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Degree apprenticeships: are qualifications the linchpin of success?

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Introduction

Degree apprenticeships are a radical and innovative addition to the more traditional apprenticeship offering.

Universities have been able to leverage their enormous experience in teaching and research to higher-level vocational learning. The benefits go beyond underrepresented individuals being able to work and learn without incurring enormous debt. In many ways, degree apprenticeships have created significant shifts in pedagogy, and potentially open up conventionally elite subjects to a much wider cross-section of society.

Yet universities are facing significant challenges when it comes to degree apprenticeships, as they have increasingly come under pressure from press and policymakers alike.

Inevitably, ongoing debate over standards like Senior Leader, to name one, have prompted some fear that government will seek to de-mandate more degrees from higher-level apprenticeship as it questions both the cost and value of the degree to skills training. Indeed, the consultation outcome appears to suggest a shift in direction change of emphasis from IfATE. We will look at this policy change in section two.

In this white paper, we look at the history and rationale of the mandated qualification in degree apprenticeships, the competing pressure on them with regard to integration (both in terms of integration of the qualification and the end point assessment/EPA), and the three reasons why mandated qualifications matter: productivity, transferrable skills and occupational mobility. As we examine these core rationales, we will also consider instances where degrees may not need to be mandated, such as when higher-level professions do not require a degree to access them.

1 The degree apprenticeship dilemma

Degree apprenticeships have been seen by some in the skills sector, most notably the trade publication FE Week and some organisations that we will reference in this section, as the most controversial arm of the government's flagship apprenticeships programme. Why? Because according to these voices, after the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in 2017, large employers chose to use their payments for their existing workforce and for older age groups, as was permitted by the apprenticeships programme.

Some degree apprenticeships – albeit a minority of higher apprenticeships – are studied by those who already have degrees, a population already favoured in employer training programmes. For example, a report by the Learning and Work Institute[1] this year said that graduates accessed more employer-sponsored training than those with lower skills. The report said that: "*An extra 1.2 million people would receive training each year if people with low qualifications were as likely to participate in training as those qualified to degree level.*" These inequalities in access to training worsened during the pandemic, but are also underpinned by inequalities in government investment.

One of these, the report argues, is the apprenticeship and levy system, which has "*led to a fall in the number of apprenticeships, as well as a skewing of opportunities away from young people and lower levels of learning.*"

Why the concern about apprenticeship reform and the levy? Mainly because overall apprenticeship starts have fallen, and level 2 and 3 apprenticeships have been dwindling in new starts compared to higher-level

[1] https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/learning-at-work-employer-investment-in-skills/

apprenticeships (see section 4iii for figures). For many commentators, resetting the balance in favour of lower-level apprenticeships is a key plank of social justice, making apprenticeships what some feel they should be – an alternative to traditional academics. This perspective has been particularly pursued by influential trade media outlets such as FE Week.

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It should be noted, however, that apprenticeships policy identifies two core purposes: productivity and social mobility. Standards, themselves a fluid combination of academic and vocational learning, are designed to encourage entry-level as well as higher-level skills training. Further, standards were about driving up quality, from a position where some apprenticeships were not delivering on this metric. Inevitably there might be some fallout from this process. Nevertheless, policy energy should always be towards encouraging starts to go up, not down.

In the wider educational policy scene, such debates aligned in the Augar Review[2], which broadly advocated resetting policy towards the forgotten 50% who don't go to university by enhancing FE and training provision. Ministers have amplified fears of a 'middle-class grab'[3] on training, particularly when it comes to degree apprenticeships.

The pandemic and shrinking EU immigration with Brexit has also impacted many low- and medium-skilled industries and jobs (for example, hospitality), meaning that reactive policy efforts began to focus on those sectors. These combined forces have all fed into a cultural drift towards the idea that we need more of the workforce in lower-skilled jobs, culminating in Conservative MP Andrew Bridgen's Daily Express article[4] which argued that Tony Blair's drive to send 50% of young people to university is to blame for the current HGV driver shortage.

The reality is that the sector is engaged in another either/or debate, fighting itself over limited resources. According to most research[5], we need highly skilled jobs that require degrees, masters and PhDs, intermediate technical training (level 4), entry pathways for younger people (level 3),

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independent-panel-report

[3] https://feweek.co.uk/2021/05/18/keegan-dfe-still-worried-about-middle-class-grab-on-apprenticeships/

[4] https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1470465/HGV-driver-shortage-Tony-Blair-university-andrew-bridgen

[5] https://www2.aptem.co.uk/l/700593/m-uk-skills-deficit-whitepaper/4vt7p2

and efforts made to reach the unskilled by providing level 2 qualifications, apprenticeships and enhancements to adult education. It should be possible for learners to progress from level 2/3 to higher levels, embodied in the idea of lifelong learning, rather than setting up an either/or scenario.

However, these long-term trends do not prevent the occasional noisy political intervention that has a real impact on provision, most notably the removal of the mandated master's degree from the Senior Leader apprenticeship standard, accompanied by a £4,000 cut in the maximum funding band. All representatives we spoke to said this decision was a direct intervention from the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, to review the standard so as to align it with current policy. We will discuss the Senior Leader standard in more detail in section four.

The purpose of this white paper is to look at the idea of mandated qualifications as it applies to level 6 and 7 apprenticeship standards. In particular, it will explore:

- **The history of degree apprenticeships and changes to the mandated qualification policy over time.**
- **Why mandating a degree in level 6 and 7 qualifications matters, looking at three core issues of productivity, labour market change, and social mobility and social justice.**

Throughout, we will use examples of particular standards and how we might view the relationship between the apprenticeships and qualification in those instances.

2 The history of degree apprenticeships and mandated qualifications

Degree apprenticeships were announced by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition in 2015 and led by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), led at the time by Liberal Democrat Vince Cable who had been Business Secretary since 2010. During this time, the Department had produced many ground-breaking reports[6] on the state of the nation's skills, where the potential for degrees to deliver on the higher-level skills the UK evidently needed (see our white paper) had been evidenced.

Prime Minister David Cameron announced the policy as follows:

"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."

[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-skills-and-productivity-in-an-international-context

More than a soundbite, the statement was a recognition of the need for higher-level skills for the fourth industrial revolution and the UK's leading edge in services and healthcare. It also recognised the centrality of universities in delivering them. As Mandy Crawford-Lee of the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) argues, degree apprenticeships were "*helping challenge the whole notion of the 'academic-vocational divide' and represent perhaps the greatest effort to close the gap in British education and training since the major reforms in 1992 saw the conversion of most polytechnics into universities*" (2020).
This perspective was confirmed by Vince Cable, BIS Secretary from 2010 to 2015, who in an email reply for the purposes of this white paper, discussed the evolution of degree apprenticeships thus:

"*Part of the genesis of degree apprenticeships was the university and college sectors marketing degrees as the equivalent of Level 4+ qualifications. When I was the political head of BIS, I seized on the idea as a way of boosting the value of apprenticeships to persuade ambitious and capable young people (and their parents) that apprenticeships were not an alternative to university but another way of progressing to degree qualifications, and a way of being paid to learn rather than paying to learn.*

"*The biggest barrier to expanding higher apprenticeships (above Level 3), in my view, is academic snobbery; the more we can integrate apprenticeships with the qualifications of academic institutions the more their attractions will prevail.*"

In other words, evolving the higher-level apprenticeships with university-accredited qualifications could usefully erode the class-based divide between academic and skills pathways. So, what happens when that logic is dismantled, as is the case with the Senior Leader apprenticeship standard?

Standards are required to specify as to whether they include a qualification, and the criteria around which qualifications are mandated in this way have changed over time. When degree apprenticeships were initially launched in 2015, they were exempted from compliance from policy on mandated qualification. When the Institute for Apprenticeships was set up (later becoming the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) in 2017, it heralded a review of mandated qualifications, prompted by the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, Anne Milton, from 2018. Now, like any other standard, a degree (like other apprenticeship standards) could only be mandated if employers could show it was a necessary part of becoming competent and recognised in that profession or a pre-existing labour market requirement.

Why the change? According to the IfATE, there was perceived to be a risk of upgrading occupations, so that for those that currently didn't need a degree, it would become an industry norm. They did not refer to any cost implications for that; rather, the concern related to quality.

"Evolving the higher-level apprenticeships with university-accredited qualifications could usefully erode the class-based divide between academic and skills pathways."

IfATE reservations about including a degree as part of higher apprenticeship standards arose from feedback from apprentices about a disconnect between their on- and off-the-job training and the need to introduce a standardisation of good practice across the sector for integration, so that degrees are not simply hooked onto on-the-job training without significant revisions of programme content. We do need to note, however, that many universities were already implementing work-integrated learning, a project that includes degree apprenticeships. And in many ways, if we look at degrees such as law, universities have been delivering occupational training for centuries.

However, over time, the IfATE found that while certain professions did not need a discipline-specific degree, they did need graduate status. By doing the apprenticeship without a degree, the apprentice would not be able to access the profession.

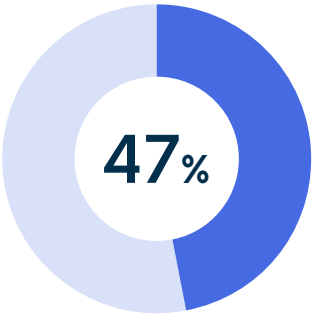
So, the Institute wanted to make a change to introduce more flexibility, which fed into a broader review about quality in degree apprenticeships and the integrated end point assessment or EPA.

The latter issue arose from the demotivating aspect of apprentices having to complete two final assessments – the degree itself and the apprenticeship EPA. Why not simply integrate them? Currently, only 47% of all degree apprenticeships are integrated.

The five proposed changes to degree apprenticeships are:

1. **Better supporting graduate-entry occupations;**
2. **Integration of on-the-job and off-the-job training;**
3. **Alignment between apprenticeship knowledge, skills and behaviours and degree learning outcomes;**
4. **Integration of assessment (the EPA is the degree qualification);**
5. **Participation of an independent assessor with occupational expertise (E).**

The IfATE, it should be noted, does not see it as a policy shift as much as the following. Firstly, cleaning up policy to remove the unintended consequences in the standard, Secondly, extend slightly the inclusion of degrees to reflect labour market realities. Thirdly, extend good practice in degree apprenticeships.



Currently, only 47% of all degree apprenticeships are integrated.

According to a spokesperson from the Institute, the IfATE will permit the mandating of degrees where it is a regulatory standard to study a specific degree, even when the requirement for a degree is relatively new and caused some controversy, such as the professions of police officer (a statutory requirement since 2020) and nursing (statutory requirement since 2009).
It will support the mandating of qualifications where employers say a graduate-level qualification is needed. However, it is not intending to permit employer requests for a degree to 'professionalise' the occupation, as it follows labour market requirements rather than creating them.

3 Why qualifications?

The IfATE's stance is interesting because it has so far been reactive rather than proactive, responding to changes in the labour market that have already become established rather than those that are emergent. Indeed, current guidance from the Institute on mandated qualifications is as follows:

"The inclusion of a qualification based on being a regulatory, professional body or hard sift requirement in an occupational standard should usually only be a temporary requirement (with the exception of degree apprenticeships). The apprenticeship standard itself should be designed to meet the requirements of a regulatory or professional body and employers in the sector. Over time, as apprenticeships gain currency, individuals will no longer be disadvantaged in the job market by not having a specific qualification, and the need to mandate it should fall away. However, we understand that there may be some situations, for example, a fixed legislative requirement, where this may not be possible."

This goes much further than current intent and suggests that the purpose of apprenticeships is to eliminate the current reliance on qualifications. However, it is largely expected that the outcome of the consultation for degree apprenticeships will mean more mandated qualifications will be approved as the Institute now recognises their currency in the labour market.

Of course, there are some very good reasons why Bachelor's or Master's might not be mandated for level 6 or 7 apprenticeships. For example, the accountancy trailblazer agreed not to mandate a degree in the professional accountant Standard, because

they wished to create a non-graduate (shorter) route into the profession and in recognition that to become a Chartered Accountant candidates only had to pass the requirements and qualifications for the relevant professional body (Source: Mandy Crawford-Lee, 2021). Of course, that does not consider whether the sector might prefer them for the purposes of occupational/labour market mobility/performance improvement.

There are also examples where the need for a mandated degree may be tenuous. For example, the Institute offered the example of the Digital & Technology Solutions Professional, which is an integrated degree apprenticeship. Historically, employees in those roles haven't always been graduates or have not necessarily been graduates from a particular discipline.
It was mandated, say the Institute, because large digital employers wanted it as a way to reach a wider labour pool, but looking at it again it might be difficult to justify retaining the degree.

However, everyone we spoke to agreed that increasingly, the trend is towards loosening up of the criteria and to mandate more degrees, as it was recognised that the graduate market works in more complex ways to other occupations. So, while there is a tension in policy, with ministers perhaps preferring that apprenticeships become a 'gold standard' aspiration for employers and employees rather than degrees, the reality is that studying for a degree is still preferred.

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In addition, mandating a degree can potentially mean integrating the EPA into the degree, a move that the Institute looks set to consolidate. A total of 47% of degree apprenticeships are integrated, which means that the EPA is integrated with all or some of the assessments for the degree, rather than being separate and discrete. The trend, says UVAC, is for more degree apprenticeships to integrate the EPA. As already outlined, this increases the incentive to finish the apprenticeship programme, as they are aligned. As Crawford-Lee says:

"For some non-integrated degree apprenticeships such as nursing, where the licence to practise and degree is achieved before Gateway, which is the incentive for the individual? Or the chartered surveyor; once somebody's got the licence to practise, where's the motivation to finish the apprenticeship?"

We have already looked at a number of practical reasons why mandated and integrated degrees make sense at levels 6 and 7. What about the more ideological reasons: economic growth and productivity, and social mobility and justice?

It is useful to restate and explore why we should support keeping the degree in higher apprenticeships and, indeed, expanding the criteria for their inclusion. We would argue there are three core reasons why degrees matter:

1. **Productivity**
2. **Transferability**
3. **Mobility**

We will now look at each of these in turn.

4 The three rationales for mandated degrees in higher apprenticeships

i. Degree qualifications and productivity

All evidence points to a shortage of skills at the higher levels. The Department for Education (DfE) Skills Survey 2020 identified that a quarter of all vacancies are skills-deficit related, with 60% of those in medium- and high-skilled roles. The Open University Business Barometer 2021 found that 63% of interviewed employers said they cannot find the skills they need to fill roles, with significant ongoing challenges around demand for managerial and leadership skills. An OECD survey in 2017 [7] found UK skills shortages in education and training, STEM and healthcare. At the moment, as a result of the pandemic and Brexit, skills shortages are being talked up in transport, hospitality and agriculture. However, skills shortages in higher level and technical roles – foundation, degree and Master's levels – have been an ongoing problem in the UK for many years.

Take the example of leadership and management skills. As we have already noted, the mandated degree – the MBA, in most cases – has been removed from the

[7] https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/getting-skills-right-united-kingdom_9789264280489-en

Senior Leader Apprenticeship, with a corresponding cut in funding. An intervention by UVAC during the consultation period for this decision noted that, while it had been seen as controversial by some parts of the sector due to its popularity as an apprenticeship, the idea that it was being used to enhance the CVs of executives in big corporations was inaccurate. As UVAC argues, over half of Senior Leader starts were in the public sector – the NHS, police forces or local authorities. It has higher proportions of women as starts than ordinary MBAs and from 'left behind' regions. And, of course, diversity has been shown to produce better leadership[8] in all sectors, potentially producing more inclusive styles of leading which have knock-on effects on employee performance. And while we conventionally think of the public sector as a drain on the economy, the relationship is more complex.

As a major employer and contributor of GDP, improving productivity in the public sector saves money, says the World Bank.[9]

Even if we consider the 50% studying for the Senior Leader degree apprenticeship in the private sector, leadership skills also improve productivity. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy estimated[10] that poor leadership skills cost the UK economy £19 billion a year through lower productivity.

[8] https://hbr.org/2019/03/why-inclusive-leaders-are-good-for-organizations-and-how-to-become-one

[9] https://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/how-can-we-measure-productivity-public-sector

[10] https://www.gbscorporate.com/blog/great-leadership-improves-productivity

So Senior Leader skills are important. Does it make a difference as to whether the apprenticeship includes a Master's or not? There are several ways in which it might, which include:

- The reduction in funding (and when the Master's was de-mandated, the funding reduced from £18,000 to £14,000), and while the Institute said that the option was there for employers to 'top up' the difference themselves to include a degree, that, as UVAC argue, will not be an option for many.

Employers have argued that the removal of the Master's will make the apprenticeship much less attractive for employers and employees. MBAs and other Master's give employees significant advantages in the labour market. Figures from the Graduate Outcomes Survey[11] for 2017-18 show that postgraduates are more likely to find full-time employment, 18% more likely to be in a professional (and often senior) role, and to earn 18% more than graduates.

- It establishes a two-tier market, where the possibility of getting an MBA will be available only for those who can afford it.

- It reduces the emphasis on 'parity of esteem' between vocational and academic pathways, originally envisaged by the then Business Secretary Vince Cable, as seen above.

UVAC argued that the decision to de-mandate the Master's in the Senior Leader apprenticeship was ideological and political. According to the IfATE, faced with a direct order by the Secretary of State to apply the existing rules around mandated qualifications to the apprenticeship, it had little option but to apply them. Indeed, the review would have been required at some point anyway, irrespective of Williamson's intervention.

[11] https://www.findamasters.com/advice/finding/masters-employability.aspx

The recent consultation outcome will have an impact on many level 6 and 7 apprenticeships.

Degrees in general seem to matter for productivity. In 2015, when the UK government spent more time developing evidence-based approaches to policy, a BIS analysis showed[12] that a 1% rise in the number of people with a university degree contributed to a 2 to 5% increase in productivity. The report examined the contribution of degree study growth to productivity and found that the impact was positive. Consolidating our argument throughout this white paper that we cannot take an either/or approach to skills and education, the report said that:

"Recent evidence has shown that economic success is determined by the availability of a broad set of skills developed at different levels, both in general and vocational education."

[12] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-skills-and-productivity-in-an-international-context

"...many states have been retreating from their responsibility to ensure state economic growth that benefits all residents in favor of a short-sighted approach to economic development. In these states, the focus is on luring employers from other states with strategies that do not lead to rising incomes because they do not make the workforce more productive. Even worse, the focus drains resources from the most important, proven, path to increasing productivity: investments in education."

Why does investment in highly skilled training benefit productivity? Because it improves the individual's capacity to produce more than they receive in wages (even though their wages are higher than average). The Institute's analysis of correlations between educational investment and productivity showed that those states that invested heavily in high skills education saw the biggest growth in productivity.

The UK's output per hour, meanwhile, is 16.3% below the average for G7 economies (Source: UVAC 2020[13]). We explore productivity lags in more detail in our white paper on skills, What is to be Done about the UK Skills Deficit[14]

But again, does high-skill, productivity-enhancing training automatically entail a degree? Some argue not. For example, Terry Hodgetts, Director of Corporate Client Solutions at Aston University, says that whether or not a degree is seen as the primary goal, a degree apprenticeship is very much about the perception that it is the core labour market currency. And this may be shifting, he says:

"The degree qualification is still very much seen as the primary goal in my view, and we are in the early stages of employers and employees embracing an apprenticeship as a goal in itself (the name doesn't help given the

[13] https://www.fenews.co.uk/featured-article/57591-apprenticeship-social-mobility-and-the-levelling-up-agenda-the-need-for-a-more-ambitious-approach

[14] https://www2.aptem.co.uk/l/700593/m-uk-skills-deficit-whitepaper/4vt7p2

association with day release and craft/trade courses). The value of the apprenticeship as a developmental programme is being recognised and we are seeing a shift in perception, I think."

To return to the Senior Leader standard, he argues that, while the MBA is internationally recognised, "*a well-designed and delivered apprenticeship will offer similar value.*"

As for productivity, substantive data is needed on whether higher or degree apprenticeships yield better productivity returns (that is, is the qualification a necessary addition when it comes to productivity). Evidently, the Department for Education may hope (we don't know for sure) that a cultural shift might occur. However, relying on a shift of this magnitude, to the extent it shapes labour market preferences by employers and employees alike, may be a long time arriving.

For a country that only recently embraced mass higher education after centuries of degree-level study being available only to the few – and grants were available only after 1964 – it may be hard to convince aspirational students that they don't need or want one.

And as Hodgetts points out, there are other reasons why a degree matters in level 6 and 7 standards. Degrees provide an established educational pathway to structured learning on the apprenticeship and "*quality-assuring the underpinning knowledge of the apprenticeship programme.*" Is it logical to not use programmes that have gone through years of robust quality assurance and validation processes or simply combine them, so that each pedagogic method – the degree and the apprenticeship – informs and transforms the other over time? In Germany, for example[15], vocational skills are integrated into degree programmes in a variety of ways.

[15] https://www.expatrio.com/studying-germany/german-degrees

This brings us to the second reason why including degrees makes sense: the question of transferrable skills.

ii. Soft and transferrable skills

It is evidently the case that our current government favours occupational/competency-based training over the academic degree. Indeed, the aspiration to send 50% of young people to university may be formally shelved[16]. However – and this seems to be recognised by the skills sector as well as individual ministers such as former Apprenticeships Minister Gillian Keegan – degrees, whether an academic or apprenticeship pathway – offer high-level, transferrable skills.

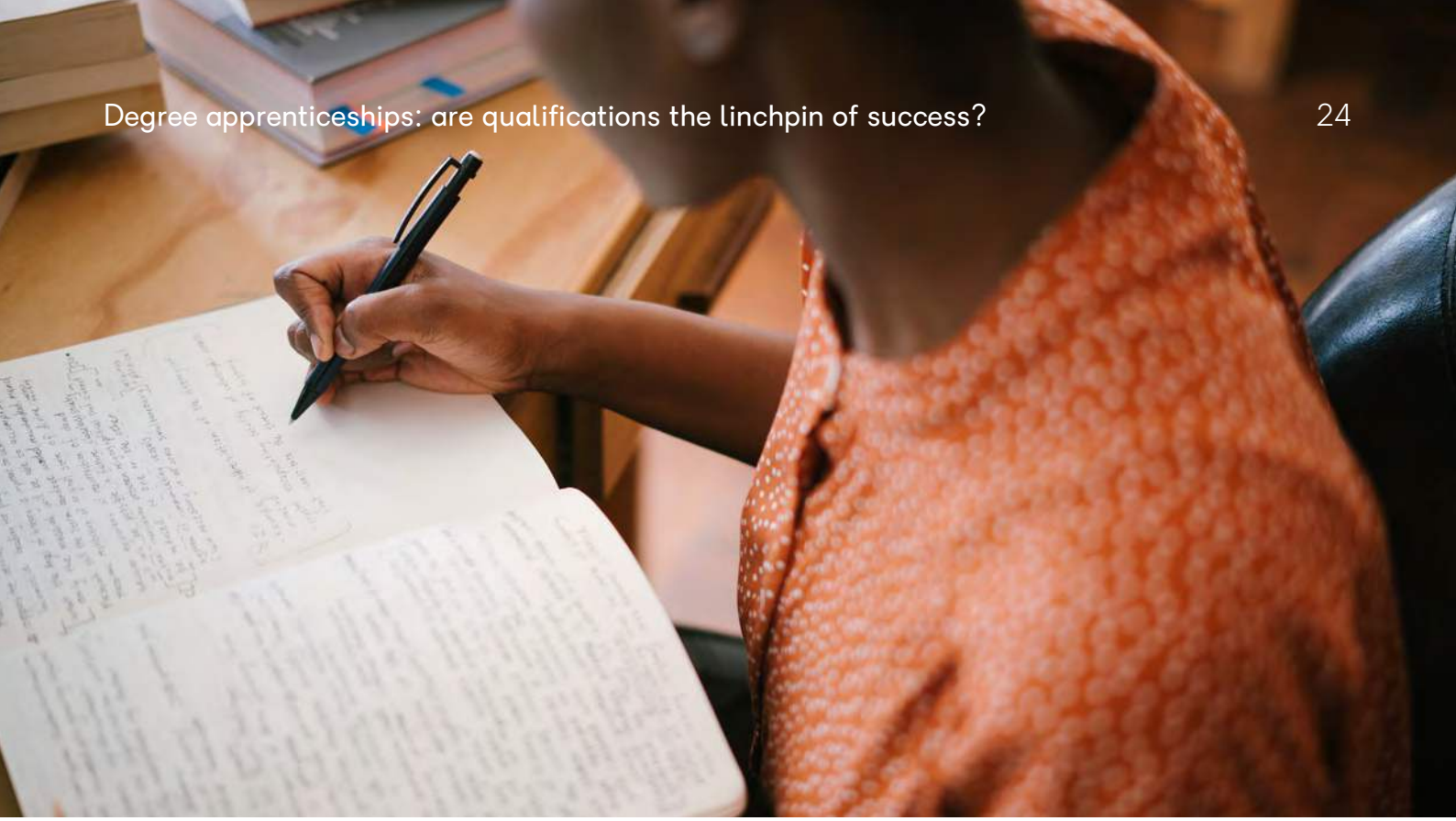
Our society, economy and consequently labour force is undergoing significant change and at a rapid rate in line with technological developments and other enduring crises, from the economy to the climate crisis to politics and policy change.

Whereas in the post-war period, those entering the professions could foresee a life-long career with only marginal changes to the nature of their role, individuals with higher-level qualifications/skills are likely to move around professional roles throughout their lives.

What is the best way of responding to this situation? Some argue that the concept of a degree is fundamentally outdated, particularly in the tech space. Noting that Google and Apple have ceased making degrees a requirement of a job, futurist Mike Colagrossi[17] points to freelancers who engage in ongoing skills updating, because universities simply can't teach them what they know to keep up to date with industry developments. In programming, business, marketing and so on, taking three to four years out of a workplace to study in the somewhat

[16] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jul/09/ministers-to-ditch-target-of-50-of-young-people-in-england-going-to-university

[17] https://bigthink.com/personal-growth/skills-degrees?rebelltitem=2#rebelltitem2



unreal world of university means you aren't keeping up. Says Colagrossi:

"A lot of what is being taught in college has no bearing or relevance on the day-to-day functions of a real job. Yet, there is still this perception that degrees are some kind of holy constitution of mastery over your topic of study. For doctors or other highly advanced degrees, that may still be true for now. But more often than not, your professional competency has nothing to do with what you learned in school."

However, it is also the case that soft skills are in demand and boost productivity[18]. While soft skills can be learned on the job over time, degrees (whether in the form of an apprenticeship or a traditional academic structure) offer a focused opportunity to learn them. And universities excel at imparting transferrable skills.

"A lot of what is being taught in college has no bearing or relevance on the day-to-day functions of a real job."

[18] https://record.umich.edu/articles/research-indicates-soft-skills-training-boosts-productivity/

Managing Director of Hays Belgium, Robbie Vanuxem, argues[19] that university teaches students four key transferrable skills: self-motivation and tenacity; time-management and working under pressure; thirst for learning and self-improvement, and interpersonal and communication skills. To this we can add good writing skills (and most higher-level jobs require this), analytical and problem-solving skills (helpful for any workplace looking to up its game), ability to engage with diversity and difference, dealing with criticism, adaptability and that much-in-demand skill of leadership. The IfATE says it has done some work into 'graduate attributes' as part of the rationale for degree apprenticeships and how they may contribute to progression and transferability.

Imagine that one profession you are working in has been displaced by automation. What would enable you to learn a new profession? Skills such as research, understanding market trends, reimagining your CV, learning, being able to understand and describe how your skills can be transferred, being able to apply method to your situation and new working environment, to name a few. These are all learned at university.

And those skills are forward looking. The breadth of the degree and Master's offerings expand the individual's mind to offer more creative possibilities for evolving future roles. In other words, degrees and Master's qualifications offer the greatest scope for developing soft and transferrable skills. Given the labour market is subject to a high degree of change, learning methods, adaptability, independence, and transferrable skills are most likely to equip people to move around in the labour market.

[19] https://social.hays.com/2018/10/04/transferable-skills-university-taught/

Reflecting on his own experience of doing an MBA through a non-apprenticeship route, Hodgetts says:

"...on reflection, the greatest value from that qualification has not been the 'badge' on my CV, but the toolkit the programme gave me, the integrating view I gained of the entirety of the business, and the interrelationships between function and specialism, that I would never have gained through experience alone."

He goes on to say that that knowledge deepened through several years of experience, and that is what the Senior Leader standard aims to replicate:

"If I look at today's Senior Leader standard, I firmly believe that the learning journey those apprentices will undertake will deliver similar results for them, but faster and better than with the degree alone. I have been saying to clients for several years that this is the way MBAs should always have been delivered, and even though the MBA has been removed from the standard, I still believe it."

Far from degrees becoming less relevant, in other sectors the drift has been towards embracing them, for example, within public-sector bodies. Why? Broadly, to raise standards. For example, in 2020 it was announced that all new police recruits in the UK would need a degree, a degree apprenticeship or a postgraduate conversion course. The College of Policing said that technological change, such as the growth in cybercrime, along with the social aspects of policing, such as working with vulnerable populations and victims of crime and abuse, requires a new skill set. Studies of US policing brought together in an article in The Conversation[20] said that police officers with degrees were less likely to use violence, had more problem-solving skills, better understood communities,

[20] https://theconversation.com/5-reasons-police-officers-should-have-college-degrees-140523

could identify best practice and had more leadership skills than those without.

Allowing degree apprenticeships to embrace academic learning alongside also increases diversity and widening opportunity. Medical doctors require extensive qualifications and training, and indeed already have an established vocational pathway. However, training is expensive and prohibitive for young people. Currently the IfATE is working on a medical doctor standard, which could open routes for a much more diverse healthcare workforce at the upper levels of skill. It may also provide an opportunity to inculcate more 'people skills' into medical training, such as communication[21] and leadership[22].

Ultimately, what the UK's journey with degree apprenticeships may show is that, whether you take an occupational or academic route, and whether you call it a degree or something else, individuals need academic learning alongside occupational experience if they are to be responsible citizens and successful in their careers. And that has implications for the way we run colleges and universities, as well as how employers think about cultivating the skills of their employees. And while that might be an argument for eroding the status of the degree as a qualification while retaining the critical importance of higher-level and integrated learning, we again return to the deeply ingrained popularity of degrees in the UK.

"Allowing degree apprenticeships to embrace academic learning alongside also increases diversity and widening opportunity."

[21] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4413084/

[22] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5968745/

iii. Social and occupational mobility

It is perhaps counterintuitive to suggest that degree apprenticeships deliver on social mobility. Many in the apprenticeship sector, including influential publications like FE Week as we have already seen, argue that social mobility is best delivered by increasing provision and quality at level 2 and 3. And on a superficial reading, the statistics on who takes degree apprenticeships do not look good for those who want to make the case for their contribution to social mobility.

Higher-level apprenticeships have proven to be popular with employers, seeing a rapid growth of new starts over time, from 48k in 2017-18 to 82k in 2019-20. In 2020-21 high-level apprenticeships comprise 32% of all starts, up 8.6% on the same period in the previous year. L2 are 26% of all starts, compared to 38% in 2018-19. (Source: Aptem Intelligence Dashboard.)

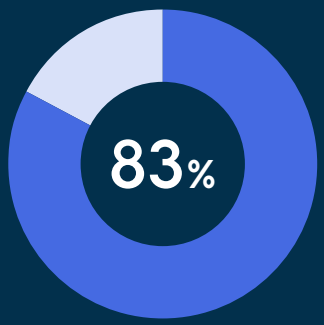
Degree apprenticeships account for 21% of all higher-level apprenticeship starts. Both advanced and intermediate apprenticeships have seen falls in new starts. Overall, there has been a drop in new starts from a high point of 509k in 2015-16 to 323k in 2019-20. Since 2017-18, the proportion of over-25s taking apprenticeships has remained the largest group compared to 19-24s and under-19s. Apprenticeship starts by gender have gradually equalised, and are slightly up for those with disabilities and those from BAME backgrounds.

However, while higher-level apprenticeships have increased dramatically over the past decade, these increases have mostly been at level 4 and 5. In 2019-20, Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships accounted for 30k new starts together, compared to 52k for level 4 and 5 (Source: HoC Briefing Paper 2021[23]).

[23] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06113/

During the pandemic (from August 2020 to January 2021), overall starts were down 83% on the previous year (or 79% down on the same period for 2018-19). Starts have generally risen or fallen in line with UK lockdowns. The number of 16 to 18-year-old starts fell by 33%. The figure was 20% for 19 to 24-year-olds and 7% for 25+ apprentices. The over 25s now account for 47% of all apprentices. (Source: Aptem Intelligence Dashboard.)

Drilling down into degree apprenticeships, we can see that similar trends are evident. At level 6, the proportion of under-21s undertaking degree apprenticeships has fallen, comparing 2016-17 to 2018-19 figures. At level 7, the percentage of those under 26 also fell over two years. Participation by those with disabilities and BAME groups were also significantly lower compared to sector trends. For gender, participation is largely equal (although distributed different across subject areas). (Source: Office for Students 2020[24]).



Overall starts were down 83% on the previous year during the pandemic

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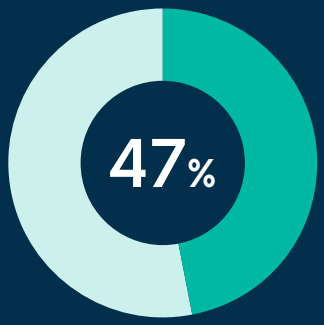

The over 25s now account for 47% of all apprentices.

[24] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/analysis-of-level-6-and-7-apprenticeships/

UVAC, in its report Realising the Potential of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship in Supporting Social Mobility and the Levelling-Up Agenda[25], argues that the social mobility agenda needs to be examined in the context of what apprenticeships, and specifically degree apprenticeships, are for, namely for individuals to achieve technical and occupational competence, as opposed to simply gaining skills. By definition, it lends itself to occupational competence in higher-skill occupations, although does not preclude less skilled job roles. Apprenticeships are also about boosting productivity (see section 4:i) and addressing skills gaps, such as in nursing. As such, careful, evidence-based analysis is needed to examine how social mobility and the levelling-up agenda (regional inequalities) map onto those aspirations, rather than prioritising one objective (social mobility) over another. Says the report:

> *"Regrettably, in most of the reports on Apprenticeship and social mobility little connection is made between supporting social mobility and tackling skills gaps and shortages in the UK economy."*

Further, while we have broad-based statistics on who takes apprenticeships, as discussed above, the report makes the case that we need better evidence to show individual and regional backgrounds and outcomes, data that doesn't currently exist or has not been collated for these purposes. What we can do is explore arguments around the evidence. Let's look at age.

We have already seen that those undertaking higher and degree apprenticeships are older. At level 6, 68% of apprenticeships were over 21 in 2018-19 compared to 29% for the HE sector. Leaving aside the question as to whether being over 21 is beyond the scope of encouraging occupational education for young people,

[25] https://www.fenews.co.uk/featured-article/57591-apprenticeship-social-mobility-and-the-levelling-up-agenda-the-need-for-a-more-ambitious-approach

the skew towards mature apprentices has been used by organisations such as the Sutton Trust to say[26] that degree apprenticeships are awarded to "*older and already experienced staff*". Further, it says: "*We need many more apprenticeships at these levels targeted at young people if we are to establish this route as an alternative to university.*" UVAC, in reply, argues that the Trust's perspective is a 'disappointing' attitude towards the possibilities of social mobility for adults.

If we look at the degree apprenticeship standards with the biggest volumes, we can see that these are hardly elite professions, but rather mostly moderately incomed and much-needed ones. They are: Chartered Manager; Chartered Surveyor; Civil Engineer; Digital Technology Solutions Professional; Healthcare Science Practitioner; Manufacturing Engineer; Police Constable; Registered Nurse; Senior Leader; Social Worker. As we have seen with the most controversial higher apprenticeship, that of Senior Leader, many in the public sector also take this apprenticeship (although it is no longer a degree apprenticeship).

Further, we would argue that the social justice argument sets up a misleading distinction between apprenticeships and degrees, when the purpose of degree apprenticeships is to align them. Eroding the artificial distinction between academic and vocational learning that has plagued the British education system for generations, which has its roots in a highly stratified class system, is critical. Elevating the status of vocational training through degree apprenticeships is arguably a smarter way of achieving this than downgrading level 6 and 7 learning into a narrow occupational lens. And hitching a degree onto an apprenticeship, a qualification which has always been an aspiration for many

[26] https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/levelling-up/

working-class children and adults historically, allows them to study debt-free. Debt is a huge barrier to engagement in higher education[27] with all its benefits for social mobility and higher incomes.

However, that is not to say that investment at all levels, with a generous understanding of the importance of vocational and academic learning and the relationship between them, isn't needed. The ideas of progression and lifelong learning are perhaps the most important concepts when considering social mobility and social justice. Progression and lifelong learning need to be firmly embedded across the entire educational system, vocational and academic. With apprenticeships, progression from a Level 2/3 apprenticeship to a higher or degree apprenticeship should be an entirely plausible career development. And doing so would end, in theory, the either/or argument and herald greater cooperation across all sectors.

[27] https://www.ft.com/content/720424bc-83c1-11e9-a7f0-77d3101896ec

5 Conclusion

In many ways, it looks as if the recent consultation outcome has settled arguments about mandated degrees in level 6 and 7 apprenticeships. However, the debate reminds us of the work that needs to be done around rethinking the value of education and training at all levels, the value of notions of progression and lifelong learning, and why all these matter to productivity and social mobility.

There needs to be a greater focus on evidence around these ideas. In particular, as UVAC argues, we require a proper analysis of who is accessing degree apprenticeships and what are their outcomes. If it shows that degree apprenticeships are enhancing both productivity and social mobility, then their value is established. If analysis shows that more work is needed to improve access from disadvantaged or underrepresented populations, then reforms should be directed there.

What we do need to move away from is the idea that vocational and higher education are in competition, towards a more fluid relationship between the two, combining vocational and academic learning and progression through all levels of learning.

"We require a proper analysis of who is accessing degree apprenticeships and what are their outcomes. If it shows that degree apprenticeships are enhancing both productivity and social mobility, then their value is established."

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