

Response to Economy Infrastructure and Skills Committee consultation on Degree Apprenticeships

About Universities Wales

Universities Wales represents the interests of universities in Wales. Our membership encompasses the vice-chancellors of all the universities in Wales and the Open University in Wales. Our mission is to support a university education system which transforms lives through the work Welsh universities do with the people and places of Wales and the wider world.

Summary

1. We believe that meeting the demand for future-skills in Wales is a significant challenge and that the skills system should provide a flexible and responsive environment which will enable providers, employers and individuals to access the skills they need in a way that suits them. Degree apprenticeships offer an important vehicle to provide more people of all ages and backgrounds to access higher level skills.
2. Degree apprenticeships are apprenticeship programmes which lead to an undergraduate, postgraduate or doctoral degree. They offer a mix of on-the-job training, paid employment and formal study. Typically, these programmes last 3-4 years and whilst engaged on it the apprentice is considered an employee.
3. Welsh Government initially committed to funding degree apprenticeships in two framework areas which cover advanced manufacturing, engineering and computing. In Wales, development of degree apprenticeships is limited to level 6 (Honours Degree).
4. Degree apprenticeships are an important tool in preparing Wales to mitigate the challenges of technological and workplace change while making the most of the opportunities that change offers. They promote life-long learning and allow for people to develop their skills whilst remaining with their employer. Degree apprenticeships provide an option for those who do not wish to commit to traditional full-time higher education routes.
5. Degree apprenticeships are also effective in building partnerships and collaborations across Wales. For example, the majority of existing degree apprenticeships in Wales are delivered in partnership between further and higher education providers.
6. The existing degree apprenticeships in advanced manufacturing, engineering and computing suggest that degree apprenticeships are also an effective tool in addressing gender imbalance in subject areas. The latest figures available indicate that more women are accessing digital degree apprenticeships in this field than through traditional recruitment (women account for 21% of the degree apprenticeship cohort and 13% of the traditional full-time undergraduate cohort in computing)

7. Universities Wales believes that Welsh Government expanding their degree apprenticeship priorities to cover a broader range of degree apprenticeship subject areas at levels 6 and 7 would allow universities to work with employers to further develop programmes that address skills needs in Wales. Currently there are 11 graduate apprenticeship frameworks available in Scotland and 98 degree apprenticeship standards in England.

In addition to supporting employers and addressing skills needs, offering a broader range of degree apprenticeships would enable progression for those who are studying apprenticeships in areas not covered by the current Welsh Government's priorities for degree apprenticeships. For example, 39% of apprenticeships at level 4 and above are in Management and Professional and 48% are in Healthcare and Public Services, currently these apprentices have no vocational pathway to a degree.

The Committee would welcome your views on any or all of the issues covered in the terms of reference, and in particular on the following questions:

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

8. Although the programmes have been very well received by employers and apprentices, due to the short timescales that universities have had to work to, designing bespoke programmes in that time is one of the challenges that has become apparent.

It would be useful for Welsh Government to provide clarity on a wide-ranging and long-term plan for degree apprenticeships, this would allow for strategic planning and development of resources. A longer lead-in time would be essential for industry so that they can coherently plan their apprenticeship recruitment programmes and would also enable a greater range of employers to participate.

- *Was the process and criteria used for approving proposals from providers to deliver degree apprenticeships satisfactory?*
9. Setting aside issues on timing, we welcome the process as administered through HEFCW which ensures the burden on providers and employers who wish to set up degree apprenticeships in Wales is not too onerous.

However, there is frustration at the current limit to the number of frameworks available in Wales which puts Welsh higher education at a disadvantage given the nature breadth of the offer available in England and Scotland.

In Scotland 6 frameworks were initially made available at level 6, this increased to 11 in 2018/19 leading to a 230% increase in take-up between 2017/18 and 2018/19. As of August 2019 they were able to report approximately 1200 students engaged with 350 employers.

In England, there are 66 standards available at level 6, 21 at level 7 and 1 at level 8 ranging from Advanced Clinical Practitioner to Transport Planner. Approximately 13,000 students are recorded as starting degree apprenticeships in 2018-19 alone. The full list of opportunities is available live [here](#) but as of January 2020 the list includes:

- Advanced clinical practitioner (degree)
- Archaeological specialist (degree)
- Architect (degree)
- Bioinformatics scientist (degree)
- Chartered Manager (degree)

- Chartered Surveyor (degree)
 - Clinical Trials Specialist (degree)
 - Design and constructions management (degree)
 - Diagnostic radiographer (integrated degree)
 - Ecologist (degree)
 - Environmental health practitioner (degree)
 - Food and Drink advanced engineer (degree)
 - Laboratory Scientist (degree)
 - Marine Technical Superintendent (degree)
 - Midwife (degree)
 - Outside broadcast engineer (degree)
 - Physiotherapist (degree)
 - Podiatrist (degree)
 - Process automation engineer (degree)
 - Rail and rail systems principal engineer (degree)
 - Registered nurse (degree)
 - Social worker (degree)
 - Sonographer (degree)
 - Therapeutic radiographer (degree)
 - Transport planner (degree)
- *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?*

10. Demand for degree apprenticeships in Wales clearly exceeds the subjects and levels offered, and it is felt that the sector could easily put out a call for numbers for areas that are not covered by the current frameworks. As things stand, Welsh institutions are at a disadvantage when trying to work with UK-wide companies as high-level skills can be provided in England and paid for with the apprenticeship levy. Welsh universities are at a competitive disadvantage and learner numbers are potentially being lost over the border with the obvious knock on effect for retaining Welsh talent and industrial presence within Wales.

There is also particular interest for degree apprenticeships that range through to level 7 (Masters level).

Conversations with employers have revealed interest in the following areas:

Compound semi-conductors (L7)

Construction

Digital (Flexible IT route)

Engineering (L7)

Financial Services

Food Technology

Health Care (including environmental and public health, social care health and health care support)

Journalism

Law and Accountancy (L6)

Leadership and Management

Media

Product Design

Quantity Surveying

Science (particularly industrial pharmaceuticals and life sciences)

We would strongly support the development of a system that enables universities, in partnership with employers, to develop frameworks that respond to individual and employer demand.

This would also provide for greater progression from apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5. Existing apprentices who wish to progress on to a degree apprenticeship are able to, and if they already hold a level 4 or 5 apprenticeship that can be recognised meaning that the apprentice is able to complete the degree apprenticeship in a shorter period of time.

However, outside of degree apprenticeships, 39% of apprenticeships at level 4 and above are in Management and Professional and 48% in Healthcare and Public Services. Due to Welsh Government priorities and funding, currently only Digital, Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing degree apprenticeships are available in Wales, limiting the pool of existing apprentices who are able to progress on to a degree apprenticeship. This means that there are no clear pathways for the majority of apprentices on level 4 apprenticeships and above, in particular those on apprenticeships in Management and Professional or Healthcare and Public Services, to progress onto a degree apprenticeship.

- *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?*
11. The sector welcomes the focus on widening access in recruitment activity and feels it could help to attract key high-level industry for skills in the region(s). Currently 36% of the employers accessing the framework are small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This is a reassuring start demonstrating a range of SMEs are already engaging with the programmes, although there is room for improvement here.
- Early indications are that degree apprenticeships can be an effective tool in addressing gender imbalance in subjects. We note that the latest figures available indicates that more women are accessing digital degree apprenticeships in this field than through traditional recruitment (women account for 21% of the degree apprenticeship cohort and 13% of the traditional full-time undergraduate cohort in computing). While this is still an imbalance it shows that this is becoming an attractive route for those who may not have pursued these subjects previously. Similarly, in Scotland, after two years of delivery there has been a growth in women doing graduate apprenticeships in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) frameworks, with participation ahead of the average across all higher education.
- *Do you have any comments on the cost of degree apprenticeships, how degree apprenticeships are funded and the level of funding committed to them?*
12. The current framework funding levels for degree apprenticeships adequately reflect the cost of delivery and, in value for money terms, compare favourably to the per credit cost of many apprenticeships that result in a level 4 or 5 in engineering. A level 6 degree apprenticeship takes learners in at level 4 and progresses them through levels 4, 5 and 6 which results in the award of a 360 credit degree. Alternatively, learners who already hold a level 4 or 5 can have

their prior learning recognised and complete the level 6 degree apprenticeship in a shorter period of time.

Administration of the funding through the Higher Education Funding Council has also meant that degree apprenticeships are subject to the same quality and regulatory arrangements as higher education provision more broadly and also mitigates the level of bureaucracy for employers seen in England.

The timing of funding has proved problematic in some cases. Funding being allocated late in the 19/20 cycle caused issues with the shortened lead time affecting institutions ability to recruit effectively which also has impacted plans to recruit from under-represented groups.

For degree apprenticeships, the key issues in relation to funding are certainty beyond the length of the pilot and the opportunity to utilise degree apprenticeship funding for a broader range of subject areas and for level 7 provision.

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

13. The introduction of degree apprenticeships has had a positive impact on the opportunities available to apprentices studying other levels. For example, students who have undertaken apprenticeships to levels 3, 4 and 5 are now able to progress onto full degree apprenticeships adding value in the computing and engineering fields. Expanding the range of degree apprentices available would enable a greater number of existing apprentices to benefit from this.

Universities Wales has recently submitted feedback to the Structure for Welsh Apprenticeship Frameworks Consultation run by Welsh Government. In our response we noted that there the sub-degree frameworks should retain enough flexibility so that students can take both a 'straight-line' progressing through levels of apprenticeship and the option to be flexible, accessing both apprenticeship frameworks and traditional education routes as appropriate to the learner.

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

14. It would be useful to the sector for there to be more of a drive from Welsh Government on degree apprenticeships, raising awareness and understanding of what they are would attract more employers and potential apprentices.

A long-term plan outlining which subject areas (and levels) will come online beyond 2021 and the funding allocations for these would allow for better planning, more useful engagement with industry and alignment with strategic governmental goals.