



State of the Nation Policy Briefing May 2023

Policy and Operational Updates

Higher Level Skills – Horizon Scanning

The mood music for universities can seem at times a little depressing. The chorus chant that too many young people go to university is rising in volume. A rebalancing of post-18 education between apprenticeships and technical education and higher education in favour of the former, often dominates the proposals advanced by policy makers at the moment.

In higher education there is, however, a significant growth opportunity - higher and degree apprenticeships. In terms of conservative policy, degree apprenticeships seem to be able to do no wrong.

- **Westminster Government** – Apprenticeships enjoy cross party support. Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP the Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education Minister and former Chair of the Education Select Committee delights in describing 'degree apprenticeship' as his two favourite words in the English Language. He has also made clear that he wants ALL universities to offer degree apprenticeships. The Secretary of State (SoS) the Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP has similar enthusiasm seeing herself, when she started work, as one of the first degree apprentices. Meanwhile, Toby Perkins MP Labour's Shadow Minister for Skills and Further Education has made clear that "For Labour, Apprenticeships are the Gold Standard."
- The recent growth of level 6 and 7 apprenticeships has been impressive with starts increasing by 14% when the first quarter of the 2022/23 academic year (August, September and October) is compared with the same quarter in the 2021/22 academic year. Data for the first quarter of the 2022/23 academic year shows that level 6 and 7 apprenticeships accounted for around a fifth (18%) of all apprenticeship starts.
- But we are all probably reflecting on a strange year in politics. We have another SoS, the 4th in 2022 alone and the tenth since 2010. And we have seen a return by Robert Halfon – styled as the champion of technical education and lover of the 2 words degree apprenticeship – as Minister for Skills with a large portfolio including universities.
- We have had a great deal of uncertainty of policy directions due to the change in government over the last 12 months. Goodness knows what will happen to the idea

of a Voxbridge in the North, but It remains important that we state and restate with ministers the success of Degree Apprenticeships and act as a reminder to government that they are a brilliant UK Invention. It does help that we have Gillian Keegan as Secretary of State and Robert Halfon as Minister.

- For much of last year UVAC said that the policy and ideological position on higher and degree apprenticeships in government has been far more settled with a strong commitment from the SoS for Education and ministers to the growth in higher level skills including degree apprenticeships. And there was official recognition of the value of the brand of degree apprenticeship overall from decision makers and policy officials.
- **Skills and Technical Education** – UVAC is looking ahead to what might be the potential outcome of a change of government to a labour administration. A question we are keen to understand is are we at risk of seeing a once in a generation opportunity lost where higher and degree apprenticeship are concerned? We welcomed Minister Donelan’s intention to get universities to offer more Degree Apprenticeships and higher technical qualifications and to help disadvantaged young people realise their potential.
- Higher and degree apprenticeships and higher technical qualifications with their focus on developing the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to be occupationally competent totally met this government’s objective that Higher Education focuses on “getting on rather than just getting in.” Like current ministers, UVAC wants more Higher and Degree Apprenticeships, more universities and HEIs in the market to deliver and more individuals to take Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) and progress into HE from T levels.
- But what about the opposition party’s position and a likely future Labour Government? In October, Labour’s Council of Skills Advisors produced a [Report on Learning and Skills](#).
- UVAC welcomes Labour’s proposal that “Degree Apprenticeships should be significantly expanded”. (p78) UVAC is, however, concerned that Labour’s proposal to significantly expand Degree Apprenticeship appears to be contradicted by other proposals in the report. In particular:
 - That “An incoming Labour Government should examine the most appropriate means for ensuring that a higher proportion of the levy is used for entry-level apprenticeships.” (p74)
 - The report appears to argue for the expansion of Degree Apprenticeships, while at the same time arguing that more of the levy should be used for entry-level Apprenticeships i.e., level 2 and level 3.
 - Other proposals are listed here including individual learning accounts, learning and skills passports and a new unit Skills England... and Labour makes clear that “It should be possible to transfer credits between different providers and courses.” (p58) and that “Labour must ensure that any policy change on university tuition fees in England supports and incentivises flexible, part-time study.” (p58)

- Additionally, Labour proposes a new **National Skills Taskforce**.
- We would urge Labour as we have with this and previous conservative and coalition governments to focus on skills at all levels and be driven by the skills needed to raise productivity, social mobility, tackle regional inequalities, deliver net zero and high quality public sector services. Too often, in the past, initiatives of this type have overly focused on lower level skills. Some are predicting a skills and growth levy despite 99.9% of the apprenticeship levy being spent in the last financial year. Even with 10-12% growth in the levy per year, a widening of the use of the levy would mean more funding would be needed with smaller employers included in the scope and I am not sure that this is quite the proposal the British Retail Consortium or UK Hospitality had in mind when they criticised the levy.
- Looking ahead to a 2024 General Election, regarding Labour's Growth and Skills Levy and Approach to Apprenticeships our position would be:
 - UVAC welcomes Labour's focus on skills and their proposal that 'degree apprenticeships would be significantly expanded' (p78) and note the observation that 'higher education institutions should integrate more project-based learning and employer engagement into their provision'. While we agree with this sentiment, significant good practice already exists in this area. Indeed, the promotion and development of work-based and work-related learning in HE has been a core objective of UVAC since we were established by the sector, for the sector over 20 years ago. We also welcome Labour's observation that 'degree apprenticeships will play a crucial part in facilitating the development of cutting-edge industries' but believe Labour should acknowledge the critical role of degree apprenticeships in training for key public sector occupations.
 - While Labour is right to place considerable emphasis on lifelong learning and the need for greater collaboration between providers there would appear to be a need to remind Labour that as FE colleges play a fundamental role in education and training the current and future workforce, so do universities.
- To ensure the future success of apprenticeships and higher technical education and when refining its growth and skills levy policy we would ask for a number of guarantees including guarantees concerning:
 - **Apprenticeship Budget** – the current government budget for apprenticeships is set to rise to £2.7bn in 2024/25. We would want a future government to make a commitment to match or exceed the current and projected apprenticeship budget. Labour's current policy to reserve just 50% of levy funds for apprenticeships could mean an effective cut of up to 50% in the apprenticeship budget.
 - **Public sector apprenticeships** – degree apprenticeships are used extensively to train nursed health care professional and police offers. We would want to see a guarantee that the NHS, Local authorities and police forces will continue to be able to use their levy payments.
 - **SMEs** – apprenticeship levy funds not used by levy paying employers are not 'wasted' as many claim but are instead used to ensure that apprenticeship funding is available for smaller employers who don't pay the levy. We would

ask that existing funds that support SMEs to use apprenticeships at level 2-7 to train new and existing employees of any age for the occupations and job roles their organisations need.

- **Social mobility** – degree apprenticeships are developing new progression routes to the professions and higher level occupations, and we hope Labour will be ambitious and focus on this use to create new pathways rather than just concentrate on lower level roles at levels 2 and 3. Particularly that a commitment is made that employers can retain use of the levy for funding degree apprenticeships. This is critical if apprenticeships are to have a meaningful role in supporting the social mobility and workforce diversity agendas.
 - **Productivity** – again we would want to know that employers will be able to continue to use the levy and co-investment to fund the apprenticeships their organisations need.
 - **Aspiration**, i.e., all age, all level and as a key programme to raise productivity, increase social mobility and deliver the net zero/green growth agenda. We would ask that labour be ambitious in its apprenticeship policy and focus on apprenticeships as a programme for individuals of all abilities, ages and as a key programme to raise productivity, increase social mobility and delivery the net zero agenda. Most of all we need stability.
 - **Funding bands** – must be based on the actual cost of delivering the training and assessment needed to become occupationally competent. What we would ask for is that all apprenticeships are financially viable to deliver
- We ask that although apprenticeships are working and recognise, they could work better, that Labour consider:
- **A separate budget for apprenticeships** for non-levy paying employers given the lack of transparency in how apprenticeships are funded.
 - **Implement a degree apprenticeship growth plan** – we have already contributed to this idea as part of this debate. The number of starts need to be increased.
 - **A focus on the contribution apprenticeships make to the green economy and cyber security agendas** which are typically at levels 6 and 7. Still there are those in the FE sector and in the opposition ranks that argue that levy funds should not be used for apprenticeships at higher levels and by default for those roles that are critical to the success of the net zero, green jobs, energy security and cyber security agendas.
- If Labour introduced wider skills levy, we would ask that employers were supported to use funds for quality provision at levels 2 – 7 for employees of any age provided by a training provider, college or university on the basis of what their org needed to raise performance and productivity. Similarly, we would hope that Skills England the new organisation that labour proposes would focus on skills needed in the economy at all levels up to and including level 7. It must focus on young people entering the workforce and lifelong learning.
- We would also remind a new government of the role that universities play in apprenticeship and skills delivery. Too often apprenticeships and skills policy are seen as synonymous with FE. FE has a role to play but so too does HE. Future skills policy must be about far more than just supporting school and college leavers who

- are deemed 'not academic' or have not performed well at school. Skills policy must encompass those entering the workforce and as importantly the existing workforce.
- **Degree Apprenticeships** - after all the talk of 'middle class land grabs' it was reassuring last when a former skills minister promoted degree apprenticeships as a key way to deliver on levelling up and sent a clear signal about how important degree apprenticeships are to the government's agenda. You will recall that Minister Donelan asked the Office for Students (OfS) to rewrite Access and Participation Plans (APPs) to 'strongly encourage providers to set themselves ambitious measurable targets to significantly increase the proportion of students on higher and degree apprenticeships.
 - In response to the then chair of the education select committee, Robert Halfon, that DfE should introduce a target of 50% of students on degree apprenticeships in March 2022, the then SoS announced a Strategic Priorities Grant Fund of £8m to grow degree apprenticeships alongside another £8m for growing higher technical qualifications at levels 4 & 5. It was only in March this year that the [mid-year allocations of recurrent funding for 2022/23](#) was confirmed out to providers. [£8m to accelerate the growth of level 6 degree apprenticeships and develop new offers is divided between 102 universities](#) and colleges but restricted to those already delivering and not to those wanting to deliver degree apprenticeships for the first time.
 - The funding can be used by HEIs to develop new degree apprenticeships beyond their current offer, refresh their existing programmes to 'better meet the needs of the labour market' and upskill staff in direct delivery. Providers can also use the fund to 'grow a pipeline of new degree apprenticeship vacancies' through research and intelligence gathering to ensure alignment with local needs. For this first £8m, OfS used a formula-led allocation using in-year ILR data based on starts meaning the HEIs with the most degree apprentice starts since 2021/22 received the most allocation.
 - Anglia Ruskin received the largest allocation (£770,163) followed by Sheffield Hallam (£445,222), then Staffordshire (£414,452), UWE (£359,907) and Middlesex (£301,632). The smallest slice was £466. ESFA/DfE have shared with UVAC that they are wanting to estimate the impact of this £8m in anticipation of another year's grant funding. This will be completed after this academic year, but it is likely that providers will be asked to provide a narrative that sets out how they have used their funding allocation in line with its purposes and identify benefits and outcomes achieved.
 - So, more recently, OfS has been told to establish a £40m fund dedicated to drive up degree apprenticeship provision in the next two – three years which follows on from the £8m given this year and can be used for providers offering degree apprenticeships for the first time, as well as for existing providers to widen their programmes and help improve access to the courses. It is expected that Y1 budget will be £16m and Y2 £24m.
 - OfS has not announced how it will distribute the new fund yet, but providers can look forward to a competitive process focused on a number of priorities including SME engagement, growth, impact on groups, wider employer engagement, and skills gaps.

- Keegan wrote that the OfS should support establishments with ‘the greatest potential to diversify growth at level 6’. Upping degree apprenticeship starts has been one of the key pillars of the new ministerial team’s first six months. Robert Halfon has again repeated that he wants all higher education providers to offer degree apprenticeships telling the UUK conference in February that Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships now account for more than 12 percent of all apprenticeships.
- DfE is working with OfS colleagues on the design phase and assessing what is possible and what the parameters should be. It is expected that recipients will be OfS registered providers.
- DfE is keen to work with UVAC and the Mission Groups on the design questions:
 - how many funding pots
 - what the focus should be
 - how the funding streams should be structured
 - how it supports new providers to enter the market to deliver
 - the amount to support providers to broaden the offer
 - the amount of funding to support disadvantaged, underserved cohorts and address access.
- Not since the Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund (DADF) in 2016 has there been such a clear indication that universities need to get on board in expanding opportunities through degree apprenticeships.
- To facilitate growth, DfE/ESFA have announced a new approach to application to the RoATP – exceptions are not expected to be proved nor are gaps in provision needed to be demonstrated. A simple form filling asking to join/make an application to the Register is now all that is needed. It is not a ‘free pass’ but a ‘fast track’ and more light touch. Applicants will have to demonstrate which Standards, which employers/sectors for example. Secondly, there is no appetite for a further refresh for all providers, but ESFA will be taking a targeted approach where there is an ‘oversupply’ of some standards. It is suggested that OfS want to establish a ‘gold standard’ model for degree apprenticeship providers.
- **Degree Apprenticeship Growth Plan** - Earlier last year, UVAC called for a Degree Apprenticeship growth plan that could incorporate Higher Apprenticeships and Higher Technical Education. This would include reiterating the multiple objectives of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship and Higher Technical Qualifications (productivity, social mobility, levelling-up, provision of public sector services and supporting the net zero agenda) and action needed to remove the remaining barriers to Higher and Degree Apprenticeship growth and could consider targets in the context of economic and societal need and the levelling up agenda. This could complement OfS action to encourage providers to significantly increase the share of students recruited onto Higher and Degree Apprenticeship programmes and institutional approaches to setting ambitious targets for Higher and Degree Apprenticeships, Higher Technical Qualifications, and part time courses.
- Such a Growth Plan, focused on skills needs and the Net Zero and Levelling Up agendas, would identify where there was the most need and potential to deliver

- Degree Apprenticeship. The IfATE could then work with employers and universities to bust barriers that were restricting the growth of Degree Apprenticeships.
- UVAC has written [a Plan](#) as a contribution to thinking and discussion in this area. Ministers could find that an investment in developing university capacity, based on skills needs and employer and individual demand for Degree Apprenticeships, pays dividends. We would also recommend that a study on the potential impact of financial incentives for Degree Apprenticeships, particularly in areas where there are skills gaps and shortages, should be undertaken. This should also be conducted in the context of the Net Zero and Levelling Up agendas and be part of the Degree Apprenticeship Growth Plan. It may, however, be the case that any incentives/development funding to grow provision would £ for £ have a greater impact on growing Degree Apprenticeship numbers.
 - UUK also [launched a ten point plan](#) at its degree apprenticeship conference earlier this year which aligns with ours and we have agreed some joint lobbying activities with UUK going forward.
 - **Recognition of Prior Learning** – On 5th July last year UVAC launched a new Knowledge Network based on the practice of the translation and Recognition of Prior Learning. We hosted a second on 10 January 2023 and a third on 27 March. I have included a link to the last recorded session. This work came out of work commissioned by Health Education England (HEE) led by Middlesex University in partnership with the Open University (OU), the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) and Credit Works to establish standardised approaches for recognising prior learning within the healthcare sector. The project capitalised on the changing skills policy landscape to promote career progression opportunities for the sector. The aims are to maximise widening participation, levelling-up, diversity, inclusion and social mobility. Once developed, it will be tested and informed by consultation with higher education providers, employers, and other key stakeholders. This will then – hopefully - inform the development of a standardised approach to APEL, reflecting practice in other public sector professions.
 - The project has developed a number of guidance materials for HE providers and employers and written a national framework for accrediting prior experiential learning (APEL), including learning achieved through work – these will be on our website shortly. The focus is to bang home the message that the apprenticeship fully meets the learning expectations for level 3 and give admissions teams confidence that learners will be successful and appropriately prepared to complete a higher level programme. Not just an ok preparation but an excellent preparation and one which HE providers should be looking out for.
 - The project finished at the end of March but a main call to action is a signing up to a national progression agreement which is about recognising people's potential that is not bound by traditional approaches and this work is ongoing. For those higher education providers that deliver health programmes including nursing and allied health professional courses they are:
 - invited to sign this agreement endorsed by HEE / NHS England. The National Progression agreement is [available for download](#) now.

- **Apprenticeship Workforce Development Programme** - UVAC is committed to supporting the higher education sector and its members to develop and grow higher and degree apprenticeships and to respond to the government's degree apprenticeship growth calls. As you may be aware, we are one of the delivery partners for the DfE funded Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) Programme for all providers of apprenticeships and for all staff involved in their delivery, support and growth.
- New live online and face to face AWD courses became available to support staff and practitioners in their apprenticeship delivery. This current offer also includes in-house training on request. Take-up overall has been pretty good and today we have around 40 colleagues attending from all provider types and sizes. The range of courses on offer is intended to appeal to all staff involved in delivery from those new in role to those with more strategic and leadership responsibilities including governors, and governance professionals.
- These new online and face to face activities are complemented by eight on-demand FutureLearn courses from phase one of the programme accessed via ETF's Professional Development Platform and a downloadable guide on 'Working effectively with employers' which includes checklists, self-assessments and action plans for institutions to use.
- Starting this autumn, a new programme of CPD and support will be made freely available to all those delivering apprenticeships, building on the existing Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) offer. It's part of the government's long-term investment in the apprenticeship workforce – helping staff in all roles and settings to improve the quality of training for apprentices and employers. It is very exciting to know that new CPD training and associated resources are currently being developed as part of this phase two of AWD. The new offer is being informed by a training needs analysis of all provider types conducted in November and December 2022 followed by focus groups and sector research. Indeed, based on the insights gained, a more comprehensive package of industry relevant CPD will be developed for all apprenticeship providers, employers, and their workforces. Without a doubt this CPD will enable the delivery and sharing of high-quality teaching and training required for occupational competence.
- In March Applications were open for the Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) programme's practitioner improvement and collaborative project opportunities. I am pleased to report that awards were made to Middlesex in partnership with OU and Consalia for a collaborative project looking at best practice models for integrating on and off the job and practitioner improvement projects were awarded to Portsmouth, Northumbria and Wolverhampton universities. They report and disseminate in October.
- Early CPD delivery has already started. Until end of July, The AWD programme is currently offering a range of FREE courses on many aspects of apprenticeship delivery and is relevant to all provider types and sizes. There are four strands split into two 3-hour courses each.

Strands and Themes:

- **Strand 1: Assessor to Teacher**
Understanding How we Learn
Developing How to Teach
 - **Strand 2: Effective Technical Teaching**
Enhancing Pedagogy and Professional Practice
Preparing for End Point Assessment Success
 - **Strand 3: Technical Curriculum Design**
Effective Curriculum Design in Practice
Principles and Models of Curriculum Design
 - **Strand 4: Apprenticeship Leadership**
Developing Your Team
Effective Use of Resources
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- There is also a downloadable guide on [Working Effectively with Employers](#) which includes checklists, self-assessments and action plans for organisational use.
 - **To find out more about the AWD programme and register for training and resources please go to the ETF [booking site](#).**