
Submission to the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's Inquiry into Degree Apprenticeships

Introduction

1. The National Training Federation for Wales (NTfW) is the authoritative organisation in Wales in regards to apprenticeships and employability skills programmes, and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this hugely important consultation.

2. The NTfW is a 'not for profit' membership led, membership organisation of over 70 quality assured organisations involved in the delivery of apprenticeships and employability skills programmes in Wales. We are a pan-Wales representative body for a network of quality assured work-based learning providers, who are contracted by the Welsh Government to deliver this apprenticeship and employability programmes.

Aim

3. The aim of this Submission Paper is to provide evidence to the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee ahead of a planned meeting which will take place at the Senedd on Thursday 27 February 2020.

Have any issues become apparent during the rollout of degree apprenticeships and what lessons can be learnt from their introduction?

4. The main issue that has become apparent to the existing network of contracted work-based learning (WBL) providers is that of the displacement of learners that were already following a Higher Apprenticeship.

5. Anecdotal evidence from our members indicates that some individuals following a Higher Apprenticeship, whose knowledge-based component was being delivered at a HNC/D level, were being target to progress onto the second year of a Degree Apprenticeship. It is expected that these learners are being claimed as 'new apprentices' when in fact they have already started an apprenticeship programme.

Clearly, this 'gaming of the system' does not benefit the overall Apprenticeships Programme in Wales.

6. In addition, there appears to be a lack of awareness and some confusion regarding what constitutes a degree apprenticeship and a higher apprenticeship. Greater clarity about the difference in levels would be welcome from employers and employer bodies.

Was the process and criteria used for approving proposals from providers to deliver degree apprenticeships satisfactory?

7. It is difficult for NTfW to comment on this, as none of our members were involved in the process. That said, there is a great deal of annoyance amongst NTfW members that degree apprenticeship providers do not have to follow the same level of robust contracting that the existing WBL provider network need to navigate and endure.

What are your views on the demand for degree apprenticeships and how that demand should be managed, both in terms of the range of frameworks and demand from employers and learners?

8. It should be clear by all, that the Apprenticeships Programme in Wales is significantly different to that of England, where the concept of a 'Degree Apprenticeship' was first established – as a means to assist the UK Government to achieve its target of three million apprenticeship starts (in the then Parliament).

9. It is welcomed that the Welsh Government has taken a far more measured and pragmatic approach to the development of its Degree Apprenticeship programme, which is something we would welcome moving forward.

10. It is clear that there is an increasing demand from individuals and employers for Degree Apprenticeships. This should be no surprise, as the individual can receive a fully-funded degree, and the employer can benefit from the upskilling of an individual at such a level.

11. However, Degree Apprenticeships are funded at a significantly higher level than Higher Apprenticeships (Levels 4 - 6) and this demand must be controlled, to ensure that there is a fair and equitable distribution of limited budgets, to ensure all levels of demand are catered for. Further, without skills provision at the lower-levels, there can be no progression to the higher-levels.

12. Funding for apprenticeships delivered by the contracted WBL sector is robustly managed by Welsh Government, which in turn is informed by the evidence and data supplied the three Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs). Therefore, the NTfW believes that the development, and the subsequent prioritisation of funding for Degree Apprenticeships, must be based on the needs of employers, as demonstrated by the RSPs.

13. Further, we would urge the Committee to recommend that all HEIs delivering Degree Apprenticeships work with all contracted WBL providers, regardless of type, in order that they can utilise the intelligence held on individuals and employers, to ensure sustainable progression and completion.

To what extent should activity aimed at widening access feature in degree apprenticeship recruitment, and how can this be used to ensure that cohorts are representative?

14. This agenda needs to be addressed in the same way that it is for contracted WBL providers. Challenging targets and performance management is applied to areas such as disability, diversity and Welsh language.

15. Once again, if HEIs engaged with all contracted WBL providers, then these areas could be addressed in collaboration.

16. As contracted providers, NTfW members are expected to support learners in a variety of ways, depending on the sector and employer. As such, we would welcome the same conditions of funding being applied to Degree Apprenticeship provision.

Do you have any comments on the cost of degree apprenticeships, how degree apprenticeships are funded and the level of funding committed to them?

17. In comparison to a Higher Apprenticeship (which costs on average a total £7,500), Degree Apprenticeships are much more expensive (at £27,000), and also require a funding commitment for a minimum of 3 years, which is challenging in an environment where funding is becoming increasingly constrained.

18. Assuming that the current Degree Apprenticeship Pilot is rolled-out, the funding for Degree Apprenticeships should come from the overall HE budgets.

19. If for some reason the funding is drawn from a non-HE budget, then the NTfW would recommend that all Degree Apprenticeships are funded in-line with the Activity Costs Model applied to the existing contracted WBL provision.

How has the degree apprenticeship pilot impacted on other level apprenticeships, if at all?

20. See response to Q1 above.

Should any aspect of the approach to delivering degree apprenticeships change and if so, what should be the future direction?

21. Further to our responses above, the NTfW believes that if the current pilot is rolled-out, then all of the following should apply:

- a. Degree Apprenticeships should form part of the contracting process applied by Welsh Government to all other levels;
- b. All Degree Apprenticeships should be funded in accordance with an Activity Costs Model, to ensure value-for-money;
- c. There needs to be a level-playing field in relation to the contractual requirements between the contracted WBL providers and the Degree Apprenticeships programme;
- d. The development and prioritisation for funding for Degree Apprenticeships must be informed by the evidence and data emanating from the RSPs.
- e. HEIs delivering Degree Apprenticeships should work collaboratively with all contracted WBL providers, regardless of type, to ensure sustainable progression for learners and framework completions.