Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning

Degree apprenticeships in England (2015–2025): a decade of quality assurance and regulation

Lisa Knight and Emma Hill
Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

Received 18 April 2025
Revised 31 May 2025
Accepted 22 July 2025

Abstract

Purpose – This paper critically examines the evolution of quality assurance (QA) and regulation in degree apprenticeships in England from 2015 to 2025. It explores how regulatory frameworks have developed over the decade, their implications for higher education institutions and how these compare with international approaches to degree-level work-based learning.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs a qualitative documentary analysis of policy documents, regulatory frameworks, inspection reports and stakeholder commentary. It draws on grey literature, government publications and international case studies to trace the development of England's QA landscape and benchmark it against comparable systems globally.

Findings – The English regulatory environment has transitioned from a fragmented oversight system to a more integrated, albeit complex, framework involving multiple agencies. While the coordination between regulatory bodies has improved, providers continue to experience significant compliance burdens. International comparisons highlight alternative approaches to integration and standardisation. The study finds that while institutional governance has matured, persistent challenges remain around inspection consistency, retention and balancing vocational and academic quality.

Originality/value – Findings highlight the cumulative effects of regulatory reform on institutional practice, governance and risk by tracing the evolution of England's degree apprenticeship QA landscape over its first decade. Comparative insights drawn from international systems illuminate how differing regulatory logics shape provision, oversight and employer engagement. The analysis offers a synthesis of the English model's structural tensions, alongside emerging patterns of convergence and divergence in higher-level work-based learning.

Keywords Employer-university collaboration, Policy in higher education, Apprenticeship policy

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Quality education is increasingly recognised as central to addressing global economic challenges such as youth unemployment, underemployment, and the persistent misalignment between workforce skills and evolving labour market demands. Apprenticeships have attracted renewed policy attention for their potential to support access to decent work and enhance national skills capacity. In response to this agenda, the International Labour Organization (ILO) issued its 2023 Quality Apprenticeships Recommendation, providing a framework to guide member states in the development and regulation of inclusive, high-quality apprenticeship systems (International Labour Organization, 2023).

In England, degree apprenticeships were introduced in 2015 as part of a wider strategy to reform skills policy and address gaps in higher-level technical education. Positioned as an "earn-and-learn" alternative to full-time university study, their introduction built on earlier reforms (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012) and was accelerated by the Apprenticeships Levy introduced in 2017, which sought to increase employer investment in training (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015; HM Government, 2017).

This paper examines the evolution of quality assurance (QA) and regulatory oversight in degree apprenticeships in England over the period 2015–2025. It traces how QA frameworks

Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2042-390X
p-ISSN: 2042-3896
DOI 10.1108/HESWBL-04-2025-0150

have developed in response to policy reforms, institutional practice, and shifting regulatory expectations. It explores the roles and interactions of the key regulatory bodies involved and critically assesses how the regulatory system has responded to the dual challenge of integrating vocational and academic quality standards. Comparative analysis of international models is used to illuminate the distinctiveness of the English approach and to identify alternative methods for achieving consistency, accountability, and employer engagement in work-based learning.

The analysis draws on documentary evidence, including policy texts, grey literature, inspection reports, and institutional case studies. It aims to identify key developments in QA practice, assess the implications for higher education institutions (HEIs), and derive insights for the future regulation of hybrid academic-vocational provision. While focused on England, the paper seeks to contribute to a broader conversation on the governance of degree-level apprenticeships globally, particularly in relation to how regulatory logics and institutional cultures mediate QA in work-integrated learning.

Quality assurance frameworks (2015–2025)

From fragmentation to coordination (2015–2020)

At the roll-out of degree apprenticeships in 2015, providers were required to meet Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) standards under the Higher Education (HE) Quality Code as well as skills funding requirements monitored by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2015). Ofsted held a remit for apprenticeship inspection covering levels 2–5, with level 6 and 7 apprenticeships falling in the scope of the Office for Students (OfS) and QAA. In practice, this meant no formal inspections for degree apprenticeships at launch; instead, quality was managed via university QA processes and any external examiners or professional accreditation relevant to the degree component.

The creation of the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) in April 2017 (later renamed Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, IfATE) was intended to put employers at the heart of apprenticeship design, ensure consistent quality in apprenticeship standards, and oversee the QA of end-point assessments (EPA) (IfATE, 2017). However, in practice, a lack of support and guidance for HEIs resulted in curricula being developed predominantly by academic staff with minimal employer input (Quew-Jones, 2023). The regulatory landscape further shifted with the establishment of the OfS in 2018 as the HE regulator in England, replacing Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The OfS became responsible for monitoring quality and standards in higher education (Office for Students, 2018), and from June 2019, this included level 6–7 apprenticeships.

The OfS began developing a method to review degree apprenticeship provision, launching pilot reviews in late 2019 to assess selected provider processes for "ongoing quality management" of apprenticeships (Office for Students, 2022a, b). However, progress was slow, by early 2020 OfS had conducted a handful of pilot reviews and then paused further activity due to the pandemic and other regulatory priorities. In parallel, in February 2020, IfATE launched a consultation to overhaul the QA of EPA (IfATE, 2020). The proposal (strongly supported by HE stakeholders like the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC)) was to centralise QA under the statutory regulators: Ofqual for most apprenticeships and OfS (through the QAA as Designated Quality Body) for integrated degree apprenticeships; representing a move toward a more consistent framework.

Consolidation and cultural challenge (2020–2025)

The period from 2020 to 2025 marked a significant shift in the regulation of degree apprenticeships, both structurally and culturally. In April 2021, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) was formally granted responsibility for inspecting all apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7, addressing the longstanding gap in oversight for higher-level programmes (Augar *et al.*, 2019). Universities and other providers were brought under the remit of Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (EIF), which evaluates the quality of education, leadership and management, and apprentice outcomes (Ofsted, 2021). Although the EIF

criteria remained largely unchanged, following their "Big Listen" consultation in 2023, Ofsted began piloting a revised approach to inspection and reporting, better tailored to apprenticeship provision in HE, with full implementation scheduled for November 2025 (Ofsted, 2023).

This consolidation highlighted persistent tensions between academic and vocational paradigms. HEIs, accustomed to enhancement-led approaches through the QAA, had to adjust to Ofsted's more prescriptive model. These differing epistemic traditions, focused respectively on continuous improvement and compliance with measurable outcomes, posed both operational and cultural challenges. Aligning external inspection requirements with academic assurance processes required institutional navigation of differing regulatory expectations (Clarke *et al.*, 2021). Additional changes included the introduction of updated QA arrangements in June 2022 by IfATE and the QAA (as the Designated Quality Body) for integrated provision (QAA, 2022). The OfS also revised its regulatory conditions, particularly the B conditions relating to quality and student outcomes, by establishing new thresholds for continuation, completion, and graduate progression. These applied across all higher education, including apprenticeships, and were reinforced by the Department for Education's Apprenticeship Accountability Framework (Department for Education, 2021), which set performance expectations around retention and employer feedback.

By 2023, Ofsted inspections of level 6 and 7 apprenticeships were well underway, with the aim of reviewing all providers by 2025 (Ofsted, 2023). Providers were now operating within a multi-agency system, involving Ofsted's evidenced-based judgements, the OfS's outcomes-based oversight, and IfATE's responsibility for standards and technical relevance. While this arrangement provided a more detailed picture of the provision, it also brought significant procedural demands. By the end of the decade, oversight of degree apprenticeships had become more cohesive, though not necessarily less burdensome. Institutions reported both advantages, such as improved alignment of performance data, and challenges, including increased demands on internal capacity and the need to reconcile different regulatory expectations. This shift from dispersed oversight to a more unified approach reflected a broader reconfiguration of how vocational education is positioned within higher education. Providers were required to adapt not only their systems but also their underlying assumptions about the nature of QA (Hodgson *et al.*, 2017).

Ahead of the 2024 General Election, the Labour Party pledged to reform apprenticeships amid criticism of excessive bureaucracy, limited training relevance, and levy underspend (CBI, 2023). Their proposed "Growth and Skills Levy" would allow 50% of levy funds to be used for non-apprenticeship training, though operational details remain unclear (Labour Party, 2024). Labour's agenda also led to the creation of Skills England, replacing both IfATE and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), with regulatory and funding responsibilities consolidated under the Department for Education. Skills England will also devolve planning powers to combined authorities and emphasise employer-led design.

Regulatory bodies and their roles

Ofsted evaluates the quality of the off-the-job training and the overall apprenticeship experience through inspections, using the EIF applied to further education and skills providers. Ofsted's inspections focus on several key aspects: the effectiveness of leadership and management (how well leaders implement and monitor apprenticeship programmes), the quality of education (curriculum design, teaching, training, and assessment practices), apprentice behaviour and attitudes, and outcomes (skills gained, progression). Ofsted gathers evidence from classroom visits, work scrutiny, apprentice/employer feedback, and performance data, then publicly issues judgements, reporting findings to both the provider and other regulators, including the DfE/ESFA and OfS. In summary, Ofsted inspects the apprenticeship training and support, OfS monitors academic standards and outcomes (and oversees EPA quality via the DQB framework), and IfATE (c.f Skills England) reviews and updates apprenticeship standards to maintain relevance and currency of content.

The interplay between the English bodies, Ofsted, OfS, QAA (Designated Quality Body (DQB)), IfATE, and also ESFA (for funding compliance), has been a defining feature of the QA

landscape in degree apprenticeships. Each has a legitimate remit: *Ofsted* for training quality, *OfS* for academic quality and outcomes, *IfATE* for standard setting and EPA quality, *ESFA/DfE* for funding and performance accountability, and *QAA* (as DQB) for assisting in quality checks. However, this led to a complex regulatory landscape with often competing demands placed on providers, with the result that "too much QA spoils the broth" (QAA, 2023, p. 5), given that parts of a degree apprenticeship programme and the provider could be evaluated multiple times by different bodies. While the 2025 changes may simplify this by bringing the ESFA and IfATE under one DfE umbrella, there is still potential for conflict with other bodies.

However, the consequences of regulatory scrutiny are not merely procedural; published inspection outcomes carry reputational weight and may directly influence a provider's ability to recruit apprentices or retain employer partners. A "Requires Improvement" or "Inadequate" grade can trigger funding restrictions, prompt further investigation by other bodies, and deter employer engagement. As a result, Ofsted has faced increasing scrutiny for contributing to excessive workload demands on educators, particularly within HEIs which have historically lacked the infrastructure and inspection experience more commonly found in primary, secondary, and further education settings (Tian and Diamon, 2024; Fitzsimons and Smith, 2024). Similarly, failure to meet OfS conditions on continuation or completion rates may result in regulatory intervention or additional reporting requirements. For providers, especially those new to degree apprenticeships, the high-stakes nature of these ratings can be an incentive for quality improvement, but also a source of strategic risk.

Ofqual regulates apprenticeship awarding organisations offering regulated EPA. This should ensure that EPAs are delivered securely and are fair and valid, meet their stated aims, they support progression, and their standards are maintained over time (Ofqual, 2023). The OfS regulates integrated higher and degree apprenticeships offered by HEIs, i.e. where the EPA forms part of the degree (Office for Students, 2022a, b). Therefore for some apprenticeships part of the provision is regulated by Ofsted and part by either Ofqual or by the OfS, alongside any other Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory Body (PSRB) oversight.

The coexistence of multiple regulatory bodies, each with its own frameworks, data requirements, and audit cycles, has led to significant operational complexity. Internal governance processes must now accommodate regular inspections (Ofsted), academic monitoring (OfS), standards revisions (IfATE/Skills England), funding compliance (ESFA/DfE), and, where applicable, regulated EPA oversight (Ofqual or OfS/QAA). This institutional layering reflects what several commentators describe as a fragmented policy environment, where overlapping mandates and performance metrics generate unintended burdens on providers (*Relly and Laczik*, 2022). These challenges are compounded by the need for providers to navigate distinct regulatory logics, academic, vocational, and occupational, each with its own assumptions, language, and expectations. As Guile and Unwin (2022) argue, vocational expertise must be understood in terms of its context-specific, action-oriented character, highlighting the need for regulatory approaches that reflect the realities of workplace learning. However, efforts have been made to improve coordination – the 2022 External Quality Assurance (EQA) reform reduced one layer of choice; OfS and Ofsted have an MoU to share information; and DfE's accountability framework states that if ESFA takes action on quality, OfS usually will not duplicate that action (Department for Education, 2022).

International quality assurance

International models offer contrasting approaches to the regulation and QA of degree apprenticeships and comparable work-based learning programmes.

Australia

Unlike England, where degree apprenticeship QA has become increasingly centralised through the expansion of Ofsted's remit, Australia's system remains in an early stage of

development, within the context of a fragmented tertiary education system and a historical division between vocational and higher education (Vocational Development Centre, 2019). Historically Australian apprenticeships have been limited to the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, delivered primarily through Technical and Further Education institutions and Registered Training Organisations, with only limited pathways into degree-level study (Vocational Development Centre, 2019). The regulation of apprenticeships at these levels has been managed by the Australian Skills Quality Authority, which oversees compliance with national training packages, while state and territory governments have been responsible for registering apprenticeship contracts and distributing employer incentives (National Centre for vocational education research NCVER, 2019). Higher education, by contrast, has been regulated separately by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, which ensures that universities meet the requirements of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2023).

Australian providers must comply with two separate regulatory systems; the vocational component must be accredited by the Australian Skills Quality Authority, while the degree component must meet the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's requirements, resulting in administrative duplication and increased compliance costs (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2023). This dual regulatory burden has discouraged some universities from offering degree apprenticeships, due to the perceived complexity and resource-intensiveness (National Centre for vocational education research NCVER, 2019).

While in England, degree apprenticeships have been scaled nationally through the Apprenticeship Levy, Australian institutions and employers, in the absence of a dedicated funding mechanism to support employer engagement and institutional participation, must negotiate programme structures on a case-by-case basis (Ai Group, 2023). Therefore, the introduction of degree apprenticeships in Australia has been largely experimental, with universities and industry partners developing pilot models or via temporary, state-funded pilot programmes, in response to employer demand for higher technical skills. However, in the absence of a dedicated regulatory framework or a nationally coordinated funding mechanism (Australia's degree apprenticeships are governed within state-based structures), these initiatives remain constrained in their scalability and standardisation (National Centre for vocational education research NCVER, 2019).

Switzerland

Switzerland's QA and regulatory apprenticeship landscape operates within a tripartite system involving federal authorities, cantonal bodies, and professional organisations. Cantonal VET offices are responsible for visiting workplaces and vocational schools to monitor quality (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2015). The Swiss accreditation and inspection framework is based on the Federal Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act, which mandates national training ordinances for every apprenticeship occupation. These ordinances, developed by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation in consultation with industry bodies, define learning objectives, skill acquisition, and assessment requirements (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2015). Moreover, rather than separate accreditation for vocational and academic elements, Switzerland integrates both into unified occupational profiles.

The Swiss Confederation supports this system by funding research and innovation in vocational education, but direct regulatory intervention is rare, as Swiss apprenticeships are largely self-regulating (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2016). Approximately 60% of the costs of apprenticeship training are covered by employers, who voluntarily invest in training (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2015). Where employer participation is lower, sector-specific training funds are introduced, requiring all firms within a given industry to contribute to apprenticeship training (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2022).

Switzerland's apprenticeship outcomes remain among the strongest in Europe. Youth unemployment consistently remains below four percent, largely attributed to the smooth transition from apprenticeships to employment (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2016). Over 90% of apprentices successfully complete their training, and many progress to higher vocational qualifications (Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2017).

Germany

The German system of apprenticeships and vocational education is widely regarded as one of the strongest in the world for training skilled professionals (Kotthoff, 2011). As a result many countries have explored exporting the system in whole or in part, though few have done so successfully as it has been shaped by "prevailing legal norms, traditions, pedagogical principles and institutional structures" (Euler, 2013); apprenticeships are strongly linked to occupational identity and supported by employers, trade unions and the public, contributing to their perceived quality and status (Deissinger and Gonon, 2021).

As in England, German apprenticeships combine work-based training (approximately 70%) with vocational school education (around 30%) over a duration of 2.5–3 years (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training [BIBB], 2022). Training providers and employers work in partnership, and the curriculum is designed to ensure that apprentices develop occupational competence. Training is aligned to recognised standards and assessment requirements set out in legislation (Dessinger, 2022). The 2005 Vocational Training Act and the more recent Vocational Training and Education Act (2022) set out the legal framework for the in-company element of training. These Acts define standards for around 300 recognised occupations, including curricula, assessment protocols, and the rights and responsibilities of apprentices and employers. They also specify the qualifications and conditions required of trainers and training centres. In this respect, the Acts perform a similar role to IfATE and Ofqual in England.

Responsibility for monitoring training quality is devolved to approximately 80 "competent bodies", most of which are chambers of commerce and industry (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2021). These bodies inspect provision to check that training is aligned to the curriculum, delivered in appropriate conditions, and that the employer and training personnel meet the regulatory requirements. Inspections also review the support offered to apprentices and whether recommendations from previous visits have been addressed (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2021). The system is decentralised but operates within a national legal and QA framework. The law requires each chamber to establish a VET Committee comprising six employer representatives, six employee representatives, and six vocational school teachers (the latter with advisory status only). The committee's remit is to support continuous improvement of provision and advise on changes to standards, content and delivery. In some ways, this is comparable to the IfATE trailblazer groups in England, but it is more prescriptive in structure and more clearly embedded in legislation. The exclusion of school representatives from voting emphasises the central role of employers in shaping provision.

Germany consistently reports low youth unemployment in part due to the strong transition into work supported by the apprenticeship model. However, the system is not without its challenges. Skills shortages persist in several sectors, and there are concerns about the number of training places available, particularly for smaller firms and in some regions. The requirements to become an approved training provider, including having appropriately qualified staff and facilities, can be a barrier to entry for small or micro-enterprises. While apprenticeships continue to enjoy high levels of esteem, their comparability with higher education remains a point of debate. Nevertheless, a large proportion of apprentices remain with their employer after completion, suggesting that the system is effective in supporting

long-term employment (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [CEDEFOP], 2019).

In 2024, the BMBF highlighted three quality-related concerns (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2021). First, contract termination rates have increased, indicating that some apprenticeships may not be meeting expectations. Early relationships between the employer and apprentice are seen as key to retention. Second, there is a recognised need to simplify and speed up administrative processes. Third, some critics argue that training curricula are too focused on standardisation and may not keep pace with changes in employer demand (Peters, 2021).

Global South

Several Global South countries have developed or are piloting degree-level work-based learning programmes, although few have formalised frameworks equivalent to England's degree apprenticeships. In general, these systems rely on integration within existing higher education or vocational regulatory frameworks, with less institutional layering and fewer dedicated regulatory bodies.

Singapore's expansion of Work-Study Degree Programmes reflects a national strategy to blend academic and vocational learning (Skills Future Singapore, 2021). These programmes are developed and delivered collaboratively by public universities and industry partners, overseen by SSG, a statutory board under the Ministry of Education. QA is integrated within institutional governance and the Ministry of Education's regulatory functions, with no separate inspectorate akin to Ofsted. Employers contribute to curriculum co-design and provide structured training placements, but their role is brokered and coordinated centrally by the state, reflecting a centralised, state-mediated form of employer engagement (Skills Future Singapore, 2021).

India has recently introduced Apprenticeship-Embedded Degree Programmes as part of its broader reforms to vocational and higher education (All India Council for Technical Education, 2021). These initiatives are supported by the Ministry of Education, the AICTE, and the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, alongside the National Skill Development Corporation. Regulatory guidance is provided centrally, while universities are expected to integrate apprenticeships into degree curricula, particularly in technical disciplines. QA remains institutionally led, under the oversight of existing accreditation bodies (e.g. AICTE). Although the integration of on-the-job training into credit-bearing programmes mirrors the English model, India's employer engagement is less formalised and often hampered by low industry uptake and limited cross-sector coordination (Gayithri *et al.*, 2019).

Work-Integrated Learning is embedded within many professionally oriented degrees in South Africa, particularly in universities of technology. Compared to England, South Africa's system lacks a distinct degree apprenticeship framework but achieves similar aims through parallel structures. Regulatory oversight is shared between the Department of Higher Education and Training and the Council on Higher Education, which monitors academic quality through programme accreditation. Parallel to this, Sector Education and Training Authorities coordinate workplace-based learning in the form of learnerships, often outside of the university system. While Work-Integrated Learning within degrees is quality assured through academic mechanisms, learnerships involve employer participation in curriculum delivery and assessment, guided by occupational standards.

China has offered a "Modern Apprenticeship" model in higher vocational institutions since 2014, supported by the Ministry of Education and local governments (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018). These programmes aim to integrate formal study with enterprise-based training, often in partnership with local industry associations. Regulatory oversight is centralised, with pilot institutions required to align delivery with national skill standards and assessment frameworks. Unlike England, China's model is experimental,

policy-driven, and closely linked to state-directed skills planning. QA is primarily internal, supplemented by periodic government reviews rather than external inspection (UNESCO, 2022).

Evaluating quality assurance mechanisms

Over the course of the past decade, HEIs have made considerable progress in embedding degree apprenticeships within institutional structures, supported by the development of dedicated governance mechanisms such as apprenticeship steering groups and formal oversight committees (QAA, 2023). These arrangements have allowed providers to monitor learner progress more effectively, aligning apprenticeship provision with internal QA cycles. Moreover, the regulatory emphasis on "substantial new skills" and "apprentice progress", particularly under Ofsted's EIF, has prompted more proactive engagement with apprentice tracking, support, and curriculum alignment (Ofsted, 2021). At the same time, there is growing recognition that these governance adaptations are shaped by institutional capacity, senior leadership engagement, and the degree to which apprenticeship provision is positioned as central or peripheral within strategic planning (Bathmaker, 2017).

A notable strength of the current QA system is the formal recognition of employers as central partners in the QA process. Employer input is required in the development of apprenticeship standards, delivery of work-based training, and evaluation of apprentice competence. This has contributed to stronger alignment between provision and workforce needs (IfATE, 2022). In addition, the involvement of regulatory bodies such as Ofqual and the OfS in overseeing EPA (EPAs) has introduced greater standardisation and rigour, fostering confidence among employers that final assessments are fair, consistent, and independent (Ofqual, 2023; OfS, 2023).

However, the integration of apprenticeship QA within institutional systems remains uneven. Some HEIs continue to treat degree apprenticeships as adjuncts to mainstream provision, resulting in fragmented QA oversight and inconsistent use of apprenticeship data in broader monitoring and review processes (UVAC, 2022). External reviews, including Ofsted inspections, have identified variability in how well providers align off-the-job training, workplace mentoring, and academic learning, as well as in the consistency and quality of tripartite reviews (Ofsted, 2022).

The complexity of the regulatory landscape itself presents a persistent weakness. While the distinct responsibilities of Ofsted, OfS, IfATE, ESFA, and others are clear, their overlapping remits and differing assurance methodologies result in duplicated reporting, multiple audit cycles, and increased administrative load (House of Commons Library, 2024). These burdens raise concerns about the proportionality of QA requirements and the risk that complex compliance regimes might discourage provider participation. In particular, newer or smaller providers may be deterred from entering or growing their apprenticeship offer due to the intensity of regulatory scrutiny (QAA, 2023). As *Relly and Laczik* (2022) observe, this situation reflects a wider tension in apprenticeship policy: the need to broaden access while maintaining robust oversight within a tightly regulated environment.

Furthermore, the high-stakes nature of inspection and regulatory judgements, such as Ofsted's published grades and the OfS's student outcome thresholds, introduces reputational and financial risks that can have significant institutional consequences. A 'Requires Improvement' rating can limit recruitment opportunities and deter employer collaboration, while falling below OfS benchmarks may result in intervention or enhanced monitoring. These pressures can incentivise short-term compliance behaviours at the expense of sustained quality enhancement (OfS, 2022). These developments should also be understood in light of the broader policy context in English higher education, which has seen intensified performance metrics, datafication, and market-driven reforms since the establishment of the OfS (McCaig, 2022). Degree apprenticeship QA reflects this environment, with an emphasis on outcomes-based regulation (e.g. continuation, completion, employment metrics) that aligns with national goals for productivity and value-for-money.

Despite the increased oversight, apprenticeship completion rates remain a systemic concern. The 2022/23 national qualification achievement rates (QAR) for standards with a standard learning aim was 56.3%, with HEI provider rates averaging 61.3% (DfE, 2024). These figures highlight ongoing challenges related to apprentice retention and progression, particularly given the dual pressures apprentices face as both learners and employees. Some providers have reportedly withdrawn from the apprenticeship market, citing the cumulative demands of QA and inspection regimes, although the evidence base on provider exit remains limited (UVAC, 2022).

Implications for enhancing practice

Several key lessons have emerged from the implementation and regulation of degree apprenticeships in England. First, greater coherence between training and academic oversight has proved beneficial. The phased movement toward a more streamlined system, particularly the consolidation of training inspection under Ofsted and academic standards under the OfS, has reduced ambiguity in regulatory expectations and allowed providers to align internal QA processes more effectively. The capacity of providers to realign QA processes with shifting regulatory expectations has varied significantly, influenced by institutional histories, resource allocation, and the strategic status of apprenticeship provision within each HEI (UVAC, 2022). The creation of Skills England and integration of regulatory bodies should further streamline the process for all actors.

Second, the centrality of employer engagement has been consistently reinforced as a hallmark of high-quality provision (Bravenboer, 2016; Quew-Jones, 2023). Programmes that involve employers throughout the design, delivery, and review cycle tend to demonstrate stronger relevance, enhanced learner support, and greater alignment with occupational outcomes. The integration of employer feedback into quality monitoring has helped ensure curricula remain responsive to labour market needs. As Skills England's role evolves, clear mechanisms for supporting and assessing employer engagement must be maintained and strengthened, potentially requiring further guidance for HEIs from sector bodies such as UVAC, Advance HE, and The Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP).

Third, the unique demands of work-based learning have required providers to move beyond traditional higher education QA methods. Real-time monitoring of apprentice progress, structured tripartite reviews, and mechanisms for evidencing workplace learning have become essential features of effective provision. Institutions that have embedded these practices report improved retention, better learner outcomes, and enhanced employer satisfaction. Sharing of best practices from Ofsted reports and via apprenticeship forums specifically for HEIs could enhance this.

Fourth, regulatory transparency and consistency in quality expectations have enabled the system to mature, but not without cost. The administrative and compliance burden, particularly where regulatory remits overlap, has at times impeded innovation and created disincentives for smaller or less experienced providers. While many institutions have responded by investing in new governance structures and operational capacity, others have opted not to enter or to exit the apprenticeship market altogether.

Finally, QA mechanisms have contributed to a gradual convergence in standards across providers. Published inspection reports, data-driven outcome thresholds, and the standardisation of EPA have exerted upward pressure on quality. At the same time, systemic challenges, such as variable completion rates and inconsistent integration of apprenticeship provision within university strategies, persist. Taken together, these lessons reflect the complexities of embedding a hybrid academic-vocational model within a fragmented but maturing regulatory system, one that requires continued alignment between policy ambition, institutional capacity, and employer participation.

Conclusion

From their inception as a policy response to perceived skills gaps, degree apprenticeships have matured into a structured and accountable mode of higher education provision. This maturation has been facilitated by the gradual consolidation of oversight mechanisms, particularly through the roles of Ofsted, the OfS, and Skills England which together now constitute a more coherent, though not yet fully streamlined, QA architecture. Providers have responded to this environment by developing more sophisticated governance infrastructures, embedding employer partnerships, and aligning apprenticeship delivery with internal quality processes. These institutional adaptations have strengthened the integrity of provision and enhanced the learner experience. Nevertheless, the coexistence of multiple regulatory bodies, varied data requirements, and high-stakes inspection regimes has introduced operational complexity that continues to present risks, particularly for smaller providers.

International comparisons highlight both the progress and the limitations of the English model. While systems such as Germany and Switzerland demonstrate the benefits of integrated, socially embedded apprenticeship frameworks, others such as Australia, India, and Singapore reveal the challenges of navigating dual regulatory pathways or emerging models. England's emphasis on accountability, standardisation, and employer engagement reflect a commitment to high-quality provision but also reveal the tensions inherent in managing both academic and vocational logics within a single framework.

Despite greater coherence in oversight, persistent challenges remain. Variability in completion rates, uneven integration across institutions, and overlapping regulatory demands continue to place pressure on providers and may inhibit innovation. These developments reflect deeper tensions between vocational and academic logics within higher education, shaped by competing regulatory priorities and cultures of assurance. Looking ahead, future reform would benefit from prioritising simplification and proportionality while creating the conditions for dialogue and adaptability. Sustained collaboration between regulators, providers, and employers will be essential to ensuring that degree apprenticeships continue to evolve as a credible, inclusive, and high-quality pathway into and through higher education.

References

AICTE (All India Council for Technical Education) (2021), *National Education Policy Implementation Plan: Embedding Apprenticeships in Undergraduate Programmes*, AICTE, New Delhi.

Ai Group (2023), *Degree Apprenticeships: Creating the Right Environment in Australia*, Australian Industry Group, available at: https://www.aigroup.com.au/globalassets/news/policy-papers/2023/degree_apprenticeships_thought_starter_august_2023.pdf

Augar, P., Bank, J., Bell, J., Bosworth, D., Broadbent, J., Emmerson, C. and Mayhew, K. (2019), *Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, Department for Education, London.

Bathmaker, A.-M. (2017), "Post-secondary education and training, new vocational and hybrid pathways and questions of equity, inequality and social mobility: introduction to the special issue", *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, Vol. 69 No. 1, pp. 1-9, doi: 10.1080/13636820.2017.1304680.

BIBB (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training) (2022), *Apprenticeship Training in SMEs: Challenges and Policy Options*, BIBB, Bonn.

Bravenboer, D. (2016), "Why co-design and delivery is 'a no brainer' for higher and degree apprenticeship policy", *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, Vol. 6 No. 4, pp. 384-400, doi: 10.1108/HESWBL-06-2016-0038.

CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) (2019), *Germany: Retention of Apprentices in SMEs*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Clarke, L., Westerhuis, A. and Winch, C. (2021), "Comparative VET European research since the 1980s: accommodating changes in VET systems and labour markets", *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, Vol. 73 No. 1, pp. 21-22.

Confederation of British Industry (2023), "Apprenticeships are good, the Apprenticeship Levy needs to work better", available at: https://www.cbi.org.uk/articles/apprenticeships-are-good-the-apprenticeship-levy-needs-to-work-better/

Deissinger, T. and Gonon, P. (2021), "The development and cultural foundations of dual apprenticeships – a comparison of Germany and Switzerland", *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, Vol. 73 No. 2, pp. 197-216.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2012), *The Richard Review of Apprenticeships*, BIS, London.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2015), *English Apprenticeships: Our 2020 Vision*, BIS, London.

Department for Education (2021), *Apprenticeship Accountability Statement*, DfE, London.

Department for Education (2022), *Accountability Framework for Degree Apprenticeships*, DfE, London.

Dessinger, T. (2022), The standing of dual apprenticeships in Germany: institutional stability and current challenges, in Billett, S., Stalder, B., Aarkrog, E., Choy, S., Hodge, S. and Le, A-H. (Eds), *The Standing of Vocational Education and the Occupations It Serves: Current Concerns and Strategies for Enhancing That Standing*, Springer, Cham, pp. 83-101.

DfE (2024), *Apprenticeship Achievement Rate Sector Update 2024*, Department for Education, London.

Education and Skills Funding Agency (2015), *Funding Rules for Apprenticeship Providers: Higher Education Institutions*, ESFA, London.

Euler, D. (2013), "Germany's dual vocational training system: a model for other countries?" *Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung*, available at: https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/GP_Germanys_dual_vocational_training_system.pdf

Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (2015), *Country Report Switzerland: Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act*, Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, Bonn.

Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) (2021), *Report on Vocational Education and Training in Germany*, BMBF, Berlin.

Fitzsimons, S. and Smith, D. (2024), "Ofsted inspections affect not just teachers but also the people who train them", *The Conversation*, available at: https://theconversation.com/ofsted-inspections-affect-not-just-teachers-but-also-the-people-who-train-them-249084

Gayithri, K., Tantri, M.L. and Rajasekhar, D. (2019), "A critical review of apprenticeship policy of India", Working Paper No. 440, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.

Guile, D. and Unwin, L. (2022), "Expertise as a 'capacity for action': reframing vocational knowledge from the perspective of work", *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, Vol. 74 No. 1, pp. 31-49, doi: 10.1080/13636820.2020.1858939.

HM Government (2017), "Apprenticeship levy: how it will work", available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-levy-how-it-will-work

Hodgson, A., Spours, K. and Smith, D. (2017), "Future apprenticeships in England: the role of mediation in the new model", *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 30 No. 6, pp. 653-668, doi: 10.1080/13639080.2017.1349299.

House of Commons Library (2024), *Degree Apprenticeships: Regulatory Roles of DfE/ESFA, IfATE, Ofsted, and OfS*, UK Parliament, London.

IfATE (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education) (2017), *Driving the Quality of Apprenticeships in England*, IfATE, London.

IfATE (2020), *External Quality Assurance (EQA) Reform Consultation Document*, IfATE, London.

IfATE (2022), *Quality Strategy: Supporting High-Quality Apprenticeships*, IfATE, London.

International Labour Organization (2023), R208 – *Quality Apprenticeships Recommendation, 2023*, International Labour Organization, available at: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:4347381 (accessed 18 August 2025).

Kotthoff, H.-G. (2011), "Between excellence and equity: the case of the German education system", *Revista Española de Educación Comparada*, Vol. 18, pp. 28-60.

Labour Party (2024), "Break down barriers to opportunity", available at: https://labour.org.uk/change/break-down-barriers-to-opportunity/ (accessed 31 May 2025).

McCaig, C. (2022), "The marketisation of English higher education: a policy analysis of a risk-based system", *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 46-64.

Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2018), *Modern Apprenticeship Pilot Implementation Plan (Phase II)*, Ministry of Education, Beijing.

National Center on Education and the Economy (2015), *Gold Standard: Swiss Vocational Education and Training*, NCEE, Washington, DC.

National Centre for vocational education research (NCVER) (2019), "Higher Apprenticeships in Australia", *NCVER*.

Office for Students (2018), *Regulatory Framework for Higher Education in England*, OfS, London.

Office for Students (2022a), *Degree Apprenticeships: A Guide for Higher Education Providers*, OfS, London.

Office for Students (2022b), *Degree Apprenticeships Thematic Review*, OfS, London.

Ofqual (2023), *Annual Report And Accounts 2022-23*, Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, London.

OfS (2022), *Consultation on Quality and Standards: B Conditions*, Office for Students, London.

OfS (2023), *Degree Apprenticeships and the Regulatory Framework*, Office for Students, London.

Ofsted (2021), *Education Inspection Framework (EIF)*, Office for Standards in Education, London.

Ofsted (2022), *Apprenticeship Providers: Thematic Review Findings*, Office for Standards in Education, London.

Ofsted (2023), *Further Education and Skills Inspection Handbook: September 2023*, Office for Standards in Education, London.

Peters, S. (2021), "Market conditions of international VET providers: a comparative analysis of Australia, UK, USA, and Germany", *Empirical Research in Vocational Education and Training*, Vol. 13 No. 23, doi: 10.1186/s40461-021-00128-w.

QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) (2022), *Delivering on the Ambition of Quality Degree Apprenticeships in England*, QAA, Gloucester.

QAA (2023), *Degrees of Difference: Delivering on the Ambition of Quality Degree Apprenticeships in England*, QAA, London.

Quew-Jones, R.J. (2023), "Degree apprenticeships in the UK higher education institutions – are they viable?: integrative literature review", *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, Vol. 13 No. 6, pp. 1250-1268, doi: 10.1108/heswbl-02-2023-0026.

Relly, S.J. and Laczik, A. (2022), "Apprenticeship, employer engagement and vocational formation: a process of collaboration", *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 1-15, doi: 10.1080/13639080.2021.1983524.

SkillsFuture Singapore (2021), *Overview of Work-Study Degree Programmes*, SSG, Singapore.

State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (2016), *Vocational and Professional Education and Training in Switzerland – Facts and Figures*, SERI, Bern.

Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (2017), *Federal Ordinance on Professional Education*, EDK, Bern.

TEQSA (2023), *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)*, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, Canberra.

Tian, M. and Diamond, C. (2024), "OfSTED from within: inspectors' views on challenges and future direction", *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, Vol. 0 No. 0, 17411432241292284, doi: 10.1177/17411432241292284.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2022), *Global Review of Training Funds: Employer Contributions in Apprenticeship Systems*, UNESCO, Paris.

University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) (2022), *Policy Commentary: HE Provider Engagement with Degree Apprenticeship Quality Processes*, UVAC, Manchester.

VDC (2019), *Higher Apprenticeships: A Policy Review and Industry Consultation*, Vocational Development Centre, Melbourne.

Corresponding author
Lisa Knight can be contacted at: l.knight@ljmu.ac.uk