Higher and Degree Apprenticeships: a perspective from UK professions

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Abstract

Since their introduction from 2008 onwards, Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (H/DAs) have increasingly been used as, or to contribute to, professional entry and progression routes. The literature to date has reported increasing acceptance of H/DAs among professional bodies, along with a number of problems including mismatches with professional qualifying requirements, issues of delivery and assessment, and in some fields a tendency to replicate existing barriers to entry.

This study uses an interpretive approach based on loosely-structured interviews and group discussions with professional bodies and providers. The findings show a high level of involvement, support and enthusiasm from professional bodies, with many making significant efforts to integrate H/DAs into their qualifying routes. There is evidence that apprenticeships can be more effective and faster at bringing people to qualified level than full-time higher education followed by professional training. Their ability to widen access to professional careers is variable in relation to school-leavers, but unequivocal for people already in the workforce. There are still areas where the design, delivery and national management of apprenticeships are in need of improvement, particularly around the integration of workplace and academic learning, the streamlining and authenticity of assessment, the appropriateness of quality assurance regimes, and the consistency and groundedness of national policy. Recent changes to funding priorities are also creating challenges for some professions, and creative solutions need to be developed including ones that do not rely on government-controlled funding. Nevertheless, professions are likely to benefit from engaging with apprenticeships provided that they can be designed appropriately in relation to professional qualifying processes.

Research paper. Work-based learning; work-integrated learning; learning-integrated work; apprenticeships; professions; professional qualifications.

Introduction

The British apprenticeship revival of the 1990s was initially limited to (England and Wales) level 3, the level below higher education. In 2008 Higher Apprenticeships (HAs) were introduced at levels 4 and 5, and extended to levels 6 and 7 in 2013 (see Bravenboer and Lester, 2016, for a discussion of the development and extension of HAs and their positioning in relation to professions and higher education). Reflecting the fact that some of these latter were beginning to incorporate university qualifications, official Degree Apprenticeships (DAs), leading to bachelors' or masters' degrees, were launched in 2015 (BIS, 2015; and see Bravenboer, 2016, and Lester, 2020). This brought

apprenticeships into the territory of occupations that have traditionally been associated with graduate entry, potentially enabling them to meet the education and training requirements of legally registered, chartered and other self-regulating professions.

In principle, H/DAs can be regarded as being a creatively disruptive force in many professions (cf. Bravenboer, 2019), offering a new form of entry-route that integrates academic and practical learning rather than providing them via a full-time degree followed by professional training, or running them as parallel but separate strands (Bravenboer and Lester, 2016). While integrated approaches are well-established in some professions, particularly in the health sector and in teaching, they have tended to take the form of a nominally full-time course with practice placements, as a form of 'tightly-coupled' work-integrated learning (WIL, see Ajjawi *et al*, 2020). The apprenticeship approach reverses this so that the learner is primarily located in the workplace, with academic learning integrated through a variety of means that can include regular or periodic attendance on campus, digitally-mediated learning in all its forms, learning projects of various kinds and the presence of workplace mentors and tutors or practitioner-academics (Lester and Crawford-Lee, 2023). Although this approach is often referred to as a form of WIL, it has more recently been reframed as learning-integrated work (LIW, after Garnett, 2020 and Lester, 2025), where employment is based around a defined programme of learning that integrates the practical and the theoretical and normally leads to some form of qualification or formal recognition.

In practice the acceptance, diffusion and effectiveness of apprenticeships in the professional arena has been variable, driven by factors that include the willingness of different professions to embrace new types of pathway (Williams and Hanson, 2011; Lester and Bravenboer, 2020); the types of route already present in the profession (Williams and Hanson, 2011; Hordern, 2015); the capacity of the organisations charged with managing apprenticeships to understand and engage effectively with professions (PARN, 2017; Bishop and Hordern, 2017); the effectiveness of universities and other providers at taking on and running integrated development programmes (Lester and Bravenboer, 2020; Lester, 2024a); and not least, the willingness of employers to engage with the apprenticeship system and take on or support people with a diverse range of backgrounds and entry qualifications (Lester and Bravenboer, 2020; Laczik *et al*, 2025). In order to assess the current position in respect of apprenticeships as professional entry- and progression routes, the author, on behalf of the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC), undertook a qualitative study involving a small selection of professions represented by the relevant professional bodies and corresponding provider interests. The findings of this study are reported here.

Professions and H/DAs

The potential for apprenticeships to lead to professional careers increased significantly in the UK with the introduction of HAs in 2008. Initially the response of professional bodies tended to be cautious apart from where there were already well-used work-based routes to fully-qualified level, such as in engineering and to some extent the financial professions. A study by the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN; Williams and Hanson, 2011) indicated a good level of support (70% of their sample of professional bodies) for HAs, but also limited knowledge about them and low levels of progression from apprenticeships to professionally qualified level. One concern they identified was that many professions set their fully-qualified point at level 6 or 7, and means were needed to allow Higher Apprentices to continue their journey to qualifying. Subsequent changes, both to extend HAs

to levels 6 and 7, and to make it easier for higher education institutions to incorporate academic qualifications into apprenticeship frameworks, overcame these concerns at least in principle (Bravenboer and Lester, 2016).

A second study by PARN after these changes (PARN, 2015) showed growing involvement in apprenticeships among professional bodies, with half of their sample of 64 organisations now supporting apprenticeships as a route to qualifying. The greatest involvement was reported in the business sector and in and science, technology and engineering, and the least in the health sector where WIL degrees formed the standard entry-route for many professions; of these latter, nursing was beginning to explore apprenticeships as a means of providing employment-based routes from healthcare assistant posts to registered nurse (Glasper, 2014; Willis, 2015). Barriers to involvement included difficulties in engaging with the then new, employer-led Trailblazer (apprenticeship development) groups; mismatches between apprenticeship content and professional qualifying requirements; perceptions that apprenticeships were inferior to full-time university study; and administrative costs relating to supporting apprenticeships.

The Richard review of apprenticeships (Richard, 2012) had recommended several changes to the apprenticeship system, including a move from apprenticeship 'frameworks', in which the apprenticeship is effectively specified via the qualification(s) to be included, to employer-specified 'standards', with the apprenticeship being set out as a set of 'duties' or functions accompanied by associated knowledge, skills and behaviours. In this model the apprenticeship itself would be assessed through a summative or 'end-point' assessment (EPA), with an assumption against including qualifications unless they were vital for employment or professional recognition. Richard also recommended that apprenticeships should lead to trade or professional certification where this was required or customary in the relevant occupation. The implementation of these recommendations took place over several years; funding reforms, based on a payroll levy on larger employers, were for instance not introduced until 2017. Alongside these changes Degree Apprenticeships were introduced in 2015 (BIS, 2015), providing an official framework for incorporating a bachelor's or master's degree into level 6 and 7 apprenticeships, subject to this being a requirement of professional registration or a customary criterion for employment.

A subsequent PARN survey (PARN, 2017) showed increasing involvement of professional bodies in developing apprenticeships (81% of the 32 organisations that responded). It also however indicated difficulties in engaging smaller employers and reluctance from some universities to become involved, with particular concerns around EPAs. There were also frustrations with dealing with the government bodies involved in apprenticeship development and oversight, with slow or unclear responses, rigid procedures particularly associated with EPAs and quality assurance, and frequent changes of policy. Nevertheless the majority view was that apprenticeships would have a positive impact on the profession, with a few concerns about potentially undermining existing entry routes.

The effect of H/DAs on professions that have become involved in them has been reported as modifying entry- and progression routes, increasing the diversity of entrants, and for some occupations starting or accelerating processes of professionalisation. Hordern (2015) identified three principal effects on professional career structures, one of extending them 'horizontally' by offering alternative pathways, one of 'downwards' extension to bring technician and associate roles within the scope of the profession, and one of 'upwards' extension where higher-level roles become formalised in an

occupation where the main qualifications are below level 4. A study by Lester and Bravenboer (2020) indicated a strong structural effect in nursing, with apprenticeships supporting pathways from level 2 assistants through to level 7 advanced practitioners, as well as a less formal progression route in engineering that can take entrants through technician to Incorporated Engineer standard, and (outside of the apprenticeship system) on to Chartered Engineer. The extent to which entry to professions has widened as a result of introducing H/DAs is more equivocal. On the one hand there is evidence that some fields recruit mainly from well-qualified school leavers (Policy Connect/HEC, 2019), with at least up to 2019 a less diverse population on DAs than in higher education as a whole (Lester and Bravenboer, 2020) and barriers hindering the participation of disadvantaged young people (Mackay, 2022). On the other hand successes have been reported in specific fields, such as improving the gender balance in engineering and digital industries (UVAC/SDN, 2017), as well as more generally in increasing the proportion of learners progressing from further education or lower-level apprenticeships and from unqualified or less qualified roles in the existing workforce (Engeli and Turner, 2019; Lester and Bravenboer, 2020; Lillis and Bravenboer, 2022). Nawaz *et al* (2023) conclude in a meta-analysis that DAs are on balance a positive force for social mobility, but also that the evidence is limited and differs by field. Finally, the contribution of H/DAs to the professionalisation of occupations has been noted in fields as diverse as sales (Sutton, 2022), policing (Leek, 2020) and information technology (Lester and Bravenboer, 2020), where the explicit standards and structured work-based learning present in apprenticeships has supported or reinforced the idea of a formally-qualified workforce.

A detailed discussion of the design and delivery of apprenticeships is outside the scope of this paper, but several points are worth noting from the perspective of professions. A tendency to focus on job roles rather than professional fields, along with professional bodies initially being relegated to a supporting role in Trailblazer groups, resulted in some apprenticeships being too narrow or not covering professional requirements particularly well (PARN, 2017; Bishop and Hordern, 2017). The presence of a separate assessment regime (including the EPA) for apprenticeships has been problematic (Lillis and Varetto, 2020), although current policy is that where possible assessment for the EPA is combined with that for the degree or substituted by the professional assessment. Despite what is now becoming a substantial literature on the need to integrate practical and academic learning (e.g. Lillis, 2018; QAA, 2022; Lester, 2024a) and ensure that the workplace is a site of effective learning rather than just one of experience (e.g. Fuller and Unwin, 2008; Quew-Jones and Rowe, 2022; Jones *et al*, 2022), there is still evidence of apprenticeships being run on the traditional parallel (i.e. day- or block-release) model. Finally, similar points apply to assessment, so that while there is growing literature about good assessment practice in work-oriented contexts (e.g. Ajjawi *et al*, 2020; Fergusson *et al*, 2022; Boud *et al*, 2023) its implementation can lag behind (and therefore act as a drag on) teaching and learning practices (Lester, 2024b).

Methodology

The study used a primarily interpretive approach, guided by a systems-oriented (Wilson, 1990) and to some extent phenomenological (Lester, 1999) concern to develop a rich picture of the field informed by the perspective of those working within it. It aimed to cover around 20 professions drawn from different sectors and ranging from those comprising a few thousand members to some of the largest UK professions. Ideally each would be represented by a professional body (whether an independent regulator, a chartered institute or other self-regulating qualifying body, or purely a national membership association) as well as a participant from the relevant department of a university or other

provider. Professions were selected by comparing the official list of apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7 with fields that had some form of qualifying body, before prioritising to include some of the most widely-used apprenticeships as well as covering the parameters listed above.

Table 1. Participants in the first stage of the study.

Field	*Professional bodies*	*Providers*[2]	*Main qualifying level of profession*	*Relevant apprentice-ships*[3,4]
Heritage conservation	1		7	7D
Museums (curatorial)	1	1	7	7(D)
Records and archives	1	1 (Ad)	7	7
Highways and transport	1		7	6D
Civil engineering	1	1	6, 7	6D
Surveying	1	1	6	6D
Construction management	1[1]		6	6D
Architecture	2		7	6D, 7D
Landscape and environment	1		7	7[5]
Ecology and environment	1		7	6D, 7D
Personnel and development	1	1 (Ind)	7	5, 7
Business-to-business sales		1 (Ind)		6D
Law (solicitors)	1		7	7(D)
Law (legal executives)	1		6, 7	6, 7
Environmental health	1	1	6	6D
Health professions	1	1	6, 7, 8	5, 6D, 7, 7D
Nursing	1	1	6	5, 6D
Psychology	1	1	7, 8	6D, 7D
Physiotherapy	1		6	6D
Osteopathy	1		6	6D[5]
Social work	1	1	6	6D

Notes:

(1) Completed the questionnaire only, unable to take part in the interview.

(2) Universities apart from two independent providers (Ind) and one adult education service (Ad).

(3) Level 5 apprenticeships are only included where they form part of a progression route.

(4) D = Degree Apprenticeship, (D) = Higher Apprenticeship with an optional degree.

(5) In development or awaiting approval to run.

Professional bodies were contacted directly and via PARN, resulting in 21 participants in the first, interview stage of the research (see table 1); these comprised a broad spread of professions, with the main exceptions being the financial and education sectors, where all the bodies approached declined or were unable to take part. For providers, lead members of staff for the apprenticeships concerned were approached in two ways: (a) via the relevant professional body (particularly where there was only one provider for the relevant apprenticeship), and (b) via 'gatekeeper' contacts provided by UVAC, principally heads of apprenticeships or work-based learning, at seven organisations ranging from a

major research-intensive university to a small specialist institution that had just been awarded university status. Providers proved more difficult to recruit than professional bodies and eleven took part in the interviews, including one in an additional field (sales) where there was existing evidence of the DA contributing to professionalisation. Most interviews with professional bodies were carried out between June and August 2024, and with providers between August and October. Participants were provided with pre-interview information and a questionnaire to cover basic factual questions and their assessments of various aspects relating to apprenticeships; in the event 17 professional bodies returned completed questionnaires, enabling responses to be aggregated as well as being used to inform the interviews, while only three providers completed them fully. The interviews were carried out using digital platforms and took between 35 and 75 minutes. They followed a loosely-structured format focussing on three themes. For professional bodies these were (a) the relationship between the apprenticeship, the professional body, and its qualified status or membership category; (b) how well it worked as an entry- or progression-route; and (c) any systems or design issues. For providers the coverage was (a) the success or otherwise of the apprenticeship as a professional entry- or progression-route; (b) any systems or design issues; and (c) successes or issues in practice.

The final stage of the study took place in November 2024 and consisted of six online focus groups of up to ten people per group, recruited first from the earlier participants, and then via an open invitation via UVAC and PARN. Four groups were themed (business and law; construction and engineering; and culture, science and smaller professions; and health and social care), and two open. Thirty-seven people took part, including 28 new to the study; 29 represented providers, five professional bodies, and three employer or sector bodies. Participants were sent a summary of findings from the interviews, along with three areas for discussion:

- Do these findings accord with your experience? Can you offer any other insights?
- What now needs to be done to improve H/DAs as professional entry and progression routes?
- What should UVAC do in this area?

Discussions lasted between 90 minutes and two hours, following a common format of introductions, a summary of the interim findings, and an open discussion.

The group discussions, and where possible the interviews, were recorded with participants' permission and notes were also taken by hand; for the discussions participants' contributions were also tagged with their field and whether they were from a provider, professional body or other organisation. At each stage notes were read through to compile an overall list of themes, then reinterrogated theme-by-theme, and finally with some adjustment to themes the accounts combined and summarised for the draft report. The report was circulated to interview participants and two peer reviewers for comment before finalisation.

Findings

The response to H/DAs from both professional body and corresponding provider participants was overwhelmingly positive, with widespread support expressed across the professions in the study. None of the participants were negative about apprenticeships in principle. Enthusiasm was typically less in professions that already had well-used work-based routes, such as legal executives and personnel and development, and there were some specific reservations in smaller professions that

had struggled to develop apprenticeships or make them work. On balance H/DAs were seen as providing clear career pathways for school leavers as well as progression routes to qualified level for existing workers, and in several professions they could be considered mainstream routes to qualifying. Nevertheless matters of viability, design and implementation were widely commented on, and in some professions these were causing significant issues.

Professions' use of H/DAs

H/DAs can now be considered fairly widespread across professions, including in fields such as law, architecture and curating that have traditionally placed a strong emphasis on academic education. Of the professions completing the questionnaire, 71% were members of Trailblazer groups and 82% formally endorsed H/DAs as contributing to qualified status. In the health and social care sector the DA route can now be considered part of the mainstream, with one of the major regulators reporting that a third of programmes approved over the last two years had been apprenticeships. In this sector H/DAs where present have the same status as WIL degrees, covering the education and work-based training requirements for registration. Some other professions accept H/DAs in a similar manner, so that for instance the level 7 apprenticeships for solicitors and architects cover the respective qualifying requirements, as does the level 6 programme for legal executives. In personnel and development and building management any additional requirements needed to qualify are generally minimal, while in surveying and environmental health the coverage is linked so that in principle apprentices can meet the qualifying requirements with little additional work, e.g. "(the requirements) are very close and candidates can re-jig their evidence to fit the (professional assessment)" (professional body, surveying).

In other fields the apprenticeship is designed to align with the profession's requirements without bringing learners directly to qualified level. In some instances this reflects a difference in the formal level between the apprenticeship and the profession's qualified status, so that significant further learning is needed before taking the professional qualification. This applies in transport planning as well as for engineers progressing to chartered level (some engineering apprenticeships provide access directly or with a small amount of additional work to the intermediate Incorporated Engineer status), and an analogous situation is also present in psychology where although level 6 and 7 apprenticeships qualify for intermediate roles, Chartered Psychologist is positioned at level 8. In other professions particularly in the cultural sector the issue is more one of needing to develop the level of proficiency and experience sought for qualified status: for instance "the level 7 apprenticeship covers the (professional) standards, but completers are expected to need a couple of years more before being ready for accreditation" (professional body, heritage conservation).

On balance, close linkage between the apprenticeship and professional requirements was viewed as desirable, with some caveats. In surveying it was apparent that some apprentices were struggling to complete the qualifying requirements within their apprenticeships, typically leading to them finishing the degree, not always taking the EPA, and completing the professional assessment some time later. Other participants had concerns that where completing the apprenticeship was too closely tied to the professional assessment, it could set learners up to fail. This was not seen as an issue in fields where the programme was carefully designed to meet the professional requirements, but it was raised for instance in heritage conservation, personnel and development and (by some participants) in surveying as an argument for keeping qualified status and the apprenticeship linked but separate: for instance

"apprentices need relevant support and experience at work to prepare for Chartership, typically for more than the four years of the Degree Apprenticeship" (provider, surveying).

Most professions were open as to the roles that apprenticeships could play in terms of entry- and progression routes, for instance seeing them as equally suitable for school or college leavers and for people already in the workforce wishing to progress to a qualified or more advanced role. In nursing, an initial tendency to attract healthcare assistants was being supplemented by the apprenticeship drawing in school leavers as funding for WIL degrees dried up. For solicitors, the long level 7 apprenticeship was seen as primarily a vehicle for young entrants, with other routes thought more suitable for work-based progression. On the other hand the value of apprenticeships as a work-based route, for entrants from any source, was acknowledged across most of the professions.

Apprenticeships compared with sequential routes

H/DAs were widely reported in the interviews and the focus groups as being highly effective routes to becoming professionally qualified, and as excellent ways to enter employment and gain promotion and progression. They were seen by professional bodies and providers as being at least as effective as existing entry-routes and in many cases more so. No quantitative evidence was provided, but interviewees variously cited success in gaining or retaining employment (e.g. "practices are keen to keep them on", professional body, architecture; "more employable, better employment prospects", professional body, ecology); the level of competence attained and responsibility taken on ("apprentices are often well ahead [of full-time entrants]", provider, social work; "being promoted, taking on more responsibility… bringing new ideas and practices into the workplace", provider, management); comparative success in professional and academic assessments ("perform better in the solicitors' qualifying examination", professional body, law; "really high quality people, get higher grades than full-time students", professional body, surveying; "get more firsts", provider, engineering); and career progression post-qualification ("progress more quickly post-registration", professional body, health). Less tangible attributes such as being more motivated, focussed and tuned in to the workplace were also mentioned by several participants.

Taking the total time from enrolling on the apprenticeship or degree to achieving the professional qualification, surveying and engineering apprentices were reported as taking typically between two and four years less than entrants following the sequential route of a full-time degree plus professional training: "an accelerated route to chartership" (provider, surveying). Apprentice-route entrants were also reported as taking on responsibility more quickly, for instance leading teams or acting as mentors by the time that they achieved qualified status. Fewer direct comparisons were offered between apprenticeships and health and social care WIL degrees, but to take one example apprentices were described as "excelling in the workplace" (professional body, physiotherapy), and for another as" taking on cases that would not normally be expected of a newly-qualified (WIL-route) graduate" (provider, social work).

A problem that was noted in making objective comparisons between apprentices and sequential-route entrants was the different starting-points typical of apprentices and full-time students, with the former often being at least slightly older and having some prior work experience. No direct evidence was offered comparing entrants on a like-with-like basis. However, where entrants were generally more comparable, such as in law and environmental health, the balance still favoured the H/DA route: for

instance “the apprenticeship model is far superior to the full-time degree plus professional training… incomparable, much higher quality” (provider, environmental health).

There was also some discussion of how different entrants progressed through H/DAs. Apprentices who had started in assistant-type or similar roles were described as sometimes finding the academic level challenging, but typically soon finding their feet and doing well once settled in (e.g. “initially weaker on academic learning, but more experience, more committed… catch up quickly”, provider, engineering). They could also need more prompting to think conceptually and look beyond the immediate concerns of their organisation and work role. On the other hand some younger entrants were reported as lacking motivation at first and finding the intensity of their programmes challenging. The focus group discussions suggested however that the apprenticeship route was effective both for well-motivated school- and college-leavers, and for people who had already entered the workplace and were looking to progress without returning to full-time education.

Apprentice demographics and diversity

The effect of H/DAs on widening access to professional careers appeared variable, with factors differing by profession. In some fields including law (solicitors), architecture, archives and psychology diversifying entry had been a significant factor driving the development of apprenticeships, but younger entrants were reported as being largely from the same pool of high-achieving students as for full-time degrees. The solicitors’ regulator quoted some recent unpublished research that showed that this was starting to change, with increasing uptake from young people from less affluent backgrounds. Effects on ethnic mix, gender balance and neurodiversity were variable, with for instance providers reporting apprentice cohorts as more diverse than full-time students in social work but less diverse in quantity surveying and some branches of engineering. The group discussions indicated that employer recruitment practices can pose a significant problem (e.g. “at the whim of big employers”, provider, engineering; “a lot of (employers) don’t understand widening participation”, provider, cross-sectoral). Employers were described as having variable levels of interest in diversity and sometimes adhering to traditional criteria such as looking for top A-level grades or preferring graduates from particular universities. Some successes were also described such as providers and employers working together to design recruitment strategies, and employers recruiting specifically from further education colleges and lower-level apprenticeships. In archives and ecology, apprenticeships were described as helping overcome a barrier where employers tended to expect graduates to work as volunteers before moving on to a paid role: in ecology “traditionally graduates started with voluntary work, but it was very exclusive… and they needed to afford a car, driving lessons etc. in an unpaid job” (professional body, ecology).

The most significant impact of H/DAs in many fields was described as providing routes for existing workers, including returners and career-changers, but more often people in assistant-level roles who either lacked higher education, or (in psychology) had become stuck in intermediate-level graduate posts without an obvious way forward. This was apparent across most sectors apart from law and personnel and development where work-based progression routes were already available. In the cultural sector, the level 7 apprenticeships were reported as overcoming a traditional barrier where people in assistant-level roles rarely progressed into professions such as curating, which could be seen as “a super-elite area, very academic and theoretical” (provider, curating). The group discussions confirmed the effectiveness of H/DAs for people already in the workforce, including “bringing in people

from boots on the ground roles" (sector organisation, engineering) as well as those who had taken lower-level apprenticeships. The effect on other aspects of diversity of recruiting from existing workers was also discussed, and while in most cases the equation was positive, in some fields there was a tendency to narrow intakes depending on the composition of the source group: for instance in one area of engineering "white, male manual workers" (provider, engineering).

Apprenticeship structure and design

On balance, professional bodies reported a high level of satisfaction with the content and design of apprenticeships. There were comments about some apprenticeships being too narrow, leading to "salami-slicing of careers" (professional body, surveying), as well as (in the group discussions) instances where related apprenticeship standards appeared to have been designed in isolation from each other, with "too much overlap… (making it) difficult for employers and young people to navigate their way through" (provider, cross-sectoral). Broadly-specified standards were also discussed in one of the groups, with for instance the data scientist and curatorial standards commended as being designed so that they could easily be interpreted into different contexts, while the laboratory scientist apprenticeship was criticised as too broad and difficult to contextualise, "requir(ing) things that don't reflect all jobs, such as doing statistics… (making it) difficult to deliver and to assess in a way that is authentic" (provider, cross-sectoral). One participant commented that a balance is needed between breadth and specificity, so that "new entrants need a broader approach, (while) a more specialised one is needed for those who are progressing" (provider, cross-sectoral).

There was some discussion in both the interviews and the groups about different apprenticeship structures, for instance comparing a long level 7 programme that could be entered from school with linked apprenticeships at different levels. Multiple steps were thought to be more flexible and allow learners to step on and off without the stigma of non-completion, or to join at the relevant level. Less positively, there could be barriers between one level and the next: an example was provided in nursing, where entrants could choose to enrol directly on the level 6 Registered Nurse apprenticeship, or first take the level 5 apprenticeship which nests within it, but with "a funding pinch-point and no guarantee of being able to progress" (professional body, nursing).

Reflecting both pedagogical concerns and the point mentioned earlier concerning non-completion of apprenticeships, the most widely-discussed structural issue was the use, integration and design of end-point assessments. Some EPAs were seen to be working reasonably well, such as those in law and architecture where they had been fitted around the professional assessment structures, but others were seen as problematic particularly in their relationship to professional assessments. Health professions had largely opted for fully-integrated assessments, but elsewhere there was debate as to whether the EPA should be integrated with the degree or the professional assessment, and whether it was feasible or desirable to integrate all three. Stand-alone EPAs were considered of questionable value, a source of unnecessary bureaucracy, and an additional burden for learners (cf. PARN, 2017 and Lillis and Varetto, 2020); in some cases they were also described as imposing poor-quality, inauthentic or outdated assessment practices, e.g. "a restrictive assessment, no innovation or creativity" (provider, health professions) and "a bit archaic in approach" (professional body, surveying). On the other hand the assumption that professional qualifying assessments could be integrated with, or simply substituted for, EPAs was also questioned given that in some cases the qualifying requirements were too stretching to be achieved at the end of the apprenticeship, for instance "the (EPA) standard needs

to be achievable, but the APC (assessment for chartership) expectations are too high at this stage" (provider, surveying). In addition not all professional assessments were seen as reflecting good practice, for instance in finance "apprentices need to pass a professional examination (to be eligible for the EPA)… it has a 30% pass rate, creating a barrier even before the… EPA is reached" (provider, cross-sectoral). On balance the consensus was that arrangements needed to be appropriate to the qualifying requirements of individual professions, reflecting the factors discussed under 'Professions' use of H/DAs' above.

Apprenticeship delivery

Professional body interviewees generally reported the 'off-job' part of apprenticeships as being done well. The main issues that were discussed, by providers as well as professional bodies, related to workplace learning and effective integration of what is provided by the employer and by the university or provider; for instance "firms and universities still viewing it as just a part-time degree, not integrating it properly" (professional body, surveying). In the group discussions the dominant view was that apprenticeships are moving towards a genuine LIW model, but that this is happening slowly. Some universities were described as "not getting work-based learning and just teaching the degree" (provider, cross-sectoral), or at best treating it as a set of tools and procedures that are added on for apprentices. Some professional bodies were critical of providers for not engaging sufficiently with the workplace or managing learners' overall programmes, but examples of good practice with strong provider-employer partnerships, effective integration between theory and practice and authentic approaches to assessment were also given.

Problems reported with workplace learning stemmed from employers providing an insufficiently broad range of experience, and not providing sufficiently stretching learning opportunities or adequate mentoring and one-to-one support. Coverage issues were discussed as stemming from the breadth of the organisation's work, a particular issue with small and specialist employers regardless of field (e.g. "difficult to organise the placement aspect because the sector is dominated by self-employed practitioners", professional body, osteopathy); the employer only wanting to cover the parts of the standards that match a specific job role (e.g. "candidates can become stuck in a specific role… the employer doesn't allow the role to develop and the learner can't cover the full range of what's needed", professional body, law); and apprentices being restricted to relatively basic tasks ("some employers don't give apprentices their wings… not allowed to do various tasks because they are a trainee", professional body, surveying). Particularly in nursing, social work and engineering, apprentices who had joined from assistant-level roles were sometimes being expected to continue with their current jobs in addition to doing the apprenticeship; for instance "there has been an issue with people progressing from support worker and similar roles effectively doing their existing job, which doesn't count as part of the 200 days (required to qualify)" (professional body, social work). More positively, several examples were given of providers working with employers to change practices, and in some fields the use of placements (i.e. with organisations other that the apprentice's employer) was common either as a general strategy to cover the apprenticeship requirements, or organised on a more ad-hoc basis by individual providers or consortia.

Barriers

Several factors not already discussed were reported as barriers to the development, availability or uptake of H/DAs. A major theme in these discussions, both from professional bodies and providers, related to governance at a national level. Wherever discussed this was seen as inflexible and slow to respond, and sitting in what one group participant described as a "pervasively immature policy landscape" (provider, management) characterised by continuing uncertainty about direction, funding, and design and operating rules. Some providers described operating on very narrow margins, with apprenticeships either being subsidised by other provision or barely justifying the investment involved. An issue that had been encountered by several professional bodies was slowness in getting apprenticeships approved, with two having had problems in setting up acceptable EPA arrangements (e.g. "Ofqual requirements require a lot of work to understand… they duplicate what professional bodies do already and… make it difficult for smaller organisations", professional body, transport). Another, a statutory regulator, had been unable to secure changes to the apprenticeship in time to coincide with its own revision of the profession's qualifying process. Quality assurance arrangements were described by some professional bodies as creating duplication, and in some instances as promoting questionable practices more appropriate to school-age learners; one for instance commented on "Ofsted finding fault with a university that didn't meet requirements that were applicable to schools rather than universities… it had to suspend the course for a year" (professional body, environmental health). Beyond the costs of compliance, audit and quality assurance regimes were regarded by some professional bodies as creating a disincentive to providers to become involved; this was particularly an issue where full-time provision and therefore much of the profession's educational expertise was located largely in research-intensive universities, several of which were reported as not being prepared to take on apprenticeships. As an example one body commented that "there's general reluctance among our accredited universities to get involved in DAs… one explained it's policy not to come under the Ofsted regime… they see it as lots of bureaucracy" (professional body, landscape and environment).

Several professional bodies discussed issues of size and geographical spread. Archives, conservation, museums, transport and ecology, all groups with qualified members in the low thousands, each relied on a single provider. Although some sole providers appeared to be able to operate successfully at a national level, in general this was seen as creating geographical cold spots and also risking the apprenticeship collapsing if for any reason the provider pulled out; this had recently happened in conservation, where the provider "was too remote from big cities (and had) trouble recruiting… only five learners enrolled, it wasn't cost-effective" (professional body, conservation). Even in physiotherapy, a field with over 50,000 practitioners, the geographical distribution of apprenticeships was proving problematic, with "few (apprenticeship) places in rural and coastal areas that have (physiotherapist) recruitment problems anyway… the uneven availability of apprenticeships is not helping" (professional body, physiotherapy).

While employers were more often than not described as supportive, their availability and willingness to take on and adequately support apprentices was also reported as a barrier in some areas. For some fields this stemmed from a lack of understanding of H/DAs, maintaining traditional graduate recruitment practices, or simply a bias towards research-intensive universities (e.g. "some practices would rather recruit Russell Group graduates than deal with post-92s", professional body, architecture). Some were also quoted as finding the apprenticeship regulations and quality assurance

requirements offputting, and in some cases were “moving people off the apprenticeship to do part-time degrees” (professional body, engineering). Small firms were reported as having difficulties in becoming involved, for various reasons including accessing funding, the administrative work involved, and providing sufficient coverage; this was seen as a particular problem in areas where small units and sole practitioners predominate, such as physiotherapy and osteopathy.

Finally, although ‘apprenticeship’ as a title appears to have become fairly well-accepted, it was still reported as having some negative connotations; for instance in the legal and cultural sectors it was cited as often “associated with 17- and 18-year-olds and manual trades” (professional body, law). In quantity surveying the provider reported having to assure potential applicants of the parity of degrees taken via apprenticeships and full-time courses. Level 6 or 7 HAs without degrees were also seen as problematic in some fields; many providers of the solicitor apprenticeship had voluntarily incorporated a Bachelor of Law degree, while the sole curatorial provider had integrated an MA with the apprenticeship.

Commentary

The study’s findings can be interpreted as a continuation of the trends reported by PARN (Williams and Hanson, 2011; PARN, 2015; and PARN, 2017) with respect to professions’ responses to, and involvement in, H/DAs, and by Lester (2009) in relation to the ongoing opening up of professional entry pathways. Professional bodies are increasingly positive about apprenticeships, more are becoming involved in them, and the proportions of new qualifiers entering via them appears to be on an upwards trajectory. It has been suspected for some time that apprenticeship-type routes are more effective than sequential or even conventional WIL-type ones at bringing new entrants to qualified level (e.g. Bravenboer and Lester, 2016; Cushen-Brewster *et al,* 2022), and while it does not provide conclusive comparative evidence, the study is strongly supportive of this position. This must however not be interpreted to mean that all, or even the majority, of entrants will be best-served by LIW-type routes. On one hand the initially more theoretical orientation, the buffer between school and work and (in most cases) lack of a need to immediately commit to a specific career that a full-time degree provides will still be relevant for many school-leavers. On the other the more individual pathways to qualifying that many professions now support can offer more appropriate routes particularly but not only for existing workers (see for instance Ching, 2025, in the context of recent changes to solicitors’ qualifying requirements). H/DAs, and the wider LIW approaches that they represent, are a welcome and in some fields constructively disruptive addition to the mix of professional qualifying pathways, but it is important to put them in the context of multiple routes to qualifying and of an overall trend towards emphasising requirements to be met rather than routes to be followed.

The existing evidence for H/DAs widening entry to professional careers could be described, after Nawaz *et al* (2023), as on balance positive but with reservations. The study largely echoes this, with examples of H/DAs attracting both more and less diverse cohorts compared with full-time higher education. It does however indicate that, at least in some professions, the LIW approach forms a highly effective tool to enable people already in the workforce to progress to professionally qualified level. Many of these will not have experienced higher education and some will not have conventional university entrance qualifications; a minority, for instance in psychology, may be graduates but be stuck in intermediate-level roles without opportunities to progress further. This suggests that, particularly for professions that do not have readily-available work-based routes already, one of the most powerful

applications of H/DAs for both social mobility and for creating talent pipelines is to focus on progression pathways for existing workers. Particularly in the context of the restrictions to level 7 apprenticeship funding that were announced in 2025[1], it is important that these pathways provide or lead to an easily-accessible work-based through-route to qualified level and, echoing Williams and Hanson (2011), do not leave entrants in a part-qualified limbo.

It is apparent from the study that apprenticeship design and positioning still needs addressing in some fields, both to clarify the relationship between the apprenticeship and professionally qualified status, and to ensure that the routes available through apprenticeships can reflect the way that careers and employment opportunities are structured as well as the realities of learners' lives. Two main points need to be explored here. One is how the profession's qualifying requirements relates to what it is feasible to include in an apprenticeship, and therefore to what extent the apprenticeship can be designed to lead to qualified status. This depends partly on where the profession pitches its qualified level, but it also requires a nuanced understanding of how qualified status operates, in different professions and in different contexts within professions, in relation to the labour and professional services market. These factors affect whether it is necessary to be fully qualified at the end of the apprenticeship, whether further structured learning or supervised experience is needed, or whether it is more appropriate for learners to choose whether to go forward for qualified status after finishing their apprenticeships. The second is where apprenticeships would benefit from greater flexibility, for instance through being 'nested' as with the Nursing Associate and Registered Nurse apprenticeships, or through a sequence with stepping-off points at intermediate levels. A note is again needed in relation to funding policy, as limiting the age at which learners can access apprenticeships is likely to favour the development of long programmes rather than stepped sequences, regardless of what is most appropriate for the particular professional and employment context.

At the level of implementation, the study suggests that while there are many examples of good practice, the 'parallel-but-separate' model of apprenticeship is still fairly common. Improvements can be needed in integration between theory and practice; in the authenticity of assessment; in the effectiveness of provider-employer partnerships; and in employers' roles in providing 'expansive' learning environments supported by high-quality mentoring (cf. Fuller and Unwin, 2008). This broadly reflects the situation reported by Lester and Bravenboer (2020) and is consistent with subsequent research including Jones *et al* (2022), Fabian *et al* (2022) and Laczik *et al* (2025).

In relation to policy, governance and quality assurance, criticisms of current arrangements persist, and suggest that if H/DAs are to operate effectively as professional entry- and progression-routes there is need for better co-ordination and consistency, and a more collaborative approach to regulations and quality assurance. In particular, apprenticeships need to be attractive and sustainable for providers and employers (including small organisations) to operate; they need to be straightforward to set up, including for smaller professions, and able to respond quickly to changes in professional qualifying requirements as well as work practices; and rules and standards for delivery need to reflect good practice for professional-level LIW programmes rather than being based on a model that was initially designed for 16- to 18-year-olds.

[1] As at May 2025 a policy announcement had been made to restrict levy funding for level 7 apprenticeships to learners starting on the programme before their 22nd birthday, with some specific exceptions: https://help.apprenticeships.education.gov.uk/hc/en-gb/articles/24002145831954-Changes-to-funding-for-level-7-apprenticeships

Finally, both professions and employers need to consider the opportunities that exist for developing LIW-type pathways outside of the apprenticeship system. If as the study suggests LIW programmes are valued as entry- and progression-routes, there is a case for resourcing them directly in the same way that much post-degree and non-graduate initial professional training is supported. A 'mixed economy' integrated model would both offer a means of developing programmes that can be innovative beyond what is allowed by current apprenticeship rules, as well as mitigating the vagaries of funding policy.

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A more extensive report of the findings including a list of the organisations that took part is available at: https://uvac.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/UVAC_Report-7_2025-series_For-screen_V3.pdf or https://devmts.org.uk/profhdas.pdf.

Research ethics

The research took place outside of an instutional framework and no ethical approvals were required for the study. Ethical principles based on the British Sociological Association's 2017 Statement of Ethical Practice were followed in the study.

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