

Chapter 3

The Creative Disruption of Degree Apprenticeships in the UK

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of an apprenticeship levy for employers with a payroll above £3m in 2017 has transformed the landscape for higher-level skills in the UK. While there is some evidence of the economic benefits of higher education, it seems to be largely operating to reproduce economic position rather than as an agent of social mobility. At the same time, UK employers have made it clear that graduates do not possess the range of skills that they require and yet have a poor record of investing in the development of their employees. In this problematized context, degree apprenticeships can operate to creatively disrupt our understanding of the relationship between higher education and work. Assumptions about the presumed differences between academic and professional standards, knowledge and competence, on-and-off-the-job learning are all challenged by the introduction of degree apprenticeships. Can universities overcome these challenges to rethink the role of higher education as the worlds of work and learning align?

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the context, policy, development and potential for what is widely anticipated to become the most prominent form of work-based learning (WBL) in the UK, namely apprenticeships. Until now WBL in various forms has been delivered in many UK universities, including my own and this has largely taken two forms. Initially most WBL programmes were designed to meet the needs of those with significant professional experience, studying part time but more recently, to enable younger employed people to undertake ‘work-integrated’ degrees aligned with work roles. The anticipated growth in degree apprenticeships is intended to meet the needs of both younger people seeking access to professional roles and existing employees who are seeking professional recognition and career progression.

Through the examination of some of the tensions between ‘traditional’ higher education provision and the advent of the specific requirements of apprenticeships I identify how the development of ‘degree apprenticeships’ have served to challenge conceptions about the relationship between work and learning. It is of course the case that universities have for many years been providing work-based and employer sponsored degrees. The provision of employer sponsored degrees also challenges the traditional conception of higher education and the relationship between work and learning. Indeed there are those who contend that:

While there is much that is good about Modern (including Higher and Degree) Apprenticeships, they are clearly not a silver bullet for the UK’s skills and productivity issues. (Phoenix, 2016, p4)

It is also the case, as Phoenix (2016) argues, that there exists a lack of a level playing field between employer sponsored degrees and degree apprenticeships, as a consequence of the introduction of an ‘Apprenticeship Levy’ in the UK. However, I want to propose that the advent of degree apprenticeships, in particular, has the potential to transform our cultural understanding of the role universities, professional associations and employers and place learning at the center of our working lives.

The policy relationship between higher education, work, employment and skills in the UK has fluctuated considerably and the tension between students being ‘at the heart of the system’ (BIS, 2011a) and employers driving the apprenticeship agenda is palpable. The provision of UK higher education, based upon delivering traditional undergraduate programmes, is significantly challenged by the demographic downturn in the UK population of young (18-21 year old) people since around 2009, which is not projected to start to rise again until after 2020 (UUK, 2008). The projected decline between 2010/11 and 2020/21 is 13.2% (Bekhradnia, 2006). While this decline has to a degree been mitigated by non-UK students, the inclusion of students

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in UK Government immigration statistics has resulted in the majority international student feeling unwelcome (NUS, 2014) and are turning away from studying in the UK (Reidy, 2017). Universities UK produce annual reports on 'Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education' and the numbers reported indicate a decline of 215,815 students between 2011/12 and 2015/16 (UUK, 2013, 2017) The total number of higher education students reported for 2015/16 was 2,280,830 (UUK, 2017). By way of policy context, the UK Government currently has a target of 3 million apprentices by 2020 (BIS, 2015), which is significantly larger than the whole of the UK higher education sector. The overall decline in young UK higher education students provides a context for increased competition in a shrinking market at a time when 'alternative providers' of higher education are being encouraged (Skip and Hopwood, 2017).

One of the key aspects of work-based learning in the UK is that it has challenged the some assumed relationships between higher education and employment. Where higher education is thought of as (at least in part) a preparation for employment, it necessarily draws a relationship between the knowledge and skills that graduates gain as a consequence of the programmes of study they have undertaken and those expected or required by employers. Whereas there are those that consider any alignment of the aims of higher education with those of industry and employment to be a debasement of the intrinsic value of higher education (Collini, 2012), work-based learning places the work that learners are engaged in at the center of the 'practice' (in the sense used by Macintyre, 2007), of higher education. There have been attempts to resolve this seeming tension through a variety of UK Government policy interventions. While there is evidence of the economic benefits of higher education (at least in some areas) it seems to be largely operating to reproduce economic position rather as an agent of social mobility (Britton et al 2016; UUK 2016; Blackman 2017). The evidence seems to indicate that, despite employability initiatives and outreach schemes, parental and social background is still the key determinant to accessing professional job roles. At the same time, UK employers have made it clear that graduates do not possess the range of skills that they require and yet employers themselves have a poor record of investing in the development of their employees (CIPD, 2017). In this problematised context, higher and degree apprenticeships can operate to creatively disrupt our understanding of the relationship between higher education and work. Assumptions about the presumed differences between academic and professional standards, knowledge and competence, on-and-off-the-job learning, are all challenged by the introduction of degree apprenticeships. So too are presumptions about the roles and responsibilities of universities and employers in developing and delivering higher and degree apprenticeships, these can be perceived as both a threat to institutional autonomy and an opportunity for sustainable collaboration. Can UK universities overcome these challenges to rethink the role of higher education as the worlds of work and learning align?

The Earnings Premium of Higher Education

In considering ‘Fair Access to Higher Education’, The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group (2004) (The Schwartz Report) suggested that, higher education is a ‘valuable commodity’ or what we might call a ‘positional good’ that enables those that have successfully completed a higher education programme to gain significant economic benefits. In their ‘Working Futures’ report the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) projected that by 2024 46% of all UK employment and 70% of all newly created jobs will be in higher skilled occupations (UKCES, 2016). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey also found that 74% of graduates are in professional jobs three and a half years after leaving higher education (HESA, 2015). If the career trajectories of graduates are an indicator of the extent to which they can access the higher skilled occupations projected by UKCES, then there is at least the possibility that higher education could be advantageous in securing employment in more highly skilled occupations.

Similarly, a study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) indicated that the lifetime earnings premium for those gaining a first degree is £250k for women and £165k for men (Britton et al, 2016). HESA data has also indicated that graduates earn on average £10k per year more than non-graduates (HESA, 2015). However, the recent Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data published by the UK Department for Education (DfE) indicates a far more complex picture of the economic benefits of higher education (DfE, 2017). Educational attainment prior to undertaking higher education seems to be a significant indicator of earnings after graduation, which could raise questions about the added value of higher education. The earning premium also seems to vary greatly depending upon the subject studied with arts subjects being less likely to bring the same level of economic rewards as other subjects.

The IFS Working Paper ‘How English domiciled graduate earnings vary with gender, institution attended, subject and socio-economic background’ (Britton et al, 2016) found that graduates from higher-income backgrounds earn significantly more after graduation than graduates from poorer families. Strikingly, this seems to be the case even where students complete the same degree from the same university. This echoes some of the findings from UUK’s Social Mobility Advisory Group:

Having graduated from university, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to go into professional jobs, and if they do they are likely to be paid less (UUK, 2016)

HESA (2015) data also seems to indicate a strong correlation between those higher education institutions whose students have parents from senior managerial

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and professional occupations and those institutions with the highest tariff entry requirements. This correlation is also reflected in the relationship between institutions with low tariff entry requirements and relatively low levels of students from professional backgrounds. In considering the purpose of very high tariff entry requirements Blackman (2017) argues that:

It is unlikely that these are all valid assessments of what is needed to succeed on a particular course. If instead these differences are about rationing places on high demand courses, there are serious issues about how the highest of these requirements discriminate systematically against...students. (Blackman, 2017, p10)

High entry tariff institutions might argue that the requirement for extremely high prior learning attainment is a mechanism to ensure that those accepted onto courses have the ‘merit and potential’ (Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, 2004) to succeed on very demanding programmes of study. However, it seems likely, given the major differences in entry tariff requirements for seemingly very similar degree programmes (albeit offered by more or less selective institutions), that this is being used as a means to reproduce the ‘brand value’ of ‘academically excellent’ institutions (Marginson, 2004, 2006, Bravenboer, 2012). Whilst the correlation between the professional family backgrounds of students at the most selective institutions is not, in itself, necessarily a causal relationship, it does seem to reinforce the idea that the economic position afforded by social and family background is being reproduced by the UK higher education system. While higher education can seemingly provide positional economic benefits, access to these benefits is significantly and even primarily dependent upon the social and economic position of an applicant’s or student’s family. This does to point to a social mobility deficit in the provision of higher education in the UK that potentially undermines the idea of higher education as a positional good, in that access to the associated positional benefits (employment, earnings and professional status) seem significantly dependent upon other factors. As a consequence the idea that higher education, in and of itself, serves as a preparation for work and employment is similarly problematised.

Higher Education, Employability, and Skills

Employability is not a new idea in UK higher education and can be understood as: “having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required” (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). There are of course other contested conceptions that position employability more broadly as a context dependent developmental process rather than as a specific measurable outcome or as an individualised set of skills to attained (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005; Reid 2016;

Sin & Neave 2016). However, the emphasis on the ‘outcomes’ of employability has arguably heightened as the rationale for higher tuition fees has been increasingly based upon the positional goods that higher education can bring. The Browne Report (2012) made the case for increased tuition fees based on the idea that as individual students are the main beneficiaries of higher education they should bear the main brunt of the cost. The benefits Browne (2012) associated with higher education are that:

On graduating, graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next. Participating in higher education enables individuals from low-income backgrounds and then their families to enter higher status jobs and increase their earnings. (Browne, 2012, p14)

Tomlinson (2008) has argued that while students may have internalised the idea that higher education brings positional employability benefits they are also aware of a decline in the value of academic credentials in securing these same benefits. Tomlinson points to the co-existence of elite and mass higher education systems, which seemingly provides access to employability benefits but operates to intensify the positional differences between advantaged and disadvantaged groups, reinforcing inequalities. If higher education were found to not be delivering on these benefits, it would serve to undermine a fundamental plank of the rationale for shifting the burden of funding higher education from the state to the individual student/graduate. Various governmental measures and rankings of the effectiveness of higher education to realise the benefits of employment, higher wages are utilised by the sector as a whole and by individual institutions to demonstrate and reaffirm the economic value of higher education. This has included the Destinations of Higher Education Leavers Survey and the Report on Longitudinal Educational Outcomes. The UK Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (HEFCE, 2016) includes an employability metric (‘Employment/destinations including highly skilled employment’) as one factor in determining if an individual institution is TEF ‘Gold’, ‘Silver’ or ‘Bronze’, powerful stuff in a highly competitive higher education market place. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that UK universities have been investing in a wide range of employability initiatives (Laughton, 2016) to boost their performance and reputation for delivering the employability benefit.

Another key factor in realising the employability benefits of higher education is the extent to which employers regard graduates as having the relevant capacities to undertake work roles effectively. Sadly, despite the efforts by UK universities to enhance employability, the evidence would seem to suggest that employers do not regard graduates as having the requisite capabilities. More than this, some consider it takes at least nine months for a graduate to become economically productive (Rich,

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2015). The YouGov survey results for their ‘Good University Guide’ (YouGov, 2013) found that:

52% of employers think none or few graduate recruits are work-ready, 17% think none of them were fit for the job. (Paton, 2013)

Such views may be dismissed by some academics as being concerned with narrow skills or competencies that are either irrelevant or restrictive to the requirements of higher education. However, it may be that the factors that employers value relate to broader capabilities (Burke and Gibbs, 2014) such as: initiative; resourcefulness; communication; numeracy and mathematical skills; IT skills; teamwork; organisational skills; enterprise: creativity; learning; self-awareness and reflection (Rich, 2015).

Some of these kinds of capabilities are not outside of the scope of higher education and in fact are reflected in a range of established UK higher education descriptors, for example the ‘SEEC Credit Level Descriptors’ (SEEC, 2016). However, it is perhaps worth noting that the capabilities that are more ‘behavioural’ (such as initiative, resourcefulness etc.) tend to feature less significantly. Perhaps an alternative question for higher education providers could be, why do we need additional interventions in the form of employability activities to make degree programmes fit for purpose in effectively preparing graduates for work? Why are degree programmes not always designed to build the development of the required capabilities to gain employment? Rich (2016) has argued that it is possible that higher education may be developing highly educated individuals but that this may not be the same thing as meeting the skills needs of the country. The cultural uneasiness regarding the relationship between higher education and skills or between the expectations of academia and employers could certainly be at play but the lack of perceived fit between higher education and the requirements of employment does serve to undermine its economic value.

At the same time, employers also seem to recognise that they are not effectively utilising the skills of their existing workforce. In a survey of over 91,200 employers the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) found that:

2 million staff have skills not currently being used in the workplace and that the impacts of skill shortages reported by employers have the potential to be very damaging to business. (UKCES, 2015, p14)

In a recent essay, Keep (2017) has described how the structure of job roles in the UK constitutes a major factor in our lack of productivity. Keep argues that UK employers demonstrate significantly low demand for education beyond compulsory schooling while nearly half of all workers are over qualified for the roles they are undertaking.

These issues are a huge challenge for traditional supply-led policies. As the OECD suggests, we need to think how we can better link skills, economic development, and business improvement in order to underlying levels of demand for skill. We also need...to enable greater workplace innovation, and to help organisations re-think work organisation and job design to make better use of the skills and knowledge we are creating. (Keep, 2017, p16)

This lack of utilisation of skills in the workplace arguably also has an impact on the relationship between higher education and employment. If the solution for meeting skills shortages is graduate recruitment schemes then this may do little to embed a learning culture within organisations. In their report 'Driving New Success Strategies in Graduate

Recruitment' Burke and Gibbs (2014) identify the significant 'sunken' costs that are associated with graduate recruitment estimating that the return on the investment in the UK of £888m in 2013 was £112m, which equates to a 12.6% return. The report discusses the relative returns of a variety of 'talent management' strategies. The strategies discussed include: 'buy' (buying in graduate talent to meet immediate skills needs); 'buy and build' (buying in graduate talent combined with building on existing workforce skills); and 'build' (building on existing workforce skills and investing in the longer term development of new graduates). Strikingly, the report identified that the likelihood of success of 'buy' strategies was 1:15 compared with 1:4 for 'buy and build' and 1:1 for 'build' strategies. Perhaps this is unsurprising when considering that:

- 2 in 3 graduates spend five hours or less researching their current employer.
- 1 in 4 graduates understand day-to-day work before starting a job.
- 1 in 3 graduates say they made the right decision when accepting a job.
- 1 in 5 graduates apply for jobs that do not match their interests.
- 1 in 2 graduates receive more than one job offer.
- 1 in 4 graduates say they are likely to leave their first employer within 12 months (Burke and Gibbs, 2014, p19).

'Buying in' skills rather than 'building' or 'growing your own' seems predicated on the idea that the responsibility for integrating higher-level learning and work lies outside of the workplace and is not the responsibility of the employer. It is perhaps unsurprising that employers are dissatisfied with the 'readiness' of graduates to meet their skills needs given the level of investment and the relatively low rate of return. What seems obvious is that the merits of the 'buy' model are significantly limited at best and may be based on a mistaken understanding of the relationship between higher education and employment. Studies have indicated that effective collaboration

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between higher education institution and employers provide the most effective means of securing employability benefits (Matsuka & Mihail, 2016; Lowden et al, 2011; Reid, 2016). However, the ‘buy’ model seems to provide little purpose for sustained collaboration once a graduate has secured a job. Alternatively, the ‘build’ model could certainly provide a reason for sustained collaboration, for example in support of the on-going development of recruited graduates and potentially the development of workplace mentoring capabilities for staff with supervisory responsibilities for graduate recruits.

As the UKCES employer survey report found:

...the economy cannot rely on initial education alone to ensure people have the continuously changing skills that are needed: the workplace is a vital location to develop these skills. (UKCES, 2015, p12)

THE FLUCTUATING POLICY LANDSCAPE OF UK WORK-BASED LEARNING AND APPRENTICESHIPS

The introduction of Foundation degrees in the UK (HEFCE, 2000) attempted to involve employers in both the design and delivery of higher education programmes as one way to align the seeming disparities between the expectations of employers and the higher education sector. While this alignment may not have been fully realised for Foundation degrees (Morgan et al, 2004, Little, 2005), it has at least raised the prospect that employers might have a valuable contribution to make regarding how the design and delivery of higher education programmes constitutes an adequate preparation for work.

Subsequently, the need to increase higher-level skills in the UK (Leitch, 2006) resulted in the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) ‘Higher Education Transforming Workforce Development Programme’ (Kerwin et al, 2011). This included the promotion of employer or ‘demand’ led higher education provision as well as a model for employer-government co-funding of delivery. The model provided higher education institutions with significant (£247m) funding to pump-prime a broad range of initiatives to engage employers in the process of developing higher education programmes that were specifically designed to meet their workforce development needs. This meant that higher education institutions would still be in full control of the design, development, approval and delivery processes but that in order to qualify for co-funding employers would have to contribute 50% (at least in kind) to the delivery cost. This attempted shift in the funding of ‘employer led’ higher education constituted both an encouragement for more engagement and

collaboration between higher education institutions and employers as well as a means to get employers to invest in workforce development.

Despite much innovation in higher education practice and the broad achievement of the aims of the Workforce Development Programme (Kerwin et al, 2011), a change in UK Government resulted in the employer co-funding model being dropped. Subsequently, the introduction of a new tuition fees system that positioned students 'at the heart of the system' (BIS, 2011a) and as primary bearers of the costs of higher education based on the rationale that they individually benefitted. The tripling of tuition fee levels resulted in a number of higher education institutions seeking to justify the level of fees charged in relation to their 'academic excellence'. In several cases this was based on the extent that an institution could demonstrate excellence in research and some institutions sought to align with research intensive mission groups as a signifier of this excellence (Grove, 2012). Echoing the differential strategies in brand promotion for 'elite' institutions described by Marginson (2006), research excellence was associated to high band value, access to which was made scarce through ultra high tariff entry requirements.

At the same time that the UK university sector was introducing higher tuition fees the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) published its prospectus for the Higher Apprenticeship Development Fund (NAS, 2011). Whilst universities were mentioned as a source of innovation for models of delivery, higher apprenticeships were positioned as an alternative to university as a route to access 'highly skilled careers'.

The idea of an Apprenticeship as being a route to professional status goes against the grain of universities being the "gateway to the professions". (NAS, 2011, p. 11)

Similarly, the Wilson Review (2012) drew a clear distinction between university degrees and higher apprenticeships, which "are not congruent with the requirements of an honours degree but are equal in rigour and esteem" (Wilson, 2012, p. 46). The Specification for Apprenticeship Standards in England (SASE) (BIS, 2011b) constituted the regulatory framework for apprenticeships at the time and presented significant limitations on the potential alignment of higher apprenticeships with higher education qualifications. Significantly, higher apprenticeships could only reach level 5 and the qualifications required could range in size from 10 credits to 240 credits (equivalent to a Foundation degree) at levels 4 and 5. In the context of higher apprenticeships, the NAS also erroneously described Foundation degree as 'knowledge qualifications'. This unhelpful positioning reproduced the typical requirement for separate 'knowledge' and 'competence' qualifications within higher

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apprenticeships (Anderson et al, 2012) but failed to recognise the requirement that Foundation degrees “are underpinned by work-based learning” (QAA, 2010, para. 24),

The funding environment at the time was also differentiated depending upon whether a required qualification was Skills Funding Agency (SFA) funded or recognised as a prescribed HEFCE higher education qualification. With regards to the former, employers could claim 50-100% of the associated fees from the SFA, however, this facility was not available for higher apprenticeships that required a higher education qualification. As Anderson et al (2012) and Bravenboer (2016) have argued, this represented a significant barrier to university engagement with the higher apprenticeship agenda.

These barriers, combined with the policy that placed ‘students at the heart of the system’ and the consequent shift towards ‘academic excellence’, made it clear that the ‘skills agenda’ was not a core aspect of university business. Significant progress was made in the alignment of apprenticeships with higher education qualifications in the revised SASE of 2013. Major changes included, higher apprenticeships up to level 7 (Masters level); the requirements that higher apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7 be comprised of at least 120 credits (equivalent to one full-time year of undergraduate study) and at least 90 credits at levels 4 and 5; the requirements for alignment with professional recognition (where available). These regulatory changes presented the prospect of a realignment of higher apprenticeships with higher education as the basis for constructive collaboration between employers, professional bodies and universities.

However, at the same time that the revised SASE (BIS, 2013) was being published, the UK Government had also initiated a major review of apprenticeships following press coverage of concerns about systemic low quality of apprenticeship provision (Reinis, 2012). The Richard Review (2012) focused on apprenticeships at lower level ‘intermediate’ and ‘advanced’ apprenticeships rather than higher apprenticeships that included higher education qualifications but its recommendations would apply to all apprenticeships. Richard recommended that employers determine the ‘standards’ that apprentices need to achieve to reach occupational competence and that employers should have control of the purchasing of apprenticeship training. The Review also recommended that the statement of apprenticeship ‘standards’ be greatly simplified to focus on the description of what an apprentice needs to know and do and that this should be rigorously tested at the end an apprenticeship.

The test should be holistic, at the end, and assess whether the individual is fully competent and employable, within their job and their sector. Employers should be directly involved in assessment (Richard, 2012, p. 18).

These recommendations strongly positioned employers as the primary drivers of apprenticeship standards, design, delivery and assessment and were all subsequently formally constituted in the ‘Trailblazer’ process for developing new ‘Apprenticeship Standards’. The UK Government guidance for this process steered employers away from including qualifications.

As the EPA [End-point Assessment] will provide definitive evidence of whether the apprentice has acquired full competence, qualifications should not generally need to be included within an apprenticeship. (BIS, 2015, p30)

The fracturing of the relationship between qualifications and apprenticeships as well as the requirement that providers were excluded from the ‘Trailblazer’ consortium of employers approved to develop new Apprenticeship Standards operated to distance skills policy from higher education.

The Apprenticeship Levy

The introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in the UK is arguably the most significant development in skills policy in decades. Since April 2017 UK legislation requires that all employers with a payroll of over £3m (including universities) must pay 0.5% of their payroll as an Apprenticeship Levy, so an employer with a payroll of £100m would pay £500k per annum. In total this has been projected to raise £3bn per annum in the UK. The impact of this legislation is not only to require employer investment in workforce development but also that this investment can only be used to purchase apprenticeship training for employees. In addition, all UK public sector employers with 250 plus employees have a statutory duty to employ 2.3% of their workforce as apprentices. The public sector equates to 16.2% of the total UK workforce, which could mean around 97k public sector apprenticeships annually. While not all of these public sector apprenticeships will be at higher levels, given that nursing, teaching, policing and social work are all graduate professions it is likely that a significant proportion will be higher and degree apprenticeships. This has the potential to radically shift the way that apprenticeships are thought of. Once all teachers, nurses, police officers, social workers and higher education academics gain professional status through degree apprenticeships, they will no longer be positioned as a niche or ‘alternative’ option. Rather, degree apprenticeships will become the route of choice to professional status and have a major affect on the nature of provision that universities deliver.

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The rationale for the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy was that if employers were going to have to pay for apprenticeships, they should drive the process of apprenticeships design and development to ensure that they are fit for purpose in meeting their needs. As the newly formed Institute for Apprenticeships has said:

The government wants employers to be at the center of the process for designing and delivering apprenticeships. This is why apprenticeship standards are designed by groups of employers, known as trailblazers, to meet their own skills needs, those of their broader sector and of the economy more widely. (IfA, 2017)

There is however a major unresolved question in considering the comparability of the methods of funding for traditional degrees and degree apprenticeships. The current version of the UK tuition fee system followed the Browne Report (2010), which sought to place ‘Students at the Heart of the System’. The key rationale for increasing student tuition fees highlighted by Browne was that as students are the main beneficiaries of higher education, for example in terms of higher income, it is fair that they pay for it. Furthermore, as students would be paying for higher education, it should be their needs that are paramount in its provision. Browne actually contrasted the needs of students with those of employers in proposing the new system.

Asking businesses to contribute through a new tax is also likely to mean that the higher education system will have to be more responsive to their demands; and there is a risk that these may displace the choices made by students. (Browne, 2010, p54)

Providers of degree apprenticeships, or for that matter any apprenticeship that includes a higher education qualification, actually have a dual responsibility to both employers and apprentices/students. This is familiar territory for universities that have worked with employers to provide work-based employer-sponsored higher education programmes (Phoenix, 2016). However, as degree apprenticeships become ‘core business’ for universities, it seems more likely to significantly affect conceptions of the purpose of higher education.

KNOWLEDGE, COMPETENCE, AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Standards of occupational competence measured through end-point assessment is a core requirement of all new UK apprenticeships and yet the achievement of ‘competence’ per se may not commonly be perceived to be a core aim of higher education programmes. This may particularly be the case where competence is understood as the ability to complete identified (perhaps narrowly defined) tasks to a standard. As indicated above, the seeming distinction between knowledge and competence was also reproduced in the requirements for the original apprenticeship frameworks in the UK (BIS, 2011b). All apprenticeship frameworks required separately assessed ‘knowledge qualifications’ typically assessed by college based assessors and ‘competence qualifications’ typically assessed in the workplace. The only possible exception to this was Foundation degrees, which could integrate knowledge and competence assessments.

This fractured conception of the relationship between knowledge and competence is also reflected in the majority ways in which individuals gain entry and recognition to higher-level occupations and professions. In reviewing literature related to work-integrated degrees, Lester et al (2016) identified four main routes to professional status. ‘Sequential routes’ involve an individual first gaining knowledge of relevant theory, typically via a degree and/or professional course followed by learning in the workplace that puts the theory learned into practice. In other words, knowledge first and then competence. ‘Parallel routes’ are usually constructed as a traineeship with an associated course running along side work in the form of day or block release. The parallel course is also designed to deliver the relevant knowledge and theory but there may not be a clear reciprocal with practice. In other words, knowledge is delivered in parallel with but separated from competence. ‘Experiential routes’ provide a means for individuals to gain recognition for the learning that has been gained through their prior experience of work. This learning can then contribute to the achievement of an individually negotiated higher education qualification. In other words, competence is recognised as knowledge. Lastly, ‘integrated routes’ involve the simultaneous coordination of theoretical and practical learning. The workplace is positioned as an important and equivalent source of both theoretical and practical learning. In other words, knowledge and competence are integrated.

Apprenticeships in the UK reflect differing aspects of these routes to the professions. The requirement for end-point assessment as a test of occupational competence reflects the traditional sequential route but does not preclude the development of competence through ‘on-programme’ learning. The legal requirement for employers to provide 20% of employed time for ‘off-the-job learning’ for all apprentices (in England) seems to reflect the practice of day-release approaches

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associated with parallel routes to professional roles. However, government guidance on off-the-job learning also makes it clear that this requirement can be met through allocating time for learning in the work environment and at times that suite flexible work patterns (DfE, 2017; Bravenboer 2017c). Apprenticeships can accommodate experimental routes to the professions and several Apprenticeship Standards allow knowledge, skills and behaviours to be demonstrated through the recognition of prior experiential learning. However, the funding requirements for apprenticeships mean that an apprentice must be developing ‘substantive new skills’, which is normally constituted in the form of training towards a new job role. There are two forms of degree apprenticeship that can be provided at present within the UK. The first can include an existing degree that is an appropriate means to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours required in an identified occupational area for an identified Apprenticeship Standard. This form of degree apprenticeship must have a separate ‘end-point assessment’ conducted by an organisation independent of the provision of the degree. Integrated degree apprenticeships, which are the only form of Apprenticeship Standards in England that do not require a separate end-point assessment, align most clearly with integrated routes to professional roles. For integrated degree apprenticeships, the degree programme is specifically designed for the purpose of delivering the learning required by the Apprenticeship Standard and incorporates the required end-point assessment. Integrated degree apprenticeships require that employers, universities and professional associations collaborate in the design and development of the associated Apprenticeship Standards. This collaborative approach perhaps offers the clearest opportunity to develop new provision that is specifically designed to align the workforce development needs of employers with the requirements of both academic and professional standards. However, apprenticeships are still relatively new to most UK universities and their relationship with the ‘core business’ of more traditional degree programmes is yet to be fully established across the sector. In some universities there may be a perception that ‘apprenticeships and skills’ are not part of the purpose of universities. Similarly, as apprenticeships are employer driven there can be a perception that the skills needs of employers are in contrast with the broader educational needs of students and at odds with the aims of the academy.

Barnett (1994) contrasts the limits of both what he terms ‘operational competence’ and ‘academic competence’ with his conception of higher education.

For Barnett, the limitations of academic competence are associated with its focus on mastery within an identified disciplinary knowledge domain, while the limitations of operational competence lie in the emphasis on outcomes and skill performance. Both conceptions are found wanting as a basis for higher education by Barnett to

the extent that they underplay the role of values, understanding and criticality in the context of “life-world” unpredictability. (Bravenboer & Lester 2016)

Interestingly, ‘values’, which Barnett argues is one of the areas that is under-represented where higher education is overly focused on the mastery of specialised knowledge domains, are present in at least some descriptions of ‘professional competence’. For example, the Engineering Council describes competence as the ability to “integrate knowledge, understanding, skills and values” (Engineering Council, 2013). Similarly, the professional competence of medical practitioners has been described as:

The habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served. (Epstein & Hundert 2002)

Such descriptions of professional competence do not limit the scope of learning to operational competencies but do broaden requirements to include values and expectations around what might constitute acting as ‘a professional’. It is perhaps arguable that the lack of satisfaction of employers with traditional higher education as a preparation for work is in part as a consequence of the lack of consistent emphasis on developing or requiring the demonstration of standards of professional behaviour.

On the one hand, current apprenticeship policy in the UK has removed the requirement for qualifications (with the exception of ‘mandated qualifications’ required by professional associations). However, the requirement to describe apprenticeship standards in terms of ‘knowledge’, ‘skills’ and ‘behaviours’ has the potential to align ‘knowing’, ‘doing’ and ‘being’ in a way that Barnett might celebrate as the basis for something close to his conception of higher education. In fact, in some approved Apprenticeship Standards ‘values’ have been explicitly included. For example, the Business to Business (B2B) Sales Professional Degree Apprenticeship Standard describes the requirements for professional competence in terms of ‘knowledge’, ‘skills’ and ‘professional behaviours and values’. This degree apprenticeship sought to establish B2B Sales as a profession and, working with the Association of Professional Sales, emphasised ethical professional practice as core to the requirements for the demonstration of competence (Bravenboer, 2017a). Similarly, the Academic Professional Apprenticeship Standard also describes the requirements for professional competence in terms of ‘core values and behaviours’ in addition to ‘knowledge’ and ‘skills’. This potentially transformative apprenticeship is designed to prepare academic staff working in higher education institutions to operate at a professional level, including both teaching and/or research focused roles. The apprenticeship also leads to professional body recognition through Fellowship

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of the UK Higher Education Academy. As UK universities validate higher education programmes to deliver these new apprenticeships they will be required to demonstrate that courses develop and require professional values and behaviours as learning outcomes. This provides the opportunity to more fully integrate the requirements for professional values and behaviours into higher education programme design, delivery and assessment beyond traditional requirements for ‘mapping’ learning outcomes against standards statements for professional body recognition/accreditation. Perhaps also, it could point to a shift away from the emphasis on a specialist ‘knowledge’ driven curriculum towards one that also includes strong emphasis on transdisciplinary professional learning (Bravenboer, 2017b). This emphasis would reflect and align well with work-based curriculum frameworks established by many universities (Bravenboer and Workman, 2016a, 2016b)

Perhaps the emphasis on professional values also opens the opportunity for building into programmes the expectation and requirement that learners demonstrate the ability to reflect on and challenge current practice towards on-going enhancement and innovation as practitioners. Macintyre’s concept of ‘practices’ presents the idea that engagement with a practice requires practitioners to continually challenge existing practice to extend the ends and goods of that practice. For Macintyre practices can be described as:

...any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music. (Macintyre, 2007, p187)

Apprenticeship Standards for professions at Bachelors or Masters levels in the UK include teacher; registered nurse; police constable; social worker; commercial airline pilot; chartered manager; senior leader; civil engineer; aerospace engineer; nuclear scientist and nuclear engineer; accountancy and taxation professional; chartered legal executive; senior insurance professional; actuary; and solicitor amongst many others. It seems sensible to suggest that the professional occupations that are defined by these Apprenticeship Standards seem to fall within Macintyre’s (2007) conception of practices as they include professional behaviours that require activity to further the goods that are internal to each practice. The end-point assessment requirements

for Apprenticeship Standards in the UK also typically include the production of work-based projects that provide the opportunity to demonstrate a full range of knowledge, skills and behaviours. These requirements align well with work-based learning curricula provided by universities in the UK, which typically include work-based projects as the culminating, or 'cap stone' vehicle for work-based learning degree programmes (Bravenboer and Workman, 2016a, 2016b). Such projects also typically include learning outcomes that require a focus on professional practice enhancement and innovation, which can include public service enhancements or business benefits in the private sector but in either case can contribute to increased effectiveness and higher productivity. This serves to illustrate how this core element of work-based learning curricula could be mainstreamed in UK higher education provision through degree apprenticeships. More than this, it illustrates that degree apprenticeships could provide the means to establish reflection on practice towards enhancement as a core aspect of what it means to be 'a professional'.

A Potential 'Disrupted' Future

There are many barriers and challenges to university engagement with degree apprenticeships in the UK and some of these have been discussed above. Providing higher and degree apprenticeships as a core part of the business of universities requires comprehensive changes in the way that a university operates, which are inevitably disruptive. This includes all major functions such as admissions, registry, finance, marketing and quality. For example, for apprenticeships employers recruit apprentices rather than the university admitting students and students cannot be enrolled until contracts with employers are signed. The reporting requirements for apprentices require specific information about each employer and need to meet the requirements of governmental bodies whose systems are not designed (as yet) to be responsive those of the higher education sector. Apprentices are not charged tuition fees in the UK but specific financial arrangements need to be in place to draw down the corresponding apprenticeship levy or direct employer payments. The audience for marketing and communications are primarily employers rather than students and they key messages are around return on investment. The validation and approval of degree apprenticeships by universities needs to demonstrate that programmes are an appropriate means to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours designed and specified by employers in nationally approved Apprenticeship Standards not solely academic standards determined by the university, and so on.

Perhaps equally significant is the fact that degree apprenticeships in England require recognition that at 80% of the required learning must be derived from work and take place while apprentices are working (Bravenboer, 2017c). While this will be very familiar to many universities who have developed work-based learning

programmes, it can represent a major cultural shift for academic staff that do not have this experience. This may require significant staff and curriculum development to enable universities to meet the challenge of providing flexible learning that meet the needs of apprentices and their employers. The potential shift away from the emphasis on academic subject expertise towards practice-based professional and/or industry expertise is also a challenge for academics whose professional identity is predicated on the former.

We can add into this head-spinning array of challenges the fact that the apprenticeship market is new and significantly unpredictable. At present, apprenticeships seem to be a priority for all political parties in the UK but the shifting sands of previous skills policy initiatives tell us that we cannot take this for granted. Some private sector employers seem reluctant to change their established practice of piecemeal workforce development and in the UK all public sector areas have undergone major budget restrictions and many National Health Service Trusts are in deficit. Despite the urgent need to recruit and develop staff in UK public sector areas such as policing, nursing, teaching and social work, this presents a majorly challenging context for new initiatives to take root, even if they provide potential solutions. While the Apprenticeship Levy provides a very good reason to ensure that universities are ready to deliver degree apprenticeships, it is nonetheless uncertain how the employer driven market will play out in practice.

However, despite the significant risks involved with investing in developing the new systems and resources required to deliver apprenticeships and the many uncertainties, there are clear opportunities for universities. Apprenticeships provide an opportunity to maximise recruitment and income by accessing new higher and degree apprenticeship markets resulting from the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy to mitigate the demographic downturn in traditional students in the UK. There is of course the risk that the predicted rise in traditional students in the UK post 2021 will encourage some universities resist any significant change in their existing provision. Higher and degree apprenticeships however, do also provide a means to diversify provision offered by universities to minimise the risk of fluctuations in sources of more traditional income. Universities can enhance their results through delivering degree apprenticeships against key employability, student outcomes and learning gain performance indicators, such as within the Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK. There are opportunities to provide new ways to establish and build on strategic collaborations with employers and other providers to develop and deliver higher and degree apprenticeships that meet workforce development, local/regional and sector skills needs. Developing higher and degree apprenticeships necessarily stimulates innovation in approaches to learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design helping to ensure that the position of universities at the leading edge of higher education provision is maintained. It is worth noting that private and

‘alternative’ providers of higher education in the UK constitute early adopters of degree apprenticeships and are unhindered by pre-existing traditional higher education delivery practices. There are also opportunities for universities to contribute directly to the social mobility agenda by broadening access to higher education and the professions through higher and degree apprenticeships for under-represented groups. The development and delivery of higher and degree apprenticeships necessarily widens access to higher education by meeting the needs of a key group who are under-represented, namely those in work. While existing approaches to widen access to higher education through raising the aspirations of ‘disadvantaged’ groups have not impacted upon the reproductive effect of higher education in enabling those from professional family backgrounds to access professions job roles (Blackman 2017), higher and degree apprenticeships could. Some employers are already deciding to redefine their criteria for degree apprenticeship applicants to ensure that they widen their ‘talent pool’ beyond and to some extent in contrast to previous graduate recruitment schemes. For example, Barclays Bank have established an initiative to use apprenticeships to “reach into the community to hire the most excluded” (Thompson, 2017) by specifically targeting the long-term unemployed and those without the standard school qualifications (five GCSEs).

To conclude I want to go beyond these opportunities to imagine a (not too distant) future where the degree apprenticeships have had a dramatic, and from my perspective positive, effect on the nature of higher education and perhaps more importantly the relationship between work and learning.

In this future, the academic/vocational divide is dead and work-integrated learning is the norm! Universities are no longer thought to be the sole gatekeepers of access to higher education – multiple routes of equal esteem are available. Standards are designed and maintained through collaboration between higher education providers, professional associations and employers. Each has a stake, each has a role and each has a responsibility to ensure that the quality of learning (in whatever context) is high and that it is fit for purpose in enabling people to engage with life and work. The workplace is understood as an important source of higher level of learning, knowledge generation, innovation and expertise that providers of higher education cannot afford to ignore. Universities are highly efficient at managing dynamic collaborations with employers and professional bodies at local, national and international levels. They understand that a key part of the purpose of a university is to provide a locus for constructive collaboration that is informed both by critical thinking and the necessities of practical impact.

Employers expect to invest in apprenticeships and work-integrated learning as the business benefits are well established. Banks and all public sector projects require clear and coherent integrated workforce development plans that demonstrate how job roles require and support the development of higher-level learning and qualifications as an integral aspect of the case for business investment. There is a common expectation that access to professional work roles normally require engagement with higher or degree apprenticeships supported by employers. It is standards practice that job role benefits describe the ‘learning package’ that will enable people to develop and progress their capabilities and their career.

Universities, professional bodies and employers collaboratively drive ongoing enhancement and innovation through apprenticeships and productivity is increased. The very idea of being a ‘professional’ implies that people systematically seek to extend and constructively challenge their own and others practice, through critical reflection, engagement and collaboration. The time allocated for reflection and collaboration is valued by employers and built into work patterns based on the track record of business benefits and service enhancement. Managers are required to demonstrate coaching and mentoring skills and have a responsibility to promote learning opportunity as an integral aspect of day-to day work.

The requirements for academic and professional recognition are aligned with job roles through the vehicle of apprenticeships. All teachers, social workers, nurses, police officers, civil servants, solicitors, accountants, actuaries, IT professionals, managers, leaders, creative arts practitioners, designers, engineers, airline pilots, academic professionals and doctors gain professional status through higher and degree apprenticeships. The worlds of work and learning are aligned...

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