

Guest editorial: The last decade of apprenticeships in HE – breaking the echo chamber for future readiness

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Being able to reflect on a decade of policy reform and practice in apprenticeships in England is a significant milestone. The size of the England apprenticeships market delivered by universities and higher education (HE) providers, of all types and sizes, is unprecedented. There are now those ranked among the foremost universities in the world engaged in their delivery (Crawford-Lee and Wall, 2018; Crawford-Lee, 2020, 2022). Recent Westminster government policy on apprenticeships and skills may well affect the level of university engagement in the near future (Crawford-Lee, 2025a). However, the education and training system in the decade or more since the introduction of degree apprenticeships in 2015 at levels 6 and 7 has led to a unique approach to practice and pedagogy in work-based learning. This includes establishing higher and degree apprenticeships as professional entry and progression routes in many professions “and an ancillary route in others” (Lester, 2025).

The approach to apprenticeships in England is now attracting global interest. The topicality comes from the international comparisons possible on what constitutes “skills-focused HE” vis-à-vis the England system that has for more than a decade encompassed an “all age, all skills level programme” (Crawford-Lee, 2025b) and one that has challenged the unhelpful bifurcation of the education and training landscape. A bifurcation that typically perpetuates age-old notions, beliefs and descriptions of education that pitches academic against vocational and manual against mental skills, and head-smart comparisons to being hand-smart. One that intensifies the artificial vocational and academic divide (Helyer, 2012; Crawford-Lee and Wall, 2018) in both public and policy debates.

To break the echo chamber, one that concerns a residual mindset that fails to recognise how in certain professions the apprenticeship route is a powerful means of progression for those individuals in assistant, or technician-type, roles or who are changing careers, this special issue (SI) gives a historical perspective on ten years of significant policy reform that has transformed university engagement in apprenticeship delivery. Delivery, which, at times, is still strongly associated with young people and lower-level skills in traditional trades and industries rather than an association with creating routes into the registered and skilled professions, for many who typically do not have HE qualifications and may face barriers to progressing in their careers.

This SI acknowledges the importance of apprenticeships as HE practices and makes comparisons with developments in apprenticeship and skills developments in other countries. It also reflects on UK university delivery in specific sectors and occupations. In truth, HE has always had strong vocational elements represented by a long association of training for the professions where, as a minimum, a degree is necessary to practise. However, like apprenticeships, the popular perception of HE has also been misconstrued. Trow (2007) reflects how “The change in the size and character of the publics who have an interest in higher education and exert an influence on higher education policy greatly influences the nature and content of the discussions about higher education; particularly, who takes part in them, and the decisions that flow out of them” and necessarily broadens the range of perspectives significantly.

The originality of this SI comes from recent reflections on higher-level apprenticeships in England and its celebratory standpoint marking the tenth anniversary of the introduction of the concept of degree apprenticeships, a concept that has become the fastest-growing form of work-based and work-integrated learning delivered by HE providers (Crawford-Lee, 2025b). This SI brings forward new perspectives. From employer and apprentice engagement to practice and pedagogy in work-integrated professional development, assessment and quality.



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It also provides a discussion on ideas associated with the role of HE. These ideas explore the impact of policy change and the resulting adaptation and integration in curriculum planning, as well as authentic assessment and transformation in systems outside of England. Identification of “success characteristics” from pedagogical practice and identifiable “signature pedagogies” in apprenticeship delivery (Lillis, 2018) also feature. Learning from this SI comes from lessons in apprenticeships in England for international adoption, adaptation and comparison.

Indeed, having apprenticeships at HE qualification levels has helped with challenging and changing the perception of apprenticeships. Presenting apprenticeships as an aspirational programme available at all educational and skill levels can be said to represent the best of both worlds – a degree qualification and a job with training that is both academic and vocational (Anderson and Crawford-Lee, 2016; Anderson, 2020; Crawford-Lee, 2022). Such an approach helps position apprenticeships as a valued career option for high achievers as well as an accessible way into work by challenging the way that employers typically recruit into the professions (Crawford-Lee, 2022; Lester, 2024).

The launch of degree apprenticeships

While higher apprenticeships at level 4 and above were introduced in England and Wales in 2008, the introduction of degree apprenticeships with the inclusion of a mandatory bachelor’s or master’s degree was launched in England by the then UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, who said:

Equipping people with the skills they need to get on in life and backing businesses to create jobs are key parts of our long-term economic plan. Degree Apprenticeships will give people a great head start, combining a full degree with the real practical skills gained in work and the financial security of a regular pay packet. They will bring the world of business and the world of education closer together and let us build the high-level technical skills needed for the jobs of the future. I want to see many more businesses and universities begin to offer them (DBIS, 2015).

This unique model emerged at a time when many skills researchers and policy “influencers” held negative perceptions about apprenticeships (Wolf, 2011; Brophy *et al.*, 2009; UKCES, 2012). These views sat alongside the variety of misconceptions and beliefs that has created the long-held view of an academic and vocational divide. A divide that is explored in a study by Wall and Perrin (2015) (cited in Crawford-Lee and Wall, 2018) reflecting an established societal belief that a university degree has an intrinsic higher value than an apprenticeship; that “[...] choosing a path other than university is a mark of failure” (Bawden, 2011). Prior to 2015 there emerged a higher-level skills debate that positioned universities as central to UK economic recovery (DBIS, 2009, 2010; Cable, 2010, 2011). It challenged universities to demonstrate and justify their “world-class” status at the same time as the National Strategic Skills Audit (UKCES, 2010a, b) highlighted the need for apprenticeships to support further learning at HE level and create a bridge to the professions. The degree apprenticeship model carried high expectations. The Office for Students (OfS), the main regulator of HE in England, commented:

Degree apprenticeships carry the weight of expectations of multiple stakeholders. They are expected, for instance, to meet economic needs and those of employers; to increase social mobility and diversity in HE; to bridge the gap between different levels of qualifications; to create a new gateway to the professions; and to imbue a vocational route to education with the prestige accorded to more conventional routes (OfS, 2019, online).

The impact of apprenticeships in HE

Notwithstanding an early challenge of balancing HE’s purpose with that of apprenticeships; the introduction of higher-level and degree apprenticeships is described as one of the biggest changes to impact on HE in recent decades. Intended as complete training programmes

designed from the ground up, degree apprenticeships are described as bringing together and integrating theoretical and practical learning (Lillis, 2018; Bravenboer, 2016). Positioning them in this way gives the HE qualification a critical role in apprenticeship delivery as degree apprenticeships effectively adopt teaching, learning and assessment methods that are distinct from those of either classroom teaching or more typical vocational training programmes at lower skill levels. They are less formal, independent, practice- or project-oriented and collaborative (Lester *et al.*, 2016; Lillis, 2018). Such a work-integrated learning (or learning-integrated work) approach is intended to be performative: developing experienced workers' professional practice and effecting workplace change. The latter emphasises transformative aspects of teaching and learning on the job such as "to think and work outside the box" (Rowe *et al.*, 2018) and incorporating work-based pedagogies and increased individual activities such as "action learning, critical reflection, investigation and to what has been termed practice as research" (Lester *et al.*, 2016). Most importantly, degree apprenticeships reposition our understanding of what is implied and required in developing and accrediting higher level occupational and professional competence in and through work (Lester *et al.*, 2016; Rowe *et al.*, 2016) and take our understanding of the concept of apprenticeship beyond the tendency for it to be generalised to any craft or trade.

Reflections on ten years of delivery

This SI explores, additionally, the idea of degree apprenticeships and how they have been constructed within official HE and skills policy discourse. Descriptions of the emergence, role and purpose of degree apprenticeships in England are implicated in the discursive shifts described in nearly all manuscripts and allow the reader to determine which descriptions are operating and have dominance in the field of apprenticeship as a recognisable specialist field of practice.

With the introduction of degree apprenticeships in England came fresh opportunities for universities who had an interest in aligning their provision with apprenticeship development in partnership with employers. It also brought a major chance for universities to collaborate with employers in developing a model that recognises employers as best placed to understand the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to perform job roles alongside HE providers that are best placed to understand the requirements for achieving HE qualifications and with the required expertise in designing work-based assessment. Equally, degree apprenticeships acknowledge that professional bodies are also best placed to understand what constitutes "professional competence" in the relevant area of practice. It is this three-way alignment of employers, HE providers and professional bodies, which gives in apprenticeships the ability to bridge the perceived divide between the professional competence required by employers and academic qualifications. It has been an opportunity to move beyond the traditional separation of work and learning to develop the trust relationships required for effective employer-university collaboration.

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