

Working Life After Degree Apprenticeship

Key Findings from Employer Interviews

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Context

Degree Apprenticeships were introduced in 2015. They involve apprentices studying towards a Bachelor's or Master's degree for the first time in England. As a new educational pathway, little is known about how Degree Apprentices experience it, and it is only now, when the first participants are about to graduate, that we are able to begin to explore the impact of degree apprenticeships – both for individuals and the businesses engaging in the programme. The Working Life After Degree Apprenticeship (WLDA) study explored the working lives of apprentices, post degree apprenticeship, and investigated the impact the apprenticeship had on their employment outcomes and experiences.

Working Life After Degree Apprenticeship: Study overview

The study had a broad aim: to explore the impact of degree apprenticeships on working life from the perspectives of a) graduating degree apprentices and b) participating employers. The research consisted of two complementary phases:

- **Phase 1: Qualitative longitudinal research** – two waves of semi-structured interviews with 22 graduating degree apprentices. Forty-four interviews were conducted in total, reflecting a 100% retention rate. Longitudinal approaches enable researchers to follow a journey over time rather than taking a 'snapshot' in a single interview. Interviews covered a range of areas in order to explore various aspects of the working lives and experiences of degree apprentices.

- **Phase 2: Qualitative research with employers** - through ten semi-structured interviews the project explored employer experiences of engaging with degree apprenticeships.

This briefing note presents key findings from the second phase of this study. In these interviews, we explored employer experiences of engaging with degree apprenticeships to date. We also explored employer perspectives on two key issues pertinent to the success of degree apprenticeships policy – namely, the role of apprenticeships in boosting productivity and social mobility.

Sample details

Employers involved in this research were drawn from several different organisations engaged in degree apprenticeships provision. Interviewees had various roles, ranging from the COO of a company with full oversight over learning and development, to line managers and mentors. Most worked in large organisations. Interviews took place in 2019.

The impact of Degree Apprenticeships on employers

Participants felt that capturing the impact of degree apprenticeships on their businesses was difficult. Employers reflected that their impact was likely to vary from business-to-business, and depend on various factors, including both individual skills and capabilities, and organisational size, structures and cultures. As one employer noted, *'It's quite difficult for us to talk in terms of an organisation just because of the vastness of us'*. Nevertheless, the employers participating in this study were able to identify some (largely positive) impacts.

Several remarked on the culture change that degree apprentices engendered. Apprentices were reported to bring new energy, which employers believed to be infectious – bringing a new lease of life to teams and existing staff felt to be set in their ways. This was particularly welcome in relation to employer's digitisation agendas:

It's brought a different perspective into our team, for sure, because particularly in our part of IT you tend to find that people are very experienced, very narrow focused on a particular area of the solution! Having somebody come in who basically says, 'Well, I don't know anything about any of that stuff, but I want to learn things, I want to be broader' has changed perspectives in that way.

For several employers, one of the main impacts of engaging in degree apprenticeship programmes had been that they had helped to fill skills gaps and equip businesses with new tools and approaches. For one employer, this was evident in financial savings, as they no longer needed to draw on expensive contractors to fill these gaps.

Most interviewees talked about the impact of Degree Apprenticeships in terms of their contribution to a high performing workforce. One employer (talking in general terms about

their apprentices rather than specifically degree apprentices) also reported that apprentices were more likely to be promoted and had lower sickness absences compared to non-apprentice staff.

One interviewee, who had been involved in line managing degree apprentices, reported some negative impacts. This participant felt that they personally had to spend a lot of time ensuring an apprentice they managed was able to carry out their job effectively. This negative experience appeared to have resulted from a misalignment between apprenticeship training and the specific job role.

Degree apprenticeships and productivity

Degree apprenticeships are part of the government's industrial strategy and are argued to be a key part of the 'solution' to improving UK productivity. Some employers felt degree apprenticeships contributed positively to the productivity of their businesses; namely through:

- the development and utilisation of skills
- innovation and creativity
- high levels of employee engagement
- low staff turnover.

A number of factors appeared to contribute to more productive outcomes here, which resonate with existing research on the topic. These were:

- a high degree of autonomy and trust
- expansive learning environments
- commitments to training and workforce development
- high quality line management.

Conversely, employers highlighted two key factors which could inhibit the potential productivity improvements through degree apprenticeship. First, when skills gaps were not always filled when degree apprentices opted for 'more generic' consultancy routes. Second, when skills utilisation was hindered due to business pressures. Whilst employers recognised the benefits of giving degree apprentices more freedom and space to develop and apply their skills and knowledge, they could sometimes be constrained by the realities of their business environment:

I think that the ideal would be that you set aside - that you essentially give people four years to just explore. You keep them semi-aligned to business needs, but get them to use the AI machine learning stuff to help grow your business. Well, the size we're at, we can't give them carte blanche to do whatever. At times it's like, 'Well, we're going to need this stuff doing, it's a bit boring, it's probably not challenging you

Degree apprenticeships, diversity and social mobility

Degree apprenticeships are argued by some to be a means of helping people to be more socially mobile, and opening up opportunities to more diverse communities. We explored the extent to which this ambition had been realised, from the perspectives of employers engaging with a degree apprenticeship programme.

Perhaps surprisingly, given that improving social mobility is often presented as a key objective of degree apprenticeships, some were unfamiliar with the concept. However, they were more familiar, or comfortable with the language and concept of diversity.

I don't know what social mobility is. I understand the diversity element and I think that is key... I don't understand the concept of social mobility though.

One employer was keen to understand what other businesses understood by the term:

[I]t'd be interesting to understand what other companies think of social mobility or whether we've got the wrong end of the stick.

Some employers reported that social mobility and diversity were issues important to their firm, and that degree apprenticeships offered a new mechanism to facilitate this. In many cases, this was linked to a business case regarding the benefits of a diverse workforce in bringing new perspectives and understanding diverse markets.

The more diversity you have in an organisation that increases performance, has an impact on revenue and profit, and especially for [employer], which is an organisation that at its heart is really about innovation. You need people from different backgrounds to bring lots of different ideas.

However, one employer was dismissive of any emphasis on employee backgrounds in terms of recruitment practices. Another was keen to stress that they judged everyone on 'merit', rather than background:

I've said this all along...I hire the best people, I don't care who they are

Judge everyone on merit...it is sometimes a blind spot for me because maybe I think like that by default.

Some employers thought that Degree Apprenticeships did, to some extent, help to facilitate social mobility and diversity. Several referenced the fact that degree apprentices did not have to pay tuition fees as a key reason for this. One felt that flexibility regarding academic achievement prior to undertaking a degree apprenticeship was helpful for facilitating social mobility:

I would say apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships... it's opening the door to people who wouldn't normally think that they could apply.

Degree apprenticeships were felt to help improve diversity mainly in relation to gender (bringing more women into STEM/tech roles), age (creating opportunities for both younger and older workers) and cultural diversity.

Some employers identified positive examples where degree apprenticeships had worked as a vehicle to give opportunities to people from diverse backgrounds:

We've had some that have come from the private school route, we've had some that have come through from local state comprehensives, single-parent families and things like that and they're all going down the same route and the same opportunities are open to them.

[Apprentice] wouldn't have done a degree otherwise without this opportunity...[but] I think some of them would've done a degree anyway, whereas [apprentice] just - did very well at A levels but from [their] perspective wouldn't - a degree isn't what [they] would want to do, and academically [they] just wanted to come and work. So for [them] and people like them it's been a fabulous opportunity

Other employers were unsure about the extent to which degree apprentices were helping to facilitate social mobility and diversity. Whilst they acknowledged how degree apprenticeships could facilitate social mobility (i.e. through making university more accessible to those on a low income), they struggled to identify a large number of cases where this had actually been realised. Indeed, some of our interviewees felt strongly that degree apprenticeships had not led to increases in social mobility in their businesses:

Well let's be honest... the people that end up getting recruited and especially round the [local] area, straight from their A levels are going to be probably white middle-class kids

One employer was sceptical of the claim that degree apprenticeships would appeal to more people from low income backgrounds through not needing to pay fees, and one pointed out the inevitable limits of a programme involving relatively few people.

Improving Degree Apprenticeships for social mobility

Improving information about degree apprenticeships was felt by employers to be a key factor needed if they were to result in increased social mobility.

I think what limits the degree apprenticeships is people knowing about them. So I think it's more about publicity, getting into those schools, speaking to careers advice people to educate them on the alternative options rather than just degrees

They felt that both Universities and Employers, alongside good careers advice in schools, had a role to play in ensuring that degree apprenticeships facilitated social mobility and more diverse workforces. One employer also commented on a lack of national campaigning on degree apprenticeships, which they felt limited their potential in opening up opportunities to people from diverse backgrounds. Several employers had observed some resistance about promoting apprenticeships amongst some of the schools they engaged with, however that this had appeared to lessen over time.

Employers felt that making degree apprenticeships more flexible could help to include/benefit a more diverse group of people.

The degree apprentices being on site one day a week in order to complete their apprenticeship, whether that fits around everyone's sort of work/life commitments...could it be a bit more flexible for those individuals that can't necessarily commit on that regular basis?

One employer also reflected that more should be done to ensure degree apprenticeships were accessible to those with disabilities and learning impairments, suggesting that coursework and course structure could be adapted. Another suggested a more 'blended' learning approach could help to make degree apprenticeships more accessible.

One employer emphasised a need to ensure that the programme was closely monitored and changes were made if they did not attract participants from a range of backgrounds:

I think you need to look at the degree apprenticeships and say; are there parts of society that they're not appealing to, and then find out why. I don't know the answers! ... it's that sort of analysis that needs to be done

Conclusion

Overall, employers' experiences of engaging with degree apprenticeships programmes were very positive. Whilst the precise impact was hard to identify, degree apprenticeships were reported to be filling skills gaps, contributing to firm-level productivity and bringing with them an 'infectious' new energy to the workforce. There was a sense that degree apprenticeships could help to facilitate social mobility and diversity, with some examples of this happening in practice for some individuals. Success here appeared strongest in terms of generating more gender diversity in tech/STEM roles. However, employers raised questions over the extent to which social mobility objectives of degree apprenticeships policy are being realised in any significant way, and highlighted a clear need for robust data to explore progress here. Clearly, concerted action is needed on the part of employers, universities and the government if degree apprenticeships are to deliver on the objective of improving social mobility and diversity more generally.

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About the author

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The ARU aims to become a leading research unit in the field of apprenticeships, with a specific emphasis on degree apprenticeships. As the largest provider of degree apprenticeships in England, Manchester Metropolitan University is an ideal location for pioneering research on this higher-level training pathway.

Further information

For further details about the Working Life After Degree Apprenticeships study, please contact project lead, Dr Katy Jones at katy.jones@mmu.ac.uk

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