a traditional full-time degree route by the likes of UCAS, in the belief that these will be funded to the full extent by the employer's access to levy funds.³

¹ <https://charteredabs.org/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/apprenticeship-and-levy-statistics-february-2018>

³ <https://www.ucas.com/degree-apprenticeships>

- 2.3. The most popular subject area, by a considerable margin, for Higher level apprenticeships is Business, Administration and Law.⁴
- 2.4. Such programmes help to build up the quality of business leadership in the UK, an area often cited as a reason for the UK's poor performance in terms of productivity. Other degree apprenticeships such as Digital Technologies also provide crucial skills which would enhance productivity.

3. *Suggested changes*

- 3.1. It has recently been discussed at the Institute for Apprenticeships that funding for degree apprenticeships should only be made available where it is a requirement to undertake the role. This will cover people wishing to work in certain roles in certain industries, for example medicine, law or architecture, but will exclude those where there is no statutory requirement or where not every job advertisement makes a degree a prerequisite.
- 3.2. This seems at best short-sighted and at worst irresponsible. It risks preventing companies from fully utilising their levy in areas where they wish to upskill, and risks making it unrealistic for universities to offer programmes for apprentices.
- 3.3. Given that the number of apprenticeship starts has fallen and is thus further from the target number, it seems short-sighted at this point to be strictly limiting the types of qualifications that can be included and ignoring the needs of employers who have invested much time and money in the Trailblazer groups.
- 3.4. The suggestion made by the IfA that universities should top-up qualifications to a degree for free, or that self-funding students should pay for apprentices to gain the same degrees as them cannot be taken seriously. On moral grounds alone this would be wrong.
- 3.5. Equally, it would be hard to argue that employers should pay an additional fee on top of the levy charge to gain the skills they need.
- 3.6. This would also dissuade SMEs from offering apprenticeships at this level as the additional cost could be more than they could afford.

4. *Quality of Provision*

- 4.1. One of the necessary requirements for all apprenticeships is that qualifications should be of sufficient quality. Degrees are already quality assured by the QAA and a system of external examination. This is costed in to current degree fees and the same conditions apply to degree apprenticeships.
- 4.2. Universities already have a system of being able to include workplace learning in to an assessment and therefore one way of reducing cost would be to allow all degree apprenticeships to have the end point assessment determined by the institution rather than having to pay for an external to undertake this work.
- 4.3. The role of the QAA needs to be taken more seriously by the IfA, rather than Ofsted being the main regulator where degree apprenticeships are concerned. Too many regulators make life more complex than it needs to be without having any appreciative effect on quality.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships>

5. *Widening participation*

- 5.1. Universities have worked hard to improve the diversity of their student base and nowhere more than in business schools. Degree Apprenticeships offer a fantastic mechanism for pushing this agenda further, offering these students the same qualifications as those following more traditional routes, without the burden of student debt.
- 5.2. Business schools who have already engaged in the delivery of degree apprenticeships have adapted the way they work and support students to fit this new type of cohort. This includes having the ability to work via a tripartite agreement between students, employers and the university.
- 5.3. The students who come through the apprenticeship route usually have very different needs to students coming through traditional routes, requiring more support to study at that level at the same time as working. Universities have adapted and will continue to adapt to provide students with the greatest chances of success. This includes universities visiting employers to ensure learners are applying their class work in the workplace.
- 5.4. There have already been instances where students have started out on an apprenticeship only for the employer to withdraw their support for financial and existential reasons. Universities have undertaken to support their students to find alternative employment so that their studies are not also interrupted.

6. *Concerns*

- 6.1. Universities have developed their programmes to accommodate and facilitate degree apprenticeships, under what at times have been trying circumstances.
- 6.2. There is little to no expertise or experience of working with HEIs in the current set up of the IfA. This is readily admitted by the IfA, but to date there has been no action to rectify it. For perfectly understandable reasons the origins of apprenticeships were focussed on FE Colleges, but with degree apprenticeships there should be a shift to acknowledge the different ways of working.
- 6.3. We are pleased that the IfA, under its new Chief Executive, has made a commitment to improving the way in which frameworks and funding are approved. Extended delays to approvals have caused frustration and needless costs for both employers and providers and it would be good to have a system that is not just quicker, but also more stable, where the goalposts stay fixed and only ever move after sufficient warning.
- 6.4. However, there is a concern that the IfA has now stated that it is moving to severely limit the number of degree apprenticeships. They may well claim that this is not their intention, purely a result of changing their focus, but the result, if this goes ahead, will be the same.
- 6.5. The IfA has stated that it will only approve degrees where they are a statutory requirement for a job, or where it is a de facto requirement. The latter will apparently be tested by reviewing job vacancies and if just one vacancy does not state that it requires a degree then a degree will not be approved.
- 6.6. The implications could undermine all the good work done in promoting apprenticeships as a viable alternative to traditional academic progression, at a point where business and HE are working so well together to create genuinely industry-led provision
- 6.7. Further, it will prevent employers from using their levy pot to train the types of people they need in their company.
- 6.8. Third, it will further restrict the number of apprenticeship starts, making it even harder to reach the stated target.

- 6.9. Finally, at a time when the industrial strategy is trying to improve the productivity of companies in the UK, it will prevent business leaders and managers from being able to use apprenticeships as a route to success.

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