

Working Life After Degree Apprenticeship

Key Findings from Apprentice 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 first phase of this study. Wave a interviews took place in April/May 2019 and wave b interviews took place in April/May 2020. As wave b interviews took place during the UK's first Covid-19 national lockdown, they also provided insights into the impact of this on participants' working lives.

Sample characteristics

Key characteristics of the apprentice sample are as follows:

- All completed a Digital and Technology Solutions apprenticeship at the same Higher Education Institution in the North West of England
- Ages ranged from 21 to 50. Fifteen were aged under 25, seven were aged 25+
- Thirteen identified as female, nine as male.
- All except one was White
- Three had caring responsibilities
- 7/22 reported that either one or both parents had a degree

Experiences of learning and work prior to Degree Apprenticeship

Respondents had varied experiences of learning and work prior to their degree apprenticeship (see tables 1 and 2 for an overview). Several had begun an apprenticeship at a lower level, originally planning to commence a more traditional Undergraduate course upon completion. However, when the opportunity emerged to continue as a degree apprentice, pursuing this alternative higher education pathway was a preferred route. Most were already employed by their apprenticeship employer prior to undertaking their degree apprenticeship.

Table 1
Participation in education prior to DA (post-16)

Academic only (incl'd A Levels, Scottish Highers, European Bacc)	14
Vocational only	3
Academic and Vocational	5

Table 2
Economic status prior to undertaking DA

Full-time education/training	4
In employment (employed by their DA employer)	13
In employment (employed by another employer)	5

Apprentices identified a range of factors influencing their decision to undertake a degree apprenticeship. These included financial reasons (i.e. avoidance of student debt and an opportunity to 'earn while you learn'), their interest in the subject (digital and technology solutions), a preference for combining learning and work rather than pursuing more traditional undergraduate pathways (including an aversion to exams and a preference for 'hands on' learning), the influence of family, friends and employers, and a close fit with career goals. In addition, a key theme emerging from interviews was the importance of 'luck' in coming across and being able to take up the opportunity.

I don't particularly enjoy being graded on one test at one point in time. I feel like I'm better if I can show what I can do over a long period of time.

I just didn't want to go to uni and do the wrong course... and at £9,000 a year!

I was always planning on actually doing a degree. However... [I] thought, if it's just a year...It was a [Level 3] apprenticeship... I was just thinking, if it's not meant to be, it will just be a year work experience I have under my belt and then I'll go back to the normal degree. Then a year in they said, 'We're opening up this degree apprenticeship. Do you want to take part in it?'

The Impact of Degree Apprenticeship: the apprentice perspective

In our first interviews (upon immediate/near completion of their Degree Apprenticeship), participants identified a wide range of ways undertaking a degree apprenticeship had impacted on them and their working lives. These included:

- Getting a degree
- Being in a good financial situation (i.e. through not taking on debt and earning a salary)
- Being able to learn and develop
- Expanding networks and horizons
- Being able to gain work experience and progress within a company
- Benefitting from their status as an 'apprentice'

I guess the obvious one is you get a degree and it's... paid for... so you haven't got that debt coming with you afterwards.

You get a rounded foundation knowledge in several different areas within IT that you wouldn't necessarily acquire in work, even if you were in that field, you wouldn't necessarily look at.

I've not had to put my career on hold for years and earn no money or little money. I've been able to absolutely progress my career to nearly senior management.

I think one of the massive benefits that I didn't actually realise was the networking aspect... the exposure to other companies.

In our follow up interviews, the lasting impacts that stood out to our participants included the knowledge and skills they had learned, but also a belief that undertaking and completing their degree apprenticeship had facilitated significant increases in confidence and had triggered changes in mind-sets. Many were more confident in their abilities and several had changed their view of themselves as learners:

[The Degree Apprenticeship] pushed me out my comfort zone and helped me now do stuff in my job that normally I'd shy away from.

It's made me realise that I'm probably capable of doing a lot more.

It was clear from the accounts of interviewees that the combination of work and study had set most off on a strong and clear career path:

I just think it's such an amazing opportunity and, for me, it's definitely changed my career progression and my career opportunities, so I'm really grateful to have that opportunity.

For most, this involved starting careers, for others this involved a shift in existing career trajectories, opening up new opportunities that were previously inaccessible.

Skills developed through Degree Apprenticeships

Participants reported developing a wide range of skills through their degree apprenticeship, including technical skills (e.g. programming, coding and web design), project management

skills and 'soft' skills including presentation skills, time management, leadership and team working. Common across their accounts was that their Degree Apprenticeship had helped them to become an 'all-rounder', able to understand and apply both technical and soft skills in different contexts.

I can speak to executives about strategy and I can also get right into the weeds with a couple of developers on trying to solve an issue. Not everybody can do that, so that's a really powerful thing.

Several also described 'learning how to learn' as a result of undertaking a degree apprenticeship:

It's the being-able-to-learn-a-new-thing skill, that's been most beneficial, because I am constantly working with new technologies, and going about things different ways.

The Degree Apprentice 'Graduate Transition'

Most participants described experiencing a 'seamless' transition from apprentice to graduate:

I kind of almost didn't think about it too much, to be honest... There almost wasn't any transition because I was already forging my career right from the start.

For most, discussions and plans about their role post-apprenticeship were conducted in a timely manner. However, this was not always the case and a small number felt that their transition had been poorly managed. As a result, some described a period of anxiety as their apprenticeship came to an end. It was felt that uncertainty and worry could have been avoided (as ultimately it worked out well).

[My Employer] didn't manage it well... it's all very well getting [apprentices] in, but there's not much plan about what to do with them when they got there.

Most had secured a permanent role prior to apprenticeship completion, so uncertainty centred on whether or not they would be able to access specific roles, or work in particular teams or preferred departments:

I wanted to stay in the department I was in, and I was kind of getting worried. It was kind of, 'We've got a role for you. Everything's going to be fine.'

Work, progression and employer loyalty

All participants were in full-time employment at the time of both interviews. At wave a, 18/22 had permanent contracts, rising to 21/22 by wave b.

- In wave a, salaries ranged from £17,000 to £52,000.
- In wave b, salaries ranged from £22,000 to £61,000.
- Overall, the median salary at wave a was £29,000, and at wave b had risen to £37,000.
- The mean salary at wave a was £30,000. The mean salary at wave b was £39,000.
- Several had multiple promotions between the two interview waves.

We observed some differences in relation to gender and salary progression, however the reasons for this are unclear:

- For women, the median salary at wave a was £30,000, and at wave b this had risen to £35,000.
- For men, the median salary at wave a was £28,000, rising to £42,000 by wave b.

Experience of working life (pre-Covid 19)

Most participants reported high levels of job satisfaction across interview waves. Most were working in varied roles in which they continued to learn and develop, and many had taken on more responsibilities and accountability by the time of our second interview:

I've taken on a lot more responsibility and I've got a lot more contacts within the business which has really helped with my networking and confidence.

I've moved on, yes. I'm sort of a distance away from the other apprentices now. They get given the more learning, smaller jobs, and I get the decision on how to do jobs.

The majority felt there was room to grow and progress in their current roles. Others had sought, or were seeking new opportunities, both within teams and their wider organisation, or in different companies.

Employer loyalty

Most (19/22) continued to work for their apprenticeship employer after graduation and planned to do so for some time. Key factors underpinning continued loyalty included: having good employers and good jobs, 'returning the investment', job security, trust and comfort. However, the most important factor appeared to be having continued opportunities for progression (and where participants had moved on, this had been a key motivating factor).

If I didn't have that progression at the end of my degree, because that's quite a monumental point where you would expect a natural progression, no, I wouldn't probably have the same loyalty or desire to stay.

Work in Lockdown

Wave b interviews took place during the first Covid-19 UK lockdown. Most participants had continued to work full-time, but from home. For some, the shift to homeworking did not constitute a particularly significant change to their working life. However, for many, there had been changes in working priorities and increases in workload, reflecting the key sectors within which many worked (e.g. banking and pharmaceuticals). Positively for some, this had resulted in new opportunities to take on more responsibilities and further develop in their role:

Now I'm taking on a lot more of a concentrated project manager role just because a change in priorities due to COVID-19...It's definitely a challenge, but it's a good challenge and I'm really enjoying it.

Future aspirations

Participants were asked about their future career aspirations in both waves of the research. Strikingly, many goals shared in their first interview were achieved in the short period of time between interview waves:

I think I said I'd like a promotion last time, so maybe, I mean, I can't believe it's all happened really! You think, oh gosh, wow!

Most aspired towards further career progression. For some, career goals centred on ambitious and clearly defined objectives (e.g. becoming a chief

executive). Others placed a more general emphasis on continued growth and development. Most had ambitions to manage teams and in some cases progress to higher-level leadership and management roles. However, several spoke about a reluctance to progress to roles in which they would manage others:

I'm hoping I can move up to the next grade... which, in my opinion, is the sweet spot of the grades, because you're still only a technical person but there's no management, no managing of people in there.

Covid-19 impact on career prospects

Participants experienced some anxiety about the likely impact of the pandemic and associated economic turbulence on jobs and future prospects. Several had become slightly more cautious about pushing for promotion or considering job moves:

I was having the discussions in terms of like pushing for promotion before this happened, and then I kind of almost felt like I couldn't speak about it again.

More commonly however, most appeared largely unaffected and relatively unconcerned – and even optimistic - about their future job prospects (this contrasts starkly to reports about graduate uncertainty in the Covid-19 context).

I'm in a stable job in a pretty stable industry. We basically can stay at home and do the work...I feel pretty optimistic. I've not felt pessimistic at all.

Overall, participants felt they were in a good position to weather current and future economic uncertainty, especially compared to peers and other graduates. The value of the degree apprenticeship here was clear – they were graduates working in good jobs with years of experience and skills in demand:

If I got made redundant, I feel like I'm in a really strong position to go out there and get another job and I don't feel scared about doing that. I do think that the degree has helped me get there. If I think I've got a degree and four years' experience and a load of little areas that I can tap into from the skills that I've developed.

Conclusions

The WLDA project explored the experiences of some of the first to graduate from a degree apprenticeship programme. Overall, experiences have been overwhelmingly positive and this study has found evidence of a very positive impact of degree apprenticeships on participants' working lives. The positive and optimistic accounts in relation to job prospects presented above are particularly striking within the current economic context.

Some apprentices raised some issues regarding timely organisation and decision making during their 'apprentice to graduate transition'. However, now in their sixth year, it is possible that this vocational pathway is likely to have undergone change as providers and employers adapt and new processes are developed. Where these are not already in place, adopting good employment practices and principles (e.g. use of permanent contracts, timely decision-making regarding roles post-apprenticeship) would further enhance positive employment outcomes for degree apprenticeships. Upon completion of degree apprenticeships, ensuring continued opportunities for further progression appears crucial for continued retention.

Another important point to consider is the extent to which opportunities to undertake a degree apprenticeship are open to all (this is a central issue in key debates about Degree Apprenticeship policy). Whilst a small-scale qualitative study (and not a representative sample), a key theme emerging from interviews was the importance of 'luck' in coming across and being able to take up the opportunity, and the significance of family and employers in supporting participation. Participants chose to undertake a degree apprenticeship, but most had other quality opportunities available to them. For degree apprenticeships to contribute more effectively to the social mobility agenda, removing barriers to participation and ensuring diversity in take-up should be an important area of focus for policymakers, providers and employers alike.

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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

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