

## 11 September - Building on Best Practice for Public Sector Degree Apprenticeships

**Tim Blackman**

I'll start with three points, which are all about how degree apprenticeships fit in wider higher education policy, which is where I believe they should fit.

First, I'm in favour of returning to a higher education system paid for by taxation rather than fees because it's simpler and fairer.

That's how degree apprenticeships are funded – by the levy. So why not do that for all higher education?

It would take £7.5bn to abolish fees, which could come from reversing just some of the cuts to corporation tax made since 2010, and still having one of the lowest rates in the G20. Even reintroducing maintenance grants would not force corporation tax to uncompetitive levels.

So I welcome degree apprenticeships as a start to returning to free higher education in England.

My second point is that I'm very committed to the model of higher education that the polytechnics originally pioneered, which is a practical education for professional careers.

The productivity boost that such education can provide to the economy by the way is likely to mean a positive return on taxpayer investment. Higher education is not a tax burden.

My third point is that professional employment in the public sector has had a hugely important role in driving social mobility. While family background and type of school and university attended still have a large influence on who gets the top jobs, these factors are less important in the public sector than in the private sector.

The public sector has opened up huge opportunities for professional employment for people from working class backgrounds and women. It has also created careers and not just jobs.

And in terms of existing work-integrated programmes and new degree apprenticeships, I think that the work universities are doing with public sector employers has pioneered learning in the workplace as *integral to work itself*, redefining work as not just doing what I did yesterday but doing it better tomorrow, and then helping others to do it better.

The context for developing public sector degree apprenticeships is severely cash-strapped employers, with austerity-driven cuts in public sector employment. This is a difficult environment to work in but there are ways forward.

These three points make me a supporter of public sector degree apprenticeships: for what they say about the value of public sector employment, for being free higher education paid for by taxation, and for being applied education for professional careers.

There are, of course, big problems with degree apprenticeships, including their affordability for universities to deliver and their affordability for employers to fund; not just the levy but the time spent off the job as well, for apprentices and mentors.

This may mean that for many employers hiring a graduate remains the best option - although in the public sector there is not so much distance to travel compared to existing teaching, social work and nursing programmes, and as you'll be discussing in this conference much to learn from these programmes.

Unfortunately, though, the Government has sometimes been promoting apprenticeships as an alternative to higher education when degree apprenticeships are a type of higher education, dependent for their status on that word 'degree'.

More accurately, the Government has also promoted degree apprenticeships as an alternative to *going* to university.

No doubt in the minds of ministers, overwhelmingly educated at residential Russell Group universities, a degree apprenticeship seems very different to going to university. But it's not so different for us at Middlesex where many of our students still live at home, most are in paid work and we've long designed courses for work-based learning.

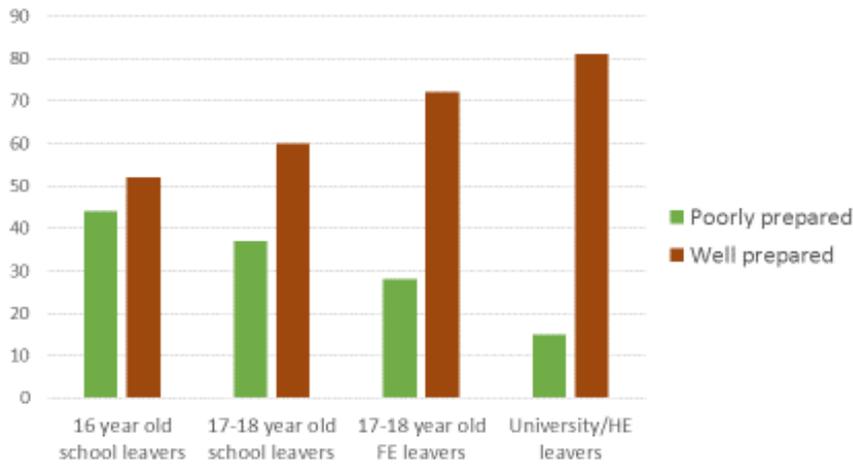
The key difference is that most of our students are funding their education themselves rather than being funded by an employer – or a scholarship or bursary.

Not only are the vast majority of HE students funding their own education, but the status of a degree apprenticeship depends on these self-funding students because it is the national and international success of the British university degree that degree apprenticeships are using.

It's not that conventional degrees have failed and that there need to be better options, but that conventional degrees are very successful, from the high earnings premium and low unemployment associated with a university degree to their popularity with employers.

While only 60% of employers in England think 17 and 18 year old school leavers are well prepared for work, this rises to 81% for university graduates, and 88% in Scotland. Employers also think that university graduates are better prepared for work than FE leavers.

**How well employers feel education leavers are prepared for work (%)**

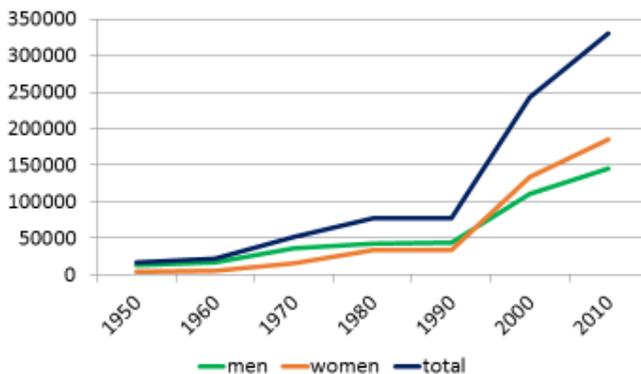


DfE Employer Perspectives Survey 2016

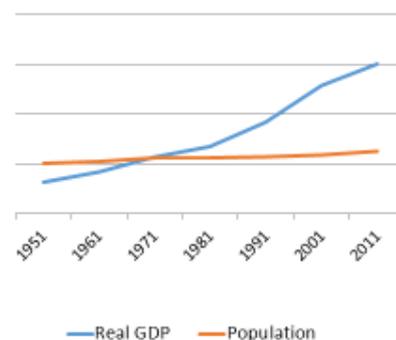
Conventional university degrees have also driven social mobility in a way that's yet to be proven for apprenticeships. The number of people obtaining degrees is an incredible fifteen times higher today than fifty years ago. This has been one of the main drivers of economic growth, with over 80 per cent of graduates in highly skilled occupations within a few years of graduating.

In England, the proportion of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas who enter higher education has increased by 50 per cent over the past 15 years. Since the mid-2000s most of the growth in student numbers has come from these areas.

**UK Students obtaining degrees**



**UK Trends in GDP and population**



However, it has not all been success, which is why degree apprenticeships are a welcome addition to the HE portfolio. But I'm talking here about addition not substitution. Degree apprenticeships should be helping to drive up the rate of participation in higher education.

And if it also matters *who* is participating, then it also matters who is taking these apprenticeships.

Young people from disadvantaged areas are still far less likely to enter higher education than other young people, especially young men. But it is dangerous to see degree apprenticeships as the solution to this.

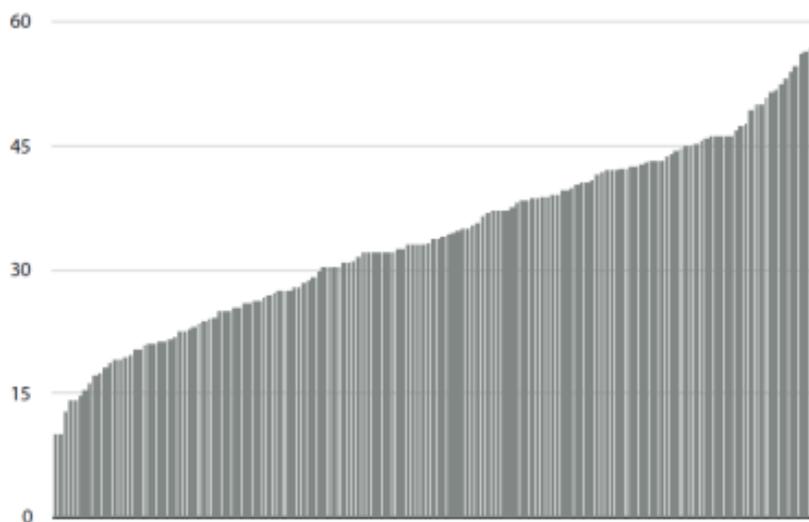
Instead, degree apprenticeships should be seen as a different way to enter HE. Their really radical potential is that this can challenge how students are traditionally selected for higher education.

Higher education in the UK is differentiated by status in a way that most schools and colleges are not because they are comprehensive, and there is a risk that degree apprenticeships will add to this differentiation in HE.

This is one of the key lessons of the polytechnics. They were set up as different but equal to the universities but they were never seen to be equal, even now as modern universities. The main reason for this was that they were not as selective academically.

Our current higher education system is one of different levels of academic selection filtering entrants into institutions of greater or lesser prestige.

*Figure 2: UK universities ranked by percentage of students in social classes 4-7*



The effect is this – the dramatic stratification of our universities by social class: in this case, the proportion of their students who are working class, ranging from just 10% to nearly 60%.

Degree apprenticeships have the potential to break this mould. Apprentices are still selected but employers and universities work together to base this on the employer's needs rather than just prior academic attainment.

And as employers come under increasing pressure to tackle lack of diversity in their workforces – and increasingly recognise the benefits of diversity to innovation and productivity – we can expect them to seek out diversity when recruiting apprentices, something which is far less easy if selection is dominated by conventional academic criteria.

Ministers need to recognise the incredible success of British degrees and their role in driving social mobility, not least through public sector careers. Degree apprenticeships are building on that success. Their measure of success should be not just their absolute numbers but whether they are driving up the overall participation rate in higher education.

While I could add a second criterion of success, and that's reducing the social class gap in HE participation, I'm concerned that this could further segment our already very class divided HE system.

Elsewhere I've written about the desirability of more mix by ability and social class in all our universities because this creates a richer learning environment.

Degree apprenticeships offer the opportunity of weaning all universities off their preoccupation with prior academic attainment. They should be a force for diversifying all universities.

It would be a tragedy that should degree apprenticeships really start expanding we simply see them replicate the social class differences we so unfortunately have across all our universities. If a degree apprentice at Oxford is seen as better than a degree apprentice at Middlesex we'll have failed.