



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Note of speaker meeting: Degree apprenticeships

Chair:

Baroness Garden of Frognal, co-chair of the APPUG

Speakers:

Professor Quintin McKellar, Vice-Chancellor, University of Hertfordshire

Nicola Turner MBE, Head of Skills Policy, HEFCE

Amy Grange, Degree Apprentice, Capgemini and Aston University

Professor Quintin McKellar structured his speech by talking through ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’ of degree apprenticeship policy. In terms of the positives associated with degree apprenticeships, he stressed that degree apprentices were paid, received vocational training and a university education without taking on debt. It was also positive for employers that they got to choose their apprentices and could define and deliver the vocational training they thought necessary. He then spoke about higher level skills and their role in increasing UK productivity.

Moving on to the downsides for degree apprentices, he stressed they did not get the full student experience and were tied to a single employer. He also speculated that middle class families were most likely to see the advantages of degree apprenticeships, and therefore there were limitations to the social mobility benefits of the policy as it may lead to the “cannibalisation” of the higher education market. More broadly, he thought the apprenticeship levy had the unintended consequence of restricting the type of training available to employers.

In terms of ‘the ugly’, Professor McKellar thought apprenticeships of any kind were still associated with boiler suits as people did not realise the range of subjects covered. He described the trailblazer process as tortuous, partly as 10 employers were needed to start the process. Other issues included the facts that end point assessment did not always convey a degree, there needed to be two sets of assessment and the legal costs had been extraordinarily high for institutions.

Finally he criticised the fact there was no higher education representation on the board of the Institute for Apprenticeships, noting that universities were employers themselves so should definitely be represented.

Nicola Turner opened her contribution by noting the Government’s view of apprenticeships as a vital tool to increase productivity. She stressed that apprenticeship reforms were taking place alongside various other ‘moving parts’ including reforms to both the qualifications landscape, and to higher education.

Explaining how crowded the regulatory landscape was, she referred to the various organisations involved in the regulation of degree apprenticeships including the Education

and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), Institute for Apprenticeships, Ofsted, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

The first barrier to progress Nicola Turner identified was the slow speed at which standards were being approved; this was causing frustration amongst employers she explained. Giving the example of the artificial intelligence sector, a key priority for the government as outlined in the industrial strategy white paper, she explained employers within the sector were turning away from the apprenticeship system and instead developing Masters' courses with select institutions instead.

The removal of higher education qualifications from some Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships was the second barrier to progress identified. The Institute for Apprenticeships is approving proposed higher level apprenticeship standards that do not have a degree element faster, but she argued this could weaken their value, as employers value the degree aspect. As well as lacking parity of esteem with academic qualifications, degree apprenticeships without the degree element would not be recognised internationally, she added.

Finally, Nicola Turner spoke about the 'issue of place' being the third barrier to progress. She explained how important degree apprenticeships could be for social mobility, particularly in deprived, rural and coastal areas. Despite this, recent ESFA procurement for non-levy payers had created cold spots in many areas of the country with low educational attainment, meaning that SMEs were unable to access local funding for degree apprenticeships.

Assessing the degree apprenticeship programme, Nicola Turner thought it was positive that degree apprenticeship standards were largely being designed for skills shortage occupations. The fact degree apprenticeships are the fastest growing part of the apprenticeship family connected with data showing the labour market needs 2.2 million more people with higher level skills by 2020, she thought.

In terms of delivering on social mobility, she stressed the challenge was huge, but there were rays on light in terms of early evidence suggesting degree apprenticeships were appealing to a wider range of people than traditional higher education. There was also evidence that degree apprenticeships were getting more females into STEM areas than traditional universities courses.

Finally, Nicola Turner praised the excellent partnership working that degree apprenticeships had created, not only between employers and universities, but also between universities and the further education sector. She thought the models that were emerging could trickle over into mainstream higher education which would be positive.

Amy Grange, a recently graduated degree apprentice from Aston University and Capgemini spoke next, explaining the fear on taking on student loan debt was one of the reasons she chose to do a degree apprenticeship. The need for practical experience as well as academic education was another factor.

She explained how the programme was run: each academic year covered 18 calendar months and was split into 3 blocks that each covered 40 credits of content. Unlike most degree courses, her four and a half year degree apprenticeship contained no long summer break or reading weeks. In terms of enabling learning, Amy Grange explained Aston University provided online lectures and tutorials, online access to library content and had

arrangements with other universities that allowed their degree apprentices to use other institutions' libraries.

Turning to the benefits, she explained that not only was she paid the living wage, she was also an employee from day 1, had face-to-face interaction with clients, was assessed on performance like other employees, and had been given responsibilities far in excess of what many new graduates would have. The number of females taking STEM courses had already greatly increased she said, adding that herself and fellow degree apprentices went out to sixth form colleges to talk about the opportunities degree apprenticeships provided.

Finally, she emphasised the value of having individuals from different backgrounds and with different experiences in the workplace, stressing that degree apprentices should not replace all graduates.