

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

Degree apprenticeships in England: What can we learn from the experiences of apprentices, employers, and education and training providers?

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Abstract

This paper discusses Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) as a new work-based learning program in England that leads to obtaining a degree. This study explores stakeholders' perceptions of DAs, their reasons for engagement, and the challenges and opportunities they face. Apprentices' motivation for pursuing a DA included their preference for practically oriented learning and non-academic settings, earning while learning and for some DAs offered an opportunity to engage in education that was not available to them previously. Employers engaged with DAs to secure long-term, sustainable employees while simultaneously addressing skill gaps within their industries, to utilize the levy fund. Training providers decided to offer DAs for reasons, such as to widen participation and engage with employers. Evidence suggest that DAs were perceived positively, however, clear suggestions for improvement emerging from the findings.

Keywords

work-related learning, degree apprenticeships, higher vocational

INTRODUCTION

Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) were introduced in the UK in 2015 as a novel alternative to traditional undergraduate programs to obtaining a degree. DAs are marketed as a debt-free, vocational pathway into higher education (HE), through a model that integrates higher learning and on-the-job training. They intended to support national economic growth, address low productivity and low investment in skills training, and meet higher-level skills shortages (Department for Education, 2020).

Degree apprenticeship is employment; a degree apprentice must secure employment with an employer before they are eligible to enrol in an apprenticeship program offered by an education and training provider (ETP). For funding purposes, they have to spend at least 6 h per week, on

average, on off-the-job training during the apprenticeship's practical period, if they work 30 h or more per week. Off-the-job training is provided by an ETP that can be a university or other higher education institution (HEI). DAs include Level 6 programs, leading to bachelors' degrees and Level 7 leading to Masters' degrees.

DA courses are intended to be developed through collaborative partnerships between ETPs, employers, and professional bodies. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) was established in 2017 to help employers develop and approve apprenticeship standards through "trailblazer" groups. In July 2024, the Labour Government announced its replacement with Skills England (Department for Education, 2024a). The introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy brought an end to the voluntary contribution of employers to training. UK

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employers with a payroll over £3 million contribute 0.5% of their payroll to a digital levy fund, with a 10% monthly government top-up. Smaller and medium size employers (SMEs) who do not pay the levy can receive support from larger, levy-paying businesses. Fifty percent of the pot of large levy-payers can be pledged to smaller businesses (Papworth & Gluck, 2024). Employers have raised concerns that the levy is insufficiently flexible to support their training needs. As of the end of 2024 as part of proposed reforms to the Apprenticeship Levy, the Labour Government has confirmed employers will be encouraged to fund Level 7 apprenticeships outside of the levy (Department for Education, 2024b). Precise details of any changes are yet to emerge.

In 2024, 106 Level 6 apprenticeship standards were approved for delivery (IfATE) and these were delivered by 101 HEIs (McLaughlin, 2023). DAs have grown in scale and stature in the education sector, in policy, and in the public view, DA numbers are still low. In 2022-2023 Level 6 and Level 7 starts although increased, totalled only 46,800 (Department for Education, 2023). These developments have stimulated innovative delivery models and new, productive employer/training provider relationships but have also been identified as causing disruption. There are concerns that increases in expensive DAs normally taken by employees already in the workforce is to the detriment of resourcing and support for apprenticeships to help young people enter the workforce. The potential capacity of DAs to act as instruments of social mobility has been simultaneously celebrated and questioned.

Given DAs are said to offer benefits, it is necessary to investigate policy claims regarding economic growth, skills development and social mobility.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In this paper, we aim to answer the following research questions: (1) How are DAs perceived and experienced by key stakeholders (employers, ETPs, degree apprentices, and policymakers). (2) What are the motivations amongst different stakeholders for engaging with DAs? (3) What are the barriers and opportunities for engaging with DAs?

The research took a qualitative approach. Interviewees were identified through purposeful, convenient, and snowball sampling. We have used semi-structured interviews with 99 individuals, from these 25 degree apprentices, 35 employers, 34 ETPs, nine policy makers and two "others". All interviews lasted between 30-70 min, were conducted online, recoded, transcribed, and anonymized. Data collection was conducted between spring 2022 and autumn

2023. Since then a new Labour Government came to power in July 2024 and introduced changes to the skills system (see above). Consequently, this has implications for some of the findings.

We utilized Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis steps and used NVivo (Beijing, China) to structure the data. The research (Laczik *et al.*, 2025) was conducted in accordance with British Educational Research Association (2024) ethical guidelines and received ethical approval from the Universities of Bath, Huddersfield and Oxford Ethics Committees.

RESULTS

These apprentices chose DAs due to a preference for hands-on learning. As one degree apprentice explained: "I knew that I wanted to be like a biological scientist since I was about fifteen or something. So I think when you're sort of presented with the fact that when you're 18 you can just go and do it rather than having to wait three years" (Apprentice 14).

Another reflected on their former school settings pointing to the reason why chose DAs, saying "I didn't particularly enjoy like classroom learning, so I knew that university wouldn't be a suitable route for me" (Apprentice 9). A very clear motivational factor for apprentices was the benefits of earning while learning and the fact that they do not accumulate student debt: "I don't quite know why I'd go to university, incur all those fees, when there's this all-inclusive package that would give me every single thing, if not more" (Apprentice 10).

For some apprentices, DAs offered access to education that was previously not available due to caring responsibilities, learning difficulties, educational disenchantment or high opportunity costs. Apprentices reported that their involvement in DAs was largely self-initiated. However, satisfaction with careers advice and guidance around DAs in secondary schools was perceived as generally poor as one apprentice recalls they were not "really given the opportunity to go and explore them (DAs), I was very much pushed down the 'you'll apply to UCAS' route" (Apprentice 23). This reflects a wider issue about the information and communication about DAs that generally need improvement.

Large levy paying employers used their levy on Level 6 and Level 7, more expensive, DAs to upskill their existing staff. Primary obstacles about engaging with DAs included resource constraints, particularly around inadequate resource to backfill positions for apprentices. Adminis-

trating levy funds was a source of confusion and presented a substantial bureaucratic burden, particularly for SMEs as one large employer explained: "A big reason why organizations aren't fully optimizing their levy is because they don't know how to" (Large Employer 13).

Many stakeholders were often unaware of DA opportunities or discovered them by chance, as one apprentice explains: "I spent a morning with our Director of Health ... she came out with me on some of my community visits, and I thought, while I had her in the car, I'd approach her and say, what is there in terms of progression for us if we wanted to go into nursing. And she said, 'you know, if I'm honest, at the moment, we don't have anything. However, I'll promise you, I'll go away and have a think, because we do have access to what is called the Apprenticeship Levy' ... And it took a couple of months after I spoke to her, and she did get back to me, and we had a few informal meetings. And that was when they decided that they would then look into doing the degree apprenticeship" (Apprentice 15).

This quotation also exemplifies how employers use DAs to help existing employees' progression. This ultimately means to secure long-term, sustainable employees while simultaneously addressing skill gaps within their industries as another interviewee explains: "You're actually investing, and that you're serious in terms of your long-term ... That you've got a long-term vision in terms of ... upskilling local ... staff for the long-term, and hopefully you'll reap the reward" (Large Employer 6).

These are all motivational factors why employers embraced DAs. Some employers' interviews point to existing misunderstanding and misconceptions about DAs as one explains: "And I think the twenty per cent off-the-job training is kind of a bit of a mental hurdle for some of the line managers to get over because they think they're losing someone for twenty percent" (Large Employer 16).

DA's sustainability rest heavily on their financial viability for training providers. Providers often reported DAs were not economically viable, and expensive compared to other forms of provision as one interviewee details: "Why the heck are we doing this for £21,000 when it would be, you know, £28,000 and a lot cheaper to deliver, because you don't have skills coaches, we don't need to worry about Ofsted" (ETP 21).

Some providers, however, recognized that DAs enable them to "articulate (the) societal, social mobility, economical, impact of our provision, our relationship with employers, and what we do" (ETP 06), including the "greening agenda" (ETP 11), and addressing "skills shortages" (ETP 21). Hence these were identified as a strategic opportunity to

diversify their offer. They saw the benefits of their design and delivery, and the development of new relationships with employers, as an effective return on their investment.

CONCLUSION

Since its introduction, DAs in England have significantly influenced the apprenticeship and diversified HE landscapes.

DAs represent a strategic instrument for stakeholders to attempt to align business skills needs and employee development with effective learning and training practices, and the civic responsibilities of employers and ETPs. While challenges around implementation, operations, and sustainability persist, their strengths mean they offer benefits that mainstream degree pathways often struggle to realize. Stakeholders' perceptions and experiences varied across all aspects of DAs, providing a constructive account. Generally, DAs were perceived positively, with clear suggestions for improvement emerging from the findings.

DAs foster pathways to degree-level study, offering distinctive and flexible opportunities for work-based learning (WBL) and may support a smooth transition of degree apprentices into work. DAs are distinguished in the way they prepare for the world of work and the transition opportunity they offer between HE and work. DAs can offer an example with its perceived strength and weaknesses for countries that signal increased interest in hybrid-study programs.

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Author contributions

Laczik A, Newton O: Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. All authors have read and approved the final version.

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Ethical approval

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure voluntary contribution. All participants were informed about how the results of this research will be used in peer reviewed journal articles and a research report published by the Edge Foundation. The participants were informed that the interview data were only used for research

purposes, and their information would be anonymized when presenting the research result. Moreover, they are also allowed to stop the recording at any moment during the interview, and they can refuse to respond to any question asked during the review.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Generative AI use declaration

During the preparation of this work the authors used Otter.ai to transcribe the interviews during the research. These transcripts were then manually checked for accuracy and anonymized according to the BERA ethical guidelines. The authors takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

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