

## ***HESWBL special issue – higher and degree apprenticeships – Autumn 2016***

The imperative to raise UK productivity and build a fairer society has never been stronger and there is a fundamental role for universities and further education colleges to make significant contributions on both fronts. This government's reform of higher and degree apprenticeships presents a powerful means to meet employers' rising demand for higher level skills and the potential to improve the life chances of learners for whom a traditional degree may not be an option.

For the first time, higher and degree apprenticeships are accepted as a mainstream part of apprenticeship provision. For a prospective student a higher or degree apprenticeship offers a job and salary from day one with fees paid by an employer and government; for an employer, it offers the ability to grow its own talent pipeline, providing a sustainable work-based learning solution to higher level skills needs. The design and delivery of apprenticeship at HE levels provide a non-traditional entry offer, an alternative to non-traditional HE provision and a chance for HE to develop a competitive apprenticeship offer for employers targeting key occupations and sectors.

An analysis of the apprenticeship standards being developed by employers clearly demonstrates that apprenticeships are migrating upwards in terms of education levels and not just in "niche" areas; apprenticeship standards have already been developed in areas of higher education provision such as engineering, manufacturing, digital, construction, accountancy and law. There are also significant prospects for standards in nursing and allied healthcare professional job roles. Universities and further education colleges delivering higher education are responding with a good appetite for this new market. At HEFCE, we received 68 bids in the first round of our Degree Apprenticeships Development Fund and these highlighted a range and scale of ambition in the sector that was beyond our expectations.

Whilst we can see the benefits for our economy and society, and we can say with confidence that our universities and colleges have the vision and the expertise to deliver, there are undoubtedly barriers to overcome. We need employers to engage fully with higher education and to put flesh on their demand for higher level skills and technical and professional occupations. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy in April 2017 is expected to produce a shock to the system, forcing a step change in investment in skills at all levels. The reforms put employers of all sizes in the driving seat, enhancing the standing of employer investment as a significant income stream for higher education. To realise this opportunity, providers will need to adapt to different funding rules, develop new ways of working with employers and funders, and to explore new methods of teaching and learning.

I have every confidence that universities and colleges in our sector will rise to the challenge, will adapt and innovate, and will bring about a growth in high quality higher and degree apprenticeship that can only enhance the brand of apprenticeships. I particularly welcome the ladder of opportunity now extended in apprenticeship provision to support social mobility and increased access to learning at HE levels. Through the reformed apprenticeship system there are possibilities for a progression pathway from craft and trade through technician, managerial, professional and higher level skills learning up to and including masters degrees.

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HEFCE has funded UVAC to support universities and colleges through expert advice in this area, enabling enhanced support for members and extension beyond this, for example to alternative providers. This has already been instrumental in enabling higher education institutions from different parts of the sector and throughout the country to respond to the opportunities. As a result there are now 77 higher education institutions able to access apprenticeship funding through the Skills Funding Agency. This gives us good grounds to believe that our ambition for an expansive apprenticeship offer, with a strong component at higher and degree level, can really be achieved.

**Professor Madeleine Atkins**