

# Who is going to university the unconventional way?

*More young people are going to university to study a traditional undergraduate degree – but is that the best option for all of them? What are the alternatives, who is taking them and what is the best preparation for accessing them? Paul Steer, OCR Head of Policy, looks at some of the limited data available and shares the findings of a recent survey in which OCR joined forces with UVAC (University Vocational Awards Council).*



With the numbers of young people attending university hitting the 50% mark this year, going to university to study for a degree is the dominant route for those seeking to study at a higher level.

Although, of course, it remains an excellent choice for the majority, it isn't the only option and policy makers and young people themselves are beginning to ask about other choices. Is a full-time university course the best route for everybody who is in a position to take it up? With ongoing concerns about the cost to students of higher education and with increased interest in technical education, what **are** the alternative forms of, and routes to, higher study, and how many people are taking them?

## Higher and Degree Apprenticeships

The main alternatives to traditional higher education available to young people with a good set of Level 3 qualifications already under their belt fall readily into higher and degree apprenticeships or courses leading to higher level technical qualifications. Higher apprenticeships are available in England at Levels 4, 5, 6 and 7 (with apprenticeships at Level 6 and 7 including a full bachelor's or master's degree known as Degree Apprenticeships). According to UCAS, higher and degree apprenticeships are available in a wide range of industries and occupations. The Degree Apprenticeship for 'Chartered Manager' was the most popular last year, with 'Digital and Technology Solutions Professional' coming second, followed by 'Chartered Surveyor', 'Registered Nurse', then 'Civil Engineer'. Financially, Degree Apprenticeships provide an attractive alternative to traditional degrees for the individual student as an apprentice is a waged employee and tuition costs are paid by the employer and state from the apprenticeship levy pot.

## Rise in numbers

However, a cursory glance at the available data reveals that most apprenticeships at the higher level are taken up by a small number of students and most of those who do are aged over 25. The majority of Level 4 and above apprentices who enrolled in the 12 months up to June 2019 were over 25. Only 19,000 of the 67,000 enrolments were 19-24 year olds.<sup>1</sup> This is admittedly impressive growth on 2015 when there were only 42,000 enrolments in total across all ages<sup>2</sup>. But in case these numbers look quite large, compare them with the fact that, in 2018, 533,000 students<sup>3</sup> accepted full-time undergraduate places at a university. And the numbers of under-21 year olds entering onto a degree apprenticeship was merely 850<sup>4</sup>. Most of these were in STEM or digital sectors.

There are a wide range of 'Higher Level Technical Qualifications' available which include HNDs and HNCs, and professional qualifications linked to specific occupational routes such as OCR's Level 6 Diploma in Career Guidance and Advice. According to the DfE, there are 4,000<sup>5</sup> Higher Level Technical Qualifications. But the same DfE report tells us that the number of certificates issued in this category represents just 4% of all certificates issued. And although the data is difficult to get hold of, it looks like fewer than 30,000 under-21-year olds studied for a Level 4 or 5 technical qualification in 2015/2016<sup>6</sup>.

## Skills Shortages

The government is concerned by the low numbers taking Level 4 and 5 technical qualifications, linking this to a shortage of skilled technical workers and Britain's poor productivity rates. The DfE has consulted on plans to promote and enhance these qualifications. Money has been found to prime the educational infrastructure so it is

better placed to deliver high quality technical education, including through its new Institutes of Technology. Another DfE priority is to put in place progression routes for young people completing T Levels, the first of which are to be taught from September 2020.

## What did UVAC members tell us?

In order to understand a bit more about the availability of routes into higher level skills and technical education, including degrees, OCR joined forces with UVAC to see what qualifications young people are using to access such programmes.

So far we have only dipped our toe in the water and there is more work to be done, but from a limited survey of UVAC member institutions, we learned the following:

- 77% of universities surveyed offer Level 4 or 5 qualifications
- 85% offer Degree Apprenticeships at Level 6
- 81% already have learners aged 18-19 starting on these programmes.

This suggests that, whilst the numbers may be low, a wide range of universities are already offering alternatives to traditional undergraduate study programmes. OCR naturally takes an interest in how its qualifications are used to progress onto further study, whether those qualifications be our well-established stable of A Levels, our OCR Cambridge Technicals, or, increasingly, a blend of the two. Our survey revealed that entry requirements for Level 4 or 5 qualifications were stipulated in the following proportions:

- 65% A Levels (academic)
- 76.5% Level 3 Technical and Vocational Qualifications
- 71% GCSE maths and/or English.

Although the sample survey was small, this shows clearly that Applied General Qualifications, such as Cambridge

Technicals are already an established route into higher technical study. It would appear that such qualifications are widely recognised for these purposes. Also of great interest was the finding that, of 18-19 year olds accepted onto Level 4 and 5 programmes, the majority had a blend of A Levels and Applied General qualifications:

- 35% Academic qualifications (AS/A Levels and GCSEs)
- 12% Level 3 Technical and/or Vocational Qualifications
- 53% Mixture of Academic and Technical/Vocational Qualifications.

Statistics show that the number of people who would qualify for access to a university place but have chosen other study programmes is massively in the minority. However, there are political and economic developments which might change this. Furthermore, there is evidence that options to take such qualifications are already available, albeit in small numbers, across a range of institutions. There is also some evidence to suggest that existing 16-19 technical and applied qualifications provide a good preparation for taking this step.

## Next steps

Our intention is to undertake further work with UVAC to monitor the growth of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships and, crucially, the qualifications that are being used to access these programmes. The next step would be to look at retention and to see how students entering with different types of qualifications progress.

### Join the conversation

If you would like to join the debate about non-traditional routes and other pathways to Higher Education, please contact Mandy Crawford-Lee, UVAC Director of Policy and Operations: [M.CrawfordLee@bolton.ac.uk](mailto:M.CrawfordLee@bolton.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> DfE, All age apprenticeship programme starts by level and age 2018-19 (tab 3)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/apprenticeship-and-levy-statistics-august-2019>

<sup>2</sup> Figure 4 Mapping the Higher Technical Landscape

<http://www.gatsby.org.uk/uploads/education/reports/pdf/mapping-the-higher-technical-landscape-final-version.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Higher education funding in England, published Monday, July 1, 2019

<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7973>

<sup>4</sup> "In 2016-17 of 1,750 degree apprenticeship starts roughly half were under 21"

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/analysis-of-degree-apprenticeships/>

<sup>5</sup> Higher technical education: the current system and the case for change, DfE, July 2019

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/814938/Higher\\_technical\\_education\\_case\\_for\\_change.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814938/Higher_technical_education_case_for_change.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Source: ILR 2015/16 & HESA 2015/16, T Mapping the higher technical landscape, table 2

<http://www.gatsby.org.uk/uploads/education/reports/pdf/mapping-the-higher-technical-landscape-final-version.pdf>