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UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

Higher and Degree Apprenticeships as professional entry and progression routes

Dr Stan Lester

2025 Report Series

Welcome

About the author

Dr Stan Lester is an associate with UVAC. He has worked since 1993 as a consultant, researcher and systems developer in professional and work-related education and development. His work spans four principal areas: professionalisation and self-regulation, professional competence, work-based higher education, and more recently digital learning. He has been described as a leading expert on professional competence as well as one of the the world's most important thought-leaders and most cited authors on university-level work-based learning. Stan is the author or co-author of several reports relating to degree apprenticeship and similar provision. These include the 2020 Edge Foundation-commissioned study by Middlesex University on the sustainability of degree apprenticeships, a 2016 report for QAA on work-integrated degrees, internal reports on tripartite reviews and mobile learning in apprenticeships, and a study of digital learning in work-based programmes in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Stan can be contacted at s.lester@devmts.co.uk.

About UVAC

The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) is one of the most authoritative voices on technical, vocational and professional education delivered by higher education and the leading expert on all aspects of the policy and operational requirements of higher and degree apprenticeships in England. UVAC is a membership body of around 80 UK universities and higher education providers and has been championing higher level technical and professional learning and progression routes into higher education and the professions for over 25 years. UVAC is known for its advocacy, representation and research, including work published in its official academic journal, Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning. In 2024, UVAC celebrated its silver jubilee.

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Contents

Summary

Higher Apprenticeships at level 4 and above were introduced in England and Wales in 2008, and formal Degree Apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7 in 2015. These higher-level apprenticeships have since become a significant route to qualifying in many professions and an ancillary route in others.

This small-scale qualitative study examines how apprenticeships are used, and how well they are working, in a cross-section of professions representing different sectors, approaches to qualifying and modes of regulation. During the summer and autumn of 2024 twenty interviews were conducted with professional body personnel and eleven with providers, and six focus groups were attended by 37 participants, mainly from providers. While there were differences between professions, and differences of emphasis between professional bodies and providers, overall a coherent picture emerges of how higher and degree apprenticeships are working in relation to qualifying professions.

Findings

Professions are continuing to broaden their entry-routes, either by continuing the trend reported in an earlier PARN study (Lester 2008) towards emphasising qualifying requirements rather than specific routes, or by approving a wider range of pathways to qualifying, including apprenticeships. The professions in the study fall into three groups: (a) those, principally in the health and social care sector, that specify particular higher education programmes, including apprenticeships; (b) those that accept varied routes to qualifying, including in some cases non-graduate work-based ones; and (c) mainly smaller professions that set qualifying requirements independently of any given route, for instance by using a practising assessment as the sole means of qualifying. There is strong support from most professional bodies for apprenticeships, many of which lead to qualified status either directly or with minor additional requirements. In a minority of professions there is a gap between the apprenticeship and the qualified level, particularly when the apprenticeship is at level 6 but qualifying status is pitched at level 7, or the qualifying assessment calls for a more advanced level of proficiency than it would be reasonable to expect at the end of the apprenticeship. There are however usually accessible means for gaining the further learning and experience needed to bridge this gap, generally premised on continuing employment and employer support.

Most professional bodies and providers are highly positive about apprentices, and view the apprenticeship route as a more efficient and effective means of entry than the sequential route of a full-time degree followed by professional training. Apprentices are typically described as excelling in the workplace, getting higher grades than full-time students, reaching qualified level more quickly, being sought after by employers and being promoted or taking on responsibility more rapidly. In the health and social care sector where practice-integrated degrees are the norm there is tentative evidence that this comparison still holds, if to a lesser extent; there are for instance some indications that apprentices can be more advanced in their practice at the point of professional registration than standard-route entrants. On the other hand apprentices in many professions are on average older and already have work experience, and further investigation is needed in order to make like-for-like comparisons. Work-based routes may also be less suitable for school-leavers who are not committed to a specific career or prepared to put in the time and effort involved.

The effect of higher-level apprenticeships on social mobility and widening access to professional careers varies, both across professions and according to the population that the apprenticeship recruits from. In many professions the apprenticeship route is a powerful means of progression for people in assistant- or technician-type roles, who generally do not have higher education qualifications and may face barriers to progressing in their careers; there is some evidence that it has similar value for career-changers and those who have been out of the workplace for various reasons. Some professions already have widely-used work-based routes that do not require a degree for entry, and the impact of introducing higher or degree apprenticeships has consequently been smaller. There is less to indicate that recruitment from school-leavers is as effective at broadening intakes, as while there are some good examples of widening participation there are also apprenticeships where learners come from a similar or narrower pool than full-time higher education students, particularly where a high level of competition for places combines with traditional recruitment criteria.

There is a fair level of satisfaction among professional bodies with the design of apprenticeships, and most professions are happy with the influence they have on apprenticeships in their areas of operation. Several issues are however apparent in the design and structure of apprenticeship standards. A minority of apprenticeships are either too narrow and job-specific to support meaningful professional careers, or specified in a way that makes them difficult to apply in context. Some closely-related apprenticeships are not designed in a co-ordinated manner, and there can be barriers to progressing between levels and no facility for stopping off at intermediate points on longer programmes. End-point assessments are not always well-designed or integrated, and the value of unintegrated EPAs is questioned; on the other hand the success of integrating the EPA with professional qualifying requirements has been variable.

At the level of implementation there are ongoing issues in maintaining a sufficient supply of apprenticeship places, ensuring that the workplace provides an adequate learning environment, and integrating practical and theoretical learning. The supply of apprenticeships is partly limited by insufficient employers offering places, and partly by providers not wanting to become involved for reasons that include funding levels and the perceived level of bureaucracy. Particularly for smaller professions the geographical availability of places can be highly variable and low learner numbers can mean relying on a single provider. Employers and workplaces can vary widely in how they accommodate and support apprentices, with reported issues including employers not providing adequate support for learning; job roles or the organisation's work being too narrow to cover the apprenticeship standard; apprentices not being allowed to take on the necessary responsibilities; and difficulties in organising and obtaining release for placements. Integration is reported as improving, but it is apparent that some employers and providers still view apprenticeships as part-time degrees and further progress is needed before genuine integration between 'on'- and 'off-job' components is the norm.

Finally, a number of issues are apparent in the way that apprenticeships are managed at a national level. The policy environment can be regarded as immature, leading to inconsistencies and ongoing uncertainties around regulations and funding. There is still inflexibility and clunkiness in apprenticeship regulations and procedures, hindering various aspects of design and delivery including the design of more appropriate and co-ordinated specifications and assessment requirements; sensible approaches to ancillary components such as functional skills; seamless and flexible routes on to, through and off pathways; and the ability to reflect emerging industry needs. Apprenticeships also attract high levels of regulation and quality assurance, in places duplicating that already present in higher education and the professional sector and not always appropriate to the type and level of programme or the learner demographic.

> **Apprentices are typically described as excelling in the workplace, getting higher grades than full-time students, reaching qualified level more quickly, being sought after by employers and being promoted or taking on responsibility more rapidly.**

Conclusions

- Higher and degree apprenticeships form an important, high-quality entry- and progression-route in many professions, strongly supported by the relevant professional bodies. For many entrants they are a more effective and efficient route than the sequential pathway of a full-time degree followed by a professional training post.
- Apprenticeships are a powerful means of progression for people in assistant-type roles or who have left full-time education without higher education qualifications. Their value as a means of widening participation for school-leavers is less clear. The strongest effect on social mobility is likely to be achieved through promoting them to people who already have experience of work including through lower-level apprenticeships, as well as those who have taken vocational courses rather than A-levels.
- Apprenticeships in professional fields need to provide entrants with clear pathways to qualified status, whether pitched at level 6, 7 or 8, either in themselves or by direct progression via other accessible work-based routes.
- Apprenticeships need to be designed so that they provide clear career paths rather than being geared to narrow job roles, enable seamless progression between levels, and allow learners to step off and back on at relevant points without penalty.
- End-point assessments need to be designed so that they use authentic and valid assessment methods, and are integrated with the degree, where present, and co-ordinated with professional assessment requirements.
- Employers need to take an active role in apprenticeship delivery, ensuring that work environments are supportive of learning, work roles (supplemented with placements where necessary) cover all the requirements of the apprenticeship standard, and work-based learning is facilitated by suitable personnel and where appropriate relevant technology.
- Providers need to ensure that practical and theoretical learning are properly integrated through means such as practical collaboration with employers, incorporation of workplace learning into the academic programme, creative use of digital technology, in-depth learning conversations and authentic and integrated approaches to assessment.
- National arrangements for managing apprenticeships need to be improved so that they support good practice, responsiveness and sustainability in apprenticeship design and implementation. This includes systems that recognise the diverse and evolving nature of the professional sector, and quality assurance arrangements that are proportionate, avoid duplication and are appropriate to the type and level of programme and the learner demographic.
- Finally, workplace-based integrated development programmes are not limited to levy-funded apprenticeships, and alternative means of developing, organising and financing them need to be explored.

Introduction

Since their introduction between 2008 and 2015, higher-level apprenticeships – in England and Wales officially Higher Apprenticeships and Degree Apprenticeships[1] – have increasingly become used as entry- and progression routes in formally qualified professions, in many fields providing an alternative to the dominant sequential route of full-time higher education followed by a professional training post. Professions' adoption of, and confidence in, these programmes has grown over the time that they have been in operation, and at least in some fields they can now be considered as mainstream entry-routes. One of their attractions is that they enable 'learning while earning', avoiding student fees and also providing an accessible pathway for people already in work who would find it difficult to return to full-time education. For employers they provide a means of growing workforces in-house in a way that combines workplace training with higher education or the equivalent and leads to professionally qualified status where it exists.

The role of professions – typically represented by one or more of a statutory regulator, self-regulating institute or a membership association (here 'professional bodies') – in the development, governance and implementation of apprenticeships is one that has been given less attention than it warrants, both in the literature and at least initially in the national systems associated with apprenticeship standards and quality assurance. Most recent studies, including for instance Lester and Bravenboer (2020) and Laczik *et al* (2025), have focussed on providers, apprentices and employers as the main players at the 'learning face', with professions placed in supporting roles often off to the side of the national agencies responsible for the apprenticeship system. This is something of an oversight, as even when not a statutory requirement it is often professionally qualified status that is most valued in the employment and professional services market, at least on a par with the higher education qualification and considerably more so than the apprenticeship certificate.

This study makes a small-scale contribution to addressing this situation by putting the profession centre-stage, complemented by the provider and with other actors in supporting roles. As the study progressed it was clear that the provider voice was necessary to explore some of the details of implementation, but the principle was maintained of provider personnel as representing the profession rather than the university or training organisation in a more generic sense. The study has its roots in two other pieces of work that the author was involved in, one a 2007 study into the evolution of professional entry-routes and entry-requirements for the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN; Lester 2008), and the other a 2019-20 piece of research by Middlesex University and funded by the Edge Foundation that examined higher and degree apprenticeships principally in engineering, nursing and the digital sector (Lester and Bravenboer 2020). Its conception was also informed by subsequent studies by PARN on professions' attitudes to and use of apprenticeships, and the work of Jim Hordern at Bath on higher apprenticeships and professional formation.

The study focusses on level 6 and 7 apprenticeships[2], although discussion of level 5 programmes – such as the Nursing Associate and People Professional apprenticeships – is included where it forms part of a pathway to qualifying at level 6 or 7.

1. Higher Level Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland, Graduate Apprenticeships in Scotland.
2. Levels given here are as used in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. While an apprenticeship is not a qualification in a formal sense, it is allocated a level independently of any qualification achieved within or alongside it (so for instance a level 7 apprenticeship in law can include a LlB degree, while level 6 apprenticeships in several fields are offered with master's degrees). A profession may also allocate a nominal level to its qualified status that is independent of any academic qualifications or apprenticeships that may contribute to achieving it.

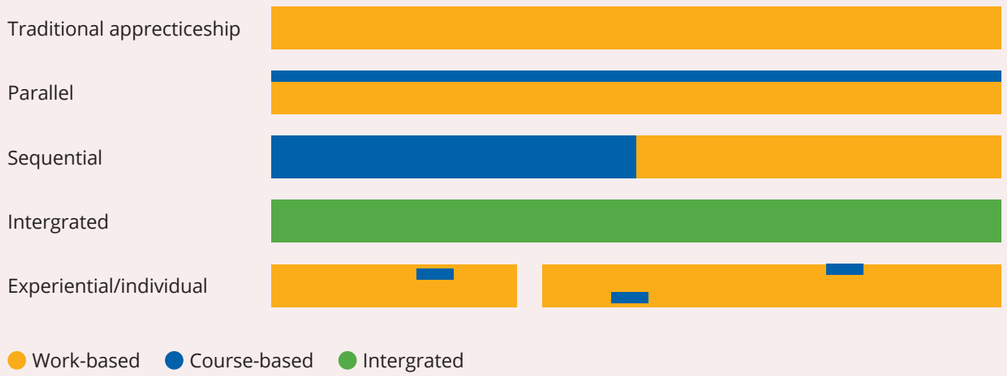
01. Background

1.1 Professions, qualified status and professional organisation

The idea of 'a profession' is a somewhat vague one that can be interpreted at one end as any sort of remunerated career, and at the other as an occupation that conforms to an ideal of being learned, highly qualified and self-governing. One fairly widely-applicable set of criteria, drawing on Hoyle and John (1995), is that professions embody expert knowledge, generally drawing on a theoretical base mediated by practice; involve the use of thought and judgement that are independent of any employment or contractual relationship; and have an ethos that at least in principle serves the public good. A common though not universal characteristic is that members of a profession are united by some form of governing body, and employ a notion of 'being qualified' in the sense of a professional status that is usually distinct from 'having a qualification'. There are exceptions such as the clergy and arguably the academic profession, as well as occupations in areas such as management, digital industries and sales where professionalisation in this sense can be regarded as partial or in progress.

Professions vary both in the implications of their qualified status and the way in which they are organised. The main legal basis of professional regulation in the UK is through 'reserved functions' and 'reserved titles'. A reserved function is restricted to persons who hold specified credentials; reserved functions include things such as auditing limited companies and representing clients in court, as well as servicing gas appliances and shoeing horses. A reserved title can only be used by an appropriately qualified or registered person; examples include 'dentist', 'solicitor', 'architect', 'constable' and 'social worker', and 'registered nurse' (though not 'nurse' on its own). The existence of one does not imply the other, for instance while company audits are reserved to members of authorised accounting bodies, 'auditor' or 'accountant' are not reserved titles; and conversely none of the functions normally carried out by architects are currently reserved. Reserved titles are rare in the UK outside of the health and legal sectors; a more common arrangement is use of a chartered title, which is conferred by a chartered professional body and *de facto* has a similar status to a reserved title (for instance 'chartered surveyor' is protected while 'surveyor' is not). Most other 'accredited', 'certificated' and similar titles, and non-chartered memberships, lack any specific legal protection although misuse can be a matter of trades description or employment fraud. Where there is no legally-protected function or title, qualified status is a matter of 'private ordering' (Ogus 1999), dependent on the extent to which practitioners, employers and service users can be persuaded that professional status provides benefits beyond those afforded by commercial and employment law (Lester 2016). Being professionally qualified can therefore be legally required to practise or to use the relevant title, near-essential due to the expectations of employers, clients or insurers, confer an advantage in the labour or professional services market, or simply be nice to have as a marker of proficiency and progression.

FIGURE 1: Professional entry-route archetypes



01.

Three principal methods of professional organisation exist in the UK. The most common, and the archetypal model for British professions, is a single, non-profit-making, often charitable body – chartered or otherwise – that is controlled by its members and where relevant is responsible for accrediting and overseeing practitioners, i.e. a self-regulating model. Unitary professional bodies of this type range from organisations that operate principally as special interest groups or learned societies, through bodies that formally accredit and regulate their members but do not have any legal protection beyond chartered status where it is present, to those that control reserved titles or functions. In some sectors individual bodies group together under a common umbrella, such as the Engineering Council or Science Council, and delegate to it responsibilities for setting and regulating common standards, although many also retain a self-regulating function (for instance the title Chartered Engineer is regulated by the Engineering Council, but Chartered Civil Engineer by the Institution of Civil Engineers, an Engineering Council member). The second model, typified by the legal sector following the Clementi reforms of 2007, splits the professional organisation into a membership arm and a regulatory arm, with the latter being free from operational interference by the former and usually having substantial external representation on its governance body; a discussion of some of the issues involved in moving to this model is provided by Dunne (2021). The third involves a fully independent regulator that registers practitioners but does not have a direct relationship with a membership body. Almost all current examples are in the health and social care sector, though in some other sectors a regulator oversees a reserved function (as with the Financial Reporting Council in relation to statutory audits and now the Health and Safety Executive for work on 'high risk buildings') but responsibility for individual practitioners remains with a self-regulating professional body. A putative trend is for paired regulators to move away from their corresponding membership bodies and towards the independent regulator model, as has happened in architecture. A fourth model can also be posited where public-sector regulation is undertaken by a government body representing the primary employer, as in teaching where regulation for working in state schools has (in England) been absorbed into the Department for Education. The nature of membership bodies where there is a separate regulator can vary between retaining almost all the characteristics of an archetypal professional body, as in architecture where RIBA remains responsible for the chartered title, and acting as principally a representative and member services body, as in nursing. The term 'professional body' is used in this report to refer to any organisation responsible for professional practitioners, whether self-regulating, a statutory regulator or purely a membership body.

1.2 Qualifying routes in professions

As discussed by Lester (2024a), drawing on Houle (1980), Bines (1992) and Lester (2008, 2009), routes into professions can be classified into five broad types: apprenticeship, parallel, sequential, integrated and experiential (figure 1). In practice these are not completely discrete and there are overlaps between them, as well as pathways that combine elements of more than one (for instance starting with a full-time first degree and progressing to a part-time professional or postgraduate course alongside a training post).

The traditional *apprenticeship* route consists of training on the job alongside an experienced practitioner, or sometimes multiple practitioners, without any formal external training. Validation is provided by the approval of the employer and historically through an association or guild, sometimes following an examination or set-piece assessment. The traditional apprenticeship has largely been replaced in formalised professions by the parallel route, although some individual practitioners' pathways to qualifying still make use of arrangements akin to informal apprenticeships.

The *parallel* or *dual* route involves the learner attending a part-time course alongside work-based training. It is typified by the day- or block-release model that became the norm in post-1990 apprenticeships, although particularly where early-career employment is insecure, there is a lack of employer support, or it is common for entrants to progress from junior roles, more flexible, distance and online courses are also common. The course curriculum and work-based training are generally expected to complement each other, though there is rarely much co-ordination between them. Parallel routes gradually emerged out of more 'pure' apprenticeships in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and before the expansion of the universities they were the dominant form of professional training; in many professions they have now largely been replaced by sequential or hybrid models.

The *sequential* route in its simplest form consists of a full-time course, for professions now usually a degree, followed by work-based training. Variations include a first degree followed by a professional course or postgraduate degree and then a qualifying period in the workplace, or a hybrid where the advanced course is taken in parallel with workplace training. The sequential model can be considered dominant over the last forty or fifty years, with its apogee at around the millennium.

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The *integrated* route brings together theoretical and practical learning in a single programme or pathway, generally either a nominally full-time course with substantial work attachments ('work-integrated learning', as is now common in the health and social care sector), or a work-based programme with a significant theoretical element ('learning-integrated work', after Garnett 2020, as in the contemporary apprenticeship model). These pathways should present learners with relatively seamless integration of the practical and the theoretical, but in practice not all do so and some nominally integrated programmes follow a parallel or sequential approach within an integrated 'wrapper' (Lester 2024a). Particularly in the work-integrated learning model there can also be doubts about the ability of the programme to bring the learner to a fully proficient level, with programmes sometimes being followed by further supervision and work-based training (Lester *et al* 2016).

Finally, an *experiential* route can also be distinguished in which the entrant assembles the necessary experience and learning needed to qualify piecemeal, either accumulating credit by various means or building to a summative qualifying assessment (or doing both). This type of route is unavailable in some professions and forms a minority pathway in most of those where it is present, though it can be significant for career-change entrants and those progressing from allied occupations or who have gained the relevant capabilities without previously qualifying.

The integrated route brings together theoretical and practical learning in a single programme or pathway, either a nominally full-time course with substantial work attachments, or a work-based programme with a significant theoretical element.

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1.3 Professions and higher-level apprenticeships

Some professions, notably in the engineering sector and in branches of accountancy and law, maintained apprenticeship-type parallel routes into fully-qualified roles throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless the official UK apprenticeship revival in the 1990s was initially restricted to level 3, partly stemming from its roots in measures to promote youth employment and partly by the way that funding for vocational education and training was administered. Apprenticeships were extended to levels 4 and 5 in 2008, and to levels 6 and 7 in 2013. The latter change was accompanied by measures that made for easier integration of higher education qualifications, encouraging the involvement of universities (Bravenboer and Lester 2016). Two years later official degree apprenticeships were launched, with a degree at level 6 or 7 included as a mandatory part of the programme (BIS 2015). Subsequently, in response to the Richard review (Richard 2012), a common set of principles were applied to all apprenticeships. These included a minimum 20% of time devoted to off-job learning; an assumption against including qualifications beyond the apprenticeship certificate, unless they are essential to the occupation; inclusion of an end-point assessment for award of the apprenticeship certificate; and an assumption that the apprenticeship should lead, or contribute to, recognition in the relevant trade or profession where one exists. At levels 6 and 7 apprenticeships can incorporate a degree ('Degree Apprenticeships' in England and Wales) or not ('Higher Apprenticeships'); where they include a degree the end-point assessment can be integrated into the degree or (until recently) designed as a separate component. Apprenticeships at these levels can lead directly to professional recognition with or without further assessment; they can contribute towards it, with the entrant needing to meet other requirements to reach qualified level; or they can simply provide learning and experience that supports meeting the profession's qualifying standards. Initially the need for professions to be involved in apprenticeship development and approval appeared to be poorly appreciated, and although this was remedied fairly quickly the indication from professional bodies has been that it remained a frustrating process (PARN 2017).

Three studies by the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) indicate how professions' involvement in official higher-level apprenticeships developed up to the mid-2010s. Williams and Hanson (2011) reported that 70% or more of professional bodies were interested in developing a higher apprenticeship-based pathway, but also noted that means would need to be found of enabling entrants from level 4 and 5 apprenticeships to progress to level 6 or 7, the point at which most professions set their qualifying criteria. The second study (PARN 2015), after the introduction of level 6 and 7 apprenticeships but before the appearance of formal degree apprenticeships, showed a similar level of interest. The main barriers were now mismatches between apprenticeship content and the profession's requirements; perceptions among existing members and prospective entrants (and parents) that apprenticeships were inferior to full-time university study; and the administrative burden of supporting apprenticeships. At the time a stronger level of interest and involvement was present in fields such as engineering that already had a tradition of apprenticeships and technician-type roles, compared for instance with health where academic entry-routes predominated. A concern was however reported about viewing technician grades as a pathway to higher levels of qualification rather than valuable in their own right. The third study (PARN 2017) reported widespread involvement from professional bodies, but also difficulties in engaging smaller employers and reluctance from some universities to become involved in degree apprenticeships. Professional bodies were also still experiencing frustrations with the procedures and relationships involved in working with the official bodies involved in apprenticeship development and approval.

The reported effect to date of higher and degree apprenticeships on professions includes modifying entry pathways and career structures; increasing the diversity of entrants; and, in some instances, accelerating the professionalisation of occupations where the notion of qualified status has been weak or absent. In a study just preceding the introduction of degree apprenticeships, Hordern (2015) identified that higher apprenticeships extended career structures in three ways. 'Downwards' extension involves creating pathways from assistant- or technician-type roles, while 'horizontal' extension provides alternatives to dominant routes based around full-time degrees. 'Upwards' extension tends to occur in fields such as hospitality and some areas of social care that lack an obvious qualified status at higher levels, providing a pathway into defined managerial and specialist roles. Lester and Bravenboer (2020) and Bravenboer *et al* (2024) have reported a particularly strong structural effect in nursing, where a restructuring of progression-routes had taken place providing an apprenticeship-based pathway from assistant levels (2 and 3), through the then new Nursing Associate role at level 5, to Registered Nurse (level 6) and on to advanced practitioner (level 7). The assistant – associate – registered sequence was seen by employers and nursing academics as an increasingly important career route and means of maintaining the supply of nurses. In engineering, degree apprenticeships were found to be effective at supporting progression routes between technician roles and Chartered or Incorporated Engineer, with many degree apprentices having progressed from level 3 apprenticeships or further education qualifications.

01.

Diversifying the professional workforce and supporting social mobility was one of the original objectives set for degree apprenticeships, alongside developing economically critical skills (BIS 2015). Reports on the effect of higher-level apprenticeships on widening participation have indicated mixed results, with some fields attracting more diverse cohorts while others have recruited from largely the same pool as full-time degrees, in some cases with competition far exceeding that for courses in the most selective universities. A report by Policy Connect/HEC (2019) shows substantial recruitment from school-leavers with good A-levels, suggesting that degree apprenticeships in particular can simply be a substitute for full-time higher education, and Mackay (2022) identifies how multiple barriers have worked against increasing the participation of disadvantaged young people. By 2020 the population on degree apprenticeships was by most measures less diverse than that in higher education as a whole, although some improvements were noted to gender balance in both male and female dominated professions (Lester and Bravenboer 2020). On the other hand there is evidence of greater uptake from mature learners (Universities UK 2019), students coming through further education (Engeli and Turner 2019), and existing workers wanting to progress from lower-level roles (Universities UK 2019, Lillis and Bravenboer 2022). Specific successes include nursing, where the pathways discussed above have attracted large numbers of learners who are unlikely to have otherwise entered higher education; policing, where degree apprenticeships are increasing ethnic diversity and improving gender balance (Universities UK 2019); and engineering and digital industries, where they are attracting a higher proportion of female entrants than conventional university routes (UVAC/SDN 2019). A meta-analysis by Nawaz *et al* (2023) concludes that on balance degree apprenticeships are contributing to social mobility, though the evidence is patchy and differs by field.

The phenomenon of professionalisation, where occupations seek to define themselves as professions and take on 'professional' characteristics such as qualified status and self-regulation, generally proceeds over decades rather than years, although some processes such as setting up an authoritative institute or putting in place a qualified status can happen quickly once other components are in place (Lester 2016). Higher and degree apprenticeships can be seen as contributing to various aspects of professionalisation in quite diverse occupations. In sales, the direction to date has been to focus on sales as a career and on ethical sales practices, but the development of a business-to-business sales degree apprenticeship has introduced a professional-level qualification (Nottingham *et al* 2019) and potentially supports the professional association's goal of achieving chartered status. In policing, emphasis on degree-level training supported by a degree apprenticeship, a parallel graduate-entry diploma and now a standardised non-degree programme at the same level are beginning to change the nature of policing towards an externally-qualified rather than organisationally-qualified occupation (Leek 2020). In digital industries apprenticeships are one of several factors contributing to the notion of a qualified level in information technology (Lester and Bravenboer 2020). A less successful example can be seen in architecture, where the level 6 apprenticeship was expected among other things to formalise the 'architectural assistant' role, but so far has had limited uptake or impact.

01.

1.4 Issues in apprenticeship design and delivery

Over the last decade various issues have become apparent in the way that higher and degree apprenticeships have been designed, managed and delivered; these have been discussed widely in the literature, including in *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning* and other UVAC publications, and will only be summarised briefly here. An initial structural issue, resolved reasonably well in some fields but still problematic in others, has been a disconnect between the coverage and specifications of apprenticeships and the requirements of professional bodies. A focus on occupational roles along with the primary responsibility for developing apprenticeship standards being given to employers has resulted in some apprenticeships being too narrow from a professional perspective (PARN 2017, Bishop and Hordern 2017), or specified in a way that does not facilitate easy compatibility with professional qualifying requirements (Lester and Bravenboer 2020). A related issue that has continued to burden some apprenticeships is the use of separate assessment regimes for the degree, the apprenticeship end-point assessment (EPA) and professional status (Lillis and Varetto 2020); however, in line with the recommendations made by Lester and Bravenboer (*op cit.*), the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) have now introduced a policy that the EPA is combined with assessment for the degree ('integrated degree apprenticeships') or professional assessment, a change that is gradually filtering through as apprenticeship standards are revised.

> **Major issues (in delivery) include a lack of integration between 'on-job' and 'off-job' learning and the quality of the work environment as a learning space.**

At the level of delivery major issues include a lack of integration between 'on-job' and 'off-job' learning and the quality of the work environment as a learning space. The initial assumption contained in the language of apprenticeship specifications reflected a traditional parallel or dual model typically with day- or block-release alongside, but not necessarily connected with, work-based training. The importance of integrating these two strands is now widely recognised (e.g. QAA 2022), but there is evidence that in practice many programmes are still being operated in a disconnected or minimally connected manner (Lester 2024a). In some fields providers have cited the way in which the profession expresses its requirements as a factor discouraging a more integrated approach to learning, while, in others, problems appear more to do with workplace pressures (e.g. Lester and Bravenboer 2020 in relation to engineering and nursing respectively); another factor is a reluctance to redesign programmes as apprenticeships rather than as standard part-time degrees (HCPC 2019). While integration of learning appears to be improving across higher-level apprenticeships, it is still proving challenging for many institutions and employers to do more than offer what are effectively parallel programmes. Workplace issues have not been researched as widely as other aspects of higher and degree apprenticeships, but there is broad agreement between studies specific to degree apprenticeships (such as Rowe *et al* 2017, Roberts *et al* 2019 and Jones *et al* 2023) and the literature on workplace learning more generally. This includes for instance the need for a supportive organisational culture with appropriate workplace learning pedagogies and access to a community of practice (Billett and Choy 2014, Billett and Smith 2014), an 'expansive' workplace that supports rounded, career-oriented development rather than training to become a productive worker as quickly as possible (Fuller and Unwin 2008), and effective mentoring and support at work (Lester and Costley 2010, Major *et al* 2011).

02. Methodology

The study was guided by a perspective that is systems-oriented (Wilson 1990), interpretive and to some extent phenomenological (Lester 1999), particularly through aiming to create a rich picture of the field that is informed by the perspective of the actors within it. At the same time it was tempered by a pragmatic concern with the need to cover essential themes without imposing too heavily on participants' time.

The study aimed to involve around 20 professions across different sectors, with perspectives from professional bodies (self-regulating, regulatory and membership-only as relevant) as well as providers in the same fields. Three phases were planned: interviews with professional body representatives from June to August, with provider personnel from August to October, and a series of focus groups in November. Professions were identified by comparing the IfATE list of apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7 with fields that had some form of professional qualifying body; the list was then prioritised to include a selection of the most widely-used apprenticeships as well as a cross-section of different sectors, sizes of profession and modes of organisation. With the exception of the health and social care sector where the HCPC covers multiple professions it was not intended to include both regulatory and membership bodies for the same field, although delayed responses meant that some duplicate invitations were issued and one field was represented by two bodies.

Professional bodies were approached in four different ways. For three a relevant person was known to the author and was contacted directly. Otherwise a general contact point was used to find the relevant person and a request made to take part. A note was also sent out in the Professional Associations Research Network's newsletter, resulting in two additional responses, one from one of the bodies on the original list and one that was involved in developing an apprenticeship. Finally, contacts were made via the UVAC network, producing a further two participants. A total of 20 interviews were carried out with professional body representatives, mostly heads of education or equivalent, and one additional body completed a questionnaire but was unable to take part in the interviews.

Two main routes were used to contact providers. In some fields only one provider existed, and details were provided by the professional body or found via the gov.uk web site. Two professional bodies also suggested providers to contact. For the remainder a list of gatekeeper contacts was drawn up from UVAC members, generally heads of apprenticeship or work-based learning, and these were asked for contacts in relevant departments with the aim of spreading interviewees across different organisations. Eleven interviews were carried out with provider representatives, covering ten discrete fields plus one for multiple health professions.

02.

Potential participants were sent a brief description of the study or a link to it (devmts.org.uk/uvacstudy.pdf). On confirming that they would take part they were then sent a short questionnaire as appropriate to provider and professional body roles (appendices 1 and 2), asking for brief factual information and their assessments of various aspects relating to apprenticeship provision. Questionnaire responses could be used to inform the interviews, for instance if a particular aspect was noted as problematic or working particularly well. Interviews were carried out online over Zoom, Teams or Skype and took between 35 and 75 minutes. A loosely-structured format was followed, focussing on three themes for each. For professional bodies this consisted of (i) the relationship between the apprenticeship, the professional body and qualified status or membership; (ii) how well the apprenticeship was working as a professional entry- or progression-route; and (iii) any issues in its design or delivery. For providers the main themes were (i) the success or otherwise of the apprenticeship as a professional entry- or progression-route; (ii) any systems or design issues, including any relating to the professional body; and (iii) successes and issues in practice. Beyond this and any specific questions arising from the questionnaire or background research participants were able to steer the discussions towards matters that were of concern or relevance to them.

Some interviews were recorded digitally, but given that recording was only set up on one platform (Zoom) and some participants preferred not to be recorded, the main method of recording was manual note-taking with quick transfer to digital text. The interview notes were then read through to compile an overall list of themes, followed by reinterrogation theme-by-theme and, following some adjustment to themes, a combined account as reported in chapter 3 below.

The final phase of the research consisted of six online focus groups held in November. Four groups were themed by sector (business and law; construction and engineering; culture, science and smaller professions; and health and social care) and two designated as open. An online signup page was created with a maximum of ten participants per group; participants in the earlier stages of the study were invited first, followed by an open invitation to professional bodies via PARN and providers via UVAC. Thirty-seven people participated in the groups, including 28 new to the study, as shown in table 3. A few days before the discussions a three-page summary of the interview findings was circulated to participants along with three topics for discussion:

- Do these findings accord with your experience? Can you offer any other insights?
- What now needs to be done to improve H/DAs as professional entry and progression routes?
- What should UVAC do in this area?

Group meetings lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. The groups followed a common format of introductions, a brief summary of findings from the first part of the research, then an open discussion based on the above topics with the emphasis on the first area. Discussions were recorded, backed up by handwritten notes; a typed summary was produced and tagged with participant codes, themes identified and summarised, and finally the themes combined as reported in chapter 4.

The draft report was circulated to interview participants and two peer reviewers for comment, and following feedback minor amendments were incorporated into the final version.

Findings from the interviews and questionnaires

03.

Twenty interviews were conducted with representatives of professional bodies and eleven with providers, and one professional body completed the questionnaire but was unable to be interviewed (tables 1 and 2). Only three providers returned questionnaires with more than identifying information, while 17 questionnaires were received from professional bodies with most of the questions answered. Where statements from interviews are quoted, they are identified as PB (professional body of any type) or Pr (provider) followed by the field.

3.1 Professions' qualifying requirements

The professions in the study can be considered on a spectrum from those where pathways to qualifying rely on specified academic programmes, to those where there are no specific education or training requirements but entrants must demonstrate that they meet standards set by the professional body. In between, professions may have preferred or majority routes, but also support or allow alternatives such as 'experienced practitioner' entry, progression from paraprofessional roles in the same field, and accelerated entry from related fields.

The first group includes most of the health and care professions. Here qualifying is premised on gaining the approved degree, which is linked directly to the requirements of the relevant professional regulator. Degrees in these fields include a substantial requirement for supervised work experience and are (at least nominally) integrated in format. Regulators typically define minimum course coverage and work experience, allowing providers at least some flexibility to decide how courses are structured. This enables for instance the use of part-time courses, degree apprenticeships, recognition of prior learning, and in some cases postgraduate as well as undergraduate courses leading to the same practice outcomes.

The middle group has broadly or more narrowly-defined entry-routes, but allows some flexibility for different individual pathways. Five examples illustrate approaches that follow this broad pattern:

- Architecture requires completion of approved postgraduate and practising courses, with flexibility to enter from related degrees or equivalent-level qualifications, or via a conversion course. A non-degree, work-based route is available through a partnership between RIBA and Oxford Brookes University. A standard assessment can also be taken by holders of non-approved postgraduate architecture degrees.
- In surveying, a standard route operates via an approved first degree and structured workplace training, though alternative pathways are available depending on experience and qualifications. All candidates must complete a comprehensive assessment of professional competence before being granted chartered status.
- In engineering, entrants in most fields need to meet the requirements of the Engineering Council (the 'UK Spec') to qualify as an Incorporated Engineer (level 6) or Chartered Engineer (level 7). These requirements are interpreted into specific engineering fields by the relevant professional body. The commonest route is a degree at the relevant level followed by relevant experience and a professional review; holders of bachelor's degrees who wish to progress to Chartered Engineer can also complete further learning deemed to be at level 7 rather than taking a master's degree. An experiential route is also available based on a practising assessment or series of technical reports.
- Solicitors have recently moved from specified routes to a standards-based route to qualifying. This requires a graduate-level qualification (not necessarily a degree) for entry, then all candidates must pass knowledge- and skills-based examinations set by the profession. Some exemptions are available for solicitors who have qualified in other jurisdictions.
- In personnel and development, basic membership is open-access then members can progress through to the level appropriate to their work using approved courses, experienced practitioner assessment, or a mix of both. While there are full-time undergraduate and postgraduate degrees that meet some of these requirements, they form a minority route and most entrants have unrelated degrees or start in assistant-type roles.

TABLE 1: Professional bodies taking part in the study

Field	Type of body	Reserved functions or title	Main qualifying level	Apprenticeships[4,5]
Heritage conservation	Self-regulating		7	7D
Museums	Self-regulating		7	7(D)
Records and archives	Self-regulating		7	7
Highways and transport	Self-regulating chartered		7	6D
Civil engineering	Self-regulating chartered		6, 7	6D
Surveying	Self-regulating chartered		6	6D
Construction	Self-regulating chartered[1]		6	6D
Architecture	(a) Independent regulator (b) Chartered membership[2]	title	7	6D, 7D
Landscape and environment	Self-regulating chartered	[3]	7	7[6]
Ecology and environment	Self-regulating chartered		7	6D, 7D
Personnel and development	Self-regulating chartered		7	5, 7
Law	(a) Paired regulator (b) Paired regulator	both both	6 7	6, 7 7(D)
Environmental health	Self-regulating chartered		6	6D
Health professions	Independent regulator	both	6, 7, 8	various
Nursing	Chartered membership	functions[3]	6	5, 6D
Psychology	Self-regulating chartered	functions[3]	7, 8	6D, 7D
Physiotherapy	Chartered membership	both	6	6D
Osteopathy	Membership	both	6	6D[6]
Social work	Independent regulator	both	6	6D

Notes:
(1) Questionnaire only.
(2) Self-regulating in respect of chartered status.
(3) Specific titles e.g. 'landscape architect', 'registered nurse' and 'clinical psychologist' are protected.
(4) Level 5 apprenticeships are only included where they form part of a progression route.
(5) D = Degree Apprenticeship, (D) = Higher Apprenticeship normally with a degree integrated into it.
(6) In development or awaiting approval to run.

TABLE 2: Providers taking part in the study

Field(s)	Provider type	Apprenticeships offered[2,3]
Curating	University	7(D)
Records and archives	Adult education service	7
Engineering, surveying	University	6D
Quantity surveying	University	6D
Personnel and development	Independent provider	5, 7
Sales	Independent provider[1]	6D, 7D
Environmental health	University	6D
Health professions	University	6D, 7D
Nursing	University	5, 6D
Psychology	University	7D
Social work	University	6D

Notes:
(1) In conjunction with validating university.
(2) Level 5 apprenticeships are only included where they form part of a progression route.
(3) D = Degree Apprenticeship, (D) = Higher Apprenticeship with a degree integrated into it.

03.

The final group, represented in the study by the creative and cultural professions and by ecology and environmental management, operates qualifying processes exclusively based on standards set by the profession, regardless of education or training route. Professional bodies may recommend or approve particular courses, but qualifying is based on a practising assessment of some form that is controlled directly by the professional body and is separate from gaining free-standing qualifications. The rationale for this approach is that it maintains common standards regardless of entry-route and avoids dictating specific pathways to entrants; this is seen as important for instance where there are widely differing routes to working in the sector.

Overall, the trend identified by Lester (2008) towards more flexible, outcome-based entry-routes appears to be continuing albeit now at a slower pace, with recent examples provided by changes to qualifying for solicitors and architects. As will be discussed later the introduction of higher and degree apprenticeships is supporting this trend particularly in health and other fields that require specific qualifications for entry.

Higher and degree apprenticeships are now reasonably widespread in professional fields, including (albeit as minority routes) in traditionally strongly academically-based professions such as architecture, law and curating.

3.2 Professions' involvement in and use of higher and degree apprenticeships

Reflecting intentions reported by PARN (2017), higher and degree apprenticeships are now reasonably widespread in professional fields, including (albeit as minority routes) in traditionally strongly academically-based professions such as architecture, law and curating. Of the 17 bodies in the study that completed the questionnaire, 82% formally endorsed degree or higher apprenticeships, and 71% were involved in their development as members of Trailblazer (apprenticeship standards development) groups. Three-quarters of those who responded to the question expected the proportion of entrants coming in via apprenticeships to increase, and the remainder for it to stay the same. There are however differences in how apprenticeships contribute to qualified status across the professions, ranging from acceptance as meeting all the qualifying requirements to informal recognition as partially preparing entrants for the profession's assessments.

In the health and social care sector the majority of professions have relevant degree apprenticeships that go most of the way to meeting their qualifying requirements in the same way as other approved degrees, with strong backing from professional regulators and the National Health Service. The HCPC, the regulator for several health and care professions, reported that a third of the new programmes that they had approved over the previous two years were apprenticeships. A strong feature in several health professions is the presence of a pathway from assistant-level occupations, typically with training at level 3, through level 5 and 6 apprenticeships that lead to specified roles, and on to an advanced practitioner role normally at level 7. Similarly, in social work a level 6 qualifying degree apprenticeship was introduced in 2019 and is beginning to form a significant route into the profession with strong support from the regulator, membership body and employers.

Psychology forms a slight outlier in this sector, as the full professional qualifying level is at 8, normally through completion of a doctorate. Degree apprenticeships cover the intermediate steps to qualification and also provide qualified status for roles at levels 6 and 7, with the largest uptake being from graduates taking the level 7 programme either to develop a career as an associate psychologist or as a stepping-stone to chartered level. The associate role was developed in advance of the apprenticeship but now uses it extensively as an entry-route. It is still becoming established as a distinct professional role in the health service and is not yet regulated by the HCPC.

03.

The middle group of professions, where relevant degrees contribute but, in most cases, do not lead directly to becoming professionally qualified, vary slightly in how they accept level 6 and 7 apprenticeships towards qualified status. A trend is apparent towards the apprenticeship meeting the full professional requirements:

- For legal executives, surveyors with some exceptions, some engineering specialisms (at incorporated level), solicitors and architects the relevant apprenticeships lead directly to fully-qualified status, having been designed so that the standards and assessments incorporate the professions' qualifying requirements. Landscape architecture has also designed its apprenticeship, which is currently awaiting approval to run, to lead directly to chartered status in the same way.
- The apprenticeships in personnel and development and building management also cover the ground required by the profession, but there is a caveat in that if the end-point assessment organisation is not the professional body, or the assessment is not carried out by an assessor approved by it, apprentices need to meet some additional, usually relatively minor requirements before being signed off. This also applies to some specialisms in surveying, such as quantity surveying, although candidates should be able to use much of their EPA evidence for the professional assessment.
- In environmental health the apprenticeship assessment is integrated with the degree rather than the professional body's assessment, but apprentices are encouraged to work towards the profession's requirements in the final year and meet both sets of standards at the same time.
- For transport planners there is no professional status that corresponds to the level 6 degree apprenticeship, and candidates for chartered status need to demonstrate additional learning at level 7 in a similar way to level 6 apprentices progressing to Chartered Engineer.

The final group of cultural and environmental professions keep their qualifying requirements separate from achievement of the apprenticeship, in line with their approach to academic programmes in general. In ecology the relationship between both sets of requirements is seen as very close, but there is no current mechanism for counting apprenticeship assessments towards chartered status. In the cultural professions the relationship is deliberately separate, with most apprentices encouraged to gain additional experience before applying; there is however recognition that this needs to be less than for graduates from full-time courses. The availability and uptake of level 7 cultural apprenticeships is however very limited, with only one provider each for curating and archives while the conservation programme has recently lost its sole provider.

3.3 The structure and functioning of apprenticeship routes

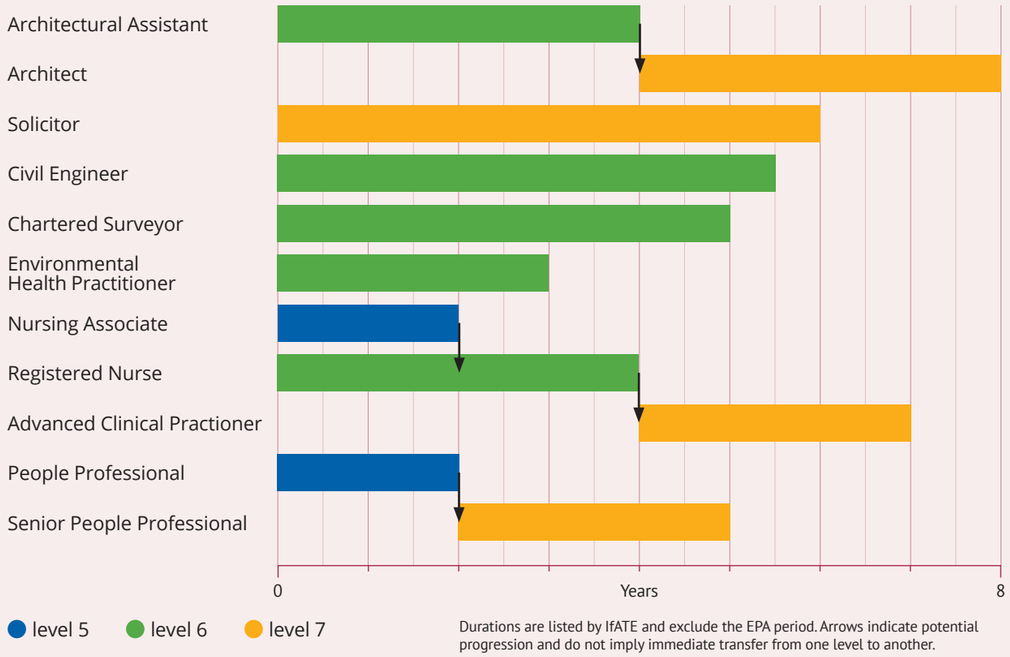
Professional apprenticeship routes can be designed in a number of ways, with typical approaches being to include all the necessary coverage in a single long programme, or to use two or more shorter programmes with stopping-off points at different levels (figure 2). The solicitors' apprenticeship is an archetypal long programme, with a single level 7 apprenticeship that is designed to take a school-leaver or equivalent through to qualified level over six or seven years. The level 6 engineering, surveying and environmental health apprenticeships work in a similar way though they are shorter. At the opposite end, examples of apprenticeship sequences are provided by nursing and personnel and development. As noted above the former has a sequence that in principle runs from healthcare assistants or support workers at levels 2 and 3, through Nursing Associate (level 5) and Registered Nurse (level 6), then on to level 7 apprenticeships for enhanced and advanced practice; the level 6 apprenticeship can be operated as a four-year programme suitable for instance for school leavers or assistant-level workers who are able to commit to a degree, or as an 18 month or 2-year follow-on programme for those who have already completed level 5. Personnel and development apprenticeships are available at levels 3, 5 and 7 mirroring the qualification structure used by the CIPD, but progression is typically linked to work roles so that it is common for those entering the workforce at level 3 to progress to level 5, or level 5 to level 7, but less so through the whole sequence (Pr, personnel and development). The personnel and development apprenticeships are discrete so for instance entrants progressing from a level 5 to a level 7 People Professional apprenticeship will normally take the full 3-year programme.

In practice there appear to be advantages and disadvantages to each approach. A long-programme has the advantage of giving apprentices a stable training structure and a clearly-defined route to qualifying, and it can also be shortened for entrants with relevant previous experience and learning. A disadvantage is that it requires a lengthy commitment that can be tested by other events in apprentices' lives, and it may lead to greater drop-out with the resultant penalties for providers (PB, ecology and environment). Multiple programmes appear well-suited to contexts where there are job roles at different levels and apprentices can step on and off at different points, aiding career progression and picking up workers who otherwise may not have been able to take the next steps. The value of the nursing pathway in this context has already been mentioned, while multiple apprenticeships are opening up opportunities in the museums sector where there has traditionally been a strong divide between 'assistant' and 'academic' roles (Pr, curating); they are currently also

being explored to encourage career progression in sales (Pr, sales). A disadvantage is that progression from one apprenticeship to another is not automatic, and problems can be encountered finding suitable places at the next level up or securing continuing support from the employer; both issues were reported for instance in nursing for progression between levels 5 and 6 (PB, nursing).

Some subtleties were noted in the way that apprenticeships function as entry-routes in practice. In social work, the apprenticeship had been designed to mirror the integrated social work degree, with newly-qualified entrants from both typically completing an assessed probationary year before working as autonomous practitioners. In practice at least some of those qualifying via the apprenticeship route were reported as able to take on considerably more responsibility at this point, suggesting that the probationary year might be incorporated into the structure of the apprenticeship (Pr, social work). On the other hand in surveying not all apprentices go forward for the chartership assessment (APC) at the end of their programme, and it was suggested that many need additional support and experience at work to prepare for the assessment (Pr, quantity surveying). Finally, employer preferences were also noted as a major factor in determining how apprenticeships are used. As an example, while the level 6 and 7 architecture apprenticeships were designed to provide a continuous work-based pathway mirroring the (former) three-part sequential route to qualifying, employers' reluctance to take on school-leavers has led to a much commoner route being a full-time degree followed by the level 7 apprenticeship (PB, architecture).

FIGURE 2: Relative durations and sequencing of selected apprenticeships



Durations are listed by IfATE and exclude the EPA period. Arrows indicate potential progression and do not imply immediate transfer from one level to another.

Two practices of note are the combination in some fields of a level 6 apprenticeship with a master's degree, and the addition of a degree to non-degree higher apprenticeships. Offering a master's degree, sometimes accompanied by substantial recognition of prior learning, as an alternative to the normal BA or BSc was reported as a strategy in social work, physiotherapy and surveying in order to increase appeal to graduates, mature entrants and entrants from related professions. This strategy was also seen by some participants as attractive if funding for level 7 apprenticeships is withdrawn; one engineering body for example wanted to create a level 7 apprenticeship, but was also considering a second level 6 apprenticeship that incorporated a postgraduate qualification to support progression to chartered level. On the other hand disadvantages were pointed out in social work in creating what could be interpreted as an accelerated graduate route that emphasised academic credentials over other relevant abilities (Pr, social work).

The incorporation of a degree into a non-degree apprenticeship was regarded by the solicitors' regulator as common though not universal practice for university providers, usually taking the form of a Bachelor of Law embedded in the level 7 apprenticeship. In the museums sector the sole provider had also made the decision to include a master's degree alongside the level 7 curator apprenticeship. In both these instances a level 7 apprenticeship without a degree was seen as unattractive to prospective applicants and potentially a source of disadvantage in a largely graduate labour market.

3.4 Professions' attitudes towards apprenticeships

The professional bodies in the study were as a group overwhelmingly positive about higher and degree apprenticeships. Individual differences appeared to be more dependent on factors such as employment patterns in the sector, availability of suitable apprenticeships, and practicalities of delivery rather than any fundamental differences between professions.

In the health and social care sector widespread support for apprenticeships was apparent from the NHS, local authorities and other employers, training organisations, professional regulators and membership bodies, building in a culture where apprenticeships are becoming an integral part of the sector's entry and progression structure. Positive messages were widely reported, for instance "apprentices are becoming great physios as well as advocates for the degree apprenticeship" and "(they) bring in a lot of positives such as interpersonal and soft skills… real strengths" (PB, physiotherapy). Osteopathy had also gained strong support from the regulator, profession and potential providers for creating a degree apprenticeship. On the other hand one specialist health provider had encountered problems gaining validation for a new apprenticeship from a professional body that didn't seem to understand how the programmes worked (Pr, health professions). The only concern expressed about apprenticeships in the sector was in nursing where some fears had been picked up that a non-degree apprenticeship could be used to undermine the graduate status of registered nurses (PB, nursing).

Several other professions indicated strong support for apprenticeships as an entry-route or a progression route from technician or assistant roles. In ecology a good level of support was reported, with the apprenticeship being seen as a means of growing the workforce in the face of a shortfall in the number of full-time students as well as an effective way of promoting ecology as a professional career. In landscape architecture the nascent apprenticeship was similarly seen as a means of attracting people into the profession, and a high level of interest was reported from employers. Environmental health also reported enthusiasm from employers, though with some reservations from "more traditional practitioners" (PB, environmental health).

> **The professional bodies in the study were as a group overwhelmingly positive about higher and degree apprenticeships.**

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For legal executives and personnel and development practitioners, existing means of qualifying are largely geared to workplace routes and so while apprenticeships provide alternative, funded pathways they do not fundamentally alter ways into the profession. The legal executives' body was nevertheless enthusiastic about the apprenticeship route, while personnel and development was more measured, supporting the apprenticeship route but also seeing it as attracting "only a small proportion of entrants" so not an area where significant resources should be focussed (PB, personnel and development).

The solicitors', architects', surveyors' and engineering bodies all expressed strong support for apprenticeships. The solicitors' regulator reported lots of interest from across the sector, and that many firms were experiencing high volumes of applications. Apprenticeship routes were seen as "brilliant, broadening the doorway" (PB, surveying), fitting well with the practicalities of the profession and providing a wider range of entry-routes. In engineering they were viewed as "a great way in for the right individual with the right support" (PB, civil engineering), reservations being that they were hard work for less motivated individuals or where employers were not properly geared up to supporting them. The architecture bodies were also highly supportive, commenting that apprenticeships had a good level of credibility; the main caveats related to firms "who would rather recruit Russell Group graduates than post-92s" (PB, architecture) along with some reluctance to employ school-leavers.

In the cultural sector responses were more mixed, with enthusiasm tempered by low uptake. Conservation had put a lot of effort into setting the apprenticeship up and working with employers to promote it, only to see a very mixed level of support along with difficulties in persuading providers to take it on. The recent withdrawal of the sole, East Midlands-based, provider had made the professional body recognise that "it may have to be realistic and accept that it isn't viable" (PB, heritage conservation), though plans were being discussed to develop a level 6 non-degree apprenticeship and offer it via a provider in London. In archives and records, the professional body reported a lack of buy-in from employers, exacerbated by local authority archives experiencing cutbacks and recruitment freezes. While the museums body was trying to move away from the default graduate entry in the sector, they felt that they were a late adopter of apprenticeships and had not promoted the curator programme to any extent as an entry-route. Finally, the sales body was described as supporting apprenticeships in principle and accepting the degree apprenticeship for full membership, but not marketing it very well and "not enthusiastically as it doesn't run the courses itself" (Pr, sales).

3.5 Success and progression

On balance professional bodies and providers viewed apprentice entrants as more successful than full-time graduates in terms of developing competence, gaining ongoing employment, and, where the apprenticeship had been running long enough, progressing in their careers.

Only a third of the professional body questionnaire respondents answered questions about employment or progression, with three (50% of those who answered the question) seeing apprenticeships as significantly more successful for gaining ongoing employment, one more successful, and two about the same. None of the professions offered any numerical evidence on employment or progression. Nevertheless in the interviews apprentices were often described as more motivated and focussed than entrants on or from full-time degrees, for instance "really excelling" (PB, physiotherapy), "fantastically successful… get higher grades than full-time students" (PB, surveying), "practically-minded… get stuck in from day one" (PB, environmental health), performing more highly in the professional examinations and "very impressive in the workplace" (PB, law), and sought after by employers with all being retained following completion (PB, architecture). In ecology apprentices were described as "more employable… with better employment prospects", something partly ascribed to the apprenticeship being more relevant and practically-focussed, e.g. "biodiversity surveys for planning, not going abroad and looking at marine turtles" (PB, ecology and environment). In surveying, apprentices' rapid progress was reported as causing problems of its own, with some being promoted during the programme and sometimes having to complete at least the professional qualifying requirements in their own time (PB, surveying).

> **In engineering the route to chartered level via the apprenticeship was described as taking around seven years, compared with ten or eleven via a full-time bachelor's degree followed by further learning and professional training.**

03.

Providers were equally positive about apprentices, and were often able to compare the apprenticeship not only with the full-time degree but with the complete sequential qualifying route. In surveying the apprenticeship was described as an accelerated route to chartership, with apprentices taking a total of four to six years to reach chartered level, compared with seven or eight years on the traditional sequential route; apprentices were also described as taking on more responsibility more quickly, for instance leading teams and acting as mentors at the point of achieving chartership (Pr, quantity surveying). Similarly in engineering the route to chartered level via the apprenticeship was described as taking around seven years, compared with ten or eleven via a full-time bachelor's degree followed by further learning and professional training (Pr, engineering). In other fields providers were similarly positive: for instance "far superior to a full-time degree plus professional training… progressively take on more responsibility" (Pr, environmental health), "excellent outcomes, 90% are promoted on completion" (Pr, sales), "100% success rate in getting really good jobs" (Pr, archives) and "more successful and progress quicker according to employers… often handling cases beyond what new graduates would take on" (Pr, social work).

The extent to which apprentices' more rapid progress was influenced by greater previous experience was more difficult to discern, and, apart from acknowledging that many were already in relevant work, participants offered little information to help with controlling for the diverse starting-points of apprentices. Two providers discussed differences between apprentices and full-time students in some depth. In engineering, many apprentices came in without A-levels and were initially weaker on academic learning, though typically more committed; they were described as soon catching up and getting a higher proportion of first-class degrees. In surveying, "full-time students are typically more open to ideas, accept them on trust, implement what they have been taught… ask 'why', less concerned with the 'how'", whereas "apprentices bring the world of work into the classroom, more discussion and debate, put tutors on their toes… but they can also have a narrower outlook… (we) have to get them thinking outside the box and critique their own practice and that of the organisation" (Pr, quantity surveying).

3.6 Apprentice backgrounds and diversity

Discussions of apprentices' backgrounds and the implications for widening access were wide-ranging and indicated factors that often differed by sector and specific profession. Professional bodies tended not to have statistics on entrant characteristics, and while providers sometimes had more detailed information this was usually limited to a single cohort or at most two or three groups of students.

In some fields there was a substantial intake from school-leavers or (for level 7 apprenticeships) graduates of full-time degrees. This was noted for school leavers in surveying, environmental health, law (solicitors), psychology for the level 6 apprenticeship, and to a lesser extent civil engineering, sales and nursing; and for graduates of full-time courses in architecture, archives and to an extent psychology. In others there were factors discouraging uptake direct from full-time education, either because of value of relevant experience in the work role (social work, physiotherapy) or because the (level 7) apprenticeship was linked to a more senior role that would be too stretching for most new graduates (personnel and development). In nursing more school-leavers were beginning to be attracted to the apprenticeship route since the removal of bursary funding, with one factor given as the difficulty of doing paid work alongside the full-time (academic plus practice) nursing degree (PB, nursing).

For some apprenticeships increasing diversity had been a major factor driving development, for instance archives and psychology which attract a majority of "white, female middle-class professionals" (PB, archives), and solicitors and architects where it was hoped that the apprenticeship would appeal to a broader range of entrants than high-achieving A-level students. However, only limited evidence was put forward of the intake from full-time education being broadened, for instance for solicitors where recent evidence has been gathered indicating an increase in learners from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds (PB, law); apprentices in some other traditionally academic fields such as architecture and psychology were reported as having essentially the same backgrounds as full-time students. One positive factor reported in archives and ecology was that apprenticeships had alleviated the situation where employers would not take on new entrants who lacked prior experience, which had favoured those who could afford to volunteer before moving into paid employment.

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The most significant impact of higher and degree apprenticeships on access and diversity was reported as their success in providing a route to fully-qualified level for people already in the workforce. This included those returning to work or changing career, but the majority were described as people in assistant or paraprofessional roles who were typically unable to access traditional entry-routes or lacked confidence academically. Apprentices were on average older than other entrants, for instance late 20s (PB) to "about 40" (Pr) in social work, 18-40 (Pr, engineering), or 25-55 at level 7 (Pr, psychology), and already had some experience in the field. In environmental health applicants were noted as finding apprenticeships more through searching for posts, including promotions, in local government rather than via the UCAS portal, and in physiotherapy through being put forward from assistant-level roles by employers, either from within the same organisation or by active recruitment of support workers into physiotherapist apprenticeships. In nursing, the most important route in to the level 5 and 6 apprenticeships was reported as progression from assistant-level jobs, while surveying, civil engineering and transport planning many entrants were progressing from level 3 or 4 apprenticeships or technician roles. On the other hand the widespread use of parallel and work-based routes in some fields, notably legal executives and personnel and development, meant that there was no obvious difference in the demographic of those coming in via apprenticeships. The professional body for legal executives commented that apprenticeships are more attractive to small firms because of the ability to draw down funding, but otherwise they are viewed in much the same way as the standard route.

The most significant impact of higher and degree apprenticeships on access and diversity was reported as their success in providing a route to fully-qualified level for people already in the workforce.

Similar factors operated for some level 7 apprenticeships, so that while for instance architecture was recruiting from "those who would likely have continued with their studies on the full-time taught programme anyway" (PB, architecture), other programmes at this level were attracting people already in the workforce. In psychology recruits were mainly graduates, but some of these were reported as stuck in psychology assistant roles without the means or confidence to progress further via established routes (Pr, psychology). The level 7 archivist and curator apprenticeships were also attracting people from the existing workforce, with the latter in particular beginning to overcome perceptions of curators as a "super-elite area, academic, theoretical" (Pr, curating); applicants were coming not only from curatorial assistants but from other areas of work in the museums and arts sector, creating a way past the traditional barrier between assistant and academic roles.

Several interviewees commented on the effectiveness or otherwise of recruiting already-employed people in terms of broader diversity at professional level. One perspective was that diversity was dictated by the practices of employers, so for instance one sector of engineering was described as "very white, British, male", leading to apprentices being less diverse than full-time students (Pr, engineering). On the other hand where the paraprofessional workforce is more diverse than that at fully-qualified level apprenticeships can widen access to the profession, for instance attracting "greater ethnic diversity, older entrants, neurodiversity, some who have had mental health conditions" (Pr, psychology). Similarly the social work apprenticeship was reported by the provider as attracting more men as well as people who had seen social work interventions at first hand (Pr, social work), bringing in a slightly different demographic from the standard degree route.

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3.7 Views on apprenticeship design and governance

The professions' pre-interview questionnaire asked respondents to rate different aspects of national apprenticeship design and governance on a four-point scale from very dissatisfied to very satisfied (appendix 1). Figure 3 presents responses as means where +1 represents totally satisfied and -1 totally dissatisfied.

On balance there was a reasonably high level of satisfaction with the design of apprenticeships, most strongly with the content of apprenticeship standards and their fit with the profession's requirements, and least strongly with assessment requirements. The main design issue that was discussed in the interviews was (as reported in section 3.3) the advantages and disadvantages of a single long apprenticeship in comparison with a ladder of different levels.

There was also substantial discussion of end-point assessments from both providers and professional bodies. Reasonably successful EPA arrangements were described for the solicitor apprenticeship and in architecture and surveying, though particularly in the latter two fields some further refinement was seen as being needed. In quantity surveying the EPA was separate from both the degree and the final assessment of professional competence (APC); some apprentices were skipping the EPA after gaining their degree, with financial penalties for the university, and taking the APC sometime later. In civil engineering the apprenticeship was about to switch from a non-integrated EPA, which essentially incorporated the professional registration requirements, to an integrated one; the professional body was uncertain about whether and how qualifying requirements could continue to be included. In ecology the need for an EPA was questioned, and an alternative put forward of having an external assessor from the professional body. In landscape architecture the lack of an EPA organisation was delaying the launch of the apprenticeship, with apparent difficulties in establishing a dialogue to find an acceptable solution. One participant described Ofqual requirements for EPA organisations as time-consuming to understand and duplicating much of what professional bodies do already, discouraging smaller bodies from becoming involved. On balance integrated EPAs were preferred and some universities had built non-integrated EPAs into the degree requirements. Both civil engineering (PB) and surveying (Pr) commented that this was causing challenges relating to where the professional assessment requirements should sit, and no instances were offered of effective formal three-way integration although as previously noted an informal arrangement operates in environmental health.

Professions were reasonably satisfied with their level of influence on 'their' apprenticeships at national level. The interviews indicated that it had become easier for professional bodies to become involved in (and in some cases lead) Trailblazer groups, and IfATE was reported as reasonably responsive to professions' needs and requirements. Nevertheless there were still issues of mismatch between apprenticeships and employment structures and needs; one commented for instance that "there needs to be more recognition from IfATE about future employment needs and workforce shortages for developing new apprenticeships" (PB, environmental health), while another had concerns that at least in some adjacent fields "there are too many apprenticeships, resulting in salami-slicing of careers and occupational definitions that are too niche" (PB, surveying). A further concern was that the process for updating apprenticeship standards could be too slow, with for instance the architecture apprenticeships lagging behind changes to the profession's entry requirements.

Net dissatisfaction was expressed with the level of funding, national administrative and governance arrangements, and to a lesser extent quality assurance. In the interviews funding rates were seen as discouraging providers from becoming involved in ecology and to an extent architecture, while in social work it was noted that inputs such as practice educators were funded in standard degrees but not in apprenticeships. Providers in archives and nursing also commented that funding did not reflect the amount of work involved in engaging with employers and working with apprentices in the workplace, while others noted that providers were penalised for non-completion or apprentices not taking the EPA when the reasons could be outside of providers' control.

The principal issue with administration and governance were that it could be slow, unresponsive and to a degree inflexible, with various examples given such as landscape architecture's difficulty in establishing EPA arrangements and slow and sometimes tortuous processes for revising or establishing apprenticeships. There were also concerns about national quality assurance practices. Ofqual was seen as gradually getting used to the difference between a qualification and an apprenticeship, while there was some fairly harsh criticism of Ofsted from two professional bodies for imposing what they saw as unnecessary requirements on providers and duplicating oversight carried out by the profession itself. One of the providers commented in some detail about Ofsted needing to have a better understanding of adult learners, the specific profession and apprenticeships in general.

FIGURE 3: Professions' satisfaction with apprenticeship design and governance

(n = 17)

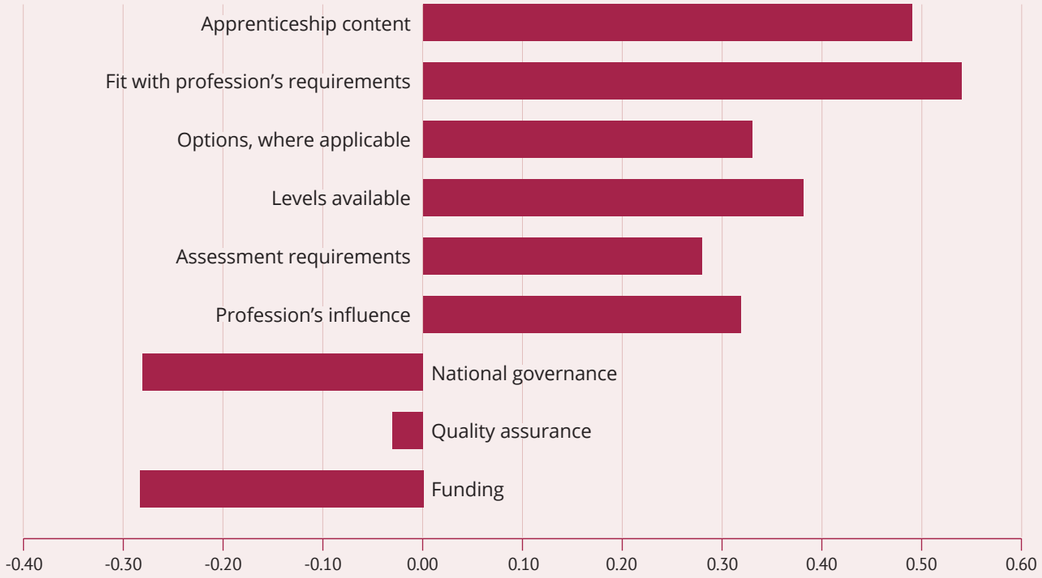
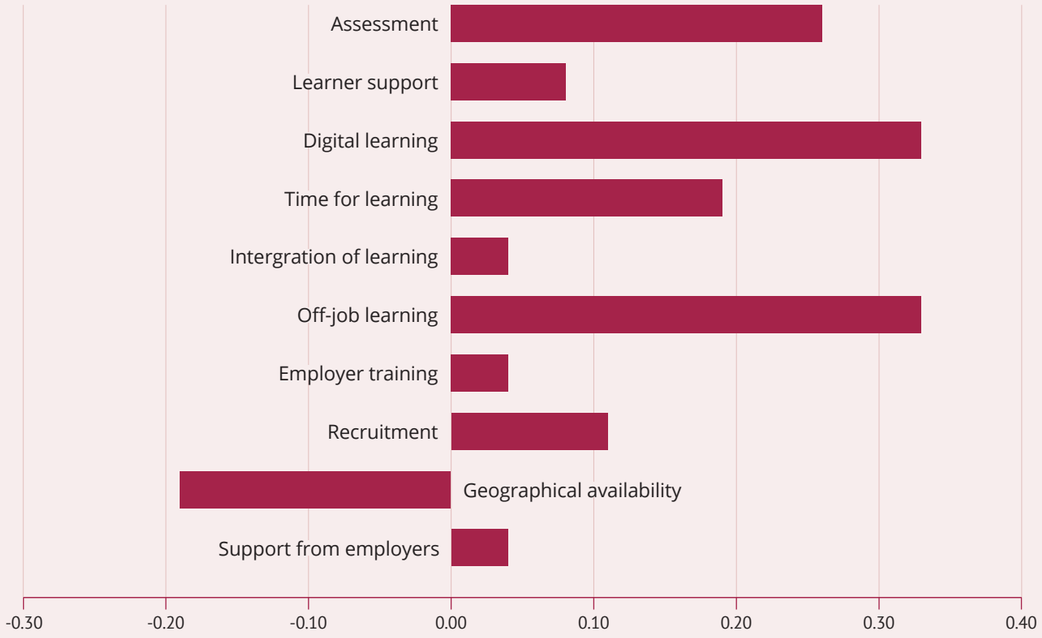


FIGURE 4: Professions' satisfaction with apprenticeship delivery

(n = 17)



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3.8 Views on apprenticeship delivery

In the questionnaire, professional body respondents were also asked to rate aspects of apprenticeship delivery, using the same scale as in section 3.7 above. Figure 4 presents responses as means where +1 represents totally satisfied and -1 totally dissatisfied.

The off-job part of the apprenticeship was generally seen by professions as being done well, with the interviews confirming that professional bodies were not encountering particular problems with teaching or assessment. Providers perhaps unsurprisingly tended to agree. Most providers highlighted aspects of good practice, including individual learner support, providing space and resources for learning, apprentices having joint sessions with full-time students, interprofessional sessions, and effective use of digital learning. Some commented on having needed to adapt their approaches and culture to run apprenticeships effectively, for instance needing to work more closely with employers, move away from traditional teaching models, make use of practitioners as tutors, and change their approach to timetabling to produce a more workable arrangement for both apprentices and full-time students. Some providers did however comment on issues that they were having or had overcome, for instance being constrained by the academic calendar, the university not having the infrastructure or commitment at a central level to run apprenticeships well, and struggling to find suitable staff. One issue raised by two professional bodies concerned providers that had no previous history of running programmes in the relevant area; for programmes linked to chartered or registered status this could be dealt with via the profession's approval procedures, but for others such as the transport planning apprenticeship the professional body effectively had no control over provider quality.

Questionnaire respondents were on balance less positive about workplace learning or the way in which on- and off-job aspects of the programme were being brought together, with the interviews identifying multiple issues relating to employers and providers. Professional bodies in most fields pointed to variable quality, with some organisations doing things well while others were poor at recognising the difference between apprenticeships and traditional parallel or sequential pathways.

A fairly common issue raised by professional bodies and providers was that employers do not always provide the necessary range of experience or engage sufficiently in supporting workplace learning. In surveying, engineering and physiotherapy some employers were described as treating the apprenticeship as a part-time degree, without recognising their responsibility for training or providing an environment in which the learner can develop further. In engineering it was suspected that some employers were taking on apprentices to spend their levy but without any real appreciation of what the apprenticeship involves, leading to poor levels of co-ordination and support (PB, civil engineering). Another common problem was that some workplaces provide too limited range of experience for apprentices to cover all the ground needed, either because of the limitations of the organisation itself (e.g. physiotherapy and potentially osteopathy) or because learners are kept in relatively narrow or low-level roles (surveying and legal executives). Particularly in the health sector but also in surveying some providers were actively organising placements, either through a formal network of employers or less effectively on a more ad-hoc basis co-ordinated by tripartite review staff. A further problem, identified particularly in nursing and social work, is where apprentices are progressing from support roles and are expected to continue doing aspects of their original job; this was reported as causing tensions between 'employee' and 'learner' roles, leading to colleagues treating the learner as on a 'second-class route' (PB, nursing), and causing problems for some apprentices in having enough time to complete the practice hours needed for professional registration.

A fairly common issue raised by professional bodies and providers was that employers do not always provide the necessary range of experience or engage sufficiently in supporting workplace learning.

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The second major area highlighted in the interviews was co-ordinating between off-job and workplace learning. Professional bodies' views were generally less positive in this area than providers. Some examples of good practice were identified, for instance in ecology, environmental health and physiotherapy, but in other areas providers were reported as less proactive: for instance "treating it as block-release with little involvement in the workplace" (PB, personnel and development), "frail partnerships, poor communication, not enough meetings [i.e. tripartite reviews] and when they do them they are cursory" (PB, surveying), or "too focussed on the degree requirements and the academic year, missing the 80% that goes on in the workplace" (PB, civil engineering). On balance professional bodies were seeing gradual improvements in this area, with for instance universities developing constructive partnerships with employers and recruiting staff from professional practitioners or who had experience of successful apprenticeship delivery with other types of provider. Providers themselves were not unaware of criticisms, but several described how they had improved practice in this area. Examples included an apprenticeship that is "action learning based… (identify) the challenge in the workplace, develop the project to help you… there are learning outcomes but it's up to the learner how to construct the project, what to tackle" (Pr, sales); "in regular contact with employers, support them on how to guide learning in the workplace… make it reflective of practice, not preset assignments" (Pr, environmental health); "staff are practitioners as well as academics… don't over-teach, focus on doing stuff at work… assessments mirror the EPA so that they build up a portfolio" (Pr, curating); and "working collaboratively with employers… we have a really good relationship, see them all the time… they are involved in curriculum development, assessments, sit on panels, collaborative reviews…" (Pr, social work).

3.9 Barriers

Participants identified a number of factors that were acting as barriers to the availability and uptake of apprenticeships. One problem for professions in some fields was finding organisations to be apprenticeship providers; landscape architecture, archives and heritage conservation all reported issues of finding universities or other providers who would take the apprenticeship on, while the nursing body noted that there were fewer places available than needed. The main reasons given for providers not wanting to be involved were poor funding levels; aversion to the administrative and quality assurance arrangements associated with apprenticeships (e.g. "a policy of not coming under the Ofsted regime because of the levels of bureaucracy" [PB, landscape architecture]); lack of engagement and support from the university centrally; and in smaller professions, doubts about recruiting enough learners. For landscape architecture and conservation this reluctance coincided with many of the profession's biggest providers of degree courses. In archives and ecology a solution had been found by working with a non-university organisation as the primary provider, and this was also being considered by conservation. A further provider issue was the difficulty of recruiting and retaining practising professionals to be tutors, with for instance the non-university providers in ecology and archives having problems in paying sufficiently attractive salaries, while the health professions provider was struggling to recruit enough practice educators.

The geographical distribution of provision was commented on in several fields, with small professions in particular tending to rely on a sole provider; this was not always perceived as a disadvantage if the provider could work effectively at a national level, but it was thought to be a major factor in the closure of the conservation apprenticeship, a problem in transport planning with a sole provider working via block-release, and also limiting for physiotherapy and potentially osteopathy where providers were unevenly distributed around the country.

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Employment and workplace factors were also widely discussed. The cultural professions all reported a lack of buy-in from employers, with typically one or a small number of enthusiastic organisations but limited support from elsewhere, not helped by some facing spending cuts and a freeze on all but the most essential recruitment. A lack of understanding of apprenticeships by some employers was noted for legal executives, civil engineering and curating. In architecture firms were reported as being reluctant to take on school leavers, stemming from the profession's traditional training structure that started with employing graduates initially for a year; this was thought to have contributed to the low uptake of the level 6 apprenticeship compared with the level 7 one that assumes entrants already have a relevant degree. Finally, two structural issues were raised in the health sector. In nursing the pathway from support worker to registered nurse was reported as being hampered at two points, one by funding limitations for enabling progression from level 5, and the other by the costs of replacing support workers who had taken up apprenticeships. The other was the problem of enabling small firms and sole practitioners to obtain funding for apprentices and to provide a sufficient breadth of training; this was described as a major issue for osteopathy, where small units predominate, and a challenge in physiotherapy and other health professions as well as for some firms in transport planning.

Resistance was noted to the 'apprenticeship' label, particularly in the cultural sector and among legal executives; the term was reported as being associated by employers and potential applicants alike with "17 to 18-year-olds and manual trades" (PB, museums) or "technical, low-level training for young people" (PB, law), creating reluctance to become involved or take part. In the museums sector some employers were reported as running the management and leadership apprenticeships but rebadging them simply as leadership programmes so that they would be more appealing to existing staff. In quantity surveying a need was identified to build confidence in the academic credentials of the apprenticeship, with some potential apprentices being uncertain about the value of a degree obtained through the apprenticeship route vis-à-vis one from a full-time course. Finally, inflexibility about functional skills was seen as a barrier once people were on the programme, with some learners "loving the course but refusing to do the functional skills" (Pr, sales), particularly where they had passed equivalent or higher-level qualifications but no longer had the certificates.

The focus group commentary

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Six online focus group discussions were held, attended by 37 people, principally from universities and other provider organisations (table 3). Nine had already been involved in the interviews while 28 were new to the study.

The focus groups discussed the findings from the study and provided additional insights into specific areas. Because of the composition of the groups the discussions spent less time on the structural aspects of professional entry-routes and more on practicalities, delivery and policy issues.

4.1 Apprenticeships as professional entry-routes

There was widespread recognition and support in the discussions for the role of higher and degree apprenticeships as entry-routes into professions, with examples given from several sectors where these integrated routes were deemed to be working well. For school leavers, apprenticeships were seen as providing clear pathways to professional careers, and there was also strong support for their role in providing existing workers with a means of progression without needing to leave work for full-time higher education. Some aspects were however described as less clear to potential learners, such as the availability of the same higher apprenticeship with or without a degree depending on the providing institution, or the need to decide whether to enrol directly on a 'long' level 6 or 7 apprenticeship or to start at a lower level without necessarily having a guarantee of progression.

A concern discussed in one of the groups was the danger of linking apprenticeships too closely to qualifying in a profession. This was expressed in terms of the value of the apprenticeship in developing professionalism in the sense of being competent and acting ethically, as opposed to gaining a formal qualified status. The danger seen here was that incorporating the professional qualification could act as a barrier to achieving the apprenticeship and have a negative effect on widening participation. Counterarguments emphasised the value of professionally-linked apprenticeships for workforce progression, increasing inclusion, and for providing a clear, integrated route for small professions. This debate was partly revisited in the discussion of end-point assessments (section 4.3).

There was agreement that higher and degree apprenticeships are excellent routes into employment and for promotion and progression. Apprentices were described as on the whole having a high level of engagement and being 'tuned in' to the workplace. Some existing workers were reported as struggling with the transition to a higher or degree apprenticeship, but doing well once they had settled into the programme. Apprenticeships were seen as valued by employers, with it being common for apprentices

TABLE 3: Participants in the focus groups

Field	Professional bodies[1]	Universities	Independent providers	Others[2]	Total
Digital industries		2			2
Cultural and creative		1			1
Engineering and construction	1	4		1	6
Business and management		4	2		6
Law	1	1			2
Health and social care	3	6		1	10
Cross-sectoral[3]		9		1	10
Total	5	27	2	3	37

Notes:
(1) Membership, self-regulating and regulators
(2) Employer, sector body, association of sector bodies.
(3) E.g. apprenticeship, work-based learning or business development units.

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to be given responsibility and promotion relatively rapidly. The discussions supported the hypothesis that the learning-integrated work route leads to more rapid progress than the sequential one, and on balance apprentices were seen as doing better once they had reached an equivalent point such as professional registration or chartership. On the other hand there were comments that it is difficult to make objective comparisons, with for instance some younger learners being less motivated and finding degree apprenticeships challenging, while for others apprenticeships worked well and led to accelerated progression.

4.2 Diversity and widening participation

The discussions mirrored the findings from the first phase of the research, in that degree and higher apprenticeships were seen as very effective tools for social mobility for people already in the workforce, but less so in diversifying entry from full-time education. They were viewed as particularly successful in pulling people in from 'boots on the ground' roles and overcoming career blocks, as well as enabling access for people returning to work and changing careers. Effects on gender balance, ethnic- and neurodiversity and improving access for people with disabilities were reported as variable, with some highly successful examples being given of widening participation as well as some counter-examples where apprentice cohorts were significantly less diverse than full-time students taking the same degree.

The discussions agreed that a significant problem for diversity is that recruitment is governed principally by employers. Employers were reported as having variable levels of understanding of, or interest in, equality, diversity and inclusion. A tendency was also reported of not looking beyond recruitment sources that the employer was familiar with, whether school-leavers with top A-level grades or for one industry 'white, male manual workers'. Approaches to broadening recruitment were discussed, including using existing apprentices to engage in outreach activities with schools and colleges, co-designing recruitment and selection strategies, and persuading employers to recruit from lower-level apprenticeships and vocational courses. One group also discussed the implications of widening participation for teaching and learning, in particular the need to adopt a broader and more flexible range of approaches to presenting information, supporting learning and assessing achievement.

At the time of the discussions there was considerable uncertainty about the future of funding for level 7 apprenticeships. Any reduction in funding was seen as potentially undermining access to professional careers, particularly where a sector relies on a 'long' level 7 apprenticeship rather than progression between levels. The uncertainty was also reported as putting on hold plans in the engineering sector to develop an extension of the apprenticeship pathway to lead directly to Chartered Engineer level.

4.3 Apprenticeship design and end-point assessment

There was some discussion of breadth versus specificity in apprenticeships, with agreement that a balance is needed between trying to cover too much ground versus designing programmes to fit specific job roles. New entrants were seen as needing broad coverage of the profession, while existing workers might benefit from a more specific or tailored programme. One broadly-defined apprenticeship standard was discussed as being poorly designed and too comprehensive for providers or workplaces to cover easily, while more positive examples were also discussed where the standard was written in fairly broad terms but designed to be contextualised into different specialisms and work contexts. Conversely, some standards were thought to be too narrow to provide a good professional grounding or basis for career progression. Further problems were reported where apprenticeship standards were not sufficiently correlated with professional standards, and where closely-related apprenticeships – such as the level 7 Enhanced Practitioner and Advanced Practitioner programmes in the health sector – appeared to have been designed independently of each other.

The aspect of apprenticeship design that was most commented on was the positioning and design of end-point assessments. There was consensus that stand-alone EPAs are problematic, with four principal issues raised:

- The burden of an additional assessment regime, with its attached quality assurance requirements, that is not experienced by people qualifying via other routes.
- The low importance placed on apprenticeship certification by many apprentices and employers, removing some of the incentive to complete the EPA and therefore contributing to low official completion rates.
- The poor design of some EPAs, with some assessment practices lacking authenticity or relevance to the work of the profession and being detached from candidates' working contexts.
- Inconsistency between different EPA organisations conducting the same assessment.

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On the other hand there was recognition that EPAs could complement the degree by providing an assessment of competence, particularly where there was no formal professional assessment or it was not usual for apprentices to take the professional assessment on completion.

There was no consensus as to a preferred model for integrating the EPA, with advantages and disadvantages discussed for integration with the degree and with the professional assessment. Integration with the degree was seen as better for learners, but there were also comments that doing this well could be challenging both to provide genuinely integrated assessment and to maintain boundaries between teaching and assessment functions within the university. A 'halfway' position was discussed in one group, where the (non-integrated) EPA forms a module in the degree, preventing the degree from being awarded until the EPA is completed. On the other hand there was also a view that the EPA sits better in some fields with professional assessment, given that they have similar aims. Integration with professional assessment was however seen as potentially more problematic, and could set apprentices up to fail unless there is a reasonable expectation that they will be ready for the professional assessment by the end of the apprenticeship. One group discussed a specific apprenticeship where the profession's assessment was regarded as considerably tougher than the EPA, and another where a written examination that had been adopted as the pre-EPA gateway assessment had a pass rate of around 30%.

4.4 Implementation

The discussions suggested that the difference between apprenticeships and conventional part-time higher education was becoming appreciated, but the journey to this point had been slow and there was still considerable work left to do. Some universities were described as 'not getting' work-based learning, and simply teaching the degree; and there was debate about the advantages and disadvantages of joint sessions for apprentices and other part- or full-time students on the same degree, as opposed to running completely separate programmes. In one group there was concern about the tendency to approach on-job learning bureaucratically through tools and procedures, concluding that a more radical approach is needed that reflects the philosophy of work-based learning and recognises workplace learning for academic credit. There was general agreement on the need for effective partnership with employers; individualisation and contextualisation of learning; the use of mentoring and buddying in the workplace; and the importance of the coach/reviewer role, with discussion of the need for employer-facing staff to have realistic workloads in order to be able to support learning effectively.

Several issues relating to employers and workplaces were also discussed. Some employers were seen as having limited understanding of apprenticeships and their role in them, needing support to carry out the workplace training and mentoring. This was discussed as being easier for providers to manage when dealing with single-employer cohorts or a few large employers, and more difficult where cohorts had multiple, particularly small, employers. Some employers were also described as not providing a broad enough range of tasks to cover the apprenticeship requirements, with three main issues identified:

- The employer trying to redesign the programme around the requirements of a specific job role rather than the apprenticeship standard.
- Lack of awareness of the apprenticeship requirements, again leading to narrowing to the job role or to whatever projects the employer is involved in at the time.
- The organisation not being able to provide the full coverage needed, particularly an issue with small or specialist employers.

The first two were seen as at least partly amenable to educating the employer about the apprenticeship standard and the need to meet sector requirements rather than only those of the employing organisation. For the third, placements were regarded as a suitable solution, but these were reported as varying widely in availability and suitability; while some sectors (and individual provider/employer networks) had effective placement arrangements in place, others suffered from limited availability, employers being unwilling to release apprentices, and placements being physically too far from learners.

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4.5 Barriers

The discussions identified several factors that could act as barriers or obstacles to the adoption, uptake and successful delivery of apprenticeships. The main areas discussed were:

a. The development process for apprenticeship standards. This was criticised as too slow to respond to sector needs, as well as in some instances uncoordinated, resulting in some of the problems discussed above under apprenticeship design.

b. Costs and funding. The funding model was described as complex and not supporting sustainable provision, particularly where additional necessary costs were being incurred (such as organising placements or paying practice tutors) or where significant proportions of apprentices chose not to complete the end-point assessment.

c. Compliance and quality assurance. This area attracted the most discussion, with apprenticeships seen as overregulated and subject to compliance and quality assurance requirements that were excessively bureaucratic, incoherent and costly. Audit requirements were viewed by some as driving a box-ticking mentality that undermined quality, while improvements were seen as needed to quality inspections in order to make them more fit for purpose for higher and degree apprenticeships and for older learners. Overall, audit and quality regimes were seen as not particularly responsive to or reflective of good practice in apprenticeship delivery.

d. Policy uncertainty and incoherence. Apprenticeships were described in one group as sitting in a 'pervasively immature policy landscape', with for instance a lack of co-ordination between different policy aims and a tendency to change one area of policy without reference to others. At the time of the discussions there were specific uncertainties about the effects of rises in employer National Insurance contributions and the potential withdrawal of funding from level 7 apprenticeships, and these were described as causing hesitation on the part of providers and employers.

e. Functional skills and recognising prior learning. Concerns from the interviews about functional skills were echoed, with what was seen as an overly rigid interpretation of the need for maths and English certification affecting both recruitment on to, and completion of, apprenticeships. Recognition of prior learning was also seen as being subject to too complex a set of rules, with more time being spent on ensuring compliance with the regulations than on working with learners to explore their learning and achievements as a basis for progression.

4.6 The role of UVAC

The final part of each session focussed on the role that participants wanted to see UVAC play in supporting higher and degree apprenticeships in relation to professions. Comments fell into three main areas, building on UVAC's current activities.

Networking was raised in four of the groups, principally to extend knowledge networks into new sectors and areas including potentially cross-apprenticeship ones such as working with employers and organising placements. Two areas mentioned specifically were a network for professional bodies of all types involved in apprenticeships, and a network to bring universities and employers together. There was also a call for more recognition of what higher education can learn from further education and independent providers, particularly in the area of developing partnerships with employers and engaging with workplace learning.

The provision of guidance, models and resources was discussed in three groups. Various topics were put forward including effective partnership models; working with employers to broaden recruitment; individualisation of learning; buddying and mentoring; and broader cross-apprenticeship guidance on work-based and integrated learning. There was some discussion of a need for a wider vision for skills-led or work-based higher education, accompanied by a best practice repository and national community of practice.

The third area, discussed in five groups, concerned working at a policy level to articulate a vision of higher and degree apprenticeships with some clear position statements and proactive lobbying to drive agendas and create a positive direction of travel. UVAC's policy work was seen as highly valuable and its influence out of proportion to the size of the organisation, though in need of a clear medium- or longer-term vision. Specific aspects that were mentioned included working with Ofsted to develop a more appropriate apprenticeship inspection framework; working to ensure alignment between professional and apprenticeship standards; ensuring that apprenticeship regulations do not act as a block to the viability of apprenticeships where they are needed; promoting more certainty in funding; and, unsurprisingly given the timing, pushing for continued funding of level 7 apprenticeships.

05. Discussion

5.1 Apprenticeships in relation to entry-routes and qualifying requirements

The findings are indicating firstly that professional entry-routes are continuing the trend identified by Lester (2008, 2009) towards greater openness and breadth, and secondly that higher and degree apprenticeships are assisting in and in some cases driving these changes. Professions' support for apprenticeships has continued to increase, and while there are still reservations in some sectors about using the term 'apprenticeship' at this level, it appears to have become more widely accepted than it was ten years ago (cf. PARN 2015).

Among the professions in the study, substantial changes have recently taken place in architecture, from a rigidly prescribed model to one where a wider range of routes are possible, and for solicitors, from a model based on fairly well-defined routes to a more open one based on meeting specified qualifying requirements. Neither of these are dependent on the presence of apprenticeships, although apprenticeships provide a means of meeting the professions' requirements. In many other professions apprenticeships have contributed to broadening by providing work-based pathways that lead to the same qualifications and outcomes, but are more accessible to people already in the workforce. These can generally be regarded as forms of 'horizontal' extension (Hordern 2015), i.e. providing an alternative to established sequential routes. In the health sector the strong linkage between specific apprenticeships and intermediate roles at different levels (such as nurse associate and associate psychologist) suggest a form of downwards extension (*ibid*) from the established professionally-qualified level. Upwards extension is also present in this sector in the form of advanced and enhanced practitioner roles, again supported (though not exclusively) by apprenticeships. The apprenticeship in sales can also be regarded as a form of upwards extension in a sector that has lacked formal qualifying requirements and tended to pitch training at a lower level; it is also an example of an apprenticeship contributing to professionalisation (Nottingham *et al* 2019, Sutton 2022), though potentially more through raising levels of personal professionalism and ethical practice than at this stage creating the formal artefacts of a profession.

In terms of the taxonomy of professional entry routes presented in section 1.2, higher and degree apprenticeships can be regarded at least nominally as representing a form of integrated route (e.g. Lester 2024a). The findings do however support the idea that some apprenticeship programmes are still only integrated at a structural level and in practice have more of the characteristics of parallel pathways. On the other hand there is tentative evidence that where learning within apprenticeships is integrated effectively, the learning-integrated work (LIW) approach that they represent (Garnett 2020, Lester 2025) is a more effective one than the work-integrated learning (WIL) or placement-based model represented by institutionally-located integrated degrees such as those common in the health and social care sector. Currently many qualifying WIL degrees are followed by a supervised and sometimes assessed period of practice, and the discussion in relation to social work (section 3.3) suggests that exploration is needed as to whether this period should be incorporated formally into the apprenticeship.

In general an assumption can be made in favour of strong linkages between apprenticeships and professional qualifying requirements, so that on completion apprentices either qualify in the profession or are at the relevant stage of development towards it. However, what is mandated for the end of the apprenticeship needs to be reasonably achievable, making sure that apprentices are not set up to fail by needing to meet professional requirements that assume a higher level of proficiency or maturity of application than is reasonable for them to reach. At present, varying approaches are being taken to this, with for instance some apprenticeships geared to comfortably reaching qualified level, others where qualifying is a stretch for apprentices, and some where the professional body advises that further experience and learning are needed before completing the qualifying requirements.

> **Professional entry-routes are continuing the trend... towards greater openness and breadth, and higher and degree apprenticeships are assisting in and in some cases driving these changes.**

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> **The integrated professional development route, particularly in learning-integrated work form as represented by apprenticeships, is a more effective means of professional entry and progression than the sequential one of a full-time degree followed by professional training.**

5.2 Success and progression

There is a growing body of circumstantial evidence that the apprenticeship route is a more effective way into a professional career than taking a full-time or even work-integrated degree (e.g. Lester *et al* 2016, Cushen-Brewster *et al* 2022), though as yet there is very little data that can be used to make direct comparisons. The findings concur that apprentices are more successful than former full-time students at gaining and retaining work, achieving professionally qualified status, and gaining promotion or other recognition at work. While apprentices in some fields may be initially less strong academically than their counterparts on full-time degrees, they appear to catch up quickly and can achieve better degree results as well as progressing to fully qualified level in a shorter timescale. This suggests quite strongly that the integrated professional development route, particularly in learning-integrated work form as represented by apprenticeships, is a more effective means of professional entry and progression than the sequential one of a full-time degree followed by professional training.

There is however a caveat in that higher and degree apprentices in many fields start with at least some work experience, for instance coming from lower-level apprenticeships, assistant and paraprofessional-type roles in the same field, or other areas of work; as a minimum these entrants will already be tuned into the working environment, if not always to the requirements of academic learning or of the profession. The study tentatively suggests that like-for-like outcomes and progression still favour the integrated route, but the direct evidence is limited and further study is needed both in the form of comparable data and comparison of individual career trajectories.

There are also personal factors that affect the suitability of integrated routes for individual entrants, both from full-time education and from the existing workforce. Transition issues were noted both for what one participant termed 'boots on the ground' workers, as well as school leavers who were unprepared for the hard work involved from moving from full-time study to working as well as learning. These factors suggest a need for appropriate selection and support, but they also caution against treating the integrated route as universally preferable.

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5.3 Diversity and widening access

Reflecting earlier studies and analyses such as those of Universities UK (2019), Lester and Bravenboer (2020), Mackay (2022), Nawaz *et al* (2023) and Pullen (2024), the findings provide evidence that higher-level apprenticeships are providing effective progression-routes for people already in the workforce, while being less clear about how effective they have been at improving other aspects of access and diversity in relation to professional careers. In several professions there is clear evidence of apprenticeships providing through-routes from related but lower-level occupations, overcoming career blocks and creating opportunities for progression, including for people returning to work or changing career. In this respect they can be regarded as effective tools for social mobility, particularly in areas where the barriers to entry to the workforce as a whole are lower than those to professional career-tracks. This effect is less marked where the profession already has a widely-used entry-route that is not predicated on full-time higher education. The extent to which this upwards mobility effect supports other aspects of diversifying the profession can be posited to depend first on the diversity of the wider workforce compared with that at professionally qualified level, and secondly on how much the intake from it is representative of this wider workforce rather than mirroring existing qualified professionals. While in most cases this equation is probably positive, in some fields an already fairly homogeneous semi-skilled or technician-level workforce can lead to less diversity via apprenticeships than via full-time degrees.

Evidence of increasing diversity from other sources of recruitment is limited, and while the findings indicate some specific successes they are balanced by instances where apprenticeships effectively recruit from a narrower pool than full-time courses, partly a result of the factor where sought-after apprenticeships have tougher entry requirements than the equivalent full-time degrees. There is also an effect in some fields, discussed in the literature (e.g. Casey and Wakeling 2022, Cavaglia *et al* 2022) though not present in the findings, where some underrepresented groups are less likely to opt for degree-level apprenticeships than full-time degrees. When considering school-leavers, on balance the evidence that apprenticeships are attracting more diverse intakes than full-time courses is relatively limited. In principle there is also no reason why this should be the case, and there are also concerns that placing an emphasis on school leaver and new entrants rather than people already in the workforce may actually reduce the social mobility effect of apprenticeships (Smith *et al* 2021). Rather than looking to apprenticeships as a tool for widening participation among school-leavers it may be more productive to play to their strengths in recruiting from sources such as vocational courses, lower-level apprenticeships, and existing and returning workers.

A further issue identified in the findings is the variable effect of employers' recruitment practices on the diversity of apprentices, with a tendency for some employers simply to tighten existing criteria – typically aiming for the best A-level grades – in response to high numbers of applicants. Particularly in the traditionally more conservative professions this might be expected to reinforce the homogeneity of existing workforces. There is a case for stronger involvement of providers in working with employers on recruitment, making recruitment decisions, and using practices such as targeted outreach (Doherty and Holt-White 2019) and strengths-based recruitment (Saville *et al* 2019) to bring in a more diverse pool of entrants.

5.4 Apprenticeship structure and design

Several issues were raised in the interviews and focus groups about the design of apprenticeships, including appropriate coverage, the relative merits of long versus linked programmes, and how apprenticeships can be combined with degrees at the same or different levels. These suggest a certain amount of clunkiness and inflexibility in the way that apprenticeships are specified and funded, though nothing that should not in principle be resolvable through national design processes and regulations.

The issue of coverage suggests that apprenticeships need to be specified in a way that is holistic enough to make sense in terms of qualifying in the relevant profession or reaching the required standard for the sector, while being capable of interpretation in a way that is appropriate and manageable in all the relevant specialisms and work contexts. The idea of a 'centre-outwards' approach to professional standards (Lester *et al* 2018) is relevant here; the principle is that standards reflect the profession as a whole, without needing a 'core and options' or similar structure, but they can be interpreted into the different specialisms and contexts that it operates in. This avoids on the one hand creating narrow job- or role-based specifications and therefore proliferating closely-related or overlapping apprenticeships, and on the other defining standards that are too broad to deliver or can only be achieved by learners working in particular contexts. While in some fields professional bodies provide an obvious means of co-ordinating suitable standards, in others professions are too weak or fragmented to perform this role and other arrangements are needed particularly where apprenticeship Trailblazer groups are not genuinely representative of national industry sectors and careers.

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The long versus staged apprenticeship dilemma can in principle be resolved by ensuring that any given route to qualified level has relevant entry- and exit-points that are accessible and attract relevant funding without penalty. As well as recognising prior learning, this means having exit-points that are meaningful in terms of work roles, attract appropriate certification and credit, and do not result in funding penalties for non-completion or prevent learners from re-entering the pathway at a later date. What is appropriate in any given profession or field will vary, but the discussions do suggest for instance that a healthcare support worker wanting to progress should not have to choose between committing directly to a level 6 programme or starting at level 5 and running the risk of not being funded for the next level, while a would-be solicitor or engineer who needs to withdraw from a long programme needs to be able to step off with recognition at the relevant level.

The linkage between apprenticeships and degrees is currently complex, and can include:

- Degree apprenticeships with degrees at the same level as the apprenticeship (the 'normal' model)
- Degree apprenticeships at level 6 with a level 7 degree, normally as an option to appeal to graduates or otherwise suitably qualified applicants
- Higher apprenticeships with a degree incorporated, at the same or a different level to the apprenticeship.

These different models appear to serve valid purposes and none are problematic in themselves, but they can be confusing to learners particularly when what is nominally the same apprenticeship can be taken with or without a degree, or with a bachelor's or a master's degree. There may be a case here for a more transparent way of 'badging' programmes so that it is clear what if any academic qualifications they lead to, as well as their relationship to qualifying in the relevant profession where appropriate.

Finally, perhaps the most debated aspect of apprenticeship design is the status and nature of end-point assessments. Unintegrated EPAs are generally problematic (see also Lillis and Varetto 2020), and given the low value placed on apprenticeship certification in at least some fields it is unclear whether they always serve a useful purpose beyond validating completion for funding purposes. 'Hard' integration with professional assessment may also cause difficulties particularly where the professional requirements are more stretching than is appropriate at the end of the apprenticeship (or are designed in a way that in effect rations access to the profession); there is however a better case for ensuring that the EPA contributes towards professional qualifying requirements. IfATE[3] published guidance on EPAs in 2022 that requires the EPA to be integrated with either the degree or the professional requirements, and in some cases allows for the latter to act as the EPA. Nevertheless, the four types of scenario that it envisages do not cover all eventualities and also do not address the issue of professional qualifying requirements that for various reasons are not appropriate to expect learners to achieve at the end of their apprenticeship. Reports of poorly designed EPAs are also concerning particularly given that there is now a growing body of literature on assessment principles and methods that are appropriate in integrated programmes (e.g. Ajjawi *et al* 2020, Fergusson *et al* 2022, Boud *et al* 2023, Lester 2024b).

Apprenticeships need to be specified in a way that is holistic enough to make sense in terms of qualifying in the relevant profession or reaching the required standard for the sector, while being capable of interpretation in a way that is appropriate and manageable in all the relevant specialisms and work contexts.

03. https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/developing-new-apprenticeships/degree-apprenticeships/, accessed December 2024.

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5.5 Implementation matters

The findings indicate implementation issues in two main areas, one relating to operating apprenticeships as an integrated whole, and the other specifically to employer and workplace matters. The focus groups observed that the journey to realising that apprenticeships are more than part-time degrees had been slow, and this partially reflects earlier findings (e.g. Lester and Bravenboer 2020); it is apparent that a considerable amount of work remains before all higher and degree apprenticeships can be described as integrated rather than parallel pathways. There is already a widely-accessible collection of literature and case-studies on good practice in co-ordinating and integrating between workplace and off-job learning and adopting work-based learning pedagogies and tools (see for instance Dalrymple *et al* 2014, Lillis 2018, Roberts *et al* 2019, Garnett 2020, Lester 2024a and Lomas 2025 among others). Although there is some debate about some of the practices involved – for instance whether creating apprenticeship-specific roles such as workplace tutors and reviewers can create another divide internal to the provider – there also appears to be a measure of inertia in moving beyond approaches that aim effectively to deliver standard degree content within the apprenticeship to ones that use genuinely work-based pedagogies. The findings indicate some good practice among participants in the study for instance in working closely with employers and recognising workplace learning, but also frustrations with institutional procedures and attitudes as well as concerns that good practice is far from universal.

The workplace issues discussed in the findings can be divided into two main types, those stemming from the way that employers support learning and organise workplaces as learning environments, and those relating to employment practices and job design. The variation between employers in terms of workplace learning again reflects what is known from previous studies, from Fuller and Unwin (2008) onwards, and suggests a spectrum from those simply concerned with spending levy money or sending employees on part-time courses through to those that are committed to providing a comprehensive programme of learning. While there will be learning-positive and indifferent employers regardless, appropriate engagement and support by providers is likely to be a significant factor in moving those in the middle ground to the learning-positive end (and see Minton and Lowe 2019).

More general employment issues occur when either the apprentice's job is not a good match with the apprenticeship standard, or the way in which employment is organised creates barriers to completion or progression. The findings suggest two types of job design issue: one where the organisation's work coverage leaves gaps in relation to the standard, most likely in (though not limited to) smaller firms, and one where the employer restricts the apprentice's experience and responsibilities in a way that limits coverage or slows progress more than is necessary. The first may be overcome as discussed by the focus groups through organising placements, while the second is at least partly a matter of negotiation between the provider and employer. More general employment issues are illustrated in the findings principally in nursing; one occurs where apprentices are expected to continue in their existing job, potentially creating role confusion and slowing progress on the apprenticeship, and the other where the employer fails to support progression from one level to the next. The former is also present in other sectors, such as engineering and construction, though rarely with as formal a distinction between the existing job role and the apprenticeship. One provider in the study was overcoming the dual role issue by requiring apprentices to start on a new contract specific to the apprenticeship, but applying this universally may limit opportunities for staff to progress particularly if the employer has difficulties recruiting into the role vacated by the apprentice. While this break in continuity is partly one of employment practices and costs, it would be largely overcome if continuity issues between levels were resolved as discussed in section 5.4.

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5.6 Policy and governance issues

The findings indicate a variety of issues with how higher and degree apprenticeships are administered nationally. These can be summarised as:

- Policy immaturity and inconsistency, leading to uncertainty about regulations and funding (the current uncertainty about level 7 apprenticeships being a case in point);
- Some lack of co-ordination, for instance allowing narrow and overlapping apprenticeships to be approved while being slow to respond to genuine industry needs;
- Slowness of process, resulting in long lead times from developing or revising an apprenticeship to it becoming available to learners;
- Inflexibility in areas such as requirements for functional skills, recognising prior learning and requiring completion of EPAs that have little practical value;
- Funding models that can ignore some essential aspects of provision, may be unsustainable for providers, and can be difficult for small firms to access;
- High levels of regulation, including audits and quality assurance requirements that result in high costs of compliance and do not always promote quality provision.

These issues suggest a need to review apprenticeship governance at both policy and operational levels. At policy level a mature discussion is needed about what apprenticeships are and how they can be financed on a sustainable basis. This needs to address what higher and degree apprenticeships are intended to achieve, how they relate where relevant to professional qualifying processes and higher education requirements, and how they link to other parts of the education system including higher technical education (see for instance Rowley and Cleaver 2025). Secondly it needs to review design requirements that have been applied indiscriminately across apprenticeships, such as functional skills and the need for end-point assessments. Finally it needs to clarify what should be funded from the employer levy and what the funding is intended to cover, giving providers and employers greater clarity into the longer term.

Operationally, there is a need to explore how the different parts of the apprenticeship system fit together and also dovetail with parallel systems operated by professional bodies and higher education. There appears to be substantial scope for reducing regulatory requirements, so that while there is adequate accountability, compliance does not draw off funding or undermine quality learning. A balance is needed here, so that for instance while external quality assurance can, if done well, be a powerful driver for improving some of the issues discussed in section 5.5, it requires processes and personnel to be in tune with good practice in higher and degree apprenticeships, with the needs of the wider age-group that typically populates them, and with professional and sector requirements.

At policy level a mature discussion is needed about what apprenticeships are and how they can be financed on a sustainable basis.

06. Conclusions and observations

There is an ongoing trend for professions to opt for broader means of entry, with higher and degree apprenticeships playing a significant role in this process for some professions and a supporting one in others. Professional bodies are on balance strongly supportive of apprenticeship-type routes, including in traditionally academic fields such as law, architecture and curating. Employers in some fields can be reluctant to look beyond traditional modes of entry and there can also be problems finding sufficient providers, but there is a general expectation that apprenticeships will continue to account for an increasing proportion of people qualifying in professions. There is also growing evidence to indicate that the integrated approach to development, particularly as represented by the learning-integrated work model, is on balance a more effective route to and beyond professionally qualified level than the dominant sequential model. This is particularly so for people already in the workforce or returning to work, but it also has benefits for school and college leavers who are ready to commit to a specific career. This all indicates the value of higher-level apprenticeships as entry-routes to professional careers, and after half a century or so of dominance by the sequential model and full-time higher education makes it imperative that integrated pathways are maintained and further developed.

Higher and degree apprenticeships provide an effective vehicle for further development for people who are already in work, returning to work or who have already completed an apprenticeship at a lower level. In many fields they are creating progression-routes for people in assistant- and technician-level jobs, overcoming career blocks and opening up opportunities for those who would not have considered, or been able to take up, full-time higher education. The evidence for widening participation from A-level students is more limited, and apart possibly from the attractiveness of 'earning while learning' – which is likely to appeal universally and not only to underrepresented groups – it is also not apparent why apprenticeships should be particularly more effective than other routes as a means of diversifying entry from school leavers. A more effective strategy for widening participation and increasing social mobility is likely to be to play to the strengths of higher and degree apprenticeships as a pathway for people in assistant-level and paraprofessional work and those who have come through apprenticeships and vocational courses, alongside working with employers to develop more inclusive recruitment strategies. As a footnote it is important in those professions where qualified status is at level 7 (or 8) that integrated routes enable progression to this level, whether funded via the apprenticeship levy or directly by employers; to leave apprenticeship entrants part-qualified without accessible pathways beyond level 6 is inequitable and would undermine the value of the apprenticeships.

A more effective strategy for widening participation and increasing social mobility is likely to be to play to the strengths of higher and degree apprenticeships as a pathway for people in assistant-level and paraprofessional work, and those who have come through apprenticeships and vocational courses.

While the design of higher-level apprenticeships has improved steadily since their introduction, there are still issues that need to be resolved. In some areas apprenticeship standards need to be designed so that they support meaningful careers rather than being geared to specific jobs, while there is also a need to ensure that broader standards are genuinely applicable across the areas intended and can be contextualised appropriately. Apprenticeships also need to provide seamless pathways with the facility to step on and off at relevant points, avoiding both choke-points for transferring between levels and the stigma (and funding penalties) of failure for not completing a 'long' apprenticeship in one go. Finally, in some apprenticeships end-point assessments need to be rethought so that they integrate properly with the degree, support professional qualifying requirements, and use assessment methods that are authentic and valid in relation to the practice of the profession. There is now a presumption for new and revised apprenticeships that EPAs must be integrated either with the degree or the professional requirements, but the guidance for doing this needs revisiting to ensure that it enables effective and workable solutions in all circumstances.

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At the level of implementation there are still problems in creating genuinely integrated programmes and pathways. This is partly a matter of employers recognising that the workplace needs to be a site of learning as much as a site of productive work, and providing firstly a job design that covers the apprenticeship standard, with placement release or internal rotation where this is not possible within the employing organisation or unit; secondly an environment that is conducive to learning that goes beyond the immediate job demands; and thirdly good-quality direct support for learning, including mentoring, review and where appropriate relevant digital resources and means of interaction. From the provider perspective there is still a need for programmes to integrate theory and practice effectively, through among other things practical working relationships with employers, crossover between staff, the facilitation and use of workplace learning as part of the academic programme, creative use of digital technology, progress reviews based on in-depth learning conversations, and not least integrated and authentic approaches to assessment.

The policy and governance arrangements for higher and degree apprenticeships need to settle down to the point where they are consistent, have constancy of purpose, and are workable for all involved. Apprenticeship regulations and compliance measures need to be based on principles of high-quality learning, accessibility and quality of outcomes, without relying on inflexible rules that act as barriers to involvement, whether for whole professions, providers, employers or individual learners. At a structural level there is a need for recognition that professions represent a broad spectrum of modes of organisation, extents and means of regulation, and practitioner populations, and these will require varied approaches to working if apprenticeships are to be implemented successfully. On the other hand there is also a need for apprenticeships not to be limited to traditional professional boundaries, particularly where there are multiple professional bodies operating in the same broad field or where new professional groups are emerging in response to changed needs and opportunities.

The policy and governance arrangements for higher and degree apprenticeships need to settle down to the point where they are consistent, have constancy of purpose, and are workable for all involved.

Finally, quality assurance measures need to be proportionate, co-ordinated between agencies including professional bodies, and geared to the type of programme, the sector and the learner characteristics involved.

As a concluding observation, while higher and degree apprenticeships have accelerated the development of integrated professional development pathways over the last decade, they have also come to dominate discussions almost to the point of assuming that similar models cannot exist outside of the apprenticeship system. Many professions have retained and sometimes further developed parallel or experiential routes to qualifying that are not premised either on recruiting graduates or on using apprenticeship funding, and there are benefits in looking more widely at how integrated pathways can be developed that work both as apprenticeships and independently. Given the growing evidence that integrated routes are highly effective for both individuals and employers, there is scope to explore alternative methods of funding that do not rely exclusively on the apprenticeship levy; for instance employers in some sectors often fund the professional training phase of graduates on sequential pathways and (despite the distortions produced by the levy system) it is not unreasonable for them to do the same in integrated routes.

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Initials and acronyms

APC	Assessment of Professional Competence
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
EPA	End-point assessment
H/DAs	Higher and Degree Apprenticeships
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
HEC	Higher Education Commission
IfATE	Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education
LIW	Learning-integrated work
NHS	National Health Service
Ofqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PARN	Professional Associations Research Network
PB	Professional body
Pr	Provider
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
RIBA	Royal Institute of British Architects
SDN	Strategic Development Network
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UUK	Universities UK
UVAC	University Vocational Awards Council
WIL	Work-integrated learning

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Architects Registration Board

Archives and Records Association

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Chartered Institute of Environmental Health

Chartered Institute of Highways and Transport

Chartered Institute of Legal Executives

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

Chartered Society of Physiotherapists

Consalia

Crosby Management Training

Health and Care Professions Council

Health Sciences University

Institute of Conservation

Institute of Osteopathy

Institution of Civil Engineers

Intellectual Property Regulation Board

Landscape Institute

Leeds Trinity University

Middlesex University

Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust

Museums Association

Northumbria University

The Open University

Professional Associations Research Network

Queen Mary University of London

Royal College of Nursing

Royal Institute of British Architects

Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors

Sheffield Hallam University

Skills Federation

Social Work England

Solicitors Regulation Authority

Staffordshire University

STEM Explored Ltd

University Centre Quayside

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University of Hertfordshire

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University of Teesside

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Appendix 1

UVAC
UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

Professions and Professional/Degree Apprenticeships study

Professional body participants' pre-discussion questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the study.

This questionnaire is to enable me to gain a quick picture of the current position for your profession and identify topics and issues to focus on in the discussion. Don't feel that you have to provide extensive free-text answers – most of the text boxes are only there to allow you to expand on answers if you want to. The discussion will allow us to focus on the matters that are of most concern in your profession.

Your answers will not be ascribed to your organisation, though we may report on fields and sectors for instance to provide examples and discuss differences. Organisations, but not individuals, will be named in the acknowledgements at the end of the report. If we would like to include a short case-study we will clear this with you before writing it up, and you will be able to comment on it before publication.

Three notes:

- We are using 'P/DAs' to mean all apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7, whether or not they incorporate a degree. For this study we are not looking at level 4/5 Higher Apprenticeships, or professional qualifications and memberships at this level.
- If you don't have active P/DAs please answer whichever questions are relevant.
- If you operate internationally, please answer for the UK (or specifically England and Wales) where possible.

If you have any questions please contact me at s.lester@uvac.ac.uk. To find out more about UVAC, please visit uvac.ac.uk.

Dr Stan Lester
for UVAC

June 2024

1. Your organisation

Your organisation

Click or tap here to enter text.

Profession or occupation covered

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

2. Qualified status

What academic level(s) would you consider your main qualified status or grade to be at (e.g. the chartered or registered level)? The qualification equivalents are given below though we recognise that many professions require additional practical experience and/or assessments as well.

- Level 6 – bachelor's degree ☐
- Level 7 – master's degree or postgraduate diploma ☐
- Level 8 – doctorate (only if you normally require a doctorate e.g. PhD, EngD, DPsychol for the main qualified level) ☐

---

3. P/DA involvement

Are you involved formally with P/DAs?

- In their development for instance as a member of a Trailblazer group ☐
- As an end-point assessment organisation ☐
- By formally endorsing them as a route to qualification/membership ☐
- Intend to be in the future ☐
- No ☐

Any additional comments:

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

4. Accepting P/DAs

How does your profession accept P/DAs towards the fully qualified status or grade (e.g. chartered or registered level)? Answer for whichever P/DA is relevant, levels 6 and 7 if there are both. If any of the last three categories are relevant you can tick more than one.

	Level 6 P/DA	*Level 7 P/DA*
Name of P/DA	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Not applicable	☐	☐
Meets full professional requirements	☐	☐
With additional academic qualifications or exams	☐	☐
With additional experience	☐	☐
With an Assessment of Professional Competence or similar	☐	☐

Any additional relevant information:

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

5. P/DAs in your profession

If known, what percentage of your (UK or England & Wales) entrants currently come in via P/DAs?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Over the next 5 years do you expect this to:

increase significantly	*increase slightly*	*stay the same*	*decrease slightly*	*decrease significantly*
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Have P/DAs affected how you operate other entry-routes, or have you created any new programmes or routes that follow similar principles to P/DAs? If so, please say how.

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

6. Diversity of entrants

Have P/DAs increased the diversity of entrants coming into or progressing in the profession? Please indicate in which areas if known:

- ☐ Disadvantaged backgrounds
- ☐ Ethnic diversity
- ☐ Gender balance
- ☐ Entrants without English as a first language
- ☐ From rural areas
- ☐ From less advantaged areas
- ☐ From further education/without A-levels
- ☐ From lower-level apprenticeships

☐ From assistant-type roles in the same field (e.g. EngTech to CEng, HCA to nurse)
☐ Career-change or return-to-work entrants

Other/any additional information.

Click or tap here to enter text.

If you have any data to back your answers up, please attach a file or link to it.

---

7. Success and progression

If you have any information about continuing employment and progression in your sector:

Compared with pre-existing entry routes, do P/DA entrants tend to be more or less successful at securing ongoing employment (or self-employment) in your sector?

considerably more successful	*slightly more*	*about the same*	*slightly less*	*considerably less successful*
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Compared with entrants who took full-time degrees, do P/DA entrants tend to progress in their careers:

considerably more quickly	*slightly more*	*about the same*	*slightly less*	*considerably less quickly*
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

If you have any further comments or data please include below/attach a link.

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

8. National issues

Thinking about the way that relevant P/DAs are designed and operated at a national level, how satisfied are you with each of the following?

	not applicable	*very dissatisfied*	*on balance dissatisfied*	*on balance satisfied*	*very satisfied*
The content of the apprenticeship standard	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The standard's fit with the profession's requirements	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The options (if any) that are available	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

The level(s) of apprenticeship that are available	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The apprenticeship's assessment requirements	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your influence on apprenticeship content, format etc. as a professional body	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Administrative and governance arrangements at national level	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Quality assurance arrangements at national level	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The level of funding per apprentice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Anything else that you are particularly satisfied or dissatisfied with, or further comments on any of the above?

Click or tap here to enter text.

If you could change one or two things about the apprenticeship at national level, what would they be?

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

9. Delivery issues

Thinking about the way that relevant P/DAs are operated by employers and universities/colleges/training providers, how satisfied are you with each of the following?

	not applicable	*very dissatisfied*	*on balance dissatisfied*	*on balance satisfied*	*very satisfied*
Employers' willingness to take on apprentices	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The geographical availability of places	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The quality and appropriateness of recruitment practices	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The quality of employer-based training	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The quality of off-job learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Integration between on- and off-job learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The time available to apprentices for learning at work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Appropriate use of online/digital learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The quality of individual support from the provider	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The quality of assessment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Anything else that you are particularly satisfied or dissatisfied with, or further comments on any of the above?

Click or tap here to enter text.

If you could change one or two things about the apprenticeship at the level of delivery, what would they be?

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

10. Your details

Your name and email

Click or tap here to enter text.

Thank you for your answers. Please email this form to s.lester@uvac.ac.uk at least three days before the interview.

Appendix 2

UVAC
UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

Professions and Professional/Degree Apprenticeships study

Provider participants' pre-interview questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the study.

This short questionnaire is to enable me to gain a quick picture of the current position for your professional field and identify topics and issues to focus on in the discussion. Don't feel that you have to provide extensive free-text answers – most of the text boxes are only there to allow you to expand on answers if you want to. The discussion will allow us to focus on the matters that are of most concern.

Your answers will not be ascribed to your organisation, though we may report on fields and sectors for instance to provide examples and discuss differences. Organisations, but not individuals, will be named in the acknowledgements at the end of the report. If we would like to include a short case-study we will clear this with you before writing it up, and you will be able to comment on it before publication.

Two notes:

- We are using 'P/DAs' to mean all apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7, whether or not they incorporate a degree. For this study we are not looking at level 4/5 Higher Apprenticeships, or professional qualifications and memberships at this level.

- If you operate across the UK (or internationally), please answer for England and Wales where there are differences between countries.

If you have any questions please contact me at s.lester@uvac.ac.uk. If you would like to find out more about UVAC, please visit uvac.ac.uk.

Dr Stan Lester
for UVAC

June 2024

1. Your organisation

Your organisation

Click or tap here to enter text.

Profession or occupation for which you are responding

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

2. Programmes offered

What programmes do you offer at level 6 and above that support qualifying in the relevant profession (as opposed to continuing development or specialisation for qualified practitioners)?

	Level 6	*Level 7*
• Degree apprenticeship	☐	☐
• Higher (non-degree) apprenticeship	☐	☐
• Full-time degree or diploma	☐	☐
• Part-time degree or diploma	☐	☐
• Full-time other professional course	☐	☐
• Part-time other professional course	☐	☐

Other:

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

3. Professions' acceptance of P/DAs

How does the profession accept P/DAs towards the fully qualified status or grade (e.g. chartered or registered level)? Answer for whichever P/DA is relevant, levels 6 and 7 if there are both. If any of the last three categories are relevant you can tick more than one.

	Level 6 P/DA	*Level 7 P/DA*
Name of P/DA	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Not applicable	☐	☐
Meets full professional requirements	☐	☐
With additional academic qualifications or exams	☐	☐
With additional experience	☐	☐
With an Assessment of Professional Competence or similar	☐	☐

Any additional relevant information:

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

4. Uptake of P/DAs

What percentage of your students in the relevant professional field are on P/DAs?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Over the next 5 years do you expect this to:

increase significantly	*increase slightly*	*stay the same*	*decrease slightly*	*decrease significantly*
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Have P/DAs affected how you operate other programmes, or have you created any new programmes that follow similar principles to P/DAs without being official apprenticeships? If yes, please say how.

Click or tap here to enter text.

---

5. Diversity of entrants

Have P/DAs increased the diversity of entrants coming on to your courses? Please indicate in which areas if known:

- ☐ Disadvantaged backgrounds
- ☐ Ethnic diversity
- ☐ Gender balance
- ☐ Entrants without English as a first language
- ☐ From rural areas
- ☐ From less advantaged areas
- ☐ From further education/without A-levels
- ☐ From lower-level apprenticeships
- ☐ From assistant-type roles in the same field (e.g. EngTech to CEng, HCA to nurse)
- ☐ Career-change or return-to-work entrants

Other/any additional information.

Click or tap here to enter text.

If you have any data to back your answers up, please attach a file or link to it.

---

6. Success and progression

If you have any information about continuing employment and progression in your sector:

Compared with pre-existing entry routes, do P/DA entrants tend to be more or less successful at securing ongoing employment (or self-employment) in your sector?

considerably more successful	*slightly more*	*about the same*	*slightly less*	*considerably less successful*
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Compared with entrants who took full-time degrees, do P/DA entrants tend to progress in their careers:

considerably more quickly	*slightly more*	*about the same*	*slightly less*	*considerably less quickly*
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

If you have any further comments or data please include below/attach a link.

Click or tap here to enter text.

7. Profession issues

Thinking about your interaction with professional bodies (associations or registration/regulatory bodies as appropriate), how do you find each of the following in relation to P/DAs:

	not applicable	*very negative*	*on balance negative*	*on balance positive*	*very positive*
Receptiveness to entrants with P/DAs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Promotion of P/DAs in the sector	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Regulations and approval requirements relating to course content and structure	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Regulations and requirements relating to assessment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Quality assurance or monitoring processes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Responsiveness to issues relating to P/DAs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Any additional comments?

Click or tap here to enter text.

If you could change one or two things about professional bodies' policies or actions in relation to P/DAs, what would they be?

Click or tap here to enter text.

8. Your details

Your name and email

Click or tap here to enter text.

Thank you for your answers. Please email this form to s.lester@uvac.ac.uk at least three days before the interview.

UVAC
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About UVAC

The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) is one of the most authoritative voices on technical, vocational and professional education delivered by higher education and the leading expert on all aspects of the policy and operational requirements of higher and degree apprenticeships in England. UVAC is a membership body of around 80 UK universities and higher education providers and has been championing higher level technical and professional learning and progression routes into higher education and the professions for over 25 years. UVAC is known for its advocacy, representation and research, including work published in its official academic journal, Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning. In 2024, UVAC celebrated its silver jubilee.

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