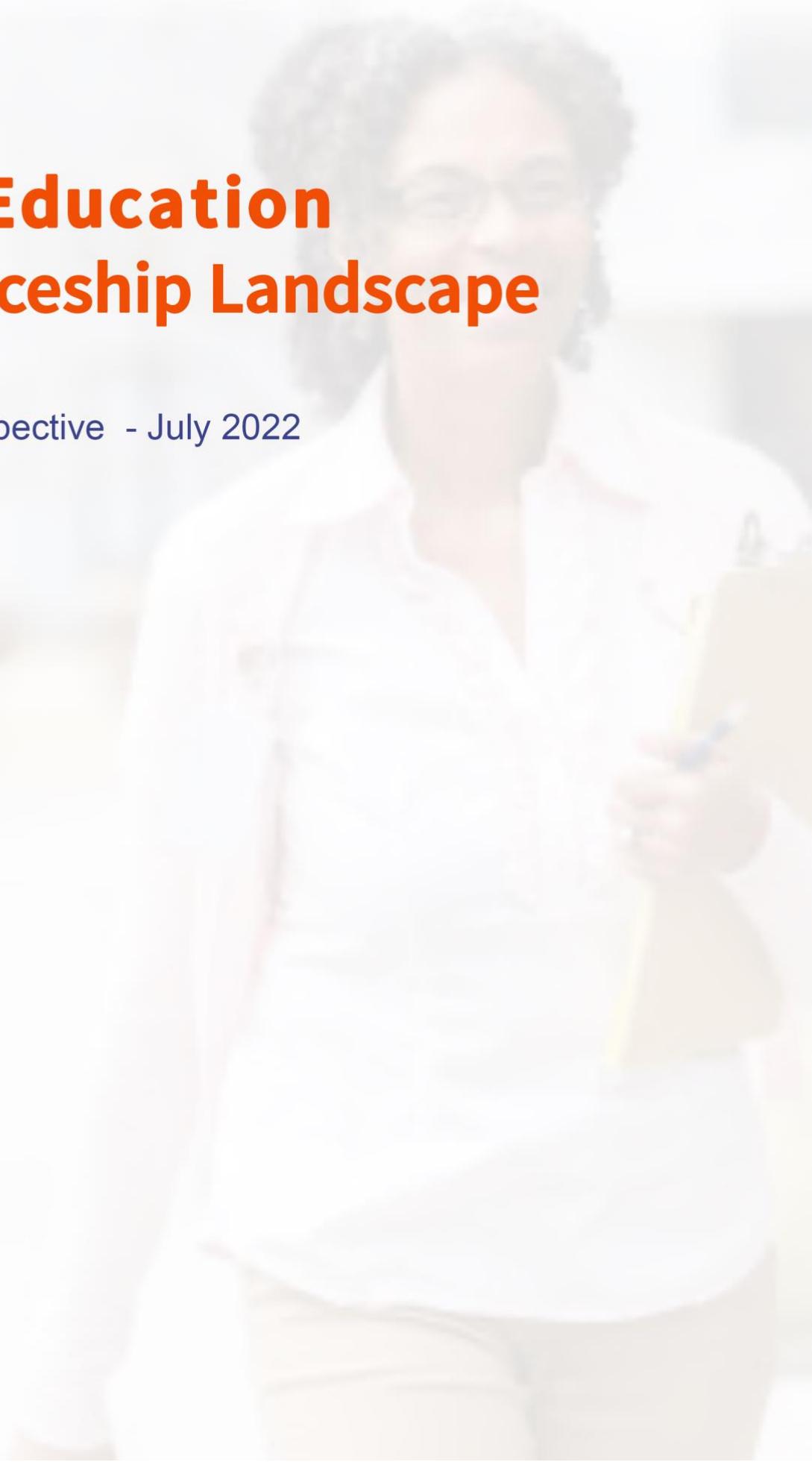


# Higher Education Apprenticeship Landscape

Practitioner Perspective - July 2022



# Introduction

To identify, and better understand a number of key operational challenges, the Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Standards (FISSS) commissioned a market research project with a group of universities currently providing, or who were considering providing, degree apprenticeships.

Specifically, the focus of the project was to understand current issues pertaining to delivery, on-programme assessment, end point assessment and submission of data returns for funding and certification. Universities were interviewed with a key aim of understanding individual institution's experience of quality assurance and adherence to regulatory requirements around apprenticeship delivery.

Universities who participated in the research included Derby, Edgehill, Henley Management School (Reading), Kent, Kings College, Suffolk.

What became clear was that there are consistent experiences across the universities. Key themes emerged which must be addressed if we are to fully realise the transformational impact that apprenticeships can have on the higher education landscape, and the educational landscape in general.



## Positive direction of travel

The backdrop, and context of the interviews, is the continuing seismic growth of degree and higher degree apprenticeships with an increase of 122% since the apprenticeship reforms and levy introduction back in 2017. Further significant growth, over the next 3-5 year period, was predicted by all the universities interviewed with the caveat of ensuring consistency of quality as well as quantity.

Employers have embraced the opportunity to fund higher level skills through the levy system and have invested in higher and degree apprenticeships in a response to the change in Government policy. Even though the pandemic negatively impacted on the Intermediate and Advanced apprenticeship starts during the period 2019/2020 to 2021/22, resulting in a -31% and -26% drop respectively on the previous year, higher and degree apprenticeships continued their growth trajectory rising a further 12%. Higher and degree apprenticeships represented 32% of all apprenticeship starts in 20/21 demonstrating their robustness during a challenging economic climate.

The shift from Apprenticeship Frameworks to Standards as a response to the Richards Review recommendation for apprenticeship reform, has created a significant opportunity for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to work closely with employers and professional body organisations to reshape the apprenticeship pathway. The Trailblazer forums for Standards development has resulted in a significant increase in new apprenticeships across a range of occupational standards. By 2022, all apprenticeship starts will be on the new Standards with Frameworks being completely phased out. New employer relations have been formed as a result, creating a closer working relationship with industry to develop a nuanced approach to regional education and training requirements. The focus on the required knowledge, skills and behaviours to meet specific sector skills needs, and address any current gaps, has also presented the opportunity to be future focussed to support a strong economic climate going forward.

The by-product of such partnership activity is that engagement with employers is strengthened and is expected to result in more integrated working between education and industry, with positive impact for graduate employability, and creating greater opportunity for new knowledge creation and transfer.

HEIs also predicted closer working relationships with Further Education Colleges to create an apprenticeship escalator ranging from levels 2-7 to create a desired, but often unrealised, regional eco-system for skills.

Within the context of stronger regional and sector partnerships, there is the perfect opportunity to take a holistic view of the educational eco-system to fully realise the impact and benefits of apprenticeship development across all educational levels and sector Standards.

## The shift to integrated

Due to an urgent need to replenish and enhance health workforces at speed during the COVID pandemic, there was agreement to see the professional body assessment as the core and final test for apprentices, thereby removing the requirement for a separate end point assessment within some apprenticeship standards. This practice is continuing for some core health provision and discussion at policy level appears to be leading to a shift towards integrated apprenticeships being the dominant model at HE level.

The move towards integrated apprenticeship provision, where the learning provider becomes the overall assessor for all aspects of the apprenticeship, anticipated and strongly welcomed by HEIs, is an indicator of the shift in thinking for apprenticeship design and delivery at the higher and degree levels. This shift acknowledges the difference in approaches at the various education levels informed by sector quality frameworks. However, this further highlights the need for guidance as this shift is realised.

Colleagues advised that they are attending multiple webinars in a bid to seek understanding of interpretation across the regulatory spectrum. Forums are often informed by Ofqual, ESFA and IfATE which are extremely helpful but do not address, nor have experience of, an integrated approach. Facilitation of a way forward, and understanding of an explicit model of compliance, will create a more confident approach to integrated apprenticeship design and will require engagement and input of all key stakeholder bodies including QAA and OfS to provide the level of clarity being sought.



# Apprenticeship Management – systems architecture

The approach to apprenticeship design, delivery and assessment requiring full engagement with employers and alignment with professional bodies, in a robust and real-time reporting scenario, does present challenges to the traditional university enterprise systems architecture, which is based, in the main, on traditional degree programme delivery.

Current enterprise systems in HE, do not meet the requirements of the diversification of HE provision. Additional enterprise systems adoption, which a number of universities have embarked upon, and/or integration of multiple systems to maximise efficiencies and assure compliance, are important considerations to manage the end-to-end apprenticeship journey and to ensure compliance throughout.

Capturing the elements of the Education Inspection Framework and quality and funding requirements, requires data sets to meet the specific intricacies of apprenticeship provision and to meet the multiple compliance components. In addition, features to support the efficient management of apprentices whilst also assuring a high-quality apprentice and employer experience, are critical if scalability and sustainability are to be achieved.

The challenges of managing end point assessment are proving particularly challenging within the current system architecture. The processes around the booking and management of assessments and undertaking Gateway readiness checks are inefficient and cumbersome. The removal of the necessity for EPAO engagement through the integrated apprenticeship route is welcomed but, has created an additional aspect of apprenticeship management falling under the jurisdiction of university responsibility.

The importance of accurate quality data and a consistent sector approach cannot be underestimated to ensure the upholding of apprenticeship standards. Assurance across all standards must be secured to allow regulators to be able to coherently articulate, backed by consistent data and robust approaches, the apprenticeship pathway within a broader quality framework, across different sectors. Aggregated reporting needs which will provide benchmark data to inform future enhancement, and identify areas of challenge for improvement, are required both at an institutional and sector level.

## Educational eco-system

Conversations with HEIs engaged in the research, illustrated the opportunity for higher and degree apprenticeship provision to be transformational in the higher educational landscape and broader educational context. In particular, the 'collision of the two worlds of FE/HE', as described through the interview process, was challenging but created a natural regional skills escalator for industry benefitting all participants.

To provide clarity in an educational framework spanning from Levels 2-7, designed in partnership with employers to ensure an alignment of knowledge, skills and behaviours for the future economy, there is an urgent need to develop a common apprenticeship narrative. For example, the focus on compliance at an FE perspective is dominant, whilst within HE the narrative is one of enhancement. It was also referenced by colleagues that the elements of Prevent and British Values needed to be approached in a more nuanced way for more mature apprentices studying at levels 6, then when applied for apprentices at levels 2-4.

Drawing upon the excellence and expertise of providers delivering across all educational levels there will be benefit in continued and further refinement of a delivery and assessment context that is appropriate for apprentices at different educational levels. The common aim should be to achieve a sophisticated translation of apprenticeship provision and assessment across all educational levels, enhanced through experience of delivery, and assessment of impact, with employers and apprentices at the core.



## Funding

Whilst all HEIs talked of further growth, concern was also expressed about the level of funding, and the reliability of future funding, balanced against the cost of the significant quality and funding compliance activity required. It was suggested that the 'mood music for funding' was currently favourable but this was offset by the seemingly ongoing review of funding bands. The uncertainty is impacting on internal investment requests and particularly so in relation to system architecture enhancements. Some concern was expressed as to whether university executive teams had fully grasped the real opportunities that apprenticeship provision would provide, and that financial margins as a single measure, might curtail apprenticeship development to its full potential regarding regional economic benefit and social mobility.

## Summary

Through an employer-led model, the uptake of higher and degree apprenticeships has demonstrated the very strong demand for work-integrated provision at levels 6 and 7. The transformational potential of apprenticeships was certainly strongly articulated by university teams involved in apprenticeship delivery who were thoroughly immersed in employer and apprentice engagement and had first-hand experience of the significant positive impact.

However, the regulatory landscape is complex and support for HEIs in navigating this must be addressed if full impact is to be realised. The complexity articulated by all, suggests refinement and alignment across all quality touchpoints is urgently needed.

The OfS has recently published an independent research report exploring current practice in the design, delivery and ongoing quality management of degree apprenticeships in higher education settings. A key takeaway is that there are varying models of engagement with employers and thereby differentiated design approaches to be quality assured. The report identifies that HEIs have made a number of adaptations in the internal quality processes to accommodate all aspects of apprenticeship provision. However, whilst the report undoubtedly provides an insight into the landscape at a fixed point in time, providers are still left wondering how the QAA will carry out its role as EQA and will undoubtedly continue to seek guidance. In a landscape that already carries a heavy administrative burden for compliance, it would be helpful if this advice was available sooner rather than later!

To support HEIs and the continued expansion of higher and degree apprenticeship provision, it would be a welcome relief to many, to observe a stronger narrative between QAA, OfS, ESFA, IfATE, Ofqual and Ofsted. Such collaboration would facilitate the positioning of apprenticeship activity as a strong model of provision within the overall educational ecosystem. Through greater collaboration it would be desirable to drive a common language, and an inclusive quality framework, that recognises the nuances of pedagogic approaches at different study levels, as well as embracing, and assuring alignment to, the core principles of apprenticeship provision.

The time for leadership and collaboration across real and perceived FE/HE sector divides must be taken to create an educational framework for skills enhancement that is within our grasp.

## This paper has been prepared by...

**Julie Stone – Consultant Researcher and PS EdTech Associate**

**PS EdTech**

Julie Stone has worked in the higher education (HE) sector for over 30 years providing leadership across a number of educational modes of delivery, including online learning and apprenticeships. Driven by her passion for widening participation and ensuring access to quality higher education for all, Julie has led on strategy to significantly grow online learning within her previous organisation to a global student population of circa 130,000 students through a strong portfolio of credit and non-credit bearing programmes and with a core focus on the learner journey. Julie also led on the growth of apprenticeships leading to circa 2,000 apprentices registered with 50+ different employer groups. With all of this experience and more, Julie has prepared this report in collaboration with Phil Sanders and The Federation for Industry Sector Skills & Standards to shed light on the topic of Higher Education Apprenticeships.

**Phil Sanders – PS EdTech Founder and Director**

**PS EdTech**

With over 20 years of experience working in the Ed Tech sector with 18 years in senior commercial roles within education systems and consultancy services, Phil has led commercial and consultancy teams in the UK and North America delivering student and management information, learner management and software solutions. In 2019 Phil set up his own consultancy business, PS EdTech, to work with education providers, sector bodies and EdTech vendors, and has supported Julie Stone in the preparation of this report.

**The Federation For Industry Sector Skills & Standards / ACE360**

Federation for  
Industry Sector  
Skills & Standards

**ACE360**  
Connect & collaborate, securely.

The Federation for Industry Sector Skills & Standards has an authority position within the Apprenticeship sector as a trusted voice of reason for best-practice within both Frameworks and Standards. With their industry-leading partners, they seek to ensure standardisation within the sector by offering ACE360 – the most cost-effective Apprenticeship Management System – to the growing list of Training Providers and End Point Assessment Organisations whilst conducting meaningful and insight-driven papers, commissioned on request.

Looking to commission a research paper? Contact the Federation for Industry Sector Skills & Standards / ACE360 team to find out more:

T: 0300 303 4444

W: [www.fisss.org](http://www.fisss.org)

E: [info@fisss.org](mailto:info@fisss.org)

