



UVAC
UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

**All degrees are equal.
But some are more
equal than others.**

Equal or Equivalent? Evaluating the Status
of Degree Apprenticeships in England

By Maighréad Hegarty

Conceptual paper series - No. 4



CENTRE
FOR DEGREE
APPRENTICESHIPS

Who we are

Celebrating UVAC at 25

UVAC is one of the most authoritative voices in the sector on education and training in higher education (HE) and the leading expert on all aspects of the policy and operational requirements of higher and degree apprenticeships. UVAC currently has members of all types and sizes and from all university mission groups and a growing number of valued corporate supporters. UVAC is celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2024; two and half decades of championing higher technical and professional learning and actively supporting progression routes into HE through our advocacy, representation and research work.

And what a remarkable 25 years we have experienced in apprenticeships. In fact, I would say we have seen a seismic shift in the development and policy design of apprenticeships in England. Where once we had apprenticeships that were just the domain of traditional industries with little engagement with or appeal to HE providers, we now have apprenticeship opportunities in England that stretch from the crafts and trades through to technical, associate professional, managerial and professional job roles and we have the foremost universities in the world involved in their delivery alongside colleges, training providers and employers. Degree Apprenticeships have become a significant entry-route to professions from architecture and engineering to nursing and social work, providing a means for young people and mid and late careerists to enter traditionally graduate occupations in the private sector and contributing to modernising and diversifying our public services.



About the author

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Maighr ad is also a professional singer, vocal coach and consultant, who has been teaching singing to individuals, groups, theatre companies and school and college students for over 25 years. She has worked as a vocal consultant with theatre companies, recording companies and individual artists. Her students are mostly established professionals or emerging young artists from wide variety of musical genres from rock to reggae and classical to country.

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Summary

Since their introduction, degree apprenticeships have been positioned as *equal* (but often, described as an 'alternative') (OfS, 2019) to traditional degrees, though persistent biases suggest they are still seen, by some, as merely *equivalent*.

Exploring the concept of equality versus equivalence in degree apprenticeships compared with 'traditional' bachelor's or master's degrees involves considering numerous factors. Using the definition of 'equal' as exact and identical in all elements, compared with 'equivalence,' defined as identical in key but not *all* elements, this discourse aims to explore how degree apprenticeships can be firmly established as equal degree qualifications, in every sense of the word, but with recognisable differences in mode and method of delivery and funding (Lester, 2023).

Degree apprenticeships arrived on the higher education (HE) scene in 2015, another qualification in a long line of post-war technical qualifications. But one with a difference. The degree apprenticeship is not simply a degree in a technical subject or even a degree with a work placement. It is learning which is integrated into the fabric of an occupation but has within its degree, standard academic learning. With recognition that apprenticeships no

longer require achievement of separate 'knowledge' and 'competence' qualifications, and that 'competence' can be integrated into university qualifications (Crawford-Lee, 2022), the degree apprenticeship provides underpinning knowledge for the application of high-level skills resulting in the award of a university degree, equal to all other degrees of the same level. (IfATE 2022; SEEC, 2021)

Degree Apprenticeships, as a concept, have been in existence for almost 10 years and before the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in 2017, the provision across England was relatively small. The growth in degree apprenticeships, which saw growth of 79% by 2021 (HoC, 2024), plus the graduation of the first cohorts has provided a rich pool for research and investigation. Apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7 for 2023-2024 comprised 16% of all starts and the level 6 degree apprenticeship achievement rate of 65.7% is the highest of any apprenticeship category (DfE, 2024a). This data demonstrates the growing popularity with employers, of degree apprenticeships. Degree apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7 contribute significantly to their total student populations, for example, University of Staffordshire 22% (HESA, 2022) and Anglia Ruskin University 10% (ARU, 2024).

The evolution of HE policy since the second world war, to the public launch of degree apprenticeships and subsequent reforms and policy statements from Westminster Government's Department for Education (DfE).

The equal scrutiny applied to degree apprenticeship quality. HE sector policy, regulation, and accountability ensure equal outcomes for both apprenticeship and non-apprenticeship routes.

This assertion of equal status is supported by a number of factors.

The role of public policy, both historical and current, in framing attitudes towards vocational and applied education, in particular the expansion of access to HE for previously underrepresented groups throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Recognition by University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) as an approved route to degree qualification by inclusion in service provision for the first time in 2023.

As the star of a new generation of high-level technical and professional skills development, the role and value placed on vocational, technical, or applied education at all levels is central to how degree apprenticeships are perceived. The perspectives of stakeholders such as employers, students, academics, industry bodies and parents, all inform the value placed on degree apprenticeships.

There are many challenges to the current acceptance of this equal status including preconceptions and myths, often based on earlier models of apprenticeships (HoC, 1968; Wolf, 2011; Crawford-Lee, 2022) which influence the perceptions expressed by employers, academics, teachers, various other stakeholders and opinion makers. It is this perception of status that currently impedes attempts to establish degree apprenticeships as an equal route to graduate outcomes, professional success and sustainable higher paid careers, whilst recognising their differences.

Concepts underpinning the developing pedagogy of assessment of vocational knowledge and skills support the argument for equal status with, typically full-time, campus-based, degrees for young people leaving school and college. However, attitudes and perceptions deeply ingrained in public perceptions have their roots in the theories of social and cultural capital exploring how class, wealth and tradition have affected participation in HE since 1945. The impact, here, is reflected through the lens of educational stratification, which suggests that UK HE creates a system that hierarchically ranks individuals based on their educational credentials. However, does this stratification in 2024 serve to obscure the equality guaranteed by regulatory and professional oversight?

It is not enough, however, to have the intention, and badge of equality if there is no clear dissemination of this intent from all elements of the HE and skills sector. The concept of equality must be reinforced in practice alongside a consistent message which not only highlights their affordability but reinforces the equal status of degree apprenticeships.

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Introduction



ince their introduction in 2015, degree apprenticeships have challenged the traditional boundaries between vocational and academic education, promising an integrated approach that combines practical skills with academic knowledge. While designed to be equal to other university degrees in both quality and status, questions persist as to whether they are recognised as equal or merely equivalent.

From the outset, the intention was for degree apprenticeships to hold the same status as degrees delivered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), often described as having 'parity'. This paper explores how this has been achieved and to what extent any barriers exist to acceptance and recognition of this equal status.

When the UK coalition government launched degree apprenticeships in March 2015, Vince Cable, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, and Skills (DBIS), commented that they would allow apprentices to "achieve a full bachelor's or master's degree, whilst training on the job" (DBIS, 2015). At the launch, Terry Scuoler, chief executive of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), remarked that degree apprenticeships were a "good step forward" that would enable apprentices to "learn while they earn", combining both vocational and academic learning. He noted that degree apprenticeships would fill a gap in vocational and technical provision and lead to the development of highly skilled employees meeting employers' needs (Scuoler, 2016). These comments underscored the clear intention that the degree qualification is crucial for ensuring sustainable professional careers.

Despite the ambitious goals set out at their inception, degree apprenticeships are still relatively new, and specific research on them is limited but growing in quantity. Since their introduction, studies sponsored by the Edge Foundation (2020, 2021), the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) including through its journal *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning* (Crawford-Lee and Moorwood, 2019; Bravenboer and Crawford-Lee, 2020), the Quality Assurance Agency (Nawaz and Edifor, 2024) and the Office for Students (OfS, 2022) have explored the impact of policies and current practices within university HE to identify areas of excellence and opportunities for improvement. As degree apprenticeships have grown, particularly in the period after the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in 2017, there has been increased opportunity to engage in more detailed research. DfE provides comprehensive data on all aspects of apprenticeships and the scrutiny of the apprenticeship funding body in England, the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the regulator of quality in apprenticeship training, Ofsted, produce reports in the public domain.

Notions of prestige and reputation pervade the HE landscape. Academic degrees are often portrayed as superior to vocational or technical routes, influenced by theories of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997, 1985). Bourdieu's concepts of "capital, habitus and social reproduction" provide a lens through which to view the persistence of stratification and notions of privilege and elitism in education. Much of this discourse centres around the distinctive features of individual and groups of universities which are often promoted as more important than the actual quality of taught provision. Blackmore (2016) provides some useful insight into how leaders from a range of UK HEIs regard the reputation and esteem of their own and peer universities. Blackmore comments that universities can maintain their prestige more easily if they are research intensive and international in outlook.



Competence-based learning has long been regarded as task-based without sound underpinning theoretical knowledge. Bravenboer and Lester (2016, pp. 409-421) challenge this long-held idea, and highlight how the accreditation of occupational learning has set the scene for developing the delivery and assessment of knowledge, skills, and behaviours (KSBs) to meet an approved degree standard. Their exploration of external assessment by bodies such as the Engineering Council, and the introduction of National Occupational Standards, using a case study from Middlesex University, underscores the importance of accountability and standardised approaches to professional competence. Occupationally focused degree routes such as architecture have always included practical skills assessment, but these followed years of theory-based study. By integrating the application of practical work-based training with the learning of theory, degree apprenticeships have challenged this norm.

The introduction and development of degree apprenticeships have transformed the HE landscape by emphasizing high-level skills that drive economic growth while building accessible routes to sustainable professional careers. Although this work primarily focused on philosophy, the development of degree apprenticeships for specific occupations from more craft or trade-based models of vocational training echoes reflections introduced by Dewey (1915, p. 309) when he argued that 'occupation', combined "intellectual and practical phases of experience", as different from trade specific training. This balance is a major feature of the design and delivery of degree apprenticeships. By formalising this model through integrating into practical and occupational training and professional development, recognised by professional bodies, it not only confers equal status but can be a "highly aspirational choice" that promotes social mobility (Crawford-Lee and Moorwood, 2019, pp. 134-140).

With the introduction of apprenticeship/occupational standards and occupational maps produced by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) vocational, technical and professional pathways are described as spanning from qualification level 2 to level 7, including degree apprenticeships. Apprenticeship standards based on professions regulated by the Professional Qualifications Act (2022), such as Nursing and Allied Health, integrate the KSBs of the apprenticeship standard with the occupational competencies and completion of the integrated degree qualification secures professional certification or registration.

A key feature of degree apprenticeships is that they are employer-led and bring together all relevant stakeholders in a shared ambition (Crawford-Lee, 2016, p. 327). This synergy has become even more dynamic since the IfATE's (2022) reform of degree apprenticeship policy that mandated greater integration of on-the-job and off-the-job learning. As this principle becomes more secure within degree apprenticeship design and assessment, it will fulfil the original ambitions of apprenticeships to be a programme that recognises fully the workplace as a site of learning and not just of application of skills (Lester, 2024).

As degree apprenticeships have expanded, so has their external regulation and oversight. Currently, there are over 90 approved degree apprenticeships (IfATE, 2024). The Office for Students (OfS, 2023) provided a stimulus for degree apprenticeship growth at level 6 through a £40 million funding competition in 2023-2024 to promote these pathways in areas with previously low enrolment. This funding highlighted a previous Westminster Government's commitment to degree apprenticeships and their status as equally valid routes to achievement as any other validated route. Announcing this funding, in a press release in 2023, John Blake confirms the status of degree apprenticeships, as equal to other routes, providing students with the "best of both worlds", combining paid work with high-quality undergraduate study.

The new Labour government, elected in July 2024, has yet to fully clarify its position and has initiated a review of work-integrated learning and employer-led skills development and a new lead body, Skills England. While there is no indication that apprenticeships will lose government support, the specific position of degree apprenticeships is beginning to emerge (DfE, 2024a) with announcements concerning the defunding of 'some' level 7 programmes.



01. Public Policy and Stratification

Since the early years of state-funded education, the UK has operated a two-tier education system, separating children into academic and non-academic paths at age 11. The 1944 Education Act, also known as the Butler Act, defined three distinct types of school for pupils aged 11 to 15: grammar, secondary modern, and technical schools. (House of Commons Library, 1944). This tripartite system, which introduced free access to secondary education for all children, also formalized the differentiation between more sophisticated theory and concept-based learning and practical skills-based training. The former, enshrined in grammar schools, provided the route into university and professional careers. The vast majority of secondary schools fell into the grammar or secondary modern categories, with technical schools forming a small minority (UK Government, 2015).

Prior to the introduction of compulsory education, skills development was the responsibility of employers, with young boys engaged in a trade or craft to learn 'by doing'. However, there was no external oversight of these apprenticeships. In testimony to the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations (1968), industry representatives observed that "an apprenticeship is a farce and provides less training than a properly constituted course lasting only a few months". Future reports such as Wolf (2011) and Richard (2012) would echo this point reinforcing the argument that the UK is stuck in a cycle of cultural reproduction, which vocational qualifications are refreshed every few years with very little positive impact (Bourdieu, 1973). Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (1973) and habitus (1977) are useful here to explain this repetitive cycle focused on low-level qualifications which prevent young people from progressing to productive and sustainable employment.

The Labour government's intention post-war was to open the doors of opportunity to professional careers for those whose ambitions had previously been thwarted by a rigid two-tier secondary education system. In his 1965 speech, Education Secretary Anthony Crosland paved the way for implementing comprehensive secondary education to enable this change. This speech is recognized as a pivotal moment for the expansion of higher education. However, while introducing the principle of a unified comprehensive secondary education system, Crosland reinforced Westminster Government's preference for the binary policy of universities with a separate vocational sector. Crosland was keen to avoid the 'ladder system', which saw institutions competing to become part of the university club — a system he described as a 'rat-race' that reinforced a hierarchy lacking innovation and diversity (Crosland, 1965).

By referencing other European nations that had established distinctive centres of excellence for vocational and technical skills, Crosland's speech focused on the need to embrace a new world where the UK was in danger of being left behind. He recognized that for many students, the principal motivation for progressing to higher education was in the obtaining of a degree, "with all it implies in our society as a mark of achievement and prestige". By creating the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), Crosland reinforced the principle of equal academic awards for equal performance. The CNAA applied the test for awarding a degree based on whether it was comparable in standard and quality to a university course, reflecting the earlier Robbins Report (1963). The established universities would maintain their autonomous degree-awarding powers allowing for more academic freedom with less external oversight than the newly created polytechnics.



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Successive UK governments have commissioned studies and reports that have influenced policies and strategies to promote vocational and technical education, aiming to enhance economic and industrial growth.

For over 20 years, the binary system continued, but as Pratt (1997) discusses, polytechnics were expanding into areas traditionally occupied by universities, affecting their original mission to focus on technical education to meet the demands of industry and commerce. Pratt described this as a blurring of boundaries and a breakdown of the traditional demarcation between vocational and academic courses. These developments were a response to demand, with student number growth driving the marketisation of the sector, particularly in offering a much wider range of courses, especially in the social sciences and humanities. By the late 1980s, polytechnics were offering every subject found in universities, except medicine (Parry, 2022).

Since the 1980s and early 1990s, marketisation has become a key feature of the higher education landscape as degree-level education has become more accessible through the expansion of the university sector. In addition, there was tension in parliament regarding the cost to the public purse of supporting the expanding number of students. A 1987 parliamentary debate recorded members expressing concern over the commercialisation of universities with Malcom Bruce (Lib. Gordon) expressing concern at the Government's apparent determination to put a "measurable price tag on everything" commenting further that this risked the quality of degrees being sacrificed for less cost. The later introduction of tuition fees has turned students into consumers, driving universities to diversify their income streams. Extensive research by Brown (2012, 2014) on the history and impact of marketisation explores how this diversification has led to the view that degrees are commercial products, prompting increased scrutiny of the effectiveness of higher education provision and greater levels of regulatory control, such as the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) in 2016 and in 2003 the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) which reviews student complaints.

This expansion in the higher education population influenced the implementation of the Higher and Further Education Act (1992). This Act was the final step for polytechnics, which had been released from local authority control in 1988, on their journey to full university status. With this change in status, former polytechnics were given institutional autonomous degree awarding powers for the first time, establishing them as on a par with the pre-1992 universities. This development could be seen through the application of Bourdieu's theories, as a break with the cycle of reinforcing stratification and rigid hierarchies in higher education with the opportunity to diversify the profile of university students and promote access for a much wider demographic.

Successive UK governments have commissioned studies and reports that have influenced policies and strategies to promote vocational and technical education, aiming to enhance economic and industrial growth. The current degree apprenticeship offering has evolved directly from these initiatives. However, questions remain as to whether they represent a pivotal moment of change or a continuation of a two-tier system, with equivalence but not equality.

The government continued to reform vocational and technical education throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, resulting in "a morass of qualifications" (Phoenix, 2020, p. 19) for students aged 14-19. These included National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) based on job-specific competencies (levels 1 to 4) and the more general NVQs at level 2 and level 3, as well as the short-lived Diploma at level 3. Bourdieu's theories of social reproduction (1973) and habitus (1977) are useful here to explain this repetitive cycle focused on low-level qualifications. Applying these theories would suggest that this cycle is embedded within the UK education system because it is created by an establishment which reinforces privilege and confines young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to experience lack of access to viable progression routes into skilled and highly skilled jobs.

The 1994 Apprenticeships Act (1994) – the so-called Butler Act – continued this cycle with the introduction of training, mostly at level 2, which was assessed by the achievement of job-related competencies and qualifications within approved frameworks. Framework apprenticeships focused on broad sectors such as construction or customer service, rather than on specific occupational routes. The Edge Foundation’s ‘Learning from the Past’ series explores the tendency to repeat and re-badge qualification types. Government-commissioned reports, including those by Wolf (2011) and Richard (2012), repeatedly found these provisions inadequate for establishing effective vocational training that supports personal career development and economic growth. Both Wolf and Richard highlighted the ineffectiveness of short, competency-based courses. Richard determined that “assessment of individual skills competencies were inadequate measures of the ability to carry out a defined job role”. The recommendations of these reports paved the way for apprenticeship reforms, leading to the creation of employer ‘trailblazer’ groups in 2015 and the approval of apprenticeships at levels 2 to 7 based on occupational standards. In 2017, the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA, later IfATE) was formed by the DfE as a semi-autonomous body responsible for the approval and implementation of apprenticeship standards

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The report found that 66% of Middlesex apprentices come from low parental/guardian HE participation backgrounds and 75% of respondents indicated that they were from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Recent developments, such as T levels (which include mandatory work experience) and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), which are entirely classroom-based, appear to perpetuate this cycle. Degree Apprenticeships stands alone in promoting high-quality and successful work-integrated learning and qualifications.

“Move on Up,” (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2022) is a technical report on apprenticeships at Middlesex University. In this report, the authors firstly deal with the notion of a “middle-class land grab” for degree apprenticeships. They assert that this opinion stems from participation data generated by the OfS which is not granular enough to support this controversial statement. Contradicting the OfS view, Lillis and Bravenboer use data from surveys and university registration information to demonstrate how degree apprenticeships at Middlesex University are widening access to higher education. The report found that 66% of Middlesex apprentices come from low parental/guardian HE participation backgrounds and 75% of respondents indicated that they were from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Crawford-Lee (2024c, in print) explores the idea of the middle-class land grab further, which can be contained by ensuring widening access to degree apprenticeships. Manchester Metropolitan University, (MMU), using recruitment data from its 2,753-degree apprenticeship enrolments and categories from the Multiple Index of Disadvantage (MID), in its Impact Survey (2021) demonstrates the positive effect of degree apprenticeships on widening participation and social mobility. The survey reports that 36% of its degree apprentices are recruited from areas of highest disadvantage. Additionally, when compared with national figures for mainstream undergraduate programmes, 3% more of MMU’s degree apprentices are from the most deprived areas.

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39% of respondents perceived a campus-based degree to be a better option because of reputation and the association of apprenticeships with “trades and manual labour”.

➤ **Learn more on page 16**
03. Vocational Education – What Class of Option?

02. Equality vs. Equivalence – The Challenge

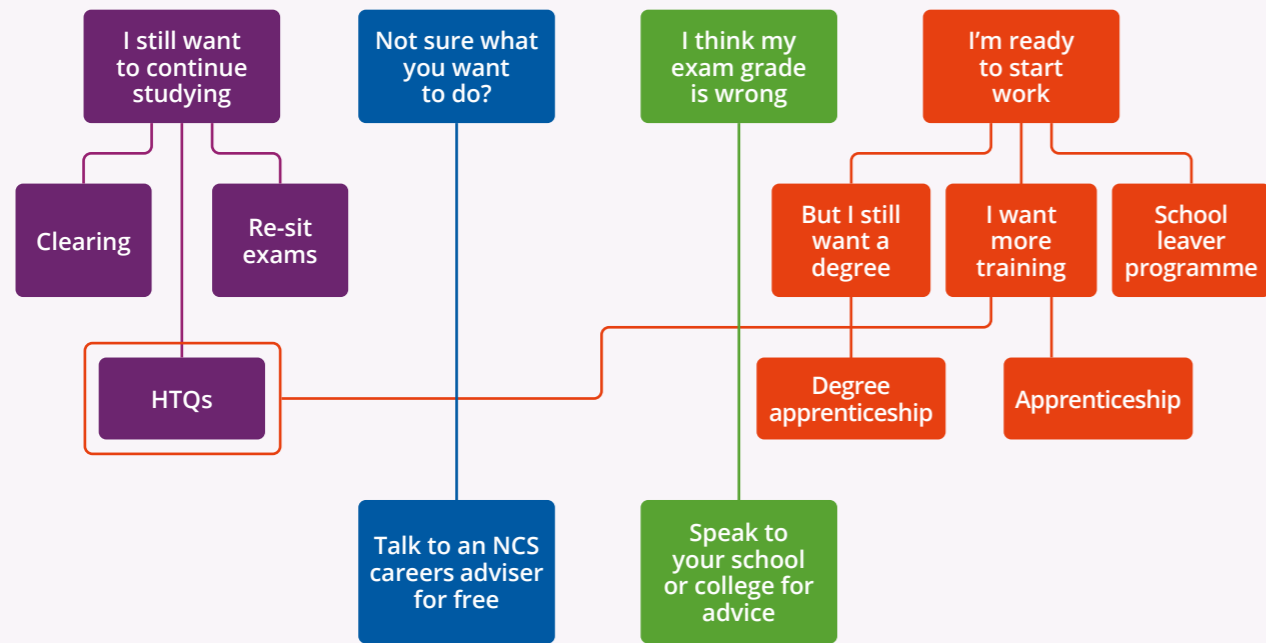
The term “equivalence” has often been used when comparing degree apprenticeships with degrees. For instance, in 2022, the Government’s gov.uk website described higher and degree apprenticeships as “equivalent to a foundation degree and above” for higher apprenticeships and “equivalent to a full bachelor’s and master’s” for degree apprenticeships (UK Government, 2022). Similarly, UCAS describes apprenticeships as providing qualifications ranging from GCSE equivalents to master’s degree equivalents, depending on the level of apprenticeship taken (UCAS, 2023). Since the 2022/23 academic year, many HEIs have actively promoted their degree apprenticeships as pathways leading to full Level 6 (bachelor’s degree) or Level 7 (master’s degree) awards. These institutions, such as Nottingham Trent University, University of Staffordshire, and the University of Exeter, recognise and highlight the features that affirm degree apprenticeships as equal in quality, value, and status to the majority undergraduate degree route.

This shift in promotion underscores the growing acceptance and recognition of degree apprenticeships within the academic and professional communities, emphasising their equality in terms of academic quality and credit. Nawaz, *et al* (2023) found that 66% of employers agreed that degree apprentices are a significant factor in their organisational success and 95% agreed that they contribute positively to their strategic priorities. “The advent of level 6 higher apprenticeships that include an honours degree would challenge the oft repeated policy idea that apprenticeships represented an “alternative to university”. (Bravenboer, 2016). This notion continues to be an issue when promoting degree apprenticeships as being of equal worth.

The information published below separates the degree apprenticeship route from the ‘university route’.

FIGURE 1: What if I don't get the grades I need for university?

Source: Results day 2024: What's next after picking up your A level, T level and VTQ results? – The Education Hub (blog.gov.uk)



The flow chart is misleading because it places degree apprenticeships in the route ‘training’ rather than ‘university’ under a headline of “what if I don’t get the grades I need for university”. Although entry criteria for degree apprenticeships may be applied more flexibly than for full-time undergraduate degrees, most will still require similar UCAS points and/or a convincing demonstration of preparedness for study at HE level. This information also contradicts the UCAS apprenticeship portal which explains how degree apprenticeships are full degrees (UCAS, 2023). Similarly, Robert Halfon, Skills Minister for the Conservative Governments from 2019 to 2024, frequently repeated that ‘Degree Apprenticeships’ were his two favourite words, reinforcing the policy intention of equality, not merely equivalence. Yet, as the DfE guidance demonstrates, this message is not yet fully embedded throughout the department.

Degree apprenticeships do not seek to replicate the student experience common to most undergraduate students and never intended to be equivalent in terms of scale of participation. Whether the apprenticeship is delivered by day release, block attendance, or distance learning models, apprentices are unlikely to live in student accommodation or have the opportunity to participate in all campus-based activities. However, this experience is not much different from part-time, distance learning, students or commuter students on degree programmes. More research is needed to ascertain whether this disconnect impacts on perceptions of degree apprenticeships because they don’t necessarily offer the full on-campus experience.

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So why does it matter? The concept of being ‘equal to’ is vital in establishing respect for degree apprenticeships as a route through higher education to valued, higher paid, careers with professional status.

In addition to establishing the equal status of degree apprenticeships, what is emerging is a clearer picture as to how degree apprenticeships are fulfilling their promise of breaking the repetitive cycle of inadequate vocational qualifications. In 2021, MMU, one of the largest providers of degree apprenticeships in England, explored how degree apprenticeships support widening access and participation and provide options for social mobility. For MMU graduates from the Digital & Technology Solutions Professional (DTSP) degree apprenticeship, salaries were 5% higher than for graduates from similar non-apprenticeship degrees. This success story is replicated across other degree apprenticeship provision with 91% in professional roles on graduation and completion of their apprenticeship (2022, HESA). The views of employers (Nawaz, *et al.*, 2023) also confirm the value they place on degree apprenticeships with a “remarkable 97%”, confirming they enhance organisational performance and yield positive outcomes, emphasising the impact of their high-quality outcomes on economic performance and career progression.

So why does it matter? The concept of being ‘equal to’ is vital in establishing respect for degree apprenticeships as a route through higher education to valued, higher paid, careers with professional status. Through the inclusion and integration of a degree, they can be a highly aspirational choice and a change agent for social mobility offering high-quality routes into sustainable highly skilled professional jobs (Crawford-Lee, 2024a).

03. Vocational Education – What Class of Option?

Vocational education as a concept has haunted public and education policy for generations. Often perceived as second-class, vocational education is more than a mode of study. It reflects embedded societal divisions, where class and social status influence educational choices. For decades, the vocational or lesser academic route was the only secondary education option for pupils failing the 11+ examination so its association with second best is long established. Applying Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the construct of the 11+ can be viewed as a construct producing a world view shared by the education establishment and by wider society. The 11+ was the state sponsored examination which judged whether eleven-year-olds had the ability to enter a grammar school where teaching and learning followed an academic curriculum. The examination was always seen as separating the brightest pupils but in reality, the numbers passing were capped by the grammar school places available within a local education area.

The current perception of 'vocational' is a far cry from the noble origins of the word, referring to a career route as a 'calling', often spiritual in nature. At times, the terms 'technical' and 'vocational' are intertwined, although each has specific meanings. The 'calling' of the vocational route refers to a specific job role and, although usually applied to lower-skilled or craft-based roles, the term can equally apply to a pharmacist or chartered surveyor. Although also quite vague, 'technical' has a more defined meaning and usually refers to job roles in STEM or IT sectors, which could range from a rocket scientist to a plumber.

A term suggested to replace 'vocational,' is 'applied,' as it suggests the application of underpinning theoretical knowledge and concepts, that may be required for highly skilled practical assessment, a nod to Dewey (1927). Professor David Phoenix, Vice-Chancellor of London South Bank University (LSBU) and a champion of the term, has demonstrated how by introducing multiple provision options, such as those on offer at LSBU's South Bank Colleges, the barriers between traditional theory-based modes of study and those focused on specific careers are being overcome in practice (Phoenix, 2020).

In 2016, Alan Milburn MP, in presenting witness testimony to a parliamentary sub-committee, commented that there is an overemphasis on academic routes, with alternatives seen as second-rate. Schools and teachers have often reinforced this idea, with a sixth form focus on the achievement of high A level grades, which reinforce their own institution's reputation. Research by the Sutton Trust (2018) revealed that, from a sample of almost 600 teachers, 64% confirmed that they would rarely or never advise students with good grades to take this 'alternative' route. Nawaz, *et al.*, (2023) confirmed this attitude, reporting that only 5% of apprentices reported support from their schools for their chosen pathway. This attitude has often been highlighted by universities attempting to access schools to promote degree apprenticeships. Change is happening, but degree apprenticeships are too often regarded as a progression for the less able student, harking back to attitudes from an earlier century.

AT A GLANCE

5%



only 5% of apprentices reported support from their schools for their chosen pathway.

47%



of apprentices responded that their degree apprenticeship was considered inferior to a full-time, campus-based, degree.

39%



of respondents perceived a campus-based degree to be a better option because of reputation and the association of apprenticeships with "trades and manual labour".



When asked about the reputation of degree apprenticeships, (Nawaz and Edifor, 2024) 47% of apprentices responded that their degree apprenticeship was considered inferior to a full-time, campus-based, degree. The findings of this study, a QAA collaborative research project, the most comprehensive so far into degree apprenticeship practice and pedagogy, reported several factors which affected the perception of degree apprenticeships. These included the view that apprenticeships are for school and college leavers with low levels of qualification achievement.

In 2024, considerable evidence suggests that the perception of vocational education as a second-class option persists. For example, the website Career Pilot (2024) describes vocational courses in its 'Parent Zone' as providing "training and qualifications related to a specific job, such as being a plumber, hairdresser, or a professional cook". Supporting the prevalence of this attitude, the careers organisation, *Prospects*, Early Career Survey (2022) reinforces some of these negative ideas about apprenticeships. 39% of respondents perceived a campus-based degree to be a better option because of reputation and the association of apprenticeships with "trades and manual labour". 10% of respondents cited their parents' perceptions as a barrier to considering apprenticeships, suggesting there is much more to do in schools and with parents to promote degree apprenticeships as an option equal to other degree routes.

Although there have been decades of discourse surrounding theories of practical skills development and applied learning, there has been a tendency, with earlier examples of degree apprenticeship delivery, to replicate more traditionally academic forms of assessment to demonstrate equal standing. This led, for instance, to the inclusion of dissertations and multiple reflective assignments throughout the curriculum rather than the development of level-appropriate, work-integrated, assessments to determine the achievement of the apprenticeship standard's knowledge, skills, and behaviours (KSBs). The evolution of degree apprenticeships has prompted the implementation of relevant assessment of the application of theoretical knowledge through practical skills assessment—traditionally an element of assessment in medicine, dentistry, architecture, and other well-established occupational degrees leading to professional registration.

In 2022, following consultation across the sector, IfATE introduced reforms to the essential characteristics of degree apprenticeships. In addition to implementing integrated end-point assessment (EPA) for apprenticeships with mandated degrees, key among these reforms is the requirement for closer integration of on- and off-the-job learning and the integration of assessment, which require higher education providers to design assessments that can be carried out in the workplace. These include practical assessments, such as Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs), which have long been a feature of occupation-specific mainstream degrees and professional training at all levels, such as in health and allied health disciplines. They align with the rigorous quality assurance measures of the regulatory body and university/HE academic regulations and provide a template for work-integrated assessments on non-clinical degree apprenticeships. Other degree subjects which rely heavily on practical skills assessment are arts and performance disciplines. The integrated assessment of theory, academic and technical skills are essential to judgements made on the performance of a Mozart concerto or an original, devised piece of theatre.

Nawaz, *et al.*, (2023) surveyed academics and found that "only 51% of institutions utilise distinct assessment methods for degree apprentices and non-apprentices i.e. regular undergraduate/postgraduate", while 55% reported utilising different teaching methods in delivery to students on non-apprenticeship pathways. However, a significant majority of academics and apprentices confirmed that the KSBs and the characteristics of individual workplaces informed delivery and assessment. Exploring the impact and effectiveness of collaboration with employers, Bravenboer (2016) observes that the co-design of degree apprenticeships is a "no-brainer". Involving employers at the design stage allows delivery and assessment to be fully integrated and enhances the apprentice experience. He observes the recommendation of the Wolf Report (2011) that "employers are involved directly in development and specification of qualifications". This approach was validated by IfATE's 2022 reforms which included a requirement for "further integration of on-and off-the-job training, which is a key principle of all apprenticeships".

Co-design with employers also fulfils the expectations of Ofsted which requires providers to demonstrate that their provision "reflects expected industry practice and meets employers' needs" and allows apprentices to apply their learning in the workplace (Ofsted, 2023). Ofsted judges this aspect of programme design as part of its theme of "intent". As an example, Ofsted's inspection of the University of Staffordshire (Ofsted, 2022) commented on how, "leaders work closely with employers and other stakeholders to shape the curriculum". They referred specifically to the police force employer consortium, collaborating on design and with active police trainers delivering professional practice modules.

04. Prestige and Reputation

A key factor influencing current perceptions of degree apprenticeships are the notions of prestige and reputation rooted in the history of our ‘old’ universities and in the legacy of late 19th-century technical institutes, which evolved into colleges of further education in the 20th century and polytechnics in the 1960s. Bourdieu’s theory of social and cultural capital, (1985) explores in detail how the economically disadvantaged are less likely to access resources which would support their progression to professional employment. Despite numerous changes to the UK higher education system and the recent expansion of providers from independent and specialist sectors, notions of prestige continue to persist.

Boliver (2015) notes that long before the mid-20th century sector changes, status distinctions were drawn between UK universities based on their historical origins. These institutions maintain their ‘elite’ reputations through factors such as financial stability, exceptional resources and facilities, globally recognized research-intensive activities, and selective student admission. Although the term *Oxbridge* is often used to refer to the two most famous English universities, Oxford and Cambridge maintain distinct identities. Boliver (2015) and Wakeling and Savage (2015), explore how the differentiation of higher education providers into several clusters of institutions with similar characteristics has been a feature of UK HE over several decades. Boliver explores how institutions often belong to more than one cluster, such as ‘red-brick’ and ‘civic’ universities. These distinctions resonate with specific audiences, including regional and international ones. For instance, several Scottish institutions promote reputations based on their ‘ancient’ status, which appeals to local students and their parents. Boliver’s research identifies a significant feature which differentiates elite universities from the others and that is admission requirements with many expecting all A or A* at A level grades, whereas post-1992 institutions are more likely to have lower and more flexible admissions criteria. As in Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital (1985), Boliver and Wakeling cite the importance of the extensive networks of influence provided to study at an ‘elite’ institution. These networks extend into the upper echelons of public and private sectors including government leaders with Oxford (28) and Cambridge (14) providing over half of the nation’s 57 prime ministers. The access to networks of the privileged is a powerful currency which to many has greater importance than educational achievement. Blackmore (2016) taken from discussions with vice-chancellors and university leaders from across the sector reported one vice-chancellor as commenting that,

“The Russell Group have successfully stage-managed the position that they are seen as the best universities. Some are and some aren’t but by and large, this is nonsense. However, parents increasingly say they want their child to go to one. I always counter by asking whether you would want that even if the subject performance was not good, but I suspect the answer to that is yes.”

As polytechnics transformed into universities with their degree-awarding powers, it seemed that a measure of equality had been achieved. However, it appeared that the traditional university sector felt required to act and in 1994, a group of seventeen universities (now 24), formed a branding organization known as the Russell Group. The primary purpose of this group has been to promote member institutions as research-intensive, with world-class reputations, facilities, and academic esteem embedded in centuries of tradition (Russell Group, 2017). Russell Group members were initially slow to embrace degree apprenticeships and growth is still moderate. In July 2023, the Russell Group acknowledged that only 10% of undergraduate entrants to degree apprenticeships were studying at Russell Group universities. They cited regulatory administrative burdens, lack of engagement from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and financial sustainability as barriers to adoption. They also noted the need for improved information and guidance to increase student awareness and knowledge of degree apprenticeships.

In 2023 and 2024, several universities have been awarded substantial sums to support degree apprenticeship development, for example Liverpool John Moore’s University, £1M and University of Staffordshire, £974,000 and for waves two and three of the competition, applications from institutions new to or with less engagement of degree apprenticeship delivery were encouraged to apply. Interestingly, no Russell Group university was successful in waves one or two of the Office for Students (OfS) degree apprenticeship funding competition, which may suggest that very few, if any, had applied, and only two were successful in wave three.

The Russell Group is not alone in promoting universities with shared characteristics. MillionPlus, the association for modern universities in the UK, represents the interests of post-1992 institutions, including former polytechnics, and has been at the forefront of championing degree apprenticeship development since their introduction in 2015. Government statistics confirm that starts at Levels 6 and 7 have increased by 6.6% to 44,060 in 2023/24. This represents 15.8% of all starts. In addition, those starting degree apprenticeships made up 5% of all Level 6 entrants and 8.6% of all Level 7 entrants in England in 2021/22, contributing significantly to the undergraduate and postgraduate population across England, (UK. Government 2024).



05. Degree Apprenticeships, Starts and Trends

The degree apprenticeships introduced from 2015 were role-specific standards, replacing more generic apprenticeship frameworks. Early standards addressed higher skills shortages in engineering, construction, digital, the professional services sectors and in leadership and management.

In the 2015/16 academic year, out of the 27,200 higher apprenticeship starts in England, approximately 740 were on degree apprenticeships. This number increased slightly in 2016/17, with 640 starts, but a significant surge occurred in 2017/18 when the number of starts more than doubled to 1,620 (House of Commons Library, 2023). This growth was driven in part by the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in May 2017, which provided employers, particularly large public sector organisations like local authorities, NHS Trusts, and police forces, with incentives to use apprenticeship funds for skills development and workforce planning. The expansion of degree apprenticeships accelerated significantly from 2020 onwards, even with the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Public sector employers continued to leverage and optimise the levy to train both new recruits and upskill existing staff, contributing to the rise in starts.

During the 2021/22 academic year, only five Level 6-degree apprenticeships had more than 1,000 starts nationally, illustrating the concentrated demand for specific roles. (Table 1) The delivery of these apprenticeship numbers was also concentrated in a relatively small group of universities.

Further analysis of apprenticeship starts by provider type in 2022/23 highlights the concentration of degree apprenticeships in specific institutions, particularly universities with strong ties to public sector employers (see Figure 2).

Continues overleaf ➔

TABLE 1: Level 6-Degree Apprenticeship Starts (2021/22)

(Source: House of Commons Library, 2023)

Apprenticeship Standard	Starts
Chartered Surveyor level 6 Degree	1,300
Digital and Technology Solutions Professional (level 6 Integrated Degree)	1,577
Chartered Manager (level 6 Degree)	2,731
Registered Nurse NMC 2018 (level 6 Integrated Degree)	3,395
Police Constable 2018 (level 6 Integrated Degree)	4,273

FIGURE 2: Apprenticeship starts by HE provider type 2022/23

(Source: Apprenticeship Statistics, House of Commons Library, Number 06113 (2021))

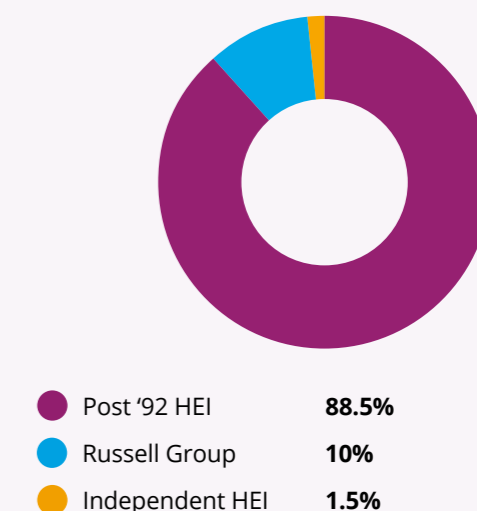


TABLE 2: DfE Strategic Priorities funding allocated by OfS, March 2023

(Source: OfS, Mid-year Allocations of Recurrent Funding for 2022-23)

Provider	Allocation £
Anglia Ruskin University	770,163
Sheffield Hallam University	445,222
Staffordshire University	414,452
Aston University	373,427
University of the West of England	359,907
Middlesex University	301,632
The University of Cumbria	300,233
The Open University	270,396
University of Salford	234,965
Coventry University	206,527
Total	£3,676,924

Since the introduction of degree apprenticeships in the 2016/17 academic year, there has been a steady increase in the number of individuals, of all ages, pursuing this route. In the 2022/23 academic year, approximately 46,800 people in England began a degree apprenticeship. Notably, 53% of these starts were at Level 6, while 47% were at Level 7 (House of Commons Library, 2023) underscoring employers' commitment to investing in the highest level of skills development for their employees.

In September 2023, the OfS launched a funding competition across three waves for higher education providers to develop Level 6-degree apprenticeships, specifically targeting standards that had previously seen low uptake. Successful bids were required to demonstrate how they would promote widening access and participation from under-represented groups (OfS, 2023). OfS allocated funding based on degree apprenticeship starts for 2022/23 to universities and colleges. Of the total funding allocation of £7,952,448 divided between 104 institutions, almost half, £3,676,924 was awarded to just 10 institutions which accounted for almost 50% of degree apprenticeship starts in that academic year. (see Table 2).

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06. Impact of the Apprenticeship Levy (2017-2024)

The apprenticeship levy imposes a tax on all employers with an annual salary bill exceeding £3 million. The tax is levied at 0.5% of the total salary bill and is stored in an employer account, which can only be used to access approved apprenticeship training. The levy has been particularly useful for large employers who previously supported employees to undertake part-time degrees in subjects such as chartered surveying, quantity surveying, manufacturing, and related subjects in construction and engineering.

The impetus provided by the levy has resulted in significant year-on-year growth to date. New degree apprenticeship standards, especially those for professional roles within the public sector, have led to significant expansion. The NHS workforce development plan clearly defines its intention for staff training for the next 15 years. Central to the strategy is to increase the use of apprenticeships for training clinical staff from today's 7% to 22% by 2031/32 with over half of this growth “to be achieved by 2028/29”, (NHS, 2023).

Large private sector companies have also turned the levy into a degree apprenticeship success story. In 2021/22, the degree apprenticeships with the largest intakes nationally were the Level 6 Digital and Technology Solutions Professional (DTSP) and Level 6 Chartered Manager. Both of these degree apprenticeships were among the earliest developed. When DTSP was revised in 2023, employers leading the IfATE Trailblazer group successfully argued for the retention of the integrated Level 6-degree qualification and an increase in the maximum funding for delivery. The campaign, led by TechSkills, the trailblazer lead organisation, and high-profile global companies such as Siemens Group and BT, added industry weight to the case for retaining the mandatory degree. They emphasised the competitiveness of the tech sector and the need for internationally recognised and transferable specialist skills.

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There have, however, been some significant concerns around the effectiveness of funding. Since implementation of the levy in 2017, some employers and providers have found the funding rules to be burdensome and apprenticeships expensive to set up. This is certainly one of the factors cited by the Russell Group as an impediment to engagement with degree apprenticeships. However, Nawaz, *et al.*, (2023) found that for 95% of employer respondents the apprenticeship levy is the key motivating factor in providing apprenticeships. 68% of these employers would be likely to discontinue their apprenticeships if support from the levy was removed or rationalised. Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) were even more likely to hold this view. SMEs, which are mainly non-levy paying, are less likely to engage with degree apprenticeships for a number of reasons. In 2019, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) published a report, “Degree Apprenticeships: Up to Standard” which observed that costs and bureaucracy were a disincentive, especially to SMEs. They added that degree apprenticeship programmes with ‘stopping off points’ at levels 4 and 5 would better suit employers unable to commit to a lengthy level 6 programme from the outset.

07. Regulatory and Policy Frameworks

The regulatory framework for degree apprenticeships has its roots in historical reforms designed to ensure quality and parity across educational pathways. The Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), established following Crosland's 1965 speech, played a crucial role in ensuring that degrees awarded by non-university higher education providers, predominantly polytechnics, were of equal quality to those awarded by autonomous universities. Initially under local authority control and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) oversight, polytechnics experienced a shift in quality assurance following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. This Act conferred university status on polytechnics and introduced measures to standardise course content, delivery, and assessment, paving the way for the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC).

Historically, the credibility of university degrees relied heavily on the prestige of the awarding institution and the academic freedom enjoyed by faculty members. However, the rapid growth of HE participation necessitated the development of standardized quality assurance frameworks, including external examination processes. The HEQC's recommendations included the establishment of consistent awards frameworks, linked to credits and levels, to ensure the comparability of different types of awards. Traditional degree and apprenticeship degrees must conform to these criteria, with credit-based modules validated by the institution and where relevant by professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRB). Although methods of delivery and assessment may differ for degree apprenticeships with work-integrated assignments and live briefs, the module outcomes will be equal to the non-apprenticeship degree.

PSRBs have also played a pivotal role in maintaining rigorous quality standards within vocational degrees, particularly in fields like medicine and architecture. These occupational degrees, with high societal value and traditionally requiring the highest academic achievements on entry, set the foundation for the degree apprenticeships developed in the 21st century. From 2022, end-point assessment for regulated professions such as registered nurse or physiotherapist has been integrated into the examination board for award of the university degree. IfATE and the PSRBs involved recognised that the proficiencies of the occupation required for registration by the relevant PSRB e.g. Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) for nursing and midwifery, and the College of Health Care Professionals (CHCP) for allied health professions were fully integrated with the validated degree and apprenticeship standard. This negated the need for additional end-point assessment or a separate assessment of occupational competence confirming parity with mainstream degrees for those professions. The impact of removing separate end-point assessment has meant those apprentices successfully completing their integrated degree apprenticeship can progress to registration and roles within their profession, with the same status assured as degree only graduates.

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08. Degree Apprenticeship Design and End-Point Assessment

Degree apprenticeships are developed based on standards approved by the IfATE and must comply with OfS and QAA guidance, as well as the requirements of role specific PSRBs. The award of credit within degree apprenticeships must conform to the university's academic regulations, meet the expectations of the OfS B conditions (OfS, 2024), and align with the QAA Framework of Higher Education Qualifications (QAA, 2024). Furthermore, degree apprenticeships are subject to inspection by Ofsted under the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) and financial audit by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)/DfE, which administers funding via the apprenticeship budget.

Degree apprenticeships are subject to external end-point assessment (EPA), which was introduced based on recommendations by Richard (2012) who emphasised the need for “holistic testing that assesses the full breadth of relevant competencies in real-world contexts”. These independent tests are conducted by registered end-point assessment organisations (EPAOs), including the same PSRBs that accredit the embedded university award. Some degree apprenticeships are approved as integrated, allowing the university to act as the EPAO, with the EPA forming part of the final degree credit, and with no separate requirement for assessment of occupational competence.

At first glance, the requirement for external EPA may appear to undermine the argument that degree apprenticeships are equal to traditional degree courses. However, the presence of EPA does not prevent the awarding of degree qualifications, with some apprentices leaving their apprenticeship having fully achieved their degree and gained professional status without completing EPA. The IfATE reforms (2022) which require the EPA to be fully integrated and co-terminus with the degree have yet to be fully implemented, but where they are in place, apprentices graduate with their degree and apprenticeship certificate at the end of their programme assessment.



09. Quality Assurance and Degree Apprenticeships

A shift towards viewing degree apprenticeships as different but equal pathways to career success, enhanced by regulatory frameworks and academic rigour, is critical for their universal acceptance.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, marketisation has become a key feature of the higher education landscape as degree level education has become more accessible through the expansion of the university sector. The extensive research by Brown (2012 and 2014) on the history and impact of marketisation explores how the introduction of student fees has promoted a view that students are consumers and degrees commercial products leading in turn to increased scrutiny of the effectiveness of the provision.

The QAA, established in 1997, has been instrumental in maintaining oversight of quality and standards across all HEIs, replacing the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC). The QAA's responsibilities include developing a national qualification framework for higher education, issuing subject benchmark statements, conducting institutional reviews including of collaborative provision.

The QAA's involvement in reviewing higher and degree apprenticeships further underscores the alignment of these programmes with established quality assurance practices. Guidance for degree apprenticeships (QAA, 2022) was reinforced in the updated Quality Code (2024) to both degree apprenticeships and non-apprenticeship degrees. Degree apprenticeship design and implementation are regulated at every stage, ensuring consistency in course design, validation, and quality assurance.

The design, implementation and assessment of degree apprenticeships are regulated at every step.

Course Design

All degree apprenticeships start with the apprenticeship standard approved by the IfATE. This standard is developed by 'trailblazer groups' representing employers and other stakeholders. These groups define the standard through KSBs, which form the learning outcomes for the apprenticeship.

Initially, degree apprenticeship design often attempted to mirror traditional degrees in the same disciplines. However, the 2022 IfATE reforms aimed to prevent degree apprenticeships from being simple 're-badged' degrees. Collaboration with employers ensures the apprenticeship KSBs are delivered through both on-the-job training and degree qualification delivery. Best practice includes involving employers in aspects of assessment, such as OSCEs or contextualized assignment briefs based on the apprentice's work context and experience.

Approval, Validation, and Credit Value

Universities design curricula, including modules, learning outcomes, and assessment criteria, and validate programmes according to their academic regulations, awarding module credit similar to other university programmes. Many apprenticeships have been approved at the trailblazer stage by PSRBs, such as the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship (NMC, 2018).

It is customary practice to include PSRBs, employers, apprentices, and service users in qualification validation processes. As noted by Bravenboer *et al.*, (2024) in *Can you credit it?* awarding credit for degree apprenticeships is complex, as "no prescribed method of awarding credit" exists. Traditionally, credit is awarded by ascribing notional hours of learning within modules. In degree apprenticeships, where assessment is integrated, the expectation is that module learning outcomes align with the KSBs of the apprenticeship standard, ensuring that assessments meet both qualification and apprenticeship outcomes.

Academic Quality Assurance and Governance

Internal institutional processes apply to degree apprenticeships, leading to awards like other university degrees. Quality procedures such as periodic review, module evaluation, course committees, and examination boards are governed by academic regulations. Most universities have adapted their regulations to ensure compliance with internal procedures and the additional external requirements of IfATE, ESFA, and Ofsted. Universities also submit an annual self-assessment report (SAR) and Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) to Ofsted, validated by the governing body.

ESFA Apprenticeship Accountability Framework (AAF)

The ESFA introduced the AAF in August 2022. This framework monitors key metrics such as retention and achievement using institutional data, forming the annually published Qualification Achievement Rate (QAR). It also tracks in-year withdrawals and breaks in learning. If either exceeds the prescribed maximum percentages, the ESFA intervenes. The ESFA shares this information with both Ofsted and the OfS to inform their institutional profiles.

External Quality Assurance of End-Point Assessment

For a brief period in 2022/23, the QAA was commissioned by OfS to act as the delegated quality body for external quality assurance of integrated degree end-point assessment (EPA). This role involved reviewing the independence, processes, and quality of assessments in universities registered as degree apprenticeship EPA organisations. QAA relinquished this role in March 2023, and the function is now managed by OfS. Following the completion of integrated apprenticeships, institutions submit a self-assessment report detailing strengths and areas for improvement in the conduct of EPA, which informs OfS' monitoring of universities status as EPAOs.

The regulatory frameworks and quality assurance processes applied to degree qualifications in all higher education providers apply equally to all degree apprenticeships. However, for the latter there is a further step, referred to as a "quagmire of regulation" (Phoenix, 2020, p. 22). In September 2020, the Secretary of State for Education wrote to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, to inform her that, "from 1 April 2021, Ofsted will become the single body responsible for the inspection of apprenticeship training provision at all levels. This includes responsibility for provision at levels 6 and 7 (both degree and non-degree)".

The vast majority of Ofsted inspections of degree apprenticeships have resulted in judgements of Grade 2 – Good – with a few at Grade 1 and at Grade 3. There have been no Grade 4 – Inadequate – judgements. Degree apprenticeships have passed the test! Yes, there have been areas for improvement identified in Ofsted reports and flagged by the ESFA but the improvement in overall achievements at levels 6 and 7 are a testament to the quality of this provision.



Conclusion

Degree apprenticeships have been framed within a complex interplay of public policy, societal perceptions, and historical stratification. They have evolved from the long-standing tradition of vocational education in the UK, which for many years was confined within a binary system separating academic and vocational or technical qualifications and designating individuals as either academic or vocational learners (Crawford-Lee, 2024b). Despite efforts by successive governments to achieve parity between vocational education and university degrees, the entrenched stratification within higher education traditions has been difficult to dismantle. The abolition of the binary system in 1992, which granted university status and degree-awarding powers to former polytechnics, marked a significant step towards a more inclusive higher education system.

However, appreciation of the quality of undergraduate education in post-1992 and specialist institutions is improving. For example, the 2024 OfS Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) awarded Gold in all categories to 28 HEIs, with only 4 from Russell Group institutions. Of those awarded Gold in at least one aspect, 24 are from institutions focused mainly on Level 4 and 5 provision (below the level of a full bachelor's degree) or with low or medium entry tariffs. Of course, while TEF enhances reputation within the sector, it may not yet have wider public traction. When the impact of policy, internal and external regulation, and quality enhancement is considered alongside the pedagogy of delivery and assessment, there can be no argument that degree apprenticeships are equal and not merely equivalent to non-apprenticeship degree programmes.

The integration of workplace learning with academic study, reinforced by quality assurance bodies such as Ofsted, the QAA and the OfS, ensures that degree apprenticeships meet the same high standards expected of a degree – it includes a regulated degree, after all! This alignment underscores the credibility and value of degree apprenticeships, affirming their status as a pathway to professional success and educational achievement.

Degree apprenticeships play a transformative role in HE, offering an inclusive pathway to professional careers that combine academic knowledge with high level skills. The integration of training with academic qualifications not only enhances employability but also supports social mobility by providing access to education and employment opportunities for everyone. By addressing the lingering biases and reinforcing the message of equality through policy, practice, and perception, degree apprenticeships can solidify their position as a legitimate and respected route to higher level learning and professional skilled careers.

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