

Growing Your Own: University and employer collaboration on Degree Apprenticeships

When I am asked by universities for advice on introducing or expanding Degree Apprenticeship provision, I invariably draw on this excellent case study of the University of Winchester's relationship with CGI.

It is a frank account of how relationships developed, of lessons learnt, benefits and messages for the wider HE sector.

Stella McKnight is one of the co-authors and is a regular speaker on the HE circuit as she continues to work with employers and Degree Apprenticeships. Stella is able to combine an excellent strategic perspective with the detailed understanding that comes from being the midwife to both the new provision and the long-term employer relationships.

Please remember that this article was written in 2016 though it remains very relevant reading for many in the HE sector. The relationship with CGI continues to strengthen and lessons learnt have informed work between the university including with Fujitsu.

The full article can be read in *A Race to the Top – Achieving Three Million More Apprenticeships by 2020* that was edited by me and published by The University of Winchester Press in 2016.

I hope you will enjoy this abridged version of that article.

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GROWING YOUR OWN GRADUATES THROUGH DEGREE APPRENTICESHIPS: A CASE STUDY OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER AND CGI

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This chapter evaluates how the University of Winchester successfully implemented a business-facing model of apprenticeship development and engagement. It describes a ten-year relationship between Winchester Business School and CGI (formerly Logica) and discusses how the relationship grew from an initial single programme into jointly pioneering degree apprenticeships.

Introduction

UK universities have many students who already have some form of industry engagement as part of their higher level studies. The higher education (HE) sector now has a new type of student with significant and focused levels of industry engagement: the Degree Apprentice. For these students learning mostly takes place away from the university and is categorised as business-led, work-based learning. The government has pledged to create three million more apprenticeships by 2020; approximately 60,000 of these will be degree apprenticeships.

Although it is one of the smallest universities in the country, the University of Winchester (UoW) has been at the forefront of degree apprenticeship development and in September 2014 launched two of the first degree apprenticeship programmes in the country, becoming a Tech Industry Gold endorsed training

provider for the digital economy.

The University of Winchester is a values-driven institution with around 7,000 students with faculties that cover the Arts; Business, Law and Sport; Education and Social Studies and Humanities.

The location of the university is within a growing and vibrant area of employment. With the right attitude to employer engagement, it is well placed to embrace and address the need for a demand-led approach. The Director for Employer Partnerships has responsibility for delivering the employer engagement strategy. This includes working with employers to identify their higher-level skills needs, and with faculties to develop responsive provision with the aim to build the long-term capability and the capacity of the university to engage with employers.

The university established a fully-fledged Business School in 2008. It has four departments: Accounting and Investment; Applied Management Studies; Global Issues and Responsible Management; and Marketing and Innovation.

Winchester Business School, where degree apprenticeship programmes reside, has developed strong links with the business community from its inception. A key part of the establishment of the Business School was foundation degrees, which included significant elements of work-based study.

The development and nurturing of collaboration with CGI (formerly Logica) involved students studying part-time at the university whilst working for CGI in various project and service delivery roles. Day-release teaching sessions at the university are complemented by additional work-based studies, guided by workplace mentors.

This relationship means that the Business School has experience in the design, development and delivery of

employer-sponsored higher education programmes at the heart of its formation and growth.

Founded in 1976, CGI Group Inc. is the fifth largest independent information technology and business process services firm in the world.

In July 2006, CGI (then Logica) approached a number of universities, voicing a sense of frustration in the preparedness of graduates for the workplace. Logica wanted a new recruitment initiative to supplement their UK graduate recruitment scheme, which although successful, did not entirely fulfill their need for well-rounded candidates with a broad understanding of IT and management skills.

To help overcome this, Logica began investigating apprenticeship schemes and other ways of attracting non-graduates to facilitate training tailored to their needs, offering a mixture of academic study and work-based learning.

The approach from Logica coincided with publication of the Leitch Review in 2006 which recommended that the UK should commit to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020. This created opportunities for academic institutions, such as the University of Winchester, to redefine their strategic priorities and gave impetus to developments of relationships with industry and commerce.

The brief from Logica's telecommunications and media arm, was to design a degree programme in Information Technology Management that was flexible and responsive to their training needs.

The University of Winchester proposed an alternative to the more traditional university Bachelor Honours programme. The solution was a tailor-made, flexible foundation degree in Information Technology Management, with an option to top up to a Bachelor Honours degree. The target market was school

leavers and those who had not previously applied to higher education, nor necessarily aspired to attend university.

The first sponsored degree was launched in September 2007 and further jointly developed degrees followed. CGI fully fund the degrees and pay their new employees a competitive salary whilst they undertake work- based learning at the company and academic study at the University of Winchester's Campus.

Early challenges

Having signed a contract in 2006, the partners were immediately faced with a number of formidable targets, including designing and validating the programme, marketing, recruitment of students, and staff development for those teaching on the programme, many of whom were unfamiliar with the concept of work-based learning. All of this had to be achieved within short timescales, with limited budget and scarce human resources. This was not for the faint-hearted and could only be achieved through a shared vision and with enormous commitment and collaboration on both sides.

Each partner soon recognised the need to be open in terms of strengths and limitations. For example, CGI were unfamiliar with undergraduate recruitment and had no relationship with their local schools and colleges. These of course are fundamental to a university and could be shared with CGI. In return, CGI were able and willing to share with the university contemporary developments in designing and using communication tools and technology.

Another early challenge the university encountered was the need to be more agile in their processes, systems and decision-making in order to be responsive to the employer's needs. In failing to be agile, the university could lose out to more nimble commercial providers. However, the university had to balance this risk against its own need to maintain quality and to uphold

academic standards.

There were on-going challenges in achieving effective work-based learning that is seen to make an impact not only on the learner but also on the employer. Most students find the concepts of the work-based learning situation difficult to grasp. Some also lack motivation to invest effort in what they perceive as a less well-defined area of their study. This lack of interest and engagement are not the only challenges. Much time and effort have been invested, by both the university and CGI, in identifying a diversity of learning situations and range of assessment methods that engage student interest and build business confidence.

Initially, the university anticipated that much of the responsibility for the effectiveness of work-based learning would lie with the employer. This was found not to be the case. CGI had limited resource and expertise to support students engaged in work-based learning. The university therefore needed to train managers in the workplace to take on mentoring roles. Support was achieved through a consultative process and has since led to a strong model of mentoring in which shared responsibility for work-based learning has been achieved and an enhanced student support mechanism established.

The challenges encountered in the university's early engagement with CGI have supported curriculum thinking in the Business School, leading to more flexible modes of delivery with the potential to offer degree programmes which better meet employer needs.

Work-based provision is now delivered to CGI on an extended basis throughout the year to meet their work-based degree apprenticeship requirements and allow sufficient time for academic provision. Academic tuition takes place one day per week, with students employed in real world roles. Much of the

assessment is work-based, designed around academic study with support from workplace managers.

The degree students, who are also apprentice employees, benefit from focused training that prepares them for their role in the business. Each student benefits from having both a workplace mentor and a personal tutor at the university. This is crucial as students do not have as much contact as they might if they were studying full-time at the university. The success of our partnership in preparing students for real world roles is captured by Lucy Waterman, who has progressed her career from student to manager:

“From being one of the first students to start and complete this programme, to becoming the programme manager for CGI’s Sponsored Degree, I have seen the evolution, development and the success of our programme and could not be more proud to have been part of it and to have helped shape it. The calibre of students, and the results they obtain, we have seen over the past 10 years, makes this our flagship UK Student Programme and a model of best practice which we share across the world.”

The university has a dedicated person who serves as the main point of contact in the partnership. This person plays a vital role in building, managing and sustaining the partnership.

Regular communication has taken place between the university and CGI to monitor quality, jointly deliver and assess learning and, where appropriate, to identify where further customisation of the programme can enhance the student learning experience. The university regularly visits CGI and vice-versa to enable a continued and enhanced understanding of their businesses; and senior managers meet to ensure that the strategic vision continues to be shared. This approach helps maintain responsive delivery and build relationships at all levels of the partnership.

There is a shared commitment to marketing and communications. Although it is the business that employs the student, joint recruitment has been found to lead to sound decisions in terms of recruiting employees who not only fit into the work-place environment but are also academically able to cope with the challenges of balancing the demands of work and study.

Progression of the partnership: positive impacts for the university and CGI

Almost ten years on, and having worked through a number of programme developments, the university and CGI harnessed their combined expertise in the design and development of two new degree apprenticeships that were validated in May 2015.

As with our sponsored degrees that were designed with and for CGI, these degree apprenticeship programmes were also tailored in order to continue to meet CGI's strategic needs:

“UK-based companies need to move into higher-level aspects of IT. We need employees of a high calibre who are able to help drive UK PLC to be a global technology leader. The combination of work- based learning and teaching during the programmes is designed to ensure graduates of the university will be fully equipped to rise to this challenge.”

Tim Gregory, President, CGI in the UK

Successful results

It goes without saying that employers will wish to see impact, not only in terms of student results, but also in terms of how their students contribute to the business and contribute to their economic bottom-line. This partnership has provided strong evidence confirming this impact.

Student retention rates are strong, regularly averaging over 85

per cent in each intake year. Academic achievement on the sponsored degree programme has been excellent and strengthened over the years with 72% achieving First Class Honours in 2015.

For CGI, the driver behind the development of their sponsored programme was to address a recruitment problem which previously saw them investing in additional training in order to prepare their graduate intake for work. CGI has been extremely pleased with the results achieved in recruiting undergraduates into the business as it has reduced investment in additional training, producing graduates who clearly meet their business needs. Upon graduation, the majority of their sponsored degree students achieve at least graduate level plus one, which means they are adding value back into the business even before graduating, which adds testimony to CGI's 'grow your own' approach.

The following from CGI's Director of Recruitment highlights why CGI believes this long-standing partnership has not only survived but flourished:

“Our programme at Winchester has been such a success due to the University of Winchester's open mind, forward-thinking and collaborative approach. As a partner they have listened to our needs as an employer and worked with us to help us develop graduates that are right for our business and clients' needs, now and for the future.”

Sarah McKinlay, CGI 2015

Benefits

The benefits of work-based learning, which underpins the degree apprenticeship model, are compelling for employers. Meaningful work-based learning experiences developed through strong partnerships provide employers with the opportunity to directly recruit talented individuals and to retain

them through focused career development. However, this demands a commitment from the university, one of which is recruiting additional staff to manage the two-tier data management system i.e. in providing both Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) returns and SFA returns.

Champion and leadership: From an educational leadership perspective, the implementation and sustainability of apprenticeship programmes needs ownership and strong and consistent support and ownership from university senior management. As pioneers in degree apprenticeships, Winchester has addressed many challenges. Support from senior management has been, and continues to be, essential to secure prioritisation and investment in the programme. It has also been essential to receive the support of the Faculty Dean who has also championed the project in negotiations with senior management.

Agile systems and strong quality processes: In order to respond to changing business needs, there is a need for universities to develop agile systems whilst at the same time maintaining quality standards. This requires additional processes and systems such as partnership agreements and institutional approval processes. It has also necessitated development of a range of additional documentation to guide and support each stakeholder, including an operational handbook which identifies the responsibilities of each partner; a handbook to support the mentors; and legal agreements and contracts with both CGI and students.

Degree apprenticeships: advantages for the university

Reputation-building with employers across the region, and raising the Winchester Brand: In 2016, Winchester Business School will have ten years' experience in designing and delivering employer-led programmes. This experience of the distinctive challenges and demonstrable benefits meant that it

was well-placed to contribute to the design and development of the national Degree Apprenticeship in Digital & Technology Solutions. Moreover, in pioneering the degree apprenticeship development, the Business School was able to gain both local and national recognition that in turn has raised the profile of both the Business School and the University's brand.

New student numbers: The degree apprenticeship has created new student numbers at a time when it is a 'free-for-all' in the higher education marketplace with the recent removal of the cap on student numbers. Furthermore, this increase in numbers is achieved without the associated accommodation demands that are faced by universities when they grow full-time student provision.

Comparatively low-cost delivery? This is not as straightforward as it might seem. Part-time students who attend one day per week equivalent are regarded as comparatively low cost delivery. However, our experience shows that there are many hidden costs in establishing, building and maintaining effective working relationship. These costs are exacerbated when one considers the number of potential partnerships that may need to be developed to build a meaningful portfolio of degree apprenticeships.

Enhances graduate employability: The CGI programme produced students with excellent academic standards and no issues with 'graduate employability'. As employees as much as students, they are not only already in roles but have potential to move their career forward ahead of graduation. There is no reason to think otherwise but it will be interesting to see whether or not this pattern will be replicated in the wider degree apprenticeship schemes.

Funding award from the Government's Funding Agency: For universities, degree apprenticeships offer a new funding stream. The administration and cash flows of drawing monies from the

Skills Funding Agency and individual employers will add to the administrative burden and costs faced by universities.

Government business/professions support: We recognise the expertise that the Tech Partnership (formerly e-skills) brought to this programme development and the support they offered our degree validation event. Gaining approval for this relatively unknown product, despite our ten years of learning and with the support of two leading IT companies, still presented a challenge. The Tech Partnership, with its credentials in trailblazing, was a welcome additional team member.

Degree apprenticeships: challenges for the university

Recruitment: One of the biggest challenges with regard to recruiting degree apprentice students has arisen due to the limited publicity around degree apprenticeships. We have found that schools and colleges, parents and many employers do not understand the concept of degree apprenticeships.

Cultural: In marketing our programmes in the Business School, we recognise that for some in our audience there is a need to get over the stigma of the word 'apprenticeship' and the notion of equivalence to traditional honours degrees.

Funding: As identified earlier, this is a potential new income stream for universities. However, there is a requirement to make a case for the numbers and type of degree apprenticeships that a university plans to recruit. From those plans, universities have to bid for a share of a 'pot'. Not only that but they also have to complete Funding Agency and HESA returns, as well as learning a raft of new regulations.

Lessons learned

First, and critically important, is strong support from university senior management who want the partnership to succeed, and are willing to listen and invest. At the University of Winchester,

both the Vice Chancellor and the Dean of the Business School were committed to moving the degree apprenticeship forward and instrumental in motivating staff to support this initiative.

Second is the importance of aligning the strategic vision of any collaborative partnership with potential offerings of a degree apprenticeship. Where a number of partners bring degree apprentices into the same classroom, this strategic vision needs to be compatible with the direction of each partner with mutual buy-in and commitment to delivering success.

The alignment of strategic vision has also to work for the university. The University of Winchester's strategic plan provides for an increase in the number of vocational programmes and to recruit from an increasing number of businesses locally, regionally and nationally.

A clear strategic vision is essential for setting priorities and for coordinating action and resources. When combined with insight at the operational level, this has ensured that the University of Winchester's change agents got buy-in from senior management, heads of departments and the teaching teams, thus countering potential resistance to change.

CGI clearly demonstrated strategic vision and commitment to the partnership, initially through their innovative ideas to 'grow their own' graduates, and through establishing the sponsored degree programmes as their flagship undergraduate recruitment scheme.

Third is the need to develop a framework for a programme that will work for an employer, professional body and government accreditation agency. Locating and working with a trailblazer employer and/or professional body will provide access to specialist support.

Fourth is the need to recognise that there are clear benefits to be gained in the development of existing programmes in terms

of curriculum and employability. There are also many opportunities for original research and knowledge exchange, all of which significantly enhance the proposition to universities.

Fifth is the vital need that the voice of the degree apprentice is heard. University of Winchester students already have a significant voice on our programme through regular satisfaction surveys and student representation on programme committees. Opportunities to assist academics and employers in trouble-shooting problems as they arise and to negotiate potential solutions should be afforded and recognised as a good learning experience.

Finally, open lines of communication should be maintained between universities and their partners, especially in relation to workplace mentors. Open lines of communication help to build relationships across levels of the university and collaborative partners. This not only raises awareness of degree apprenticeship programmes, but it creates synergy and commitment to shared goals, key to which will be supporting the degree apprentice.

Concluding comments

While employers hold the key to creating the high-skills environment, collaborative partnerships with the university sector will play a vital role in developing the nation's skills. Employers and universities should work together with a shared sense of commitment and purpose to develop the mechanisms and expertise necessary to design and implement successful degree apprenticeship programmes.

Responsibility for achieving the UK's higher skills agenda must be shared between government, employers, universities and individual degree apprenticeship learners. Strategic commitment, shared values and a mutual desire to succeed are key. Established partnerships emerge where both the university

and employer strive for high-quality, flexible provision and where each partner is prepared to invest much time and effort in tailoring provision to meet individual employer needs.

While much emphasis is given to relationship building between a university and employer in the ‘traditional’ sense of employer engagement, today’s degree apprentices should be encouraged to contribute to the design of effective work based learning and degree apprenticeship models.

This is an abridged version of the chapter first published in A Race to the Top – Achieving three million more Apprenticeships by 2020 that was edited by David Way CBE and published by The University of Winchester Press in 2016.