



Bridge Group Seminar: Summary and Policy Recommendations

The role of degree apprenticeships for social justice in higher education

23 January, 2019

Chair:

- Professor Margaret House (Vice-Chancellor, Leeds Trinity University)

Expert panellists:

- Professor Steven McIntosh (University of Sheffield)
- Professor Tim Blackman (Vice-Chancellor, Middlesex University)
- Alex Mundy (Graduate Recruitment Manager, Dentons)
- Johnny Rich (Chief Executive, Push and Engineering Professors' Council)

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1. Background to the Bridge Group

The Bridge Group is an independent, not for profit, policy association. We drive policy changes across government, higher education, employers, and the third sector to achieve greater social equality. We achieve this through research and on-going dialogues with experts, policymakers, and practitioners. We take a practical approach, turning ideas into action.

We offer senior stakeholders expert guidance on policy, drawing on our knowledge and experience and the latest research. Launched in 2010 at Google UK, the Bridge Group has maintained relationships with key influencers across sectors and has established itself as an authoritative voice on social equality. We are based at King's College London, and in the last two years have accepted significant commissions from a range of organisations, such as: the University of Oxford, UPP Foundation, KPMG, the BBC, the Cabinet Office, the Wellcome Trust, and Hogan Lovells. Further details about the Charity are available online: <https://thebridgegroup.org.uk>

This seminar on degree apprenticeships is part of our wider programme of events developed to raise awareness of key challenges to social equality and to devise practical solutions to achieve reform. The BBC will be hosting our annual conference on 21 May, 2019.

2. Summary of speakers' presentations

Professor Margaret House: Overview of the degree apprenticeship context

- There has been a rapid interest in providers offering degree apprenticeships. There are now 110 higher education institutions registered to deliver degree apprenticeships across the sector.
- The qualification is valued by both higher education institutions and employers.
- The challenge is to create demand amongst students and their influencers, improving careers information and guidance.
- The collaboration between sectors can help to ease the transition for students into the workplace.
- But degree apprenticeships will make a limited contribution to social equality unless employers recognise social equality objectives as they are the ones responsible for recruiting students.

Professor Steven McIntosh: Analysis of degree apprenticeship population

- Since their introduction 3 years ago, there has been a rapid rise in the number of degree apprenticeships. From 722 in 2015-16 to 6424 in 2017-18.
- In 2017-18, half of all degree apprenticeships were in chartered manager or digital and technology solutions.
- Analysis of degree apprenticeships, 2016-2017, by [Office for Students](#). Around one third of degree apprenticeship entrants came from areas underrepresented in higher education, slightly higher than the proportion entering similar full-time higher education courses.
- The characteristics of students undertaking degree apprenticeships are not dissimilar from those undertaking traditional degree routes. However, they are different from those undertaking lower-level apprenticeships.
- It is important to increase information, advice and guidance for young people about degree apprenticeships to get them talking about them and to raise awareness of alternative routes to progression to higher education.

Professor Tim Blackman: Degree apprenticeships and diversity

- The expansion of higher education has widened the spread of the graduate premium; however, it has also created a divide between graduates and non-graduates, and wealthy families are still monopolising entry to the most prestigious institutions.
- Degree apprenticeships are not an alternative to higher education but another route through it, focusing on work-based learning. The degree brand is important for achieving parity of esteem between degree apprenticeships and traditional degrees.
- The Institute for Apprenticeships has not taken sufficient account of the expertise of higher education institutions around standards and funding. Additionally, there is concern about OFSTED quality assuring levels 4 and 5 and the Office for Students (OfS) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) assuring level 6. All of these should be under QAA.
- Degree apprenticeships have the potential to improve access by weakening the preoccupation with prior academic attainment and diversifying the student population. They also have the potential to breakdown occupational segregation by diversifying workforces. It is important that employers recognise this, take advantage of it, and adopt strengths-based recruitment strategies to identify talent.
- We need to address the social segregation across the sector, and degree apprenticeships may help break down class-based recruitment to *both* highly selective and less selective institutions. This includes more learners from affluent families attending institutions where they are under-represented as well as more learners from disadvantaged backgrounds attending institutions where they are under-represented.

Alex Mundy: Degree apprenticeship programme at Dentons

- Dentons was motivated to develop a degree apprenticeship programme to diversify their workforce.
- Their degree apprenticeship runs for 6 years and offers candidates a degree in legal practice, allowing them to qualify as a solicitor and exit at the same level as someone who has taken the graduate route.
- The programme is specifically targeted at state non-selective schools and for 2019 applications, 87% are state educated.
- The programme is highly competitive with over 300 applications for 4 places in 2019.
- It has been challenging to access schools and sixth form colleges to advertise the programme and school-leavers are less aware of alternative pathways to the profession.

Johnny Rich: Navigating the confusing and contradictory landscape of degree apprenticeships

- Degree apprenticeships offer a great deal of potential to produce 'supergrads', learners with both subject knowledge and practical work experience. They provide a way of plugging the skills gap without placing a burden on tax payers. But, in practice, their potential is not being harnessed because of the complexity of the operating frameworks associated with them which impact on all stakeholders.
- Degree apprenticeships are complicated, and teachers, parents, and students do not understand how to access them or how they work. Careers information advice and guidance needs to be of a

nationally consistent standard and accessible to all young people. Effective careers advice will play a role in ensuring parity of esteem between degree apprenticeships and traditional degree pathways.

- Degree apprenticeships are not widely provided by small and medium sized businesses that comprise the majority of employers as they are not required to pay the Apprenticeship Levy and so do not face any cost through not engaging.
- There are no obvious progression routes from lower level apprenticeships to degree apprenticeships.
- There is an urgent need for a brokerage service – not dissimilar to the way UCAS operates for traditional degrees – which would provide a central site with information about all available degree apprenticeships and their entry criteria.
- A large proportion of the apprenticeship levy is unspent (£1.28 billion) and this could be used by employers for increased outreach activity.
- There is a funding deficit for degree apprenticeships. Degree apprenticeships do not receive the same level of funding as traditional degrees and this could impact on quality as well as parity of esteem.

4. Recommendations for policy

The seminar was attended by experts and experienced practitioners from across sectors. The following recommendations are derived from speakers' presentations, responses to questions, and audience discussion.

- A. Funding. The Institute for Apprenticeships needs to recognise the expertise of higher education institutions in accrediting the degree quality of degree apprenticeships and fund them at a level that ensures a quality equivalent to standard degrees. The government also needs to allow flexibility in the use of Apprenticeship Levy funds to support careers education, advice, and guidance as a means to promote apprenticeships to those for whom they are a best option.
- B. Careers information, advice, and guidance. Clear and transparent information about the structure of degree apprenticeships and their value needs to be shared with all stakeholders. Improved careers information, advice and guidance is required in all schools and colleges to increase demand for the qualification and to ensure that school leavers from *all* social backgrounds are made aware of alternative routes through higher education and into employment. The government has a role to play in ensuring a national standard of delivery and a wide reach. Messaging needs to be precise and consistent to avoid degree apprenticeships being associated with a particular social class and therefore further contributing to the social segregation of higher education and the social divide between higher and technical education.
- C. Brokerage. We recommend that UCAS acts as a broker for degree apprenticeships and advertises all available opportunities on a portal that is accessible by all stakeholders, preferably alongside standard degrees. At present, the system is confusing with degree apprenticeships advertised in too many different places, making it challenging for school and college students to find information without having strong personal networks to guide and offer advice.
- D. Progression. The Institute for Apprenticeships needs to create a transparent framework or map of progression routes from lower to higher and professional apprenticeships to enable career development and to be comparable with graduate routes into employment. The current

apprenticeship routes are too linear, too disjointed and too focused on short-term occupational specifications rather than long-term career opportunities and progression.

- E. Social equality objectives. The government needs to establish a clear and transparent narrative around the role of degree apprenticeships as drivers of social equality for all stakeholders. Degree apprenticeships were initially devised as a way to meet skills needs, but they are increasingly being seen as a way to achieve greater social mobility. There are concerns that degree apprenticeships are being monopolised by middle class learners to avoid tuition fees and secure a graduate job, thereby increasing rather than reducing inequality. However, too much attention has been given to a narrow social mobility narrative rather than to desegregating higher education and occupations. These are currently both very stratified by social class. Without clear policy design and objective-setting, there is a risk that degree apprenticeships will reinforce existing inequality and segregation.
- F. Monitoring. To understand the role that degree apprenticeships have on social equality, we recommend that effective monitoring procedures are implemented by the Office for Students. These need to address metrics used to monitor participation by social background, place, and type of higher education institution alongside other student characteristics.
- G. Increasing availability of opportunities. Providers and employers need to offer a wider range of standards to meet the skills needed for the economy and to offer choice to potential learners. The barriers around funding, agreeing standards, and quality assuring need to be swiftly overcome to scale-up degree apprenticeships to meet employer demand, upskill sectors and occupations with low skill profiles, and diversify workforces. We recommend that the government takes urgent and strategic action to simplify the operating frameworks surrounding degree apprenticeships to speed up the process of introducing more opportunities.

5. Next steps

- The Bridge Group will share recommendations with the Rt Hon Anne Milton MP, Minister of State for Apprenticeships and Skills and the Higher Education Commission. Additionally, we will share recommendations with Universities UK who are embarking on research into the future delivery of degree apprenticeships.
- The Bridge Group will meet with the Office for Students to discuss the outcomes of the seminar and key recommendations.
- The recommendations will feed into the Bridge Group's wider policy and research activity, for instance: our work with higher education institutions and employers to promote socio-economic diversity; and our work to achieve geographical equality.
- The Bridge Group will continue to analyse available data on degree apprenticeships and advise on messaging and careers guidance for social equality.

6. Contact details

For any queries regarding the seminar or to share information please contact:

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