

FROM ADVANCED APPRENTICESHIPS TO HIGHER LEVEL LEARNING (ABRIDGED)

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes our experiences in promoting apprenticeship progression onto higher-level learning. Linking London is a collaborative partnership of fifty institutions (universities, colleges and strategically important organisations) based at Birkbeck, University of London, committed to the progression of all vocational learners, including apprentices, into and through higher level learning in all its forms.

CONTEXT

Research carried out for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) into the progression to higher level learning of advanced level apprentices over a seven year period showed that the pattern of progression to higher level learning is very different from that of traditional full-time school and college leavers, the majority of whom progress in the year following study at level 3.

Of the advanced level apprentices who progress, 58% do so within three years of starting their apprenticeship but

significantly 42% of them do so four, five, six or seven years later. In total 19.3% percent of the 2006-07 tracked apprentice cohort progressed to higher level learning when tracked for a total of seven years. (Joslin, Smith, et al, 2015)

WHY GREATER RATES OF PROGRESSION ARE IMPORTANT

In order to improve social mobility and enhance economic prosperity apprenticeships should keep options for progression open. In some of the older established areas, routes through to higher-level learning and chartered status are well known. The same level of opportunity needs to be available for all apprentices who can benefit from it and it is important that this work-based pathway provides opportunity for further study and qualification. For some vocational learners the next step up may be into management rather than a further level of vocational learning.

22 per cent of advanced level apprentices who entered higher-level learning were classified as coming from the most educationally disadvantaged parts of the country (POLAR2 Q1). (Joslin, Smith et al, 2015) This compares to 11 per cent for all young undergraduate entrants and 12 per cent for mature undergraduate entrants (HEFCE, 2012). Apprenticeships clearly play an important role in social mobility.

There is considerable evidence that an individual's employability is improved by participating in an apprenticeship. The employment rate for those aged twenty-five to sixty-four with no qualifications was 48.5 per cent, but for those with apprenticeships it was 80.7

per cent (ONS, 2014)

Research undertaken by the Sutton Trust indicates that completing a HA at level 5 results in greater lifetime earnings than undergraduate degrees from non-Russell group universities. (Kirby, 2015)

Research carried out by Joslin, Smith et al highlighted that 82 per cent of higher education leavers from the apprentice cohort were in employment six months following their degree, higher than the all-England higher education leaver rate of 76 per cent, and a further 12 per cent were in further study. The unemployment rate was low at 2.4 per cent and the average salary of the apprentice higher education leaver cohort was also higher than that of higher education leavers generally. (Joslin, Smith et al, 2015)

HIGHER-LEVEL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES – CURRENT OPTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES WHO HAVE COMPLETED AN ADVANCED APPRENTICESHIP

There are several possibilities for employees who have completed an advanced apprenticeship:

Higher level apprenticeships - A clear progression pathway from intermediate through advanced on to higher or degree apprenticeships enables many to continue to learn and put theory into practice while working and earning a wage.

Part-time and flexible learning - Part-time and flexible learning that enables employees to continue to work and study is also an appealing option for many.

Full-time higher-level learning - as highlighted by Joslin,

Smith et al, a significant number of former advanced apprentices progress on to full time study.

Short courses - Many short courses or even in-house training provided for employers by HEIs may be accredited. These may include short courses to degree courses but also professional qualifications. Some HEIs also offer bite- sized introductory higher- level courses.

PROGRESSION ONTO HIGHER-LEVEL LEARNING – THE CHALLENGES

The challenges in our experience are many and complex. They include:

Employer engagement - More employers need to be fully engaged with both the costs and opportunities in supporting young people, in particular, to get their foot on the first or second rung of the working ladder, especially in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). We know only 38 per cent of employers, for example, offer work experience. This is not good enough if employers continue to say employees arrive with a lack of experience. It is a hard sell to convince employers, especially SMEs, of the benefits of HA/DAs.

Lack of higher level apprenticeship vacancies - Apprenticeship vacancies, especially HA/DAs, are in short supply, available in a limited number of sectors, offered in the main by larger employers rather than SMEs, and taken up predominately by older employees.

When discussing higher apprenticeships/degree apprenticeships (HA/DAs) with potential employees there is a danger of raising false expectations. Caveats need to be made in terms of availability as well as competition

levels when applying for higher level apprenticeships In the absence of a centralised portal, finding vacancies can be challenging and application processes vary from employer to employer. Recruitment methods used by a number of employers often include several stages to the process, i.e. telephone/skype interviews, online aptitude tests and attendance at assessment centres and younger applicants in particular would benefit from encouragement and support to prepare effectively.

Complexity of funding arrangements and excessive bureaucracy - the complexity of funding for providers has not helped, and the funding straddles two funding bodies, a potential recipe for confusion. There are also challenges around bureaucratic processes, although we appreciate that it is important to guard against fraud. As the 2015 Ofsted report notes, 'the complexity of funding arrangements has meant that employers, especially SMEs, have been slow to get involved in designing programmes and developing standards, or in taking on apprentices out of fear of becoming mired in bureaucracy'.

The IPPR report notes that for employers looking for clarity about a potential employee, the system is opaque and confusing. Anecdotally in our dealings with higher education providers, many have found the terrain equally confusing.

Lack of awareness of advanced apprentices as potential learners and of relevant higher education provision -

Some parts of the higher education sector need to be convinced that an advanced apprenticeship is a grounding for further study, but there also needs to be change in the type of provision on offer in higher

education. High quality work-based education has a pedagogy of its own and it is demanding.

One of the major barriers to progression for apprentices is the fact that many HEIs do not have appropriate provision onto which apprentices can progress.

The last few years has seen a complete collapse of the part-time market in higher education which has had dramatic consequences for what is now on offer. Part-time, work-based and distance learning provision is not core activity for most HEIs.

For current or former apprentices interested in progression to higher- level learning, there is a lack of appropriate information on higher education admissions requirements generally, whether for full-time or part-time and flexible provision.

Advanced apprenticeships are not UCAS tariffed and frameworks differ widely in terms of content and qualifications obtained. This presents challenges to higher education admissions departments in terms of setting entry requirements.

The very nature of an apprenticeship is complex; unlike putting on a course of study for a cohort of learners, it requires the coming together of an employer, a need for an apprentice, a job and a suitable course of study which can be part of the award. This requires flexibility on the part of the provider, and a curriculum that is appropriate for a work-based learner on an apprenticeship framework.

Poor information advice and guidance - While websites have made strides in improving the availability of information aimed at those interested in apprenticeships,

the target audience in the main is younger, typically A-level students. The wealth of information and advice aimed at those interested in higher level study is still dominated by the eighteen year old A level student interested in progressing on to full time (and usually campus-based) undergraduate study.

Information and advice on higher level learning, including apprenticeships, targeted at current or former advanced apprentices, is notable by its absence. Case studies of former advanced apprentices who have progressed on to higher level learning including HAs/DAs would be useful in this context.

In addition, while the internet is awash with information on full time higher education study opportunities, along with the UCAS website which provides a definitive centralised admissions service for full time undergraduate study, information on alternative study modes is more difficult to obtain.

Current or former advanced apprentices are not a captive audience in comparison to other level 3 learners situated in schools or colleges and this poses challenges in terms of providing IAG to them.

In summary, there are not many options for advanced apprentices, information is not readily available, and so they do not enquire about higher-level learning. As a consequence, HEIs do not currently develop more opportunities for them, or specifically market the opportunities they already have. It is a vicious circle.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN SUPPORTING PROGRESSION: A LINKING LONDON PERSPECTIVE

Linking London has been working in this area for many years trying to address some of the issues and challenges for our partners. This work includes:

Research

Linking London conducted a survey of entry criteria information available for advanced apprentices. We examined a sample (550) of entry criteria from thirty HEIs across England, representing (at the time) approximately 10 per cent of the UCAS membership. Apprenticeships, unsurprisingly, were least well served with information. Just 2.5 per cent provided information that suggested the qualification could be accepted as a route to higher-level learning. This compared with 88 per cent of entry profiles which provided complete information for A level applicants. (Linking London, 2010)

Resource development

Linking London has produced a good practice guide for admissions staff, giving details of the advanced apprenticeship, how to make a meaningful offer to advanced apprentices and where to go for further information. This publication, originally developed in 2011 has been updated. (Linking London, 2011)

In 2011, Linking London published 'Apprenticeships and Progression to Higher Education'. This publication argued that more was needed than guidance and information and it supported the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) recommendations that called for 'level 3 vocational qualifications and apprenticeships offered to young people should only be eligible for public funding if they outline clear progression routes and opportunities for progression to higher education'.

In 2012, Linking London published a detailed guide, that included information on reasons to consider higher level study; the range of courses; qualifications and study modes, including HAs; examples of related higher level courses by framework; the relevant higher education curriculum offer; and details about the Linking London Apprenticeship Admissions Pledge.

WHAT NEXT?

Addressing the challenges, particularly in terms of more employer, especially SME, engagement in the development of apprenticeships, will not be solved overnight and will require a firm commitment from both the government and employers to put right. As the Higher Education Commission and Policy Connect report *Degree Apprenticeships: Up to Standard?* highlights, while over 99% of businesses are SMEs, there has been limited engagement and take up to date and little is known of the challenges they face in doing so.

The government needs to strengthen mechanisms to implement and monitor the improvement of both the quality of apprenticeship training and to cajole and incentivise employers to target their recruitment of apprentices at all levels at the younger age group. As noted in the Ofsted report, government should also hold providers to account for the value their apprenticeships add to apprentices' careers, evidenced by progression to higher level learning and training, increased responsibility at work, and improvements in earnings.

In terms of improving the quantity of apprenticeships at higher levels, the government also needs to simplify and sustain policy approaches to enable all agencies and

individuals involved to know what an apprenticeship means and to help encourage more SME take up. This needs to include reducing, as far as possible, unnecessary bureaucracy allegedly 'putting off' employers. The public sector, including education institutions and local government, should lead by example in recruiting more apprentices at all levels.

A dedicated service for individuals, providers and employers to independently encourage, broker and support progression onto higher level learning, including the provision of up-to-date labour market information and intelligence identifying those sectors with skills shortages would also be hugely beneficial. This would enable providers to start an informed dialogue with local and other employers to plan apprenticeship provision to meet local, regional and national priorities.

More HEIs and FECs need to engage in the development and delivery of HA/DAs. This is fertile territory for a collaborative partnership such as Linking London to continue its role in brokerage and innovative development. More recently Linking London has set up and established a Higher and Degree Apprenticeship (HADA) Practitioner Group, which attracts representation from our university and college partners involved in developing and delivering higher level apprenticeships. Meetings provide a forum for discussion and exploration of current developments, challenges and good practice with a view to identifying where collaboration between partners will support HADA development and growth.

Government priorities also have a role to play and they appear to see apprenticeship development as the main purpose of further education and the route for vocational

learners. We will work with our partners to ensure they are more involved, with the caveat that apprenticeships are not the answer for everyone.

A number of recommendations (the pledge, the use of public money and funding to support alternatives to full-time provision) included in the UVAC report mentioned earlier still hold value.

Government levers are needed to encourage the growth of flexible bite-sized, part-time and work-based higher level learning to provide a greater range of opportunities for those who want to go further. In turn, HEIs should do more to promote their existing offer to advanced apprentices as well as the five million people in the workforce already qualified to level 3. Organisations such as UCAS and the National Apprenticeship Service could play an important role in supporting this.

HEIs should be encouraged as a starting point to map apprenticeship progression opportunities by standard, and to identify potential progression routes into higher level provision, enabling them to develop and promote admissions information for potential advanced apprenticeship applicants.

HEIs also need to be more aware of what an advanced apprentice can offer in terms of skills, knowledge and experience acquired. Building on this work, HEIs could then commit to an advanced apprentice admissions pledge, guaranteeing an interview for applicants while working to clarify admissions requirements in external marketing and on their websites.

In seeking to address the issues of poor IAG we suggest that key stakeholders should work together to review

current IAG resources and support that can be accessed by apprentices (and former apprentices). Collectively they need to develop a holistic offer that is widely disseminated to schools, colleges, training providers and HEIs.

Government should instruct UCAS to do more to raise awareness of alternatives to full time study, in terms of information, resources aimed at potential higher level learners, advisers and HE staff. This would ideally include work with UCAS to develop a tariff for advanced apprenticeships, building on the success of the UCAS tariffed AAT NVQ in Accountancy.

And finally to help inform these recommendations, more data and research is needed. This should include the identification of where advanced apprentices are located, current progression into and through higher level learning (in all its forms) from advanced apprenticeships, by framework, building on the work of Joslin, Smith et al.

Research also needs to be conducted to determine the level of awareness of and interest in higher level learning amongst those undertaking, or who have recently completed, an advanced apprenticeship. Research to identify existing good practice in work to support advanced apprenticeship progression would also be helpful, as would the identification of lessons to be learnt from the high progression rates of accounting apprentices. The role here of the professional body appears key.

Funding, a government target, and a change of will are important if the key players in this many-sided relationship building, on behalf of apprenticeships, is to

work. Our work will continue with admissions tutors, developing relevant resources, and actively brokering on behalf of potential employees and employers through our Borough links. For Linking London our work on arguing for, and raising awareness of, apprenticeship progression will continue

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