

Middlesex University submission to All Party Parliamentary Group on Apprenticeships call for evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on the apprenticeships and skills sector, 7 July 2020

Introduction

With over 19,000 students at our North London campus in Hendon and a further 21,000 studying at our overseas campuses in Dubai and Mauritius or for awards around the world, Middlesex University is a global operator playing a major role in the London skills ecosystem, as well as generating considerable overseas earnings for the UK. Middlesex has a distinctive practice-based approach at the heart of what we do, which informs how we shape our curriculum, research activity and engagement with external partners and stakeholders. The University also has a long history of providing higher technical education, enriched by our international profile, and is delivering pioneering higher and degree apprenticeships to meet future skills needs particularly in public sector, including in nursing and policing. With 52% of our students eligible for free school meals and 50% the first generation in their family to enter higher education, Middlesex University is focused on ensuring the most vulnerable learners are not left behind and are supported to fulfil their potential and play their full role in recovery from the pandemic in the UK and beyond.

•What are the opportunities and challenges you have faced in response to COVID-19?

Challenges

The availability of practice placements within healthcare settings for our Nursing Associate Degree Apprentices has been limited due to the virus, but through the close-working collaborative partnership that we have established with our public sector partner employers, we have worked to ensure this does not adversely affect apprentice progression. Our apprentices have therefore not experienced interruption to their learning and our progression rates remain very high (94%) to date. Our Nursing Associate Degree Apprenticeship provision also successfully migrated structured learning activity online, including providing real-time face-to-face interaction. At times the availability of apprentice managers to review progress at tripartite review meetings has been limited for Nursing Associate Apprenticeships. However, our online apprenticeship management system, with embedded Zoom platform, has supported tutor and apprentice interaction.

Opportunities

The pandemic has demonstrated the resilience of our work-integrated/online-supported apprenticeship programme design, and some of the adaptations that we have made during the pandemic have enhanced learner experience and employer satisfaction. For example, our Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship programme was designed and approved to locate the primary site of learning as the workplace and to integrate both on- and off-the job learning through a blended model of tutor-supported interactive online learning. Some assessments had been planned as 'closed book' on-site invigilated exams and we have had to revise the approach to move towards 'open book' and online examination methods. Both apprentices and employers have embraced these new approaches and are keen to retain the best elements to further enhance our model of delivery.

•How has your organisation responded and adapted to supporting apprenticeships ?

As mentioned above, we have moved all our off-the-job delivery online and are using our apprenticeship learning management system, with online video platform built in. This has given us resilience during the pandemic, where we are able to use online tools to replicate the experience that an apprentice would have had face-to-face. The virus has emphasised the importance of our work-integrated approach and given us the opportunity to consider ways to adapt the provision going forward into the recovery phase. For example, we are considering whether it will in fact be more effective for our learners to mediate their experience with online tools, as opposed to an experience that is fully on- or off-site.

•What recommendations would you have for policy makers to support apprenticeships policy going forward?

Ensure policy language reflects work-integrated learning

The current requirement for 20% off-the-job learning suggests that the higher education provider in a higher or degree apprenticeship is only providing 20% of an apprentice's learning experience and undervalues the role of

the higher education element of the programme. With the work-integrated approach used by Middlesex University, both the on- and off-the-job learning experience are supported by both employer and HE provider.

Enable non-levy paying companies to train apprentices

We support Chair of Education Select Committee, Robert Halfon's, suggestion, as part of his Apprenticeship Guarantee, that we use a Skills Challenge Fund for non-levy paying companies to train apprentices, which would enable more apprentices to access programmes. Support is needed to enable HEIs to deliver higher and degree apprenticeships in collaboration with the SMEs that play a key role in our economy

Avoid additional costly bureaucracy and barriers to the creation of apprenticeships

The Office for Students is best placed to give regulatory oversight for integrated and non-integrated degree apprenticeships, non-integrated higher apprenticeships (such as Nursing Associate) where regulated by a professional body and all specialist higher education sector apprenticeships, such as the Academic Professional. Additional reporting to Ofsted and Ofqual would add an additional and unnecessarily costly layer of administrative burden to institutions with no clear benefit for apprentices at a time when higher education institutions are working hard to secure financial sustainability.

•How can we ensure that apprenticeships play an important role in economic recovery beyond the COVID-19 crisis?

Maintain the employer-led design of the levy system with access to apprenticeships at all levels and all ages

The apprenticeship system should enable employers to focus on the high productivity jobs that their organisations need and which offer job security and a better income for individuals undertaking an apprenticeship. To prioritise level 2 or 3 programmes or restrict access to apprenticeships by age would have severe detrimental economic and social consequences, particularly for public sector apprenticeships. Employers would be prevented from using the levy to train the employees they most need to train. With this in mind, the right to retrain is important, as there will be increasing need to upskill or reskill people affected by any future economic recession. Employers will support programmes that will be sustainable, such as through growth sectors in the Government's Industrial Strategy, which will provide the jobs of the future.

We also see higher and degree apprenticeships meeting the Government's levelling up aims. Degree Apprenticeships will be of fundamental importance to training the nurses, police constables and social workers needed to deliver high quality public sector services. The Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship is, for example, making a major impact on the recruitment of more women, mature learners and BAME learners and supporting force recruitment to reflect the communities they serve. In the private sector employers are using Degree Apprenticeships for the engineers, digital, logistics specialists etc. they need. We recommend the removal of the mandatory qualifications rule, which currently means that unless there is a need for a degree as a requirement for licence to practise, or for required professional body recognition etc, an apprentice cannot gain a degree. This is at odds with feedback from trailblazer groups who repeatedly highlighted that employers want the apprentice to have a degree in order to attract candidates..

Ensure Apprenticeship Funding Bands Make Delivery Viable

The new methodologies for determining apprenticeship funding bands proposed by the IfATE show a lack of understanding of Higher Education costs. If implemented, these methodologies would lead to a collapse in key areas of higher and degree apprenticeship provision, such as nursing, policing, social work, engineering, digital etc. The IfATE must be instructed to ensure that any funding bands it recommends ensure that delivery is viable.

Invest in sustained strategic partnerships between employers and HEIs

The delivery of higher and degree apprenticeships has challenged the traditional relationships between work and learning to require productive and sustained interactions between apprentices, their employers and university tutors, facilitated by technology. Learning is more tailored, making it more likely that the apprentice will progress and succeed. Work will change forever post COVID-19 and university education must not just reflect this, but lead and inspire the changes that are necessary. Out of the crisis we should seize the opportunity to redefine the relationship between employers and universities for the benefit of all.

For more information, please contact Gemma Peach, Policy and Public Affairs Officer: g.peach@mdx.ac.uk