

Higher apprenticeships and the new apprenticeship standards

Perceived potential and limitations

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401

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Abstract

Purpose – The UK government is actively promoting higher apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships and this agenda has been gaining momentum amongst the various providers of apprenticeships. The purpose of this paper is to draw on an exploratory study on English further education (FE) colleges and highlight some of the key drivers of delivery, and possible challenges that can be faced by the providers in any expansion of this provision. Staff perceptions on the new apprenticeship standards are also presented in the paper.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on a qualitative exploratory study with ten FE colleges in England. As part of the study, 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with college staff and managers.

Findings – Higher apprenticeships have the potential to offer work-focussed alternatives to the conventional full-time degree models of higher education, however, the paper sheds light on a number of factors that can limit the uptake of higher and degree apprenticeships.

Practical implications – The paper presents some practical challenges in developing higher apprenticeships and outlines some successful instances of higher apprenticeships which will be useful for those involved in the design and delivery of apprenticeships at FE colleges as well as at other providers.

Originality/value – This paper draws on research with FE colleges and will be of particular significance to FE colleges and universities that may consider delivering higher apprenticeships. The paper presents insights into institutional experiences and decision-making associated with higher and degree apprenticeships and, in doing so, the paper offers valuable contributions to the body of knowledge in this under-researched area.

Keywords HE in FE, Degree apprenticeships, College higher education, Higher apprenticeships, Higher vocational education, Work-related learning

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The UK government is committed to expanding the number, range and quality of apprenticeships and promoting higher apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships as an alternative to the more conventional routes to higher education (HE) (BIS, 2015a). Further education (FE) colleges in England are amongst the key providers of apprenticeships although these are also delivered by alternative providers. This landscape is likely to witness a change with the introduction of the new degree apprenticeships and universities are being encouraged to actively respond to this agenda. Although the number of degree apprentices is low, it is anticipated that over 40 universities will become involved in the delivery of degree apprenticeships in 2016 (UUK, 2016). The English apprenticeship system is undergoing a reform and all new apprenticeships are being developed by the employer-led trailblazers. This reform is based on the recommendations made by the Richard Review of Apprenticeships



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(Richard, 2012) and on the premise that the standards designed by the employers will ensure that apprenticeships are relevant and therefore more attractive to the employers, and better able to meet the needs of the sector(s) and the economy.

This paper draws on a qualitative exploratory research funded and supported by the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) of colleges. Whilst every FE college (FEC) in England delivers apprenticeships, higher apprenticeships are only a small proportion of overall apprenticeship provision at FECs (AoC, 2015). This research investigated the college rationale for delivery of higher apprenticeships and gathered the perceptions of college staff and managers on the uptake of higher apprenticeships.

Context

Skills needs and apprenticeships

The UK suffers from a low skills base and there have been calls from the businesses to improve the work-ready skills of new entrants to the workforce (BCC, 2014). The results from an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) study show that England ranks third (out of 23 countries that participated in the Adult Skills Survey) for a high percentage of 16-24 year olds with low literacy and numeracy skills (Kuczera *et al.*, 2016). The UK holds a poor position on intermediate professional and technical skills, and is forecast to fall to 28th out of the 33 OECD countries for intermediate skills by 2020 (Bosworth, 2014). A report by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2014) highlighted that employers are concerned about skills shortages, reporting direct, and damaging impact of skills gaps and hard-to-fill vacancies caused by skills shortages including shortages of technical and associate professional staff and skilled trades.

The weaknesses in the skills base are known to have contributed to the UK's long-standing productivity gap with France, Germany, and the USA. In 2015, the current UK government published its plans for addressing the productivity problems in "Fixing the Foundations" and introduced a series of responses to help improve the productivity of the nation (HM Treasury, 2015). One of the approaches for driving productivity is through raising the level of skills available in the economy through education and training and particular emphasis has been placed in developing high quality training routes to help the learners in developing skills tailored to a particular sector or industry while they learn.

The government is committed to increasing the number of apprenticeships in England reaching three million starts in 2020 (BIS, 2015a). A new ten million pound fund to increase the number of degree apprenticeships available to young people has been launched (BIS, 2016). This is particularly important when work readiness of university graduates is being debated (UUK, 2015) and degree apprenticeships can offer a debt-free means of achieving degrees.

However, it must be noted that many employers, providers, and learners hold wrong beliefs around apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are associated with manual trades, low pay, and lesser academic ability and status of apprentices (Lee, 2012). More broadly, there has been a long-standing preference towards general and academic learning pathways and vocational education remains the less preferred form of study and continues to hold a low esteem (foreword by John Hayes in the Wolf Review 2011).

Apprenticeship reforms

Apprenticeships are currently undergoing a major reform in England[1] and it is anticipated that the number of apprenticeship starts will grow year on year.

A majority of apprenticeships in England are at intermediate (level 2) and advanced (level 3) levels. Higher apprenticeships did not exist before 2006/2007 and there has been a slow growth in the number of higher apprenticeship starts in England (House of Commons-Briefing Paper, 2015). In 2014/2015, there were 499,900 apprenticeship starts in England, of which, there were only 19,800 higher (level 4 and above) apprenticeships.

As part of these reforms, the existing apprenticeship frameworks will be replaced by the new employer-led apprenticeship standards that are being developed by groups of employers called trailblazers. An apprenticeship framework is a document which covers all the statutory requirements for an apprenticeship programme and includes the names of all qualifications and what each qualification is worth in terms of its credit value (AFO, 2016). The apprenticeship standards describe the knowledge, skills, and behaviour (KSBs) required to undertake a specific occupation well, and to operate confidently within a sector (BIS, 2015b). A significant shift to apprenticeship standards is expected to take place by 2017-2018.

As part of the new standards, degree apprenticeships are being introduced that will allow apprentices to attain a Bachelor's or Master's Degree as part of their apprenticeship (SFA, 2015). These were introduced in 2015 and they are still in their early stages of development. Few degree apprenticeships have been approved and others are in development.

As part of the apprenticeship reforms, the funding of apprenticeships will be changed. As part of the existing frameworks arrangements, apprenticeships are funded or part-funded by the government for learners less than 24 years of age whereas those 24 years or older may only get a contribution (SFA, 2015). The new apprenticeship standards will be funded by an apprenticeship levy in England that will be introduced in April 2017. The levy will apply to all employers in both the private as well as public sectors and it will be payable on annual pay bills of more than £3 million and less than 2 per cent of UK employers will pay the levy.

The government funding for the new standards will be based on contributions of total agreed price, up to a cap, with employers contributing the other third, all paid to the lead provider in a payment schedule agreed with the employer. All standards are allocated to one of the five funding caps – for the highest cap, government will contribute up to £18,000 based on an employer cash contribution of £9,000 (SFA, 2015).

In the light of the recent reforms and an increased focus and commitment of the government in promoting higher level and degree apprenticeships, this agenda is likely to gain momentum amongst the providers of apprenticeships. FECs in England are the key providers of sub-degree education in England and college HE (CHE) is characterised by its vocational nature and employer focussed qualifications (Parry *et al.*, 2012). HE students in FECs are more likely to be over 25 and more likely to study HE on a part time basis (HEFCE, 2006). However, a steep decline in part time CHE has been noted in the recent years and this has been of strategic concern for FECs whereas the number of full-time students at FECs has been increasing (Saraswat *et al.*, 2015).

Colleges are providers of both prescribed as well as non-prescribed HE. Prescribed HE[2] courses are the “courses of higher education” listed in Schedule 6 of the 1988 Education Reform Act and as amended by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and subsequent statutory instruments. Other higher-level courses (mainly professional awards) not covered by the statutory definition are described, in a default term, as “non-prescribed” higher education[3].

MEG represents 44 English FE colleges that deliver significant volume of HE and the number of students at each of these member colleges is at least 500 FTEs (full-time equivalent) and some have over 2,000 students. Higher apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships are a potentially significant aspect of HE delivered in FECs as well as universities and owing to it being a relatively new agenda, less is researched and known about this form of HE.

Methodology

This paper draws on a qualitative exploratory study that was conducted with ten FE colleges in England. The study aimed to identify the rationale for delivery and any expansion of higher apprenticeships; observe any patterns in the recruitment and uptake of higher apprenticeships; explore any factors that could limit the prospects of growth of higher apprenticeships; and shed light on the perceived impact of change from the apprenticeship frameworks to the new apprenticeship standards.

Of the ten colleges, six colleges were members of the MEG group. Initially, information was gathered on all the MEG colleges that delivered higher apprenticeships and subsequently additional colleges were sought, and over 25 additional non-MEG colleges were approached to identify the additional four colleges. The sample was selective and purposive, drawn on the basis of publicly available information on college websites and prospectuses. As noted previously, whilst most colleges deliver apprenticeships at levels 2 and 3, fewer colleges deliver higher apprenticeships. Rigorous searches were made and colleges that delivered broader range of apprenticeships in different subject areas were carefully selected. The participating colleges were geographically dispersed and included colleges from the Yorkshire, South East, South West, East of England, and the East Midlands regions.

At a majority of colleges, initial contacts were made through the directors of HE at colleges, and in many instances where the delivery of higher apprenticeships was not within their remit and devolved within curriculum areas, they forwarded the request to appropriate delivery managers. The lead contacts were provided the detailed objectives of the study in advance of the interviews and were encouraged to invite other colleagues who could enrich the discussion. Some lead interviewees had invited one or two other colleagues, for instance, from business development and employer facing teams, and tutors who taught on key apprenticeship programmes.

The interviewees occupied varied roles at their institutions. Some interviewees held lead academic roles where they played a key role in the delivery of a particular apprenticeship, others held cross-college managerial roles covering apprenticeship delivery at all levels. Business development and sales function at a majority of the participating colleges was separate from the operational management and delivery of apprenticeships. Also noteworthy was the position and structure of higher apprenticeship provision within the colleges as these were not necessarily viewed as part of CHE in the same way as prescribed HE.

The research was conducted during a “transitional” period as the colleges were gradually switching or preparing to switch the delivery of apprenticeships from the existing frameworks to the new apprenticeships standards. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person with a total of 19 managers and academics at these ten colleges. The number of interviewees at the participating colleges varied from 1 to 3 and in cases where more than one interviewee participated from a college,

interviewees took part in a group interview. The average duration of these in-depth interviews was 90-120 minutes and these were digitally recorded and transcribed. The participants and their colleges have been anonymised in the writings.

Higher apprenticeships at participating colleges

An overview of the range of higher apprenticeships and recruitment levels gathered through interviews and desk research is summarised in this section. The interview data highlighted that higher apprenticeships were relatively new programmes delivered by the participating colleges. Some colleges had only introduced a range of newer programmes in the academic year 2015/2016. Higher apprenticeships were largely delivered as part of the existing apprenticeships frameworks, with an exception of few programmes across all the participating colleges that were being delivered as part of the new standards arrangements since September 2015. Apprenticeships were delivered in different subject areas including accountancy, engineering, construction, health care, and business administration.

Higher apprenticeship in accountancy, that includes an Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) level 4 qualification as part of the technical component of the programme, was delivered at a majority of the participating colleges and it was one of the first higher-level apprenticeship to be introduced by the colleges. This apprenticeship was perceived to be straightforward to offer and colleges could adapt their pre-existing AAT level 4 programmes to meet the apprenticeship framework requirements.

Whilst the colleges were selected and the interviewees were approached on the basis that the colleges delivered a range of higher apprenticeships programmes, the provision proved to be small both in terms of numbers of programmes as well as student numbers. Some new programmes (CIMA Management Accounting, Business Administration, Human Resource Management, and Hospitality Management) were introduced at few of the participating colleges, however, these were not successful in attracting learners and employers. Although these programmes were still in their early stages and were advertised on the college websites, a number of programmes did not manage to recruit any apprentices. The possible reasons for the weak interest in these programmes and higher apprenticeships more broadly are highlighted in the later sections of this paper.

Drivers for higher apprenticeships

Interviewees were asked to identify the drivers for delivering apprenticeships and the key points are presented below. Colleges developed higher apprenticeships in different subject areas, depending on their strengths and pre-existing provision. A number of interviewees believed apprenticeships were a growth area for the college and there was an “untapped” potential for growth of higher apprenticeships.

Government agenda and income streams

The most important reason highlighted by the interviewees for delivering and considering to expand the provision of higher apprenticeships was in response to the government's agenda to boost the quality and quantity of apprenticeships. This was viewed to help expand the income streams because as part of the existing apprenticeship frameworks arrangements, the government offered part funding for 18-23 year old apprentices, and a majority of higher apprentices at the colleges were in this age group:

It's the government priority at the moment, they are pushing the agenda and apprenticeships are very much this is where you will invest your money and this is where we want to see a

majority of your learners in future. If we don't go down the apprenticeship route, then as a college we will be limiting the amount of funding that's coming in and we have to make sure we are economically viable in future (College 9, Interviewee A).

A majority of interviewees commented that there was high a level of employer demand for apprenticeships at levels 2 and 3 and this was perceived to be influenced by full funding for apprenticeships from the government for learners in the 16-18 age group. For higher apprenticeships, part funding from the government for 19+ learners was viewed to assist colleges in "selling" the higher apprenticeship programmes.

Unsurprisingly, colleges delivered higher apprenticeships that could draw on existing frameworks using qualifications that were already on colleges' offer. In many cases, colleges were using the in-fill models for classroom-based delivery whereby apprentices could be mixed with the existing full time and part time cohorts of students who were studying towards common qualifications. This was believed to offer economies of scale and lower the costs of delivery.

Progression routes and alternative to conventional HE

Most interviewees believed that another important driver for colleges to offer higher apprenticeships was to offer progression routes for apprentices at lower levels as well as provide part time learning opportunities for students, which could help recover the declining part time CHE. A number of interviewees perceived that, in line with the government's agenda, higher apprenticeships could genuinely offer an alternative route to studying HE for those who would prefer a less academic route and combine learning with work.

Higher apprenticeships were viewed to offer opportunities for students to study, particularly for prescribed HE, without taking the burden of student loans. From an employer's perspective, costs associated with learning were perceived to be an important aspect of their decision making and in instances where the higher apprenticeship included a qualification such as a HND or a foundation degree, it was a more cost-effective approach for staff training and development. Independent of a higher apprenticeship, prescribed HE qualifications could cost an employer up to £9,000 per year (which is the maximum fee that can be charged by the providers for prescribed HE), whereas these qualifications could be part-funded as part of apprenticeships.

Rounded learning and employability

The learning experiences and employment outcomes of higher apprentices were broadly contrasted by the interviewees with those of recent graduates. A majority of interviewees highlighted that apprenticeships enabled the learners to integrate learning that took place on-the-job and off-the-job and it was a "two way journey" for the apprentices, and offered a more "rounded" HE experience for students. Combining work (relevant work experience) and studies was perceived to make students more "employment-ready" and employable after the completion of apprenticeships, especially in contrast with recent graduates who often have little or no relevant work experience:

I have said this to people in schools [...] if you are going to a university, coming out with a £40,000 loan, find out how many people have graduated last year and got jobs in that line of work and very few people do it and very few universities would tell you for obvious reasons.

The fact that two-thirds of them will never get that line of work is just farcical whereas with apprenticeship, you are employed from day one (College 3, Interviewee B).

Some interviewees reflected on their experiences of recruitment of apprentices where employers valued apprentices over graduates because graduates were perceived to lack the “right attitude” and required longer to blend into the company ethos and values whereas apprentices had work experience and familiarity with the workplace. Most interviewees commented that most graduates are also employed whilst they study HE, however, they are mainly employed in small roles, often in retail, that did not relate to their chosen careers.

It is notable that some interviewees highlighted that a large number of graduates were applying to study for higher- and lower-level apprenticeships at their colleges. Employers in most cases were noted to be not keen to employ graduates because of the age bands which restricted the funding, and they preferred a younger person who they could train and develop.

Employer and local regional needs

Higher apprenticeships were highlighted to be helpful in meeting the higher-level skills needs of the employers and the local regions. Most colleges had identified areas for developing higher apprenticeship provision in areas that were identified by their local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) or in response to the needs of specific employers that worked with the colleges. A number of interviewees shared that a large proportion of higher apprenticeships were recruited by companies who had previously employed an apprentice through their college at lower levels.

Some programmes had proven to be very successful in addressing the skills needs in specific occupational sectors. For instance, higher apprenticeships in health and social care at two colleges were developed in response to the identified skills needs for “Band 4” workers in healthcare. These were roles at intermediate levels “higher than a care worker but below professionals and registered nurses”. Likewise, at another college, higher apprenticeships in construction were developed to meet the skills gaps for middle-level managers qualified at levels 4 and 5 and there were no qualifications available to train people at that level. In such instances, the colleges had successfully recruited large cohorts of students and worked closely with their local employers. Therefore, higher apprenticeships were helping to fill skills gaps at intermediate levels in such instances.

Some interviewees asserted that the employers considered higher apprenticeships as a means to succession planning and securing a more stable workforce. These interviewees believed that employers prefer to recruit young apprentices as it is easier to “mould” them in the company culture and apprentices often stayed with their employers for longer than those who were recruited otherwise.

Challenges in delivering and expanding higher apprenticeships

Some interviewees expressed considerable disappointment on the poor recruitment on specific higher apprenticeship programmes at their colleges. One interviewee explained that despite aligning the provision (business administration, management and hospitality) with LEP priorities and drawing on inputs from the employer engagement team, the college was not successful in recruiting any apprentices on these programmes.

A majority of interviewees strongly believed that there is a potential for growth of higher apprenticeships and a wider recognition of the benefits that this form of learning

presents for the learners and the employers, however, this would demand a shift in the attitudes of employers as well as wider society which is challenging to be achieved in the immediate future.

Status and branding

A number of interviewees strongly asserted that higher apprenticeships suffer from the perception of a “low status” pathway for those who are not able to follow the more “academic” routes of HE. The general demand for apprenticeships was also noted to suffer from the broad perceptions of poor quality and standards at some providers in England:

There is a stigma behind anyone who does a higher apprenticeship as opposed to someone who has gone to a university. Apprenticeship is seen as a lesser option for someone who has not done very well at school, that’s an issue. I think that’s an issue for us “you have not done very well at school, go do an apprenticeship, go to XX College” (College 9, Interviewee B).

The uptake of apprenticeships was also noted to be limited by a lack of impartial careers advice and guidance at schools. Some interviewees argued that during their visits to local schools, they noted that the school teachers often associated apprentices with roles such as mechanics, electricians and hairdressers, and not professions such as accountancy or engineering. Apprenticeships were noted to be the route “not recommended” by the school teachers and parents because it was often not the pathway that they themselves followed. An interviewee asserted that apprenticeships were classed as “a suitable option for someone else’s child”. The broad perception of apprenticeships was that they related to manual and low-level roles which posed significant barriers for providers in “breaking the mould”. This “low status-low pay” perception posed considerable challenges for providers in promoting apprenticeships.

A number of interviewees also critiqued the use of the terms “higher apprenticeship” and argued that employers could not readily understand the concept of higher apprenticeships and were challenged in differentiating between the levels. The usage of the terms “intermediate” and “advanced” apprenticeships was perceived to be confusing and “degree apprenticeships” were anticipated to exacerbate this issue. Interviewees reflected that apprenticeships are typically associated with learning at levels 2 and 3 and lower-level roles within organisations.

Furthermore, some interviewees commented that being an apprentice was largely associated with younger people and lower pay, and mature learners were perceived to be “less comfortable” being referred to as apprentices.

Employer attitudes, expectations, and needs

Similar to the influence of school teachers and parents of young people, a number of interviewees believed that employer attitudes towards apprenticeships were guided by the training and education routes pursued by the employers and those responsible for staff training and development.

Some interviewees were critical about the employer attitudes towards higher apprenticeships. Interviewees critiqued that some employers view higher apprenticeships as a means to securing “cheap labour”. A number of interviewees who held employer facing roles shared that the employers can have “unrealistic expectations” from the apprentices. In some cases, the roles and job vacancies for higher apprenticeships advertised by the employers were similar to graduate-level

roles and the employers were attempting to fill those vacancies by recruiting apprentices. Some colleges were not successful in filling the apprenticeship vacancies because the “salaries did not match the job description” and no applicants had applied for the apprenticeships. Furthermore, in other instances, employers were deemed to be unable to offer the appropriate level of responsibility to young apprentices that is required for successful completion of an apprenticeship:

Employers can't offer them the range of work. I personally believe we are not in a position where all employers truly recognise financially the value of apprentices. They will pay the apprenticeship minimum wage and if you are trying to get somebody on a higher apprenticeship programme, you are really not going to get anybody of any quality at £3.30 an hour (College 2, Interviewee A).

There was a general consensus amongst the interviewees that the employers were reluctant to contribute to the costs of learning for higher apprentices and preferred to recruit lower-level apprentices that were eligible for full funding from the government (as part of the existing frameworks arrangements). However, the perceived employer reluctance in investing in training is expected to change with the introduction of employer levy, and is revisited in a later section.

It was also recognised by some interviewees that employers, especially a number of micro businesses and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) may not necessarily need apprentices at higher levels. On the other hand, large employers were noted to be either not aware of alternative routes or simply relied on university graduates to fulfil their higher-level roles.

Internal structures and employer engagement

A majority of interviewees strongly asserted that employer engagement was an integral part of their college strategies and believed that FECs were more responsive to employer needs than their university counterparts. However, employer engagement can still prove to be demanding and the internal organisation and structural arrangements at colleges can pose challenges to the development of higher apprenticeships. One of the participating colleges had experienced a steep decline in its higher apprenticeship provision and in a short span of three to four years, the formerly strong provision at the college had nearly diminished. This was largely attributed to a change in senior leadership and restructuring at the college:

Directors of Learning go up to level 3, they were saying no it's not our responsibility to look after the higher apprenticeships and under person XX no one in the HE centre was looking after the higher apprenticeships, so it just went into a hole (College 5, Interviewee A).

Some interviewees also expressed that, until recently, higher apprenticeships were not of strategic significance to their college and these were gaining rapid attention of the college leaders. These interviewees believed that their institutions were not adequately prepared for pushing the apprenticeship agendas aggressively.

A majority of the ten participating colleges were attempting to be “driven by the market” and offer courses based on the industry demand, although this was not exclusively the case. An interviewee recognised the need for his college to be demanded, however, he expressed concerns that there was no “buy-in” from the college staff to accomplish such goals. The college had not maintained a central database of employers and employer engagement was very “localised” at the college within some curriculum areas and the college did not have a centralised employer engagement unit.

Colleges can also be challenged with a lack of interest and engagement from academic staff who may not view apprenticeships as part of their job roles. Some interviewees argued that the academic staff at their colleges preferred the classroom teaching models, and did not engage in alternative, flexible models of teaching that were often required for the delivery of higher apprenticeships. There is also some evidence of prevalence of departmental cultures where staff from different schools did not wish to share expertise and resources with other teams, which inhibited development of cross-disciplinary provision. It may be noted that such barriers are not specific to FECs and can be even more pronounced in universities.

Some colleges did not have staff who occupied business development roles and in cases where they did, the remit of such staff was very broad covering both FE and HE and spanned a range of curriculum areas. Developing deep links with employers demands high levels of investment in employer-related activities, a strategic commitment and an institutional ethos of employer engagement.

Other challenges of employer engagement also surfaced during the discussions, which included a critique on inadequacies of employers' understanding of their own training and developmental needs and the challenges for colleges in being employer responsive owing to the speed of response expected by the employers and that feasible for the providers to provide.

Resources and costing

One of the challenges of delivering apprenticeships at higher as well as lower levels was identified to be in securing qualified and experienced teachers. The salaries at FE colleges were not sufficiently competitive to attract practitioners to teach on the programmes. Some interviewees cited that there were particular challenges in recruiting teachers to teach on apprenticeships in subjects including plumbing, accountancy and engineering particularly because the salary standards in these occupations were very high:

What's hampering the development of higher apprenticeships, it is staff and rates of pay FE pay for their staff, it's quite difficult to attract staff to deliver and teach on Engineering and other apprenticeships (College 10, Interviewee B).

Colleges were viewing higher apprenticeships as a potentially strong income stream, however, it was argued that caution needed to be exercised by colleges, universities, and other providers while costing the programmes. Although a number of colleges were noted to be likely to "react" to the government's agenda, a careful evaluation of all the costs of the delivery was rated to be essential, in particular for apprenticeships that include Foundation or Honours Degrees validated by the universities to cover the costs of any validation fee as well as the costs of delivery, combined with additional administrative and support costs for recruitment of apprentices, supporting the apprentices throughout their journey, as well as the costs of work-based assessment. An interviewee cited an example of a college that had costed a higher apprenticeship incorrectly and experienced significant losses in the delivery of the programme.

A high level of competition with private training providers that offer comparable higher apprenticeship programmes at competitive or significantly lower fee intensified the pressures for maintaining low costs of delivery of apprenticeships. Private providers competed more strongly in classroom-based provision, which they could offer at lower costs in contrast with the FECs, whereas colleges often had a competitive edge on provision that involved technical equipment and other resources that required large sums of investment.

From frameworks to standards

Inevitably, during this period of transition from the existing apprenticeship frameworks to the new standards, comparisons between the two models were drawn by most interviewees. Some of the key points of comparisons and possible implications of the new standards that emerged from the interviews are presented below. The level of understanding of the new standards varied considerably amongst the interviewees where some were more informed about the changes and their possible implications, whereas others were less knowledgeable on the subject.

At the time when the fieldwork was conducted, further developments were being made and newer standards were being developed. Guidance was awaited on a number of operational aspects of the employer levy and funding of apprenticeships. Further guidance has been provided by the government on apprenticeships since December 2015 and these are not reflected in the interview data.

Dealing with change

A number of interviewees shared their concerns relating to the introduction of new standards and it appeared that the colleges were “waiting for the dust to settle” and “wanted other providers to adopt the standards first”. Most interviewees expressed that their colleges had made a considerable investment of time and resource to understand the complex frameworks and had commenced the delivery only in the last two years. There was therefore an element of a natural “resistance to change”, and owing to the developmental stages of the new standards, colleges were making cautious choices before making any changes to their existing delivery models.

Involvement of education providers

Whilst a majority of interviewees highlighted the challenges associated with the new standards, some interviewees expressed an optimism in employers taking the lead in the development of new standards and believed that the development of new apprenticeship standards through the employer-led trailblazers was a step in the right direction. However, all interviewees believed that a lack of involvement of educational providers and awarding bodies in the trailblazers was “a step too far”:

Apprenticeship standards are being designed with and by employers, I think we are yet to see whether it's a good thing or not. In theory it's good but clearly employers don't necessarily understand how you deliver education (College 7, Interviewee A).

The new standards were perceived to be overly focussed on the employer needs rather than the apprentices. It was argued that apprenticeships may prove to be an ideal fit for the employers' short-term needs, however, may fail to meet the long-term needs in preparing the apprentices for work and their progression routes upon completion of the apprenticeships.

Qualifications

Concerns were also raised that the standards did not have a mandatory requirement to include any qualifications and whilst this was perceived to be in the interest of the employers, it was believed to limit the opportunities for those pursuing the apprenticeships. An absence of any qualification associated with some higher apprenticeships was perceived to hinder transferability of credits and awards. A number of interviewees believed that academic standards and quality was maintained under the frameworks through the use of qualifications which provided a

level of comparability of knowledge and skills. Therefore, standards that did not specify any mandatory qualifications were criticised for potentially lowering the academic quality and rigour:

[...] that's great for the employer because they are going to get a higher apprentice who is really into what that employer does, but what about that apprentice who wants career progression and they haven't got that breadth, they only know that narrow field that they are working on (College 4, Interviewee A).

End-point assessment (EPA) and grading

Related to the qualifications were perceptions regarding the EPAs and grading of apprenticeships. As part of the new standards, the government has introduced a requirement that all apprenticeships must contain an EPA which is a holistic assessment of the KSBs that have been learnt throughout the apprenticeship and grading is being introduced to help recognise full competence and any exemplary achievement. Most interviewees were critical about using EPAs as an adequate measure of achievement and the timing of this assessment at the very end of the apprenticeship.

Some interviewees believed that grading of apprenticeships was a welcome change and will help distinguish those who invest considerably in their learning. However, one interviewee shared his insights from a trailblazer for an apprenticeship in construction where employers involved in the trailblazer could not agree on the components of the standards largely because all employers had different expectations from the knowledge and skills required for the occupation, and it was complicated to grade the apprenticeship as a whole:

I think there was an issue with the assessment strategy from the trailblazer point of view that it could not be graded. There are a lot of small qualifications which they [apprentices] pass or fail. There were all sorts of things that the employers wanted to put in the trailblazer but there was no way of grading the whole package (College 1, Interviewee A).

Over-complex to over-simplified

A number of interviewees referred to the apprenticeship standards as “glorified job descriptions” and argued that the total number of apprenticeship standards was increasing and there were more apprenticeship standards that were already agreed or were in development than the total number of existing apprenticeship frameworks. Interviewees largely agreed that whilst the existing frameworks were “overly detailed, prescriptive and complex” documents, the new standards that were two pages long documents were “overly simplified” and could be subject to varied interpretations by the providers and employers:

You have 2 sided A4 and it was sold as it will be simple, much more streamlined, it would just tell what a successful person would look like and then you will have an assessment schedule on top of that. The problem is we now have so many standards that have either been released or in development that they are now more than ever frameworks wise. At least in the framework, you had a qualification, a number of things will be subject to interpretation with the new standards (College 2, Interviewee A).

SMEs

A lack of SME representation in the development of standards was considered to be a major shortcoming of the new standards. Interviewees perceived that the government had responded to the needs of few large and influential employers and that the

“driving seat” was confined to a few large employers and the needs of SMEs were not being adequately considered. One interviewee highlighted that whilst he was closely involved in the development of a former framework and the programme was extremely valued by the local employers who informed the design of the framework, the standard (that was in development at the time) did not meet the needs of these employers which included large companies as well as SMEs. Therefore, there was a risk that the new standards will be overly focussed on the specific needs of employers who were part of the trailblazers:

The thing with trailblazers, they are led very much by the large employers. So, it is a model that may fit a large employer where they are going to have their own Learning and Development team, they have got staff to deliver it and therefore, it suits them. It's not necessarily a model that will suit SMEs. In XX region, 90 percent of employers we work with are SMEs (College 7, Interviewee B).

Employer levy and administration

There was a general consensus amongst all interviewees that the employers will view levy as a “burden and a mandatory tax”. A number of interviewees asserted that a funding system where the employers will pay some fees upfront and claim a proportion of their money back will prove to be complicated. As part of the frameworks, providers administered the funding as the employers were quoted to be not interested in the administration of funds and the bureaucracy that accompanied it, they only wanted a simplified delivery of the programmes:

Employers will be reluctant to engage based on the turnaround to get their money back. I have companies telling me they are recruiting an apprentice, not a Director, they are not interested and don't wish to be bothered with a whole load of government interaction, it's not their view from the hilltop (College 10, Interviewee B).

Despite the potential complexities of administering the levy, a small number of interviewees anticipated that the levy will favourably impact upon and potentially change the employer attitudes towards apprenticeships. One interviewee illustrated the benefits of levy through the example of the Construction Industry Training Board, which collects levy funds from construction employers and reinvests the funding for employers to train, qualify, and up-skill staff. It was asserted that the levy-paying employers will expect some returns on their investment and will therefore be more likely to engage in higher apprenticeships.

Degree apprenticeships and relationships with universities

Colleges do not have Degree Awarding Powers in England and some interviewees viewed the degree apprenticeships as the government's approach to re-invigorating the university part time HE. Most participating colleges had successful and stable partnerships with their validating universities. One interviewee strongly argued that offering degree apprenticeships will enable the universities to “sell their existing degrees” to employers at a lower cost with the government sharing two-thirds of the learning costs. Whilst FECs can offer higher-level apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5 that do not involve Foundation Degrees or university validated HNs, independent of the universities, the interviewees acknowledged that degree apprenticeships would require working with their university partner(s), and there was a possibility that universities could offer degree apprenticeships without collaborating with FECs. Therefore, it was anticipated that the introduction of new standards will be accompanied with a change

in relationships between universities and colleges and possibly lead to increased levels of competition between universities and FECs.

On the other hand, some interviewees believed that universities do not have the necessary experience of administering, and expertise of delivering apprenticeships and would benefit from working with FECs. For instance, most universities do not have contracts with the Skills Funding Agency and do not make data returns on the Individualised Learner Record. It was asserted that the delivery of apprenticeships will be a “new territory” for universities and it may be challenging for universities to work independently of FECs. Therefore, working in partnership was rated to be mutually beneficial for FECs as well as universities.

Competition and costs

The new standards were noted to provide a greater degree of choice and control to the employers who will be free to choose their training provider from those on the register of training organisations and they will be able to negotiate on the price for delivery and assessment. Employers will also be able to select assessment centres for the EPAs. This was noted to intensify competition amongst the providers and lower the costs of delivery. One interviewee illustrated the challenges of meeting the employer demands for a degree apprenticeship which was a five-year programme and despite being placed in the highest funding band, the college was challenged in keeping the programme financially viable:

That's £27,000 in all but that has to pay for Level 2 qualification, Level 4 qualification, and that's tight for all of that and it's a five year programme. You would have some money go to the university for their degree and you have to keep so much money for the end point assessment. And the degree has attracted the highest amount you can get from the government and it is still tight moneywise (College 2, Interviewee A).

Conclusions

Higher apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships have the potential to offer work-focussed and debt-free alternatives to the more conventional forms of HE in England. However, growth of higher and degree apprenticeships may be confronted with a number of challenges including the perceptions of apprenticeships to be of lower status when contrasted with academic routes, and the lower pay and manual occupations that these may lead to. Providers will be particularly tasked with overcoming the challenges relating to raising an awareness of higher and degree apprenticeships amongst employers, learners and their parents. The uptake of higher apprenticeships is also likely to be limited by the “unrealistic expectations” that some employers may have from apprentices.

Successful models of delivery will draw on strong and sustained links of providers with employers and a strategic commitment to employer engagement. Centralised employer engagement units, and cross-college ethos of working with employers will enable institutions to match their internal expertise with the employer needs. Instances where higher apprenticeships can be particularly successful will be where these are delivered in response to higher-level skills needs and draw on detailed market research. Working in partnership will be mutually beneficial for colleges as well as universities, however, it is likely that future will witness higher levels of competition amongst them. Lastly, successful uptake of higher and degree apprenticeships will require building the status and prestige of apprenticeships.

The adoption of standards is likely to be slowed down during the transition phase as providers continue to draw on apprenticeship frameworks. Although the apprenticeship standards are still in developmental stages, there is a level of scepticism amongst the providers on whether placing the employers in the driving seat has been a step too far. It is early to predict whether the levy will influence employers' attitudes and encourage them to engage with apprenticeships or will it simply be viewed as a payroll tax imposed by the government on large employers and will fail to influence attitudes and behaviours. There are still several unknowns surrounding the employer levy and funding, administration, delivery and assessment of higher and degree apprenticeships, and further research is required to investigate the employer and learner perceptions on the new model of higher apprenticeships. It will also be valuable to re-visit the sample colleges in 2017 to investigate their experiences of delivering apprenticeships as part of the new standards.

Notes

1. Owing to the transitional phase, this paper covers the frameworks as well as the new standards.
2. These include qualifications, such as, Cert Ed, Dip HE, HNC, HND, Foundation degree, First degree and others.
3. This includes National Vocational Qualifications at level 4 and above.

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