



University Alliance represents 18 higher education institutions in England and Wales educating almost a quarter of all undergraduates in the UK. Alliance universities have been proud leaders in technical and professional education since the Industrial Revolution and are still crucial to the success of cities and sectors today.

This document forms our written submission to the inquiry into the quality of apprenticeships and skills training of the Education Select Committee of the House of Commons.

Introduction

1. Alliance universities have embraced the degree apprenticeships agenda. Building on their long history of working with businesses to develop and deliver courses that give people the skills they need to succeed at work, Alliance universities recognise the potential of these apprenticeships to transform the way professional, technical and higher education is offered in the UK for a wide range of learners, including those from widening participation backgrounds, older learners in the workforce looking to acquire new skills, and people who would prefer to study on a part-time basis.
2. The 17 Alliance universities based in England are all on the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers (RoATP) and are currently engaged in the development and delivery of higher and degree apprenticeships. Across these universities, more than 180 higher and degree apprenticeship programmes are currently on offer or in development. The majority of degree apprenticeships at Alliance universities are focused in the following areas: business and administration; construction; digital; engineering and manufacturing; health and science; and legal, finance and accounting.
3. Many of these universities have been involved with the development and delivery of degree apprenticeships since they were first rolled out in 2015. As such, they have developed useful expertise within their institutions, strengthened existing partnerships and formed new partnerships with external organisations to inform a wide range of audiences about degree apprenticeships, to support employers in their roles as trailblazer group leads and to develop and market degree apprenticeship programmes that provide distinct benefits to employers and learners. These activities represent a significant investment in the success of these apprenticeships from both universities and employers.

4. Any programme of this size, scale, and ambition is likely to face challenges in the early stages. We welcome the Institute for Apprenticeships' recent commitments to improve its processes and procedures, with the aim of providing useful and timely support for those involved in the development of apprenticeships.¹ However, further collaboration is required between government, employers and training providers to ensure remaining issues associated with the development and delivery of degree apprenticeships are addressed quickly.
5. In response to the issues the Committee is exploring as part of the inquiry, University Alliance's recommendations can be summarised as follows:
 - a. The IfA and the ESFA should commit to working with higher education institutions to further incorporate elements of the existing higher education quality assurance regime in the processes used to oversee the development of degree apprenticeships.
 - b. The ESFA should conduct future ITT procurement exercises for providers delivering apprenticeships to non-Levy paying employers in a clear, consistent, timely and fair manner. This will help SMEs access a wide range of apprenticeship training at all levels for their employees, and ensure providers across all regions are able to meet demand.
 - c. The Government should continue to work with employers and providers to increase awareness and understanding of the apprenticeship funding system. It should also explore the possibility of making the Apprenticeship Levy more flexible to fund a wider range of courses that will help address skills challenges in the UK.
 - d. Government, industry and training providers should continue to work together to ensure clear progression routes and parity of esteem between education routes at all levels – including apprenticeships.

Quality of provision, quality assurance and monitoring

6. One of the main issues that our universities continue to highlight is the lack of understanding about existing HE quality mechanisms by the bodies that are responsible for overseeing apprenticeships quality. For example, our universities all adhere to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and

¹ Institute for Apprenticeships, "Faster & better: A preview of the changes to come", December 2017: <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/media/1520/a-preview-of-the-changes-to-come-final.pdf>

currently participate in HEFCE's Annual Provider Review (although this is subject to change with the implementation of the new regulatory framework for higher education, overseen by the Office for Students). We are also very used to working with industry to make sure our courses meet their needs – 43% of the courses offered by our universities are accredited by Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies. While we understand some procedural uniformity is required, a greater awareness by the IfA and the ESFA of existing HE quality assurance procedures, and the incorporation of these procedures in IfA and ESFA processes, should help reduce reporting burdens, eliminate duplicative processes and accelerate standard and funding approvals for degree apprenticeships all while maintaining a very high-quality standard.

Relationships between universities, the IfA and the ESFA

Institute for Apprenticeships

7. The current delays associated with the approval of standards and assessment plans, and the lack of consistency in the advice provided by the IfA, has led to some universities considering whether they can take the risk of investing in supporting employers developing a programme that may later be judged not to meet certain criteria. Some employers are also reconsidering their engagement with the Government's Apprenticeships programme based on their disillusionment with the lack of feedback or clarity on how judgements are being made by the IfA. In this context, we welcome the overall commitment by the IfA to accelerate processes and provide timely and comprehensive advice on technical issues.
8. There is a lack of recognition, in the approval process, of the inherent value of linked degrees and degree-level transferable skills. Some trailblazer groups seem to have been discouraged from linking level 6 apprenticeships to degrees. The degree award associated with an apprenticeship at level 6 helps ensure its parity of esteem with other higher education qualifications at this level.

Education and Skills Funding Agency

9. Many of the ESFA's processes are seen as being burdensome and duplicative by our members. Any efforts to reduce disproportionate burden in the



ESFA's reporting processes, through an increased understanding of existing HE quality assurance mechanisms, would be welcomed.

10. There also continues to be concerns with the way in which the ESFA has managed the most recent ITT procurement exercise for the delivery of apprenticeship training to non-Levy paying employers, which may lead to particular barriers for these employers in providing training to their employees through the Apprenticeships programme. Future procurement exercises will need to be conducted in a clear, consistent, timely and fair manner to ensure SMEs can access a wide range of apprenticeship training at all levels for their employees, and providers across all regions are able to meet demand.

Apprenticeship Levy

11. We understand that the roll out of the Apprenticeship Levy policy may have an impact on access to apprenticeships. We continue to hear that Levy-paying employers – as well as smaller non-Levy paying employers – have relatively low levels of awareness and understanding of how apprenticeship funding works, which may not bode well for apprenticeship participation – DfE statistics demonstrate that there has been a decline in overall apprenticeship starts since the Levy's introduction.² As the Levy has only existed since April 2017, further evidence gathering on how employers are interacting with apprenticeship funding may be helpful in determining what can be done to improve access to high-quality training.
12. While degree apprenticeships appeal to a wide range of learners, they may not be accessible enough for learners who need to balance a range of other commitments. A broadening of the Apprenticeship Levy (e.g. to fund lifelong learning courses, or provide support for part-time learners) may help businesses fund high-quality training for staff that responds to particular skills needs and that may eventually lead to a degree-level qualification in a more flexible format.

² Department for Education, Further Education and Skills in England, SFR 62/2017, 23 November 2017, p. 12:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/660580/SFR62_Nov_2017.pdf



Degree apprenticeships and social mobility

13. We are pleased to see the Government's ongoing commitment to degree apprenticeships as part of its new social mobility action plan, "Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential". As noted in the document³, mechanisms such as HEFCE's Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund have been helpful in supporting the creation of new degree apprenticeships in a targeted manner, and in the development of relevant institutional expertise. Alliance universities recognise the potential of degree apprenticeships to provide higher education opportunities to learners who may not have considered obtaining a degree previously.
14. As the Post-16 Skills Plan is implemented, government, industry and providers need to continue to work together to ensure clear progression routes and parity of esteem between education routes at all levels. To ensure parity of esteem, apprenticeships must be linked to a relevant qualification/award (e.g. a degree for a level 6 apprenticeship, a foundation degree for a level 5 apprenticeship). They must also prepare apprentices who want to go on to the next level to do so. We continue to engage with the Department for Education on this matter as it conducts work on how T-level design will fit with university-level professional and technical education.
15. As the number of degree apprenticeships grows, further understanding of the additional assistance employers and HE providers may need to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the completion of their learning activities will be helpful in further understanding how this form of training can be used as a tool to improve social mobility, and to further develop and share best practices related to apprentice support and retention.

³ Department for Education, "Unlocking Talent: Fulfilling Potential", December 2017, pp. 25-26:
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/667690/Social_Mobility_Action_Plan_-_for_printing.pdf