

NPTC response regarding degree apprenticeships: (*Response in italics 200120*)

Background

A Committee of Inquiry has been set up to review the recent introduction of degree apprenticeships. The Welsh Government first funded degree apprenticeships from academic year 2018/19. It has committed £20 million to a three year pilot, meaning recruitment has continued in 2019/20 and should continue for 2020/21. In 2018/19 there were 155 degree apprentices from around 60 employers accessing the first year of degree apprenticeships in Wales, and for 2019/20 the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has allocated 585 funded new places. According to HEFCW data of the 2018/19 cohort approximately 80% were male, 86% were 21 or over and mostly recruited from existing employees rather than newly recruited staff. Very few apprentices in the first cohort declared a disability and there is insufficient data on ethnicity. Approximately fifteen per cent declared themselves to be Welsh-speaking. Degree apprentices are enrolled onto degree apprenticeship “frameworks” and there are currently two frameworks – Digital, and Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing. There are no public plans for more frameworks and the current priority areas are influenced by Regional Skills Partnership recommendations.

Response to the questions proposed by the Committee of Inquiry

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

The short timescales and moving deadlines for submission and approval of the submissions was challenging. It is difficult for institutions to respond to new initiatives and to be able to recruit to new provision in a short timescale as there are numerous approval processes that are required. Furthermore there needs to be sufficient lead in time to allow planning and marketing of new provision. Fast track validation processes was challenging but HEFCW have been supportive. The two step process for framework approval and funding approval also delayed progress. It would be useful for Welsh Government to confirm their long-term plan for degree apprenticeships that would allow for planning and development by institutions.

The use of the name Apprentice and Apprenticeship is problematic as the word Apprenticeship is a well-established term and is a recognised brand for work based learning and the term Apprenticeship in degree apprenticeship confuses employers. Should degree apprenticeships sit more with FE/ WBL as opposed to Universities?

There is a question as to whether the term Apprenticeship is correct – is the programme just a degree programme rebadged? The WBL Element of the Degree Apprenticeship needs to be more prominent (50% WBL and 50% Academic).

2. Was the process and criteria used for approving proposals from providers to deliver degree apprenticeships satisfactory?

This was challenging due to the timescale for the initial submission (summer period) and the length of time that the approval of submissions took. This had an effect on the ability of the institution to recruit for a September start. It was also initially unclear as to whether there should be individual or joint submissions from franchised providers. The limited number of degree apprenticeships also restricts the market place compared to England and Scotland.

3. What are your views on the demand for degree apprenticeships and how that demand should be managed, both in terms of the range of frameworks and demand from employers and learners?

There has been a very mixed response to the demand for degree apprenticeships. Engineering was much more popular than computing and the provision in the South was more popular than in the North. In many instances employers were keen to support degree apprenticeships but due to the short timescale many employers were struggling to release their employees. Likewise when any new academic qualification is introduced it takes time for the market to understand the qualification and it also takes time for academic institutions to design new provision and market it. Some sectors also have a limited knowledge of what HE qualifications are and the quality processes associated with developing and recruiting to HE programmes there was also confusion between the differences between what is available in Wales and England. The lack of long-term financial commitment to degree apprenticeships does not encourage commitment from employers. The annual approval and non-recurrent funding does not encourage commitment from institutions. Limited new starters due to the timescales and they were currently 9/12.

4. To what extent should activity aimed at widening access feature in degree apprenticeship recruitment, and how can this be used to ensure that cohorts are representative?

In principle the nature of apprenticeships should suggest they are in itself an aspect of widening participation, employees wishing to progress to higher level qualifications

not previously obtained? Whilst we support this in principle as student recruitment to degree apprenticeships is already challenging focusing on widening access may further restrict applicants. Additionally, degree apprenticeships does encourage those who are employed but do not have a level 4 qualification.

5. Do you have any comments on the cost of degree apprenticeships, how degree apprenticeships are funded and the level of funding committed to them?

The funding level seems appropriate as it matches the standard HE course fee structure but the pathways that have been created are STEMM based and hence are resource expensive.

For a true apprenticeship with work based assessments additional costs of observations in the work place has not been considered in the funding structure. In addition the level of new equipment required to deliver bespoke employer focused training has not been allowed for, in WBL differing curriculum areas have a weighting for more costly courses.

Also in Wales where employers pay the levy but are not able to directly benefit from it, there is concern over the long term viability of Degree Apprenticeships and to where the funding comes from, the WBL or HE pot? WBL does not have sufficient starts to meet current employer demand so there is concern that any further reduction to support Degree.

Administration of the funding and processes through the HEFCW is positive as degree apprenticeships are subject to the same quality and regulatory arrangements as higher education provision more broadly and also mitigates the level of bureaucracy for employers seen in England

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

The use of the term apprenticeship has been confusing as it is already used in many different contexts. Eg Conflict with higher Apprenticeships which can be confusing for both learner and employer. Progression from level 2/3 to L4/5 and 6 should be seamless for the candidate.

There still appears to be an issue of commitment from employers who traditionally liked the HNC/HND route as their commitment up front is less than 3 years. At the moment Degree Apprentices leaving the programme early will get a HE Level 4 qualification which is not traditionally recognised by industry. One for SEMTA maybe – there needs to be an alignment with industry recognition on milestones throughout the Degree Apprenticeship programme.

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

Clear instructions as to the “ownership” of Degree Apps, work based learning or University and for a true apprenticeship there should be the work based monitoring element of the programme. We need to provide a long-term commitment by Welsh Government on degree apprenticeships, raising awareness and understanding of what they are would attract more employers and potential apprentices. Long-term plan outlining including which subject areas (and levels) will come online beyond 2021 and the funding allocations for these would allow for better planning.

There appears to be an issue regarding the intellectual property rights of the project that the Apprentice is doing. Currently it appears it belongs to the university but should it belong to the company where the apprentice is from as this could cause an issue with the employer (competitive advantage). Was this issue an oversight when preparing the documentation?

Submitting evidence

1. If you wish to submit evidence, please send an electronic copy of your submission form to SeneddEIS@assembly.wales.
2. Submissions should arrive by **23 January 2020**. It may not be possible to take into account responses received after this date.
3. When preparing your submission, please keep the following in mind:
 - your response should address the issues before the Committee, and should be limited to the terms of reference.
 - the National Assembly normally makes responses to public consultation available for public scrutiny and they may also be seen and discussed by Assembly Members at Committee meetings. If you do not want your response or name published, it is important that you clearly specify this in your submission; and
 - please indicate whether you are responding on behalf of an organisation, or as an individual. *This response is on behalf of the organisation.*