Guest editorial

Degree apprenticeships: delivering quality and social mobility?

Employers in England are increasingly shifting their skills and talent pipeline strategies towards higher levels, including degree apprenticeships. There is no doubt that the introduction of degree apprenticeships in 2015 represented an exciting policy move, supported by employers who have focussed on the creation of apprenticeships for job roles to meet sector skills and productivity objectives. Expansive developments can be seen across key public and private sector occupations including nursing, policing, social work, teaching, engineering, construction, digital technology and in leadership and management. Equally, there is little doubt over the positive influence made by UK Higher Education (HE) providers of all sizes and types to drive the upward migration in the skill level and professional occupational focus of apprenticeships, including post-graduate delivery. However, as this phenomenon grows, so have a number of debates about the focus of apprenticeships, with views increasingly polarised and language bordering on territorial. Should the apprenticeship system retain its primary focus on level 2 skills and support for young people entering the workforce or redefine its purpose to raise productivity, deliver high-quality public services and enhance the social mobility through outstanding teaching, learning and assessment?

As a result of this building critique, Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) (guest editor's institution) and the University Vocational Awards Council (this journal's primary sponsor and guest editor's organisation) convened a national conference in June 2018 for thought leaders and innovators to explore, understand and address issues of quality, widening participation and social inclusion in higher level and degree apprenticeship delivery. The conference was to be a celebration of achievements and opportunities in HE aimed at bringing out the best in emerging practice. It also launched an exciting number of academic papers that now form the scope of this special issue with content that looks to further our understanding of the impact on and the response from the work-based learning community, learners, employers and wider stakeholders we serve.

This special issue comes at a critical moment for learning and skills development. Some might say the transformative impact of higher level and degree apprenticeships and the advent of the apprenticeship levy (alongside government co-funding for non-levy paying employers) has been a positive disruptor in the relationship between HE and business that raises a number of important issues about how reduced inequalities and improved quality of delivery (including outcomes) are achieved. Writing in the *New Statesman* in November 2018, the Chair of The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, Professor Sir Chris Husbands (vice-chancellor, SHU) asked:

> […] how do we re-purpose our education and training institutions to meet the challenges of diversification and flexibility? […].

As a starting point he outlines how:

> Sheffield Hallam University believes in creating opportunities by working with others, especially employers, to design education and training programmes so more people can do more things. We reject the idea of universities as outside society, set back and distant from the world around us. We reject the lazy distinction drawn between academic and vocational training.

The reality of social learning in a digital age and the perspectives of some post-millennial learners might ask us to consider if the concepts of academic and vocational learning will

remain relevant to the design and delivery of skills development going forward. After all where does knowledge now reside? It has never been the preserve of one institution over another. Universities are agents of knowledge exchange and development, oftentimes thought leaders, but dependent on the cutting edge of business to maintain an influential and impactful role in society. The relationships forged through higher level and degree apprenticeships can be harnessed to enable innovation, enterprise and deeper relationships for multiple types of knowledge exchange, providing the system focuses on the right things. As the House of Commons Education Committee observed:

> The Fourth Industrial Revolution promises great opportunities for those with the skills employers want, but ever fewer for those without them. (Parliament, 2018)

So, it is a pleasure to introduce you to the contents of this special issue published at a time when degree apprenticeships are developing a solid reputation as the flagship apprenticeship programme in England (Anderson, 2018). Since their introduction, degree apprenticeships have introduced a new highly aspirational choice: a degree and an apprenticeship (job) in one package. Not a vocational or an academic choice, but a high-quality vocational and academic programme; a programme that in all likelihood will become the most prominent form of higher level work-based provision nationally (Bravenboer, 2018) and is already highly valued by employers, individuals and HE institutions alike.

Over the last few years, degree apprenticeships have undoubtedly offered an attractive proposition. For employers, degree apprenticeships have helped attract new talent, tackled gender stereotyping, encouraged inclusion and widening participation and demonstrated an apprenticeship can be equal in esteem to more traditional academic routes for both new and existing employees. For individuals, a degree apprenticeship represents a debt free route through HE and a stepping stone in a career or future learning opportunity. For universities and HE providers, degree apprenticeships offer a significantly new way to engage with employers to meet their skill needs in the context of a new, if not challenging, economic reality (Crawford-Lee and Wall, 2018) and ambiguous quality assurance landscape.

Not surprisingly degree apprenticeships appear to be attracting in growing numbers, in certain sectors, individuals from cohorts who are currently under-represented in HE provision. Degree apprenticeships are also helping transform the image and perception of apprenticeships from the good choice of "other people's children". Indeed the degree "professionalises" a job role, helps attract a different talent supply and raises performance standards for the occupation. Ask an apprentice of any age: Why they decided to pursue a degree apprenticeship and the ability to gain a degree will be one of the key reasons? The introduction of degree apprenticeships and the power of the degree brand in England have also helped sell the benefits of the wider family of apprenticeships – including apprenticeship roles at a lower level of skill – and the opportunities for progression in education and a career now seen as integral to each other. An apprenticeship is no longer just the choice for individuals who could not go to university. Through the inclusion of a degree, they can be a highly aspirational choice and a change agent for social mobility. The internationally accepted reputation and value of a UK degree when combined with an apprenticeship makes for a very bold statement. Out-going is the academic-vocational divide and in its place, quality and pedagogical innovations are now seen as paramount.

What is certain is that together with the start of the apprenticeship levy in 2017, for employers with a payroll above £3m, degree apprenticeships have changed the outlook for higher level skills in the UK. It is now the case that through the UK Government's apprenticeship reforms, a clear policy intent and the hard work of HE providers, the skills system in England has those ranked among the foremost universities in the world, now engaged in its delivery (Crawford-Lee, 2018).

The original call to this special issue identified a range of topics and suggestions including:

- collaborative partnerships and innovative employer-driven programmes in key public sector services and private sector growth areas;

- how the quality and perception of the England apprenticeship system has improved and the provision better available in meeting the needs and ambition of employers;

- innovative best practice in higher level apprenticeship work-based learning which impacts positively on social mobility and the delivery of key public sector services;

- sophisticated approaches to delivering high-quality apprenticeships, in a highly regulated sector, to ensure occupational competence meets national and international requirements and complies with relevant legislation;

- the challenges and opportunities around widening participation in workplace HE and whether degree apprenticeships are the catalyst to a step change in social mobility; and

- the status and position of degree apprenticeship *vis-à-vis* quality, governance and policy.

We hope you find that the papers in this special issue live up to this ambitious focus and that they have done so in ways that demonstrate the transformative effects of degree apprenticeships. Each of the papers is now outlined. The first of the nine papers is Felce's (2019) "Managing the quality of HE in apprenticeships". It is an important place to start as it provides a critical viewpoint from the independent body entrusted with monitoring and advising on standards and quality in UK HE. Felce gives an overview relating to the quality assurance of higher and degree apprenticeships in England during a time when the Quality Assurance Agency reflects on the process for setting out a new and comprehensive characteristics statement for apprenticeships as part of the UK Quality Code. It is inevitable that this position paper will need an update, even in the short-term, as the HE sector grapples with an increasingly complex quality assurance approach to excellence in apprenticeship. It nevertheless provides a valuable perspective on the quality regime as it stands, confirms what we know and clarifies what is still to be determined.

The second paper, McKnight *et al.*'s (2019) "Establishing a social mobility pipeline to degree apprenticeships" discusses innovative practice within geographically specific activity which, "delivered by a new collaboration of private and public sector partners aimed to build a pipeline between those currently failing to progress to, or engage with, degree apprenticeships and employers seeking higher skills and a broader pool of talent". Here the authors reflect on the impact of leveraged funds on regional activity provided by the Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund; perhaps the last major fiscal intervention of the HE Funding Council for England before it was replaced as the main regulator of HE by the Office for Students in 2018. The paper explores the contextual parameters that determine degree apprenticeship as an attractive proposition. Having framed the context, it provides insight into what remains critical activity for many universities whilst keeping a keen and impactful watch on their wider societal obligations. Of significance for McKnight *et al.* is the incorporation of an entrepreneurial strand combined with a "step-up" access model. This links an initiative for small business growth support with an approach to skills recruitment in apprenticeships so offers a truly regionally driven and SME focussed proposition. Such practice might inform other HESWBL practitioners in their own public–private sector engagement activity including but not limited to the possibility of adopting hybrid social innovation business models linked to sustainable skills development.

In the next paper, Bradley *et al.*'s (2019) "Driving social mobility? Collaborative competition in degree apprenticeship development" takes it lead from the dual policy objectives of apprenticeship reforms in England: to generate a new cohort of skilled

individuals to support economic growth as well as improve levels of social mobility. The paper explores and comment on "various manifestations of collaboration" and in this respect the authors are particularly interested in the concept of competitive collaboration, "[…] collaboration as embedded; collaboration as negotiation and as a driver for social mobility or social equality". One of the interesting insights from this case study approach is the thoughtful interrogation of the broad concept of collaborative partnership, our possible assumptions about social mobility and social equality and their applied meaning in the context of developments in degree apprenticeships. It is of particular interest as it tackles specific challenges of retaining institutional distinctiveness within a collaborative arrangement comprising, in this instance, not less than 12 HE providers. Its final call is to researchers and practitioners to keep the channels of communication open to ensure learning gains and insights are widely shared and reflected on.

Having started out with a focus on social mobility, next we have two papers that take us on a journey through an eventful three years in the health sector in England and of adaptation to the realities of investment in workforce development since the apprenticeship levy. Both offer very different perspectives but together offer a great insight into the challenges facing our nursing and healthcare infrastructures in the context of professionally oriented curricula.

In "Responding to the NHS and social care workforce crisis: the enhancement of opportunities through collaborative partnerships", Hanney and Karagic (2019) provide a comprehensive review of the multiple political and economic drivers surrounding the skills crisis in health and social care and describe how an extensive collaboration has forged a community of practice in response. The paper observes how collaborative synergy can be a force for quality enhancement and in this way supports issues raised in this special issue's third paper (Bradley *et al.*, 2019). The authors set out a scenario where further and HE providers are comfortable operating delivery in the same space; where foundation degrees and higher apprenticeships sit hand in glove and where quality enhancement is aligned to meet employer need. A follow up paper to pull through the longitudinal impact and outcomes of this joint working will have significant implications for others in the field HE, skills and work-based learning.

"Post levy apprenticeships in the NHS – early findings" provides a valuable follow on from Hanney and Karagic's (2019) case study exploration. Here, Baker (2019) seeks to establish early insight into outcomes from the employer perspective. Qualitative methods are used to identify four key themes that might be extrapolated, or tested, for the health sector as a whole: "first, organisational readiness; second, the apprenticeship offer; third, opportunities for further development; fourth, potential problems for implementation". Findings are discussed by taking a holistic look across the sector's experience including the challenges to implement off-the-job learning and the role of National Vocational Qualifications to ensure rigour in assessing workplace skills. This is particularly relevant given that in engineering degree apprenticeships the current trend is a move away from vocational on-programme assessment that does not sit easily with the idea of synoptic end point assessment and a move towards a re-focussing on professional behaviours instead. The challenge for apprenticeship delivery is reflected in a simple truth that "[…] every week there's something different coming out which is slightly changing the way that we […] think about things".

Moving on from a health sector focus, we turn to the workplace more generally to examine critical success factors in higher and degree apprenticeship delivery, with a keen focus on employer engagement in delivery. Minton and Lowe (2019) ask the broader question "How are universities supporting employers to facilitate effective 'on-the-job' learning for apprentices?" The authors are keen to acknowledge that further education and independent training providers might have a few offerings HE can benefit from and that on-the-job learning is not a new principle or practice. The role of facilitation is purposefully outlined and organisational challenges including the tension between short-term productivity and sustainable development is a key topic. This paper draws on a number of issues quite familiar to the

experienced work-based learning practitioner but acts as a timely reminder of the challenges that still remain of academics reluctant to credit the workplace as a genuine site for learning and employers hesitant to embrace their role in securing these advantages for the apprentice in a structured, consistent and sustained way. It highlights how early engagement is critical to success with a key requirement for practitioners that:

> […] higher and degree apprenticeships are developed holistically, meeting the academic requirements of the university and workplace needs of the employer. This in turn will enhance success rates and reduce attrition rates from apprenticeships […].

Next, Roberts *et al.*'s (2019) "Workplace mentoring for degree apprentices: developing principles for practice" continues on the theme of working with and supporting employers and identifies where we can see apprenticeship principles in practice establish clear blue water between traditional degree programme provision and degree apprenticeship delivery. This paper focuses on "developing a deep understanding of the nature and impact of the workplace mentor role in degree apprenticeships" and investigates a theoretical model of workplace mentoring activity leading to a set of principles for supporting the development of effective mentoring practice. Introductory discussion explores the conflation of the terms coaching and mentoring and the challenge of bridging the theory-practice gap where "mentoring thus becomes a key factor in supporting the individual apprentices in establishing the connectivity between previous learning and current activity". At a deeper level a challenge to achieving impact is identified where "organisational identities" might prevent the mentor from uncovering the accurate learning needs of the apprentice. This is a pivotal paper in bringing to prominence the critical role of the employer as the key collaborative agent in harnessing the work context as the place and source of apprentices' learning.

The final two papers move the focus to leadership and management and some vital cross sector challenges are present in each. Hughes and Saieva (2019) explore curriculum design, internal infrastructures and support systems and innovations in "Degree apprenticeships – an opportunity for all?". This paper embeds tri-partite thinking and through a case study approach explores the phenomenon of the "accidental (and aspiring) manager" in the delivery of the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship. Key themes in this paper include employer engagement, innovations in on-boarding infrastructure, demystifying "off-the-job learning" (so as to move away from the notion of "out-of-office") and defining support mechanisms as a catalyst for achieving a high-quality apprenticeship experience. The authors structure their discussion around the subject of diversification covering sub-themes of income, the student body, employer recruitment and talent strategy impact. Though less explicit, the variegation of delivery approach is also present in the discourse as they triangulate qualitative statements from apprentices and their employers with secondary data from the Chartered Management Institute to evidence apprentice productivity, economic contribution and retention impacts for the employer. The paper closes with a call for further micro and macro research to unpick and fully inform the debate about added value in higher and degree apprenticeships and for broader sector collaboration.

The final paper is "Developing apprentice leaders through critical reflection". Here Schedlitzki (2019) in her conceptual paper reflects on aspects of degree apprenticeships in leadership and management and offers us a number of fresh thoughts. She explores first the notion of "being an apprentice" and how degree apprenticeships have the potential to establish creative and reflective leadership development practices that impact on businesses for the long-term. Second, the role of and opportunities for the "educator" in degree apprenticeships and, third, the role of the learning portfolio as a critical reflection model. It seems that addressing sustainability in this professional curriculum area has an important role in moving "towards embracing deep, situated learning practices that in themselves

have a transformative effect in the form of lasting reflexive practices". From an editorial perspective, this paper is helpful in summarising an ethos that runs through this special issue as it is Schedlitski's proposition that these apprenticeships:

> […] ask individual learners to straddle across two identities: the accomplished manager in a hierarchical position and the apprentice learner. A key aim then of engaging in critical reflection is to shift this initial conflict of identities by challenging the very notion of the self as an accomplished leader or manager.

And in respect of the role of e-portfolio she suggests that by "[…] using it as a reflexive pedagogical tool rather than a container of information, we open up possibilities for enabling learners to reframe their own development as leaders as a lifelong apprenticeship".

In addition to analysing what is included in the special issue it should also be recognised that higher and degree apprenticeship delivery England wide is taking place within a very challenging context, where it is hard to separate opportunity from risk including the risk of not delivering on the policy objectives. Writing post-conference, Husbands (2018) warned:

> […] the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) is proposing reductions to a number of funding bands for apprenticeships which put delivery at risk before programmes are established. At a minimum, there should be stable funding which recognises degree apprenticeships involve significant costs for universities and employers.

Also, The Higher Education Commission's (2019) report suggests that those already benefitting from high rates of educational participation and employment hot spots are also those in the greatest proximity to degree apprenticeship opportunities while those in areas of least opportunity are not. There is no doubt that the achievements described in this exciting special issue are testament to the pragmatic determination of our work-based learning community, HE's depth of passion for authentic learner growth and a sheer willingness to deal with and make change work for the better. This special issue is dedicated to the many universities, HE providers, practitioners and stakeholders who have responded positively to the UK Government's apprenticeship reforms and are intent on ensuring that the impact on employers and individuals of improvements in the quality of apprenticeships at all levels are highlighted and the widening of opportunity is celebrated. It is our hope that these papers collectively raise a number of important issues which will help frame the research and practice development which constitutes this journal.

We give the final word to Hase and Kenyon (2001). In their exploration of heutagogy as an alternative (complementary?) approach to andragogy, they offer a general perspective on learning that adds momentum to this field of practice:

> The world is no place for the inflexible, the unprepared and the ostrich with its head in the sand, and this applies to organisations as well as individuals. Capable people are more likely to be able to deal effectively with the turbulent environment in which they live by possessing an all-round capacity centred on self-efficacy; knowing how to learn; creativity; the ability to use competencies in novel as well as familiar situations; and working with others.

We might reflect that although intended as a direct message to learners on work-integrated programmes, the above statement may equally apply to the challenges facing our academic community and institutions in further and HE seeking to cut through the ambiguity and be part of the productivity solution.

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