

Transforming the perception of apprenticeships in England: professional careers in the public sector

Public sector resilience and learning in the context of COVID-19

There is some evidence that provision of apprenticeships in England has been significantly affected by the pandemic, for example, the Sutton Trust has indicated that:

As of early April, employers surveyed reported that on average just 39% of apprenticeships were continuing as normal, with 36% having been furloughed and 8% made redundant. 17% of apprentices had their off-the-job learning suspended. (Doherty and Cullinane, 2020)

However, despite this context, providers in England have seen growth in public sector apprenticeships, for example one large provider reported that:

Whereas, as a provider, we traditionally see 10 to 15 per cent of total starts being from the public sector, April has seen this jump to almost 60 percent. (Linford, 2020)

There is also some evidence that higher and degree apprenticeships in the public sector may have been less affected with providers continuing to recruit apprenticeship starts at the height of lockdown (Linford, 2020). If we consider the roles that public sector higher and degree apprenticeships fulfil, it is perhaps unsurprising that planned starts have been relatively unaffected. Think of nursing associates, registered nurses, social workers, police constables as well as public sector managers and senior leaders, all are essential with regards to meeting the challenges of the pandemic and all require higher-level skills.

Providers of higher and degree apprenticeships in England have demonstrated significant resilience to the challenges of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Perhaps particularly in the public sector, apprenticeship has played an important role in the development of the skills required to meet these challenges based on the effective collaborative partnerships between employers and providers. This has been identified as a key aspect of a sustainable apprenticeship system (Lester and Bravenboer, 2020) and this has been fully stress tested throughout the pandemic. There is also emerging evidence (Leek, 2020) that providers of public sector higher and degree apprenticeships have been forced to ensure delivery can be conducted in an online only context, and employers and apprentices are recognising the value and benefit of a more work-integrated approach (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020). For example, the provision of tripartite progress reviews through online applications has removed the requirement to schedule meetings with employers, apprentices and tutors in a single location, enhancing the flexibility of provision.

The resilience and scale of public sector apprenticeships together with their requirement for higher-level skills, aligned with regulated professional standards, provides a major opportunity to transform the perception of apprenticeships in England. However, innovations in practice that have been introduced as a response to the specific constraints of the pandemic must not be lost and must contribute to our collective and ongoing learning. Several of the articles presented within this special issue make specific reference to COVID-19 and it is hoped that this issue contributes to the further development of our understanding and practice as providers of higher and degree apprenticeships continue to meet the continuing challenges faced.

The rise of higher and degree apprenticeships in England

Higher and degree apprenticeships have been a significant and fast-growing aspect of the higher education and the professional skills training landscape in England. While 10 years



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ago apprenticeships did not convey much on English higher education (Longmore, 2020) at the time of this publication over 100 higher education institutions are approved as providers of apprenticeships in England. Their engagement was initially accelerated by the revision of the Specification for Apprenticeship Standards in England which extended apprenticeships to bachelor's and master's degree levels and required higher apprenticeships to include qualifications closer in credit size to the norms in higher education (BIS, 2013), consolidated by the launch of degree apprenticeships in 2015 by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron and incentivised by the apprenticeship levy which followed in 2017. We are pleased to report that apprenticeship, as the UK Government's flagship skills programme, now has those ranked amongst the foremost universities in the world engaged in its delivery (Crawford-Lee and Wall, 2018).

Prior to the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) dominated the use of apprenticeship programmes in England. The levy has encouraged large employers to engage in apprenticeships and prescribed public sector bodies, virtually all of whom are levy payers, have also had to meet a government target to have 2.3% of their employees as apprentices (BIS, 2016). Understandably, there has been a significant shift to the use of apprenticeships in large employers and, in the light of COVID-19, to support the training of individuals to undertake key public sector roles as discussed above.

Higher and degree apprenticeships were intended from the outset to bring the worlds of work and higher education together under policy objectives that respond dually to matters of productivity and social mobility. They are to be considered as an innovative type of programme that adopts a work-integrated approach to development, which when delivered properly contrasts with both the (typically) day-release pattern familiar in England's further education, and the sequential or full-time higher education followed by workplace training model that has dominated graduate and professional entry for decades (Lester and Bravenboer, 2020). Over the past 10 years, higher and degree apprenticeships have also specifically helped challenge the whole notion of the "academic-vocational divide" and represent perhaps the greatest effort to close the gap in British education and skills training since major reforms in 1992 saw the conversion of most polytechnics (tertiary education teaching institutions) into universities (Dadze-Arthur *et al.*, 2020), by giving equal status to the academic and the practical.

Indeed, having apprenticeships at level 4–7 has helped transform their image and demonstrate that apprenticeships are an aspirational programme available at all educational and skill levels and are no longer seen as a good choice only for "other people's children". The development of apprenticeships at levels 2–7 has also provided an opportunity to develop genuine new work-based progression routes to other professions and higher-level occupations, unlike previous apprenticeships, whose participants were often found to tread water educationally and failed to progress in their careers. The emerging apprenticeships progression opportunities within the public sector, such as level 5 nursing associate to level 6 registered nurse or level 4 police community support officer to level 6 police constable are beginning to open doors to professional careers for under-represented groups.

Bravenboer (2019) has recently argued that with the introduction of degree apprenticeships our understanding of the relationship between higher education and the workplace has been disrupted; but in a creative and positive way. The potential to radically change our understanding of the role of higher education providers with employers in delivering the UK Government's flagship skills programme by making the workplace the site of learning, rather than only a site for its application, and learning central to working lives, cannot be underestimated. For example, the rich and highly challenging context for public sector working provides higher-level learning opportunities that are transformational, apprenticeships provide the opportunity to capture and maximise this learning as day-to-day work activities are carried

out. Additionally, higher and degree apprenticeships challenge assumptions about the assumed differences between academic and professional standards, knowledge, skills and behaviours, and on-the-job and off-the-job learning. New thinking has also emerged about the roles and responsibilities of universities and employers in co-developing, delivering and optimising higher and degree apprenticeships (Bravenboer, 2016).

In this regard, we hope the papers have lived up to the ambition and focus of the special issue. This issue is intended to be a showcase: of how the apprenticeship system in England, powered by higher education engagement and employer ambition has, since the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017, delivered innovation and best practice in the delivery of higher and degree apprenticeships in the public sector. It is also intended to be a celebratory edition, as *Higher Education Skills and Work-Based Learning's* (HESWBL) last issue of its 10th anniversary volume published in 2020.

The University Vocational Awards Council (HESWBL's primary sponsor and guest editor's organisation) and Middlesex University (guest editor's institution) would further argue that English apprenticeships are an educational and productivity success story. For higher education providers, higher and degree apprenticeships offer a significant way to engage with employers to meet their skill needs particularly in the context of a new, if not unprecedented, economic reality given the current global health crisis. Furthermore, in the renewal and recovery period post-coronavirus, it is expected that higher education providers will have a key role in determining what role higher and degree apprenticeships will play in determining skills priorities; and no more so than when they are enhancing the delivery of key public sector services (Anderson and Crawford-Lee, 2020).

Higher and degree apprenticeships now account for a growing proportion of all starts and a significantly higher proportion of employer spend on apprenticeships, and it is where the fastest growing areas of provision are forecast to be. Police forces are using the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship to drive innovation in professional practice and to attract officers from diverse groups. The National Health Service (NHS) is now more readily using apprenticeships to train new and existing employees in a key range of occupations, such as registered nurses, midwives, nursing associates, paramedics and physiotherapists, and local authorities are using degree apprenticeships to train and career progress new social workers. The growing scale and significance of public sector higher and degree apprenticeships is stimulating innovation in practice (Lillis, 2018) and encouraging new thinking about some existing policy conceptions that have emerged in the context of meeting the challenges of delivering these apprenticeships. The direction of travel is towards an integrated approach that seeks to more effectively align qualification, professional status and apprenticeship certification (Bravenboer and Lester, 2016) and if realised, could be truly transformative.

So, it is a pleasure for us to introduce you to the contents of this special issue at a time when COVID-19, while first and foremost a global pandemic and public health emergency, has had a profound consequence on the world of work, on talent and skills. It has caused us, amongst many things, to re-examine the status quo and consider the nature of jobs for a post-pandemic future; a future less work-driven and more public spirited perhaps where recovery will inevitably involve a reconsideration of what is valuable in society given coronavirus has put into stark relief the extraordinary contribution of health and social care occupations. If we are to avoid a return to the old normal, then we require new and alternative ideas on how to build prosperity while at the same time acknowledging nursing will remain one of our nation's most prominent skills shortage (but will, post-COVID-19 and post-Brexit, have gained even more prominence) and management skills will persist as the most significant skills gap in the UK economy (BEIS, 2017).

Each of the papers are now outlined. The first of eight papers in this special issue is Lester's (2020) "Creating conditions for sustainable degree apprenticeships in England". This paper is well positioned in that it provides a valuable critique and history of the policy of

apprenticeships at higher levels and adds to the literature review on degree apprenticeships and work-integrated learning (WIL), including in the context of supporting social mobility and workforce diversity in public sector roles. It takes its lead from a study funded by the Edge Foundation (an independent education foundation, dedicated to raising the status of practical and vocational learning in the UK) which sought to find ways to sustain degree apprenticeship policy by exploring the changes to the organisational structures and practices of higher education providers that are required to achieve this and makes a number of important recommendations which should frame future research and practice development for the coming policy period. From the research findings, Lester reports that higher education providers (such as universities) are purposeful, integrated, economic entities that operate to sustain the knowledge, practices and behaviours of professional higher education for the benefit of wider society and communities. It also recognises that the diversity of the higher education sector is a strength that should be celebrated. However, this diversity is predicated on a practice of continuing challenge to drive innovation that reflects and creatively responds to broader societal, economic and cultural change. In this sense, the advent of higher level apprenticeships, and degree apprenticeships particularly, represents a major opportunity for reassessing the provision of higher education in the context of a policy initiative that is, by design, intended to bring economic and societal benefits.

As Lester articulates, “the potential of Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) to support public-sector recruitment, contribute to social mobility and workforce diversity, and provide benefits to economically critical and skills-shortage industries is unequivocal. DAs have already become embedded as a means of entry to nursing, where they are a critical component of the recruitment strategy and are also creating a talent pipeline from assistant-level posts, and policing, where they are attracting a substantially more diverse entry-cohort than conventional recruitment methods”. This paper will have significant implications for everyone concerned with helping the UK economy recover from the coronavirus crisis and supports an earlier critique in this journal ([Crawford-Lee and Moorwood, 2018](#)) of how degree apprenticeships continue to grow and get further established as a mainstream higher education programme.

The second paper, [Garnett \(2020\)](#) “Work-based learning tools to inform the implementation of degree apprenticeships for the public sector in England” explores and updates our understanding and language of the integration of learning and work. By looking again at the use of work-based learning (WBL) concepts and tools, including how WBL frameworks can and do support the design and development of higher level apprenticeships programmes, Garnett at the same time encourages practitioners to take a critical look at how certain well-established approaches may require significant repurposing when delivering apprenticeship training in public service roles. The author acknowledges that “At the time of writing the challenges facing the public sector have been further compounded by a major expansion of the role of the state in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19)” and writes how this makes reflection on practice more important in terms of a key aspect of the WIL process when aligning a higher education programme with the world of work, a pivotal idea critiqued in *HESWBL* by its former editor-in-chief ([Helyer, 2011](#)) that opened up the debate about what it is to be a professional, learning on the job. Indeed, the author writes, “While the experience of WBL at higher education level appears to offer many ready-made tools for the development and delivery of degree apprenticeships, these should not be adopted uncritically. WBL provides tried and tested higher education approaches and building blocks which can be adapted and in the case of the learning review module repurposed to be of particular relevance to degree apprenticeships in general and the public sector in particular. . .”

Next we have an article by [Lillis and Bravenboer \(2020\)](#) which draws on a study of “best practices” in WIL in higher education apprenticeships and how the conception of WIL

deployed reflects different models of entry to a number of public sector professions. The authors, in their paper “Best practice in work-integrated pedagogy for degree apprenticeships in a post-viral future”, also take their lead from other research, a Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund project funded by the former higher education regulator, the Higher Education Funding Council for England to enhance access to public sector professions in London, namely, police constable, registered nurse, social worker and teacher. With the aim of generating a set of “success characteristics” alongside new higher and degree apprenticeship developments, the value of this work is in the identification and potential application of best work-integrated pedagogical practice in apprenticeship programme design and promotion to help encourage public sector confidence. The findings are highly relevant in that they critically explore the on-the-job learning environments to ensure apprentices acquire and not just apply knowledge and skills learnt during the off-the-job teaching and assessment elements delivered by the higher education provider. The paper is clear in its messaging: “Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) integrate work and learning and this means that programmes must be designed to recognise that most of an apprentice’s learning will be derived from their work” while recognising how this might be problematic for some public sector apprenticeships, notwithstanding how the “disruptive consequences” of the global pandemic has tested and challenged the appropriateness of some key aspects of public sector apprenticeship provision, resulting in certain and specific policy changes in England.

In “Police forces as learning organisations: learning through apprenticeships”, [Leek \(2020\)](#) synthesises the collaboration between four universities (the Police Education Consortium) and three England police forces to develop a degree apprenticeship offer that meets the requirement of the Police Education Qualification Framework. The author advocates for a whole institutional approach to work-integrated and practice-based learning to facilitate a reconstituted notion of higher education that recognises the workplace as a source of learning rather than only a site for its application. Against a theoretical framework including Macintyre’s concept of “practices” and developed by the application of Senge’s model to law enforcement, Leek describes how the introduction of the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship, the demands of contemporary policing and the reframing of the police officer role as requiring level 6 (bachelor’s degree) professional attributes, have necessitated the move by police forces to become learning organisations. Leek takes the narrative further and observes that “Part of the journey of transformation has to be an acknowledgement that policing becomes more open to learning culturally” and supports issues raised in the first paper ([Lester, 2020](#)), that work-integrated learning, when it extends beyond the classroom and lecture theatre “...becomes a composite part of the organic learning organisation”.

[Taylor and Flaherty \(2020\)](#) present another fascinating case study from a single higher education provider’s perspective. “Nursing associate apprenticeship – a descriptive case study narrative of impact, innovation and quality improvement” details how one provider has embraced the growth in apprenticeships and is at the forefront of developing an apprenticeship programme for nursing associates, a newly regulated profession in health and social care in the UK. The paper articulates the challenges of scaling up from a pilot phase to delivering to over 300 apprentices working with seven large NHS Trusts and 15 primary and social care employers. Effective partnership working with these employers, the paper argues, is essential and the broad-based nursing associate role requirements support service improvements, which are of value to employers and the public. The apprenticeship is described as a vehicle for social mobility and it is estimated that 50% of nursing associates will progress to the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship. It describes how apprentices have benefitted from pedagogical innovations such as virtual and augmented reality which has provided the opportunity to develop essential skills in a way that are safe but “closely reflects real life”.

The next two papers offer perspectives on how degrees in apprenticeships “professionalise” a job role, helps attract a different talent supply and raises performance standards for public sector senior leaders in business and management roles. Understanding the concept of “productive reflection”, the benefits of reflective practice and experiential learning are also central to both; as is the triadic relationship between apprentice, higher education provider and employer. They make the case for recognising that occupational “competence” can be incorporated into university qualifications and professional recognition, often allowing the two to be awarded together as in the case of the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship which forms the subject of the research paper “Investigating work-integrated learning and its relevance to skills development and reflective practice in degree apprenticeships” by [Konstantinou and Miller \(2020\)](#). They examine apprentices’ perceptions of self-motivated learning, on being reflective and on taking action.

In “The reflective practitioner: the challenges of supporting public sector senior leaders as they engage in reflective practice”, [Rowe et al. \(2020\)](#) contextualise the challenges of a healthcare setting and investigate the role of reflective practice within one of the first Senior Leader Master’s Degree Apprenticeship programme to be launched nationally. The paper highlights the important roles of the personal academic tutor (PAT) and employer in the tripartite review. By exploring the outcomes of the co-designed programme, the authors critically reflect on the ability of innovative WBL pedagogies to enable situated leadership development, underpinned by meaningful and effective reflective practice. One of the interesting insights from this paper is that “Although critical self-reflection can be a challenging undertaking the process can have very powerful and far reaching outcomes. In particular, critical self-reflection provides individuals with a great opportunity to learn from both successes and mistakes. Here, the role of the PAT is of particular relevance in pro-actively supporting development of learners’ cognitive capabilities to reflect on past and present performance by using reflection as a ‘tool for learning’ that informs next steps, a crucial skill for those aspiring to senior positions”. This is particularly relevant when we consider the need for a wider evaluation of the development of apprentices’ reflexive skills within professionally oriented curricula.

Having started out with a focus on broader and contextual perspectives of higher and degree apprenticeships in England against a backdrop of the impact of COVID-19, the final paper explores the relevance and reality of recent higher and degree apprenticeship policy for regulated healthcare professionals and the role of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE). In “Changing the course of IfATE: healthier higher and degree apprenticeships for regulated healthcare professionals” [Lillis and Varetto \(2020\)](#) offer a critical analysis of how and why viable degree apprenticeships for healthcare professionals occupations are controlled by government discourse by examining the historic origins in the constraint and control of adult learning reforms in England since 1997. It questions the complexities and inherent contradictions in determining outcomes in apprenticeship learning and assessment with responsibility and accountability split many ways between government bureaucracies including those responsible for professional standards of competency. Described as “fault lines” in the system for quality assurance, the paper makes positive suggestions to improve the outcome of discourse between those who design and develop apprenticeship standards (employers, higher education providers and professional bodies) and IfATE (that maintains the occupational maps which underpin all technical education in England) to ensure that respective roles are recognised and respected in determining successful degree apprenticeship outcomes.

There is no doubt that the achievements and prospects described in this exciting special issue are testament to the determination and innovation of our community of practitioners and researchers. While the focus for this special issue has been on apprenticeship in England, these papers collectively raise and promote a number of important issues, debates and

achievements which will help frame, inform, influence and impact upon skills and apprenticeship policy and practice internationally. Guest editorial

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