

A view on the most change in vocational and technical education in England for a generation

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In England, it has been a busy few months for the technical and vocational agenda since the last edition of *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning*. There have been plenty of developments not only with Apprenticeships but also with proposals for T levels, institutes of technology (IoTs) and the early stages of a review of Technical Education at Level 4 (certificate of higher education) and Level 5 (foundation degree). In addition, the British Prime Minister announced in February the year-long review of higher education tuition fees – which is placing particular emphasis on technical education and alternatives to full-time three-year degree programmes, varying fee levels and demonstrating the value added by different higher education courses.

Let us start with the UK Government's proposals for T levels to support entry to skilled employment in technical occupations at Level 3 and above. T levels are the latest in a long line of vocational or technical qualifications aimed at 16-19 year-olds and positioned as an alternative to the all-conquering champion of over six decades, the A level. As such, T levels follow on from the GNVQ of the 1990s and the 16-19 Diplomas of the late noughties, the latter having the shortest life-span of any major recent qualification. The question is, will T levels be different? There are some positive signs, but mistakes of the past may also be repeated. First, the positives. There is certainly a need for an alternative to A levels and the T level's focus on quality work placements and as a route to quality employment opportunities is also welcomed.

In terms of negatives, the UK Government's Department for Education's Consultation on the Implementation of T levels, published in late November 2017, stated that:

We will reform the 16-19 education system so that options for 16 year olds are radically simplified. Students will be able to choose from an academic study programme (primarily through A levels), a technical option (primarily through a T level study programme or an apprenticeship).

This statement and approach entirely misses a key qualification group followed by 16-19 year-olds in England, the Applied General, of which BTEC is the most prominent example. One large university informed UVAC that 30 per cent of its recruits entered with applied generals as part of their Level 3 qualification offering and many HEIs report the significance of applied generals in widening participation and supporting access to higher level study.

UVAC also struggled to understand the target cohort for T levels. Are they primarily designed to stretch individuals who would have remained at Level 2 (GCSE/lower secondary level)? The consultation implied that they would have more of a focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds than A levels. Or, alternatively, are T levels a fully fledged mainstream alternative to A levels? The latter seems Ministers' preference. If so, it is surprising that while, rightly, the central role of employers is outlined so little reference was made in the consultation to higher education. If T levels are to support progression to higher education and if higher education is a customer of T levels, higher education must be engaged. For UVAC ensuring progression opportunities exist to higher level learning for individuals with the ability and aspiration must be a priority.

The relationship between T levels and Apprenticeships is also critical. Employer demand for Apprenticeships is moving upwards in level. In UVAC's response to the T-level consultation (which ended in February 2018) we argued that a key role for T levels



should be to cater for a large cohort of learners who would in the past have followed “general” Level 2 Intermediate Apprenticeships (e.g. business administration and customer service). The Sutton Trust recently described how many of the individuals following Intermediate Apprenticeship tread water as their Apprenticeship is no higher than their school or college attainment, and so does not represent a stepping up in terms of skill development. T levels could potentially “stretch” such individuals and lead into skilled employment via Advanced, Higher or Degree Apprenticeships. T levels should develop employability skills and where appropriate be designed to articulate and support progression to key Apprenticeship opportunities (e.g. where employers/labour market information data suggests there is a need).

Meanwhile the UK Government pushed forward with its £170 million plan to establish new IoTs. In late November 2017, the Government launched its prospectus for IoTs and encouraged further education, higher education and employers to collaborate to develop new approaches to technical disciplines, particularly STEM focused largely, but not exclusively at Levels 4 and 5. In parallel, the Government is reviewing Level 4 and 5 technical education, particularly from the perspective of progression from T levels. Announcements relating to this review are expected in Summer 2018.

Developments with the Apprenticeship system continue apace. On the positive front a further 15 universities successfully applied to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers making over 100 higher education institutions (HEIs), in total, approved to deliver Apprenticeships in England. Successful applicants included the University of Cambridge, an outcome reported widely in the British national press. It is worth pausing at this point. For generations England has suffered from an academic vocational divide where vocational programmes were the poor relation and the good choice for other people’s children. Now, through the Government’s Apprenticeship reforms, a clear policy focus and the hard work of Government officials and universities the sector has, arguably, the number 1 ranked university in the world engaged in Apprenticeship delivery. This complements the engagement of world-class employers and the development of Apprenticeships in occupations and professions that will pass the muster of any aspirational parent.

A particularly welcome aspect of the Degree Apprenticeship agenda are early indications of positive impacts on the social mobility agenda and increasing numbers of women entering STEM occupations. This runs counter to growing concern that Degree Apprenticeships will be the preserve of the middle class. From a UVAC perspective, there needs to be a move to a position where Apprenticeships are seen as an aspirational choice for young people and adults from all backgrounds. On this point, it is good news that colleagues from Sheffield Hallam University are organising a Degree Apprenticeship National Conference: Delivering Quality and Social Mobility in partnership with UVAC and Emerald Publishing. Papers or case-study-write-ups can be considered for publication in a special volume of *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning*.

The results of the long-awaited ESFA procurement of Apprenticeship provision for non-levy paying employers were announced in December 2017. While UVAC would like to say something positive here, unfortunately, as in the past, the ESFA seems to prioritise the stability of its existing further education provider base over the need to ensure new providers can deliver the new Apprenticeship standards developed by employers.

UVAC has been contacted by over 25 HEIs expressing their concerns as to the impact the procurement outcome for non-levy employer provision will have on the availability of Degree Apprenticeships for the next 15-18 months. Our understanding is that while HEI bids were typically strong, fully compliant and met qualitative criteria, a substantial number of HEI bids have, through an ESFA regional scale back process, been pushed below the £200,000 contract threshold and have therefore not been awarded funding.

On the basis of UVAC's own analysis, the following raise concerns:

- Degree Apprenticeship Cold Spots – the procurement has resulted in Degree Apprenticeship “cold spots” in localities where there is no Degree Apprenticeship provision available for non-levy paying employers. Such “cold spots” are usually, but not exclusively, outside metropolitan areas. These “cold spots” correlate with higher education “cold spots” that the Government, through various initiatives, has been trying to combat. This has implications for both the Government's productivity and social mobility agendas. The failure to allocate funding to an HEI in a locality has an adverse impact on that locality. This is not the same for independent training providers given their large numbers. Multiple independent training providers will typically deliver Intermediate and Advanced Apprenticeships in a locality, but there is often only one local HEI offering Degree Apprenticeships. Unlike lower level Apprenticeships, other providers cannot simply step in to deliver Degree Apprenticeship provision.
- Failure to Provide Delivery Funding for Degree Apprenticeship Provision Developed through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund (DADF) – UVAC is aware of many universities with HEFCE DADF projects, with strong ESFA non-levy apprenticeship bids that, through the scale back process, have been pushed below the £200,000 threshold and therefore will not receive delivery funding. Essentially ESFA is not, as a result of its procurement approach, providing delivery funding to HEIs who have been funded by HEFCE to develop Degree Apprenticeship provision.
- HE Engagement from all Mission Groups Including the Russell Group – HEIs from all Mission Groups (including the Russell Group) have had their applications scaled back resulting in no funding or limited funding being allocated by ESFA for delivery typically to the small- and medium-sized employer. While institutions should all be treated equally, the participation of Russell Group institutions does help change the perception and standing of Apprenticeship. It seems unfortunate that the desire by universities from all parts of the higher education sector to contribute to the Apprenticeship agenda and enter on a small-scale basis has not been supported by the ESFA funding system.

It is also evident that even when successful, HEIs have had their bids reduced so substantially that they will not be able to deliver the Degree Apprenticeship demanded by employers, needed by local and regional economies or on the basis of Local Enterprise Partnership skills plans. Employers and individual learners deserve better.

Elsewhere the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) (the executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Education responsible for developing and maintaining quality in Apprenticeships) continues to make its presence felt. The first priority of its new chief executive was to speed-up the Apprenticeship standards and assessment plan development and approval process – outlined in its Faster and Better programme. Proposals to speed-up the process are essential. The construction Degree Apprenticeships – a key area of economic need – are still not ready for delivery after nearly three years of development. Other IfA approaches to the Apprenticeship agenda are less welcome, particularly the IfA's advice to Government on the funding bands for Apprenticeships.

In discussions with officials UVAC has made it clear that the funding band allocated to an Apprenticeship should be based solely on all costs relating to the delivery and assessment of the Apprenticeship. Affordability, however, seems to be seen as a key criterion. While in future the affordability of the Apprenticeships employers demand may become a major issue, artificially reducing funding bands is not the solution to making the Apprenticeship levy go further. Indeed, deflating funding bands is the best way to drive

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high-quality Apprenticeship providers out of the Apprenticeship market. UVAC has been emphasising the need to use the other Apprenticeship “levers” at the Government’s disposal; the 10 per cent top-up Government contribution to levy payers accounts, the 10 per cent non-levy paying employer co-investment or indeed the £3 million PAYE threshold at which employers start paying the levy – if and when it needs to make the levy go further.

So, with new programmes proposed and further system changes it remains a busy, albeit challenging, time for UVAC as it continues to champion the work of HEIs in delivering a world-class technical and professional training and education system.

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