



Widening participation and degree apprenticeships

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Executive Summary

Background

The focus of this project is to consider the relationship between widening participation (WP) and degree apprenticeships (DAs). Specifically, the research sought to understand the extent to which degree apprenticeships were part of existing university outreach plans to widen participation and identify the barriers that might exist for including DAs in WP activities. Despite high ambitions from policymakers and stakeholders for DAs in contributing to widening participation to HE, high skilled jobs and social mobility, little research has taken place to investigate how well DAs are achieving this so far, having been established for nearly a decade.

Methodology

The project has a case study approach, focusing on two post-92 universities offering degree apprenticeships: the first is a smaller institution broadly based in the south of England with a focus on health-related and digital apprenticeships; the second is a larger institution based broadly in the north of England with a wider range of degree apprenticeships that includes health-related and digital programmes. Interviews were conducted with staff focused on strategy, recruitment, employer engagement, and outreach. We also interviewed two policy stakeholders. All the interviews took place in autumn/winter 2023-24.

Findings

We found that universities see degree apprenticeships as part of their wider offer, and an example of diversification. The two universities differed in their approaches to including degree apprenticeships within their access and participation plans, where the institution with a broader range of DAs on offer included them, and the institution with a more specific offer did not. This did not appear to have an impact on the institutional approach to DAs.

Outreach and recruitment for DAs were generally not integrated, although both institutions highlighted increasing interest in DAs from schools with a greater proportion of higher-attaining students and non-state schools, rather than the schools where their outreach typically takes place. In one example, one of the post-92 institutions was invited to present to young people at a prestigious school, with the proviso that they only talk about DAs, while another local pre-92 institution would be discussing going to university as a full-time undergraduate. Students and parents are often interested in DAs without much awareness of the practicalities. As a result, outreach and/or recruitment teams have developed their own resources to explain the realities of a DA – fundamentally that prospective apprentices need to have an employment contract for a DA first, and then fulfil any academic requirements to be admitted onto the DA. Helping more young people to fully understand the potential opportunity and requirements for doing a DA would enable them to make more informed decisions.

Nevertheless, there are a number of hurdles prospective degree apprentices face in securing a DA, and this appears to be impacting the chances of young people from less advantaged backgrounds to a greater extent. Prospective degree apprentices face two hurdles – securing the job with the employer, then securing the university place. This puts employers in a position of control with who they decide to recruit. Many employers are more inclined to put their existing staff on DAs rather than recruit new employees,

although this varies by sector. Given employers hold significant control in the availability of apprenticeships, the supply of DAs inevitably responds to employers' priorities and skills needs, which does not necessarily relate to universities' widening participation agenda. The universities in this research tried to influence and support employers' recruitment of degree apprentices to varying extents.

Both providers had recruited a range of apprentices, with older apprentices already working for the organisation from comparatively lower socio-economic backgrounds being the norm on health-related programmes, while digital and STEM-related programmes attract younger apprentices as new recruits, from comparatively higher socio-economic backgrounds. The variation across institutions was mainly related to the DAs offered. In general, degree apprentices were older than traditional full-time undergraduate students, and mostly entered with Level 3 as their highest prior qualification. In this sense, we argue that this group would fulfil previous definitions of widening participation but are not currently seen as meeting the OfS requirements on WP.

1. Introduction

This project was conducted collaboratively by Charlynn Pullen and Colin McCaig from Sheffield Hallam University, alongside Katherine Emms and Andrea Laczik from the Edge Foundation. The focus of the project is to consider the relationship between widening participation (WP) and degree apprenticeships (DAs).

DAs were introduced in 2015 for roles including digital, automotive engineering, banking, and construction (Hubble and Bolton, 2019) but have quickly expanded to include many more occupational areas from retail management to health and social care. They have proved popular and the number of DA starts (at level 6) trebled from 6,400 in 2017/18 to 25,000 in 2022/23 (DfE, 2023). This popularity translates into relatively high entry requirements. DAs provide "an innovative new model bringing together the best of higher and vocational education" (DBIS, 2015). The incorporation of a full degree within the degree apprenticeship is "crucial to its 'brand'" (Reeve and Gallacher, 2022, p160). Reflecting that conclusion, Universities UK (2019, p15) claimed that "degree apprenticeships are seen as having parity of esteem with traditional degrees, thus helping to raise the appeal of vocational education opportunities more broadly." That DAs are free to the individual apprentice also makes them very attractive compared to paying for a degree course with a loan.

DAs are intended to be a key part of the government's strategy of improving economic productivity through enhancing the skills of the workforce whilst also addressing social inequality (see DfE, 2021). DAs are, therefore, part of a coherent and comprehensive shift in education policy and funding in relation to the perceived needs of the economy. The hybrid nature of DAs is evident in the complexity of their scrutiny and quality assurance systems which bridge traditionally academic and vocational domains and involve Ofsted, Office for Students (OfS), Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), Ofqual, and ESFA (see ESFA, 2021). Nevertheless, as a report for OfS noted in 2022, evaluation of DAs is still evolving (Cleaver for OfS, 2022, p4).

Although 101 higher education institutions offer DAs (as of 2023, see McLaughlin, 2023), there has been a degree of concentration particularly in post-92 institutions that have achieved Ofsted Grades 1 or 2 in inspections. The flexibility described above, to offer DAs in a range of industries and job roles that directly meet the needs of employers, results in a variety of delivery methods. This means institutions delivering DAs typically require different staffing structures from traditional undergraduate programmes.

There are generally considered to be two types of degree apprentices – young people as new recruits and existing staff. The first group of students is young, going into a new job role as a degree apprentice, either as part of a cohort in a large organisation or an individual joining a smaller organisation, often more affluent than the intake for traditional undergraduate programmes, and in sectors like engineering, digital, and professional services (see also Cavaglia et al., 2022). The second group of degree apprentices are existing staff. Economists often consider that degree apprenticeships undertaken by existing staff can be less beneficial than bringing new people into an organisation (Ibid, Speckesser and Xu, 2022). However, there are many benefits to training existing staff through apprenticeships (see Pullen, 2024), particularly when employers are spending less on workplace training (Evans, 2022).

2. Widening participation or social mobility?

Widening participation (WP) is a long-established societal ambition designed to address inequalities of access for underrepresented and otherwise disadvantaged groups in higher education (HE). While it had always been part of the mission of many HE institutions to open up opportunities for a wider social cohort to benefit from higher level study, and had been specifically addressed at national level by the Robbins Report (1963), inequalities of access persist. Robbins' call for expansion resulted in various policy initiatives throughout the 1960s and 1970s designed to expand the number of HE places on offer, including the designation of 30 Polytechnics and the creation of the Open University (OU), largely based on the assumption that the system would socially widen as it expanded. Notably, while participation did widen among those attending local authority-funded Polytechnics and part-time OU programmes, there was little change in the recruitment practices of autonomous universities in existence prior to 1992. (The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act unified the sector by allowing Polytechnics to also become autonomous universities). Institutional autonomy in relation to both the provision a provider wishes to offer and how they choose to set entry requirements remains a key element of the HE system, along with market competition between providers, and this necessarily sets part of the context for how WP operates (McCaig, Rainford and Squire, 2022).

The WP context of interest to this piece of research is whether DAs are expanding opportunities for higher level study to those from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. The answer, as this report explains in detail below, is mixed in part due to a variable understanding of what DAs are designed to achieve by government and HE providers. WP used to have a broader definition than it does currently. It now mainly focuses on young, underrepresented groups such as those who were disabled or from low income and/or ethnic minority backgrounds. Prior to 2012, part-time and mature students were targeted by post-1992 institutions and FE colleges and there was a greater focus on work-based learning and vocational curriculum development (HEFCE, 2006). Since then, and as the competitive differentiated market has evolved since 2012, part-time and mature student numbers have precipitously declined and simultaneously become less important to providers' WP targets.

HE providers largely responded to competition for students by focusing outreach on 'low hanging fruit' of potential applicants in schools and colleges and are now far more reliant on 18-year-olds. National WP policy – focussed on the collaborative Uni Connect programme – has also encouraged this tendency. Another notable change over the last decade has been the shift away from the use of 'widening participation' to 'social mobility' in policy discourses. While sometimes used interchangeably, (e.g. DBIS, 2011, 2016; DfE, 2020) they are actually quite different concepts. WP as a societal project is about more people from diverse backgrounds accessing HE – an input factor – whereas social mobility refers to changes in an individual's employment and financial status over time – an output which may or may not be due to accessing HE, whether in the form of DAs or traditional undergraduate programmes. Social mobility is, like the availability of DA places offered by employers, mainly a function of the changing basis of demand for labour.

The use of the discourse of social mobility by politicians is a significant change as governments have become more sceptical about widening access and participation for its own sake. Since 2017 the Conservative government began to question growth in HE numbers, and most recently DAs have been portrayed as a solution to social mobility on the basis that they provide 'particular value for those from disadvantaged backgrounds' (Halfon, 2023). This has been discursively accompanied by ministerial challenges to the notion of expanding undergraduate numbers, as in this example from then-Universities Minister Michelle Donelan's 2020 speech on 'true social mobility' (DfE, 2020):

...today I want to send a strong message – that social mobility isn't about getting more people into university. For decades we have been recruiting too many young people on to courses that do nothing to improve their life chances or help with their career goals.

...The 2004 access regime has let down too many young people. Since 2004, there has been too much focus on getting students through the door, and not enough focus on how many drop out, or how many go on to graduate jobs. Too many have been misled by the expansion of popular sounding courses with no real demand from the labour market.

This is then expressly linked to a redirection of undergraduate degree students to vocational alternatives including DAs:

True social mobility is about getting people to choose the path that will lead to their desired destination and enabling them to complete that path. True social mobility is when we put students and their needs and career ambitions first, be that in HE, FE or apprenticeships.

Whatever path taken, I want it to lead to skilled, meaningful jobs, that fulfil their ambitions and improve their life earnings, whether that's as a teacher, an electrician, a lawyer, a plumber, a nurse or in business.

Despite high policy ambitions for the contribution of DAs to widening participation to HE and high skilled jobs and their contribution to social mobility, little research has taken place to investigate how well DAs are achieving this so far, despite having been established for almost a decade. In particular we do not fully understand the role of HEIs in contributing to this ambition. It is the extent to which degree apprenticeships are able to widen participation to HE or add to social mobility that this report is mainly concerned with, specifically from the point of view of those within HE providers that are engaged in WP outreach work.

3. Methodology

This project was designed to consider the relationship between WP and DAs. It aimed to understand the extent to which degree apprenticeships were part of existing outreach plans to widen participation and identify the barriers that might exist for including DAs in WP activities.

In order to investigate this link, we used a case study approach at two different universities, both offering DAs. We interviewed three types of staff in each institution:

- staff involved in outreach and WP activities
- staff involved in employer engagement and DA recruitment
- staff involved in policy and strategy at the institution, notably the access and participation plans.

We also analysed anonymised demographic data on the qualifications and profile of degree apprentices at each institution, and the publicly available access and participation plans.

Alongside interviewing staff involved in DAs at institutions, we also interviewed two policy makers involved in policy and strategy around DAs. A total of nine interviews were carried out, including three from University 1 and four from University 2. All interviews took place online with at least one member of the research team and were recorded with transcription. The notes and transcripts from the interviews have been used for content analysis. The fieldwork took place during the autumn and winter of 2023/24.

The two universities were selected on the basis of having significant DA provision as a proportion of their higher education offer. They are both post-92 institutions, as this group have engaged more in the provision of DAs across the higher education sector. They are also both institutions with a strong commitment to WP and their local labour market, in common with many post-92 universities. They are different in terms of size, range of DAs offered and location. University 1 is a smaller institution based broadly in the south of England, while University 2 is a larger institution based broadly in the north of England. Both offer a range of DA programmes including health-related and technology programmes, as well as other public and private sector offers relevant to their local areas. In order to maintain anonymity of the participating HEIs, the staff interviewed, and data provided, we will refer to individuals by their job role and identify which university (1 or 2) they represent.

4. Findings

4.1 Plans and outreach for degree apprenticeships

4.1.1 Aims of degree apprenticeships

Since degree apprenticeships (DA) were introduced in 2015, there has been an increasing number of providers deciding to offer DAs. In 2022/23, there were 101 universities offering DAs (McLaughlin, 2023). In line with this tendency, the number of DA starts have also been going up. Levels 6 and 7 apprenticeship¹ numbers have increased by 8.2% to 46,800 starts between the academic years 2021/22 to 2022/23 (DfE, June 2023). Considering these increasing numbers, it is important to reflect on why stakeholders engage with DAs. There were considerable expectations of degree apprenticeships when they were first introduced. For example, they should contribute to filling local skills shortages, they should contribute to national economic growth, and they should support social mobility (see DBIS, 2015, 2016). While DAs have the potential to fulfil these expectations and more, it was clear from the interviews that expectations can be broad and generic, but also more specific, for example, to the stakeholder groups, industry sectors and the locality.

In our case study-based research project, we interviewed both university staff and policy makers. Policy makers reflected on the aims of DAs from the outset, as well as on other potential objectives DAs may achieve. One interviewee neatly summarised this and described that DAs: offer an alternative route to gain a degree; diversify the available provisions; and offer progression routes from both academic and vocational learning. All these may improve the parity between academic and vocational provisions, which can be another aim of DAs:

I think the core aim was to provide a diversity of options for students and provide a different way of learning I think there's also a political driver there around parity and how do you begin to really force parity into the provision? The one way of doing that is by having the same end award. In addition to that as well is having a ladder... of progression in a technical space that is comparable to framework for higher education and the graduate space. So, the fact that you can go from level 2 to 3 to 4 etc and go all the way up to 7, having that parity on that side...there was a very early narrative around [saying] degree apprenticeships will be great for disadvantaged students and a great route for disadvantaged students... the big flagship marketing of apprenticeships that you earn while you learn actually, the monetary side of it is both an attraction and a barrier. ... in terms of the purpose, it's about diversity and it's about parity. (Policy maker)

These messages were reiterated and further developed by a university staff member, who thought that diversity of provision was necessary for different student groups, including mature students. They considered it was also necessary to further push for social mobility pointing to the 'importance of people accessing higher education at different stages of their life and of their careers' (University 2, strategy manager). DAs offer a flexible route to gain a degree as individuals are working alongside studying. Similarly, another interviewee suggested that DAs are 'a really good lifelong learning provision ... Used by current professionals or those who haven't had...HE experience the first time around' (University 1, outreach). These two interviewees suggest that DAs were also introduced to serve a diverse and mature student population, and to offer them a pathway towards gaining a degree.

¹ Note: not all Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships include an integrated degree. For example, the Senior Procurement and Supply Chain Professional - <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/senior-procurement-and-supply-chain-professional-v1-0> - includes a Level 6 professional qualification but not an integrated degree. The data used here does not distinguish between degree apprenticeships and Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships, but when asking for data from the two universities in the study, we only asked for information on degree apprenticeships.

4. Findings

Some university staff were hesitant about why their university has started to offer DAs. Some talked about reasons for engaging with DAs that linked to their university role, such as working with outreach activities, employer engagement or recruitment. Others referenced the university strategy. Interviewees from University 2 claim:

A key part of the strategy is wanting to be the world leading applied university and I think degree apprenticeships have that (strategy manager, University 2)

[DA] fits very well with our vision and mission to be an applied institution (outreach, University 2)

A University 1 interviewee claimed that being a '*widening participation organisation*' they tend to have students who come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and their students are predominantly more mature. DAs serve these diverse student populations well. Their employer partners similarly were looking for alternative ways to upskill or reskill their staff who could not afford to give up employment for training.

DAs support skilling, upskilling and reskilling locally. Hence, universities and employers engage with them. An interviewee spoke about focusing on DAs that were needed in the locality and where they identified a '*massive demand for upskilling*' (recruitment, University 2). Many interviewees thought that DAs helped tackle skills shortages locally and emphasised how they support employers to deal with skills shortages. Whether it was skilling, upskilling or reskilling, also depended on industry sectors. For example, health sectors mainly use DAs for upskilling existing staff, whereas engineering and digital sectors focus on skilling new staff, typically younger recruits. It was also claimed that some employers wanted to increase the diversity of their workforce, which was supported by using DAs. One interviewee suggested that employers engage with DAs because:

they want staff who are happy, more productive, more likely to stick around with the organisation longer term. That's why they do it (recruitment, University 2).

One interviewee claimed that their university engaged with DAs purely '*for ticking the box*' as there is a clear national policy emphasis on DAs, and for commercial reasons. DAs bring students (and therefore funding) to the university, support employer engagement, develop skills that employers demand, and 'it plays to our strengths as an applied university'. Similarly, it was claimed that employers engage with DAs because

the apprenticeship levy is the ... main part of funding to use for staff training that so it just it's good value for money for them to put existing members of staff onto the course that they've already paid the fees for (recruitment, University 2).

While supporting widening participation was not the aim of DAs originally, interviewees seemed to link it to DAs in a number of different ways. It is, nevertheless, clear that DAs are used as a flexible provision to support a diverse student population to gain a degree who otherwise would not or do not have the opportunity previously to do so. Primarily, in line with their business aims, employers use DAs to skill new recruits and upskill and/or reskill their existing employees. Universities 1 and 2 use DAs to help employers to fill local skills shortages. There was a clear policy push from the previous Conservative government to increase the number of DAs (see Halfon, 2023; Donelan, 2020), and some interviewees suggested that this may have influenced their universities' engagement with DAs.

4.1.2 Inclusion in access and participation plans

Both universities produced comprehensive Access and Participation Plans (APP) which are a requirement for any HE provider wishing to charge above the basic £6,000 tuition fee. APPs are designed to rationalise targeting, priorities and intervention plans in relation to areas of the access and participation landscape that

institutions wish to focus on. Interestingly, the two universities had a markedly different approach to how DAs were discussed in relation to WP, which may be related to the different apprenticeship standards they work with, or the volume of DAs at their institution. University 1 only cited DAs once in their APP, in the context of expanding higher education opportunities through a diversification of their offer, including higher and degree apprenticeships. University 2 mentions DAs in six separate areas of the document and specifically links them to enhanced social mobility, mentioning their role in information, advice, and guidance outreach in schools and colleges. However, in relation to the proportion of their overall student body, both universities have relatively large and growing DA cohorts, albeit across a different range of standards, yet University 1 appears to see DAs as less related to their WP work than University 2.

Proxy measures? APP references to mature and part-time students

Where direct references to degree apprenticeships are relatively scant, especially in relation to University 1, there are references in APPs to what we might call 'proxy' references to areas that may well be enhanced by a growth in DA numbers. While the APP from University 1 had less to say directly about DAs as a sub-set of its student body, in discussing part-time students it does identify a 30% attainment gap and a progression gap of 25% gap between IMD quintiles 1 and 5, with an expectation that these gaps will be closed by 2024-25. It might be assumed that University 1 may be alluding to the potential of DA recruitment to close gaps among these cohorts, although no specific mechanism or educational pathway is cited. Further evidence that University 1 is reliant on growth on DAs to close some gaps comes from the section on mature students, where they report a significant improvement in its recruitment of mature students over a five-year period, which outperforms sector averages significantly. Similar improvements were noted for mature students' attainment and progression.

As noted, University 2 was in general more likely to mention DAs in its APP and also cited similar improvements in its numbers of mature students going into high skilled employment or further higher-level study. It also notes that the gap between mature and younger students was much closer than the sector average, to an extent that had been cited by OfS as statistically significant. The impression that DAs may be impacting performance data, albeit by proxy, may also be supported by a statement that its part-time students were now more likely to be mature students. If these part-time mature students are DAs, it may explain why University 2 wishes to grow this provision (a large paragraph of the APP highlights flexibility including in relation to Higher and Degree Apprenticeships), given that overall part-time numbers are in decline. A University 2 interviewee acknowledged mature students were mentioned in APP in precisely this context:

There has been a big, a precipitous decline in part time and mature numbers. And I think there has been a kind of strategic need to diversify partly that's around financial need [income for the university]. But also I think wanting to be that recognition, that new routes are needed for different student groups. (strategy manager University 2)

The recent appearance of DAs in APP terms has been to some extent organic, partly pushed by the policy environment at the Office for Students under the Director for Access John Blake, appointed by the Conservative government in 2022:

Degree apprenticeships have fallen within access and participation plans on a kind of slightly hidden and voluntary basis. So it's something we have cited in our current plan and it is kind of gaining more prominence in access and participation. So it's now in the data set for example. ... a deliberate choice because we want it to be more central to the access and participation plan where it has been, I think it's fair to say, but as a little bit of an afterthought. (strategy manager, University 2)

Even so, there was a reluctance to commit to actual targets for DAs, even while acknowledging this is why University 2 is engaging with them in the APP in the context of new OfS priorities:

4. Findings

[There is now] a much bigger focus on evaluation, which ...is a really positive thing and then also ... this is what they call flexible skills, flexible pathways. So we responded to that by publishing a variation of our access and participation plan and within that we cited [that] we're one of the largest providers of degree apprenticeships ... pioneering and all of that ... we are committed to growing our provision. So it's a commitment in the current plan with the variation, but no specific targets. (strategy manager, University 2).

The proxy link between DAs and declining mature and part-time numbers was clearly rationalised by this strategy manager:

We did also historically cite degree apprenticeships specifically around mature students where we acknowledge that there's been a big decline at the sector level. And then also here at [University 2]. So we made that specific link. (strategy manager, University 2).

At the same time, University 2 was keen to link potential growth of DAs to wider areas of underrepresentation concern, citing intersectionality, but they also note the limits to diversity among the DA population:

I think the degree apprentices are much more likely to be commuter students for us that's something that I've got a note to look into more, more generally around our students. About that kind of intersection with certain underrepresented groups. ... we make claims about, you know, our degree apprenticeship population being socially diverse. And we have some basis for that... but they aren't as diverse as the regular population. (strategy manager, University 2).

This coyness about making social diversity claims in the APP is likely to be linked to the strategic decision to relate to proxies: while both universities can be clear about performance in relation to part-time and mature students, and in the case of University 1, use these as the basis of their ability to close gaps, they are reluctant to tie these to specific growth in DAs, probably because they don't have a direct role in recruitment against specific underrepresented group targets.

Another University 2 respondent, responsible for outreach with schools and colleges, noted how DAs were becoming more important to the institution's wider recruitment goals:

[DAs are] becoming more strategically aligned with what how we report on and what we deliver. I don't necessarily know if that will lead to it becoming part of mainstream recruitment in that it would move into the recruitment team or if it would still be mainstream, but it sits in [the employer engagement department] because it's such an infrastructure and it's so embedded across that different group of employers. It might come with scale and it might come if the proportion of degree apprenticeships becomes a bigger share of the total intake and then it might administratively be more effective to merge things together. (outreach, University 2)

University 2 has taken a strategic approach to embed, as far as possible, degree apprenticeships into its APP presentation and as such interviewed staff were able to point out some of the practical inconsistencies (as noted in other sections) and areas where WP characteristics intersect with the average DA profile. As such it seems that institutions use data on mature and part-time student enrolments as proxies for data directly about DA, for example in growth planning for mature and PT students for University 1. University 2, while more open about the strategy of growing DAs, also uses the proxy effect of anticipating growth in numbers for these cohorts, but without setting specific targets for DAs, over which they have less control. The University 2 approach to the APP allowed for a more open discussion about the role of DAs in the overall growth strategy and in terms of widening participation, including where it would fit in terms of the bureaucracy of marketing and the extent that this may impact the future of HE regulation.

4.1.3 Awareness of degree apprenticeships

Awareness of and information about DAs are key to engage with them and to utilise the benefits they can offer. What can be achieved through DAs greatly depends on how stakeholders perceive them. The interview data generally suggest that while we can claim that there is awareness of DAs, the information stakeholders possess is generic, limited and very patchy. One interviewee said that even within universities that offer DAs:

People don't understand them, and they can't be bothered – [specific team within the university] deals with them. They don't understand what they are and what they can bring to employers and to students in terms of a guaranteed job and pathway. (outreach, University 1).

Both case study universities employ designated staff who are actively engaging with specific target groups with the aim of working with them and informing them about DAs. Staff members responsible for employer engagement and partnership, those working with student recruitment and engagement, or those responsible for access and outreach activities are key to reach out to interested parties to inform them. For example, an experienced access and outreach staff member trying to influence how senior management at the company thinks about parity by talking with them.

Informing young people about possible progression opportunities and what they entail is necessary for them to make an informed decision. A few interviewees suggested that there seems to be an increasing request from schools to inform their learners about apprenticeship options. This may be the result of the Baker Clause that came into force in 2018, and the Gatsby Benchmarks which aid career education in schools and colleges. It is not only the number of schools, but also the types of schools that request information are changing:

I used to do more kind of the apprenticeship kids sessions, now there are quite prestigious schools and colleges which are asking me to speak to their whole cohort around degree apprenticeships (outreach, University 2).

However, as one interviewee said, *'the gap in between how much people think highly of [DAs] and actually how much they know about securing them is massive'* (outreach University 2). In a lengthy quotation, the same interviewee further reflected on the considerable ignorance surrounding DAs, and what information is missing and what is misunderstood about them:

I think everybody's talking about the positive rhetoric, which is involved in degree apprenticeships ... But in terms of actually what it takes to get one and then complete one, I think there's a huge amount of ignorance actually [about] just how difficult they are. And a huge part of our actual talk is reinforcing [this]. Yes, they're great, but they're very difficult in terms of the contact hours. I think you know the idea of commuting and travelling. When we talk about that, the idea that your employment, the 80% of the 20% could be in different cities. A lot of people go, 'oh, crikey, I didn't know that'. So again, we kind of talk about the fact that you'd have to consider commuting or renting. You are treated as a young professional versus this kind of packaged experience where you're on campus ... So yeah, there's often not many questions around the barriers to be honest (outreach, University 2).

Private schools were explicitly identified in the way they promoted DAs and generally the way they offered career advice to their learners. They were considered as 'one step ahead' of the state schools. As one interviewee said:

it is also about investing in your career staff in your school, so being able to give them that training, that ability to go out and find out about degree apprenticeships and being able to kind of educate them so that they can then speak to parents as well, massive gatekeepers in this and they need to be able to be on board (outreach, University 1).

4. Findings

Private schools were much better informed about DAs already 6-7 year ago according to one of our interviewees and *'they were preparing their students to go to these kind of opportunities and to bring all those added value interactions into them'* (outreach, University 1).

There is considerable work still to be done with parents if DAs are to be seen as real options for their children. One interviewee felt that parents were not up-to-date with current developments and said:

for a lot of working class families, you know that I'd speak to the mums and dads and they're like, oh, yeah, but, you know, they want them to go to university. They see that as their way out of poverty or their way out. But actually a degree apprenticeship is also a way through and a way out. But they don't see that at all. No, no, no. That's like the YTS scheme. And that's back in the day. They're not seeing it now or how it's changed and moved on. (outreach, University 1).

In addition to all the hard work various university staff do, UCAS plays an important role in informing and advising young people. As one interviewee said:

There has been a gap between people being able to access information about degree apprenticeships, and I think it's welcome that they're coming into UCAS. So there is that kind of parity of availability (strategy, University 2).

With this latest development of the UCAS service, young people now can see academic and vocational opportunities (such as DAs) side by side. One in three students do not receive any information about apprenticeship opportunities, so UCAS see themselves as an 'equalizer'. As one policy interviewee said, *"[UCAS] help people connect to those opportunities better, and in a less burdensome way... So, we have the ability to make it more accessible"* (policymaker).

Provider-based interviewees were talking about a range of activities and resources to inform their local community about DAs. These included talks, career fairs, websites and TV adverts – a wide range of different outreach activities. However, as one interviewee noted, their department had no promotional material to hand out to young people or use when attending events.

4.1.4 Outreach for degree apprenticeships

Targeted approaches/programmes to WP for DAs

Given that recruitment of DAs was via employers, outreach work to promote the concept of degree apprenticeships to young people alongside other forms of higher education, was often reactive for our respondents in the two universities. The usual outreach method of targeting specific disadvantaged or shortage groups in local school/college populations is much more difficult to achieve. Recruitment of mature and part-time students had rarely been the business of university outreach teams, nor the priority of state-funded collaborative outreach programmes such as Aimhigher (funded by HEFCE 2004-2010) or the NCOP (later known as Uni Connect) programme (funded by OfS since 2017). As noted above, both national policy and institutions' own interests have become ever more geared to the 18-year-old school leaver population, more easily reached-out to and more easily referenced against OfS priorities. This necessarily coloured definitions of diversity and reduced any emphasis on 'flexibility' as the student body becomes more homogenous: *'I don't know that flexibility is how I would label it ... as a university over a number of years we have been very focused on young undergraduates'* (strategy manager, University 2).

Yet one of the premises of DAs was diversifying the institutions' offer in terms of the type of qualification and the age and study mode. So, from the WP perspective, DAs were not seen as a natural fit with the cohorts

traditionally identified for recruitment: young school leavers from diverse, disadvantaged social backgrounds, especially underrepresented ethnic groups and those from lower socio-economic status families. Mature and part-time students enrolling to traditional degree programmes had been declining in higher education since the introduction of the £9,000 fee regime in 2012-13, yet these groups formed the majority of degree apprentices and they came not via targeted outreach, but via employers, with little input from universities; hence the acknowledgement from one strategy manager that while it's true that their DA population was diverse, they weren't *'as diverse as the regular population'*, but they are far more likely to be older and part-time, and more ethnically diverse in the case of University 1.

In recent years government rhetoric has portrayed DAs as the preferred mechanism for social mobility, not least speeches from former Universities Minister Robert Halfon who stated that *'One day I would like to see 50% of students at university enrolled on degree apprenticeships'* (Halfon speech to the University Alliance, 2023). While this drive was partly seen as a corrective to the decline in part-time study (House of Lords, 2022), in other speeches DAs were portrayed by the minister as a social mobility solution for all young people from all disadvantaged backgrounds:

They hold particular value for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, giving them knowledge, training and industry insight in one complete package. Degree apprentices earn while they learn, but don't pay tuition fees like other students. It is so important we promote these routes to those who could benefit most: young people whose social and financial position currently deters them from degree-level study. This is real social mobility – getting into careers which might otherwise be closed off. We need to reach-out to those with potential, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, and connect them with employers who value alternatives to traditional graduate recruitment. (Halfon, 2023)

Targeted outreach in context: broadening the social base of degree apprenticeships?

If DAs are to be the 'social mobility' solution envisaged by ministers, HE providers, and particularly post-1992 universities like the ones in our research may need to rethink their outreach offer. When it comes to delivering outreach to school-age young people in schools and colleges activities have typically not been focused on DAs, although the outreach manager at University 1 noted that demand for this was growing:

Small minor part of it I would say is apprenticeships ... I'm getting more and more requests from schools that I work with to come in and present about apprenticeships and our response and what we do with apprenticeships at the university. And it's probably a very small part of what I'm doing at the moment, but the requests are increasing, and I think it's something to do with the legislation that they've got in terms of careers advice and guidance that they need. (outreach, University 1)

This was echoed at University 2:

What I'm seeing at the moment is a lot of requests from colleges and institutions and so on to come and tell for us to come and tell them what they are. Right. I think that's where we're at with it. So people are like, what is this thing and who is it for then? And we know about it and we agree because it's embedded into what we deliver anyway. We are being asked to be informative and to bring education about what this is (outreach, University 2)

The University 1 outreach manager noted the general lack of information about DAs in mainstream state schools compared to more selective state and private schools, particularly in relation to the entry requirements for DAs:

4. Plans and outreach for degree apprenticeships

I think they're harder to get than getting into some of our Russell Group universities, which makes it unfair. I think they're unbalanced. I think at the moment there are probably groups of learners that are in schools that are paid for, as in private schools, they're one step ahead. I remember going to conferences about 6-7 years ago where there were private school careers advisers there and they were on it. They were well on it, whereas the [state] schools were like, what? What's an apprenticeship? What's a degree apprenticeship? These guys [private schools] knew it. (outreach, University 1)

This lack of information about DAs represented a barrier for many working class and ethnic minority young people in the industrial town where University 1 is based:

[They are] academically great, you know, but obviously their grades are not going to be as high in nines and eights in GCSES because of the different backgrounds that they're coming from. But they're vocational kids, they're kids that will learn on the job, they'll learn and they'll do and they'll work hard, but not getting through. They're not even getting through the assessment centres. I think the private schools, ... they know they're able to assess how the private, the assessment centres will run (outreach, University 1)

The attitudes of parents/carers is an issue. They can often take a lot of persuading that DAs are as viable an option as traditional degree study, which is another hurdle, as discussed above in terms of awareness of DAs. Another barrier for those wishing to do targeted outreach is the context of indirect enrolment, particularly where the majority of DA provision is in disciplines with a high degree of control by the professional body and specialist recruitment companies used by employers to prepare candidates for assessment centres. As noted above, this means that academic departments where DAs will eventually be enrolled often do not carry their own marketing materials:

I had to kind of make my own presentation up for the young people. And in the end [the department head], says well, we don't really offer it. It goes from the companies and this relationship with the companies rather than, you know, out there (outreach, University 1).

The student recruitment engagement coordinator at University 2 highlighted the variability of demand for outreach IAG sessions on DAs, not least their 'seasonal' recruitment: 'Obviously National Apprenticeship Week, Careers Week are two big ones where we often get quite spikes in terms of demand for that content' (Uni 2 student recruitment). In practice:

We get varying requests. To be honest, we are really quite a reactive team. There's definitely times where we've had to respond to the demand of various schools and colleges in terms of delivering degree apprenticeship content. So in terms of the cohorts that are selected, there's definitely some schools where they'll have their kind of apprenticeship students, if you like, which is another word to say the ones who aren't academic and which is to be honest a real outdated attitude. It's really quite interesting now how it has completely inverted the whole kind of language around apprenticeships, particularly degree apprenticeships (recruitment, University 2).

This notion of inverted language around apprentices and DAs of course reflects the impression that, because of high entry requirements, the profile of those enrolling on DAs doesn't match the average WP cohort at either of our two post-1992 providers:

And it's been going on for donkeys' years that apprenticeships have been overtaken by certain groups. We need to get that balance back and go back to the old ways when it was basically, you know, your vocational pathways, vocational kids and allowing them to have those opportunities and it being equal. I don't think it is. (outreach, University 1)

A respondent from University 2 (in a city with a Russell Group neighbour) sees this new approach to outreach reflected in a differentiation between providers in their WP and outreach work:

... there are quite prestigious schools and colleges which are asking me to speak to their whole cohort around a degree apprenticeships. So actually one of the issues now for us as an institution is that we are becoming known as kind of 'the apprenticeship institution'. So I'm going to a local school next week where they're getting a local institution who's a Russell Group [university] to go and do their kind of 'this is university' talk. They've got an employer doing a talk on post 18 employment options and then we're going in exclusively to talk about degree apprenticeships, which is which is quite interesting. (recruitment, University 2)

The reality is that University 2 is the main provider of DAs in the area but doesn't recruit many undergraduate degree students from the highest achieving schools. This enables an opportunity to use their outreach and marketing offer to both grow their DAs and potentially raise the social class profile of their student body:

I would say definitely there are top end schools now which only want us in for apprenticeship content and that's kind of our leverage if you like. We're knowledge holders for that. They don't, with all due respect to us, they don't necessarily want us to be going and doing the general university stuff. They'll go for the top higher end institutions for that and they'll just kind of use us to do the apprenticeship content. (recruitment, University 2)

However, this of course does little to raise its WP profile or meet the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (with on average lower level 3 qualifications), despite degree apprenticeships giving them knowledge, training and industry insight in one complete package as envisaged by ministers (Halfon, 2023).

It is clear from the perspective of our interviewees that there is a mismatch between governmental aims for the uptake of degree apprenticeships and the focus of institutional WP work, which has long focused on underrepresented and otherwise disadvantaged groups who are less likely to be suitably qualified for DAs. HE providers have no control over the number of DAs they will be expected to deliver and typically little input into the recruitment practices of large employers, which may, of course, have their own corporate social responsibility EDI criteria. Strategically an HE provider can always shape its provision to meet its mission and can in theory (assuming there is demand) decide how many applicants to enrol to any degree programme it offers; within that the provider can target specific cohorts, if necessary it can adjust its entry requirements to those ends. None of these options are present for degree apprenticeships.

4.2 Recruiting and accepting degree apprentices

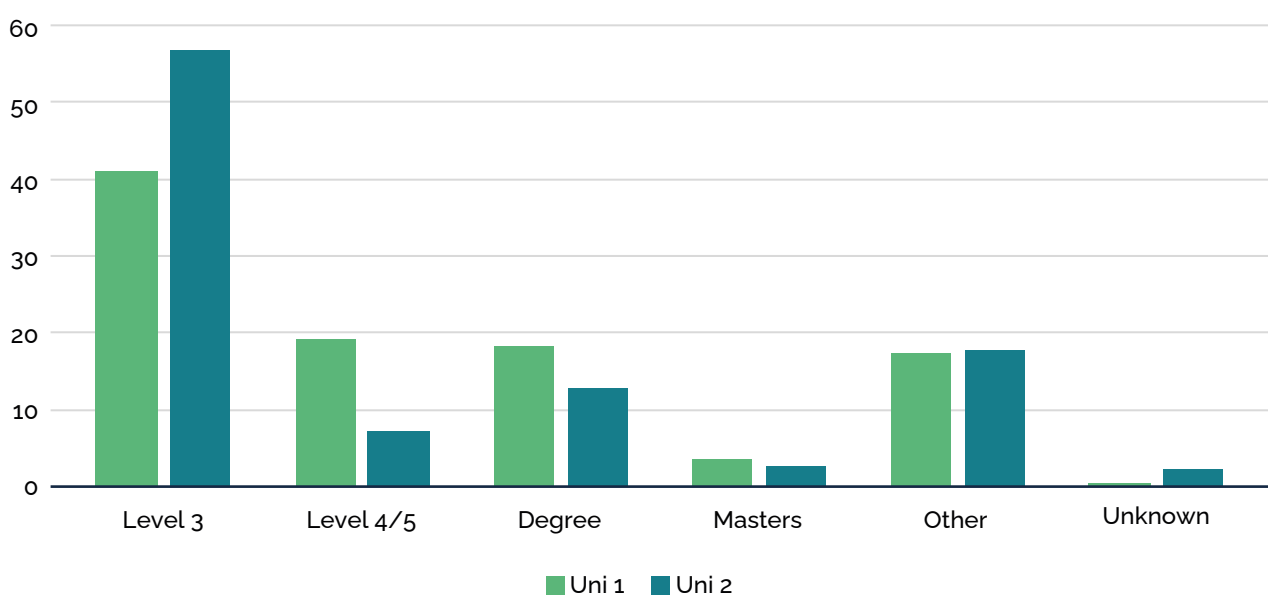
4.2.1 Qualifications on entry

In considering the entry requirements for individuals on degree apprenticeships, there are two elements that are crucial. The first is the level of prior qualifications, including English and maths. This first entry requirement is assessed by the training provider, to ascertain whether the prospective apprentice is able to undertake the degree apprenticeship programme. The second entry requirement is for the employer to select the individual for the degree apprenticeship. As an apprenticeship is fundamentally a job with a relevant training programme, an individual can only be an apprentice if they are taken on by an employer. So, in reality, this second requirement comes first, and is discussed later in this chapter.

The first requirement then is to be able to complete a degree programme. For this, most universities require students to have at least a Level 3 qualification, typically an A-Level, BTEC or equivalent qualification. Analysis of the data provided to us by both universities indicates that a Level 3 qualification is the most

likely prior level of attainment, with more than 40% of degree apprentices at University 1, which is smaller, having a Level 3 qualification, and nearly 60% of those at University 2. Other common qualifications are Levels 4 or 5, either through an apprenticeship or a specific vocational course. Levels 4 and 5 are particularly common in engineering and healthcare, but otherwise the UK has very low levels of participation in Level 4 and 5 qualifications currently. As a result, those with Level 4 and 5 qualifications prior to entry on a degree apprenticeship are likely to be specific to certain sectors. The chart below shows the spread of other kinds of entry qualifications for degree apprentices. Unfortunately, this data is not available nationally for apprentices.

Figure 1: Entry qualifications for degree apprentices



Source: data provided by each institution for individuals who have started degree apprenticeships in the year 2022/23 and before.

4.2.2 Employers and recruitment

Upskilling exiting staff vs taking new recruits

Employers can be regarded as the main determiner of the availability of degree apprenticeships, since an apprentice must have a job in place first and foremost. Employers can therefore decide that an existing employee be put on a degree apprenticeship, or they can create a new job role bringing in a new member of staff on to a DA. The employer is therefore in control of who they employ and how they recruit the apprentice. This initial step of being accepted for a job is then followed by being accepted on a degree course. The latter of which, it was suggested by interviewees, is often the lesser challenge. An interviewee explained that it is easier to gain a place on a traditional degree course as this only presents one hurdle – entry to the university. For a degree apprentice to gain a place, it involves two hurdles. A University 1 interviewee explained that for those trying to compete for a DA as an alternative to a traditional university entry route (i.e. at age 18) it is more privileged individuals who tend to get these, including those from private schools, as they receive additional coaching and support during the application process and therefore do well. Whereas those from state schools, particularly those from diverse backgrounds are less prepared to compete for these limited places.

Interviewees discussed that many employers are more inclined to put their existing staff on DAs rather than recruit new employees, and it is within their discretion to make that decision. Partly this was explained by the introduction of the apprenticeship levy which employers are keen to use, particularly on more expensive higher-level apprenticeships. DAs are also an investment in terms of time and money. Employers want to ensure that by investing in their existing staff, they become more satisfied and are therefore more likely to stay longer.

Nevertheless, it was found that there are different approaches to recruitment to DAs, with a discernible difference between different sectors. For instance, the healthcare sector tend to mostly put exiting staff on to DAs, whereas employers in the digital and engineering sectors are more likely to recruit new staff and so advertise DA opportunities externally. A policy maker explained that although DAs offer good career progression prospects for those who didn't have the opportunity to study higher education at the traditional point of entry, *'that shouldn't be at the expense of not taking on people who are starting out in their careers and being sort of potentially recruited as a degree apprentice as a way into the job'* (policy maker). The government believe employers have a responsibility to grow new jobs whilst also supporting existing staff to upskill.

Employers' priorities

Given this arrangement of the employer in control of the availability of degree apprenticeships and recruitment, DAs are evidently going to respond to the priorities and needs of employers. Stakeholders discussed that one of employers' top priorities is primarily filling skills gaps. Employers in general have less concern with ensuring that they have a diverse workforce or are offering employment opportunities to more disadvantaged groups, although for some this is a major concern. Even when diversity is a priority for employers, they do not always have the same understanding of it as higher education regulatory bodies, notably around age. Therefore, many are not going to make such considerations when employing new DAs or when they are offering DA opportunities to existing staff. One example was explained by a policy maker whereby employers tend to recruit degree apprentices in similar locations, often concentrated in a few large city locations, in the same way as they would recruit a graduate on a graduate scheme for example:

So, at the moment, we need to change employers' behaviour a little bit, because if they are only recruiting degree apprentices in exactly the same locations... that's disadvantaging the people from a place angle, particularly people whose personal circumstances mean they can't move to take up those opportunities... There's also something to do with targeting younger people. So going back to the point that I raised about employers using degree apprenticeships as part of a career development package. That's not much good for getting more jobs and career starter apprenticeships for 18- to 24-year-olds. So, there's a young person's angle there that needs to be addressed as well. (policy maker)

However, it was highlighted that some employers show an interest in widening participation and the diversity of their workforce. For example, engineering and digital firms often have concerns around ensuring more women enter into their sectors. As an interviewee from University 2 explained *'there's loads of employers that we work with and most employers, I would say, they genuinely want to increase the diversity of their workforce. That's an aspiration, but the reality is more challenging than that.'* (employer engagement, University 2).

There is some evidence that other employers are changing their mindset and to an extent their behaviour. This was partly explained by the fact that they are coming under increased scrutiny to do so but also the realisation that employers need to act to ensure they achieve a pipeline of talent into their business and tackling issues of diversity can help them address this. A policy maker explained that despite certain sectors sticking to very traditional methods for entry into their professions, there are developments in some prestigious and popular careers, for example accountancy through charities like SEO London supporting young people through the

application process (Money Marketing, 2024). Additionally, some employers are doing their own outreach work in schools and colleges, and other one-off employer-led initiatives, however it was explained that there is not always the time and resource to do this, especially for SMEs. As one university interviewee claimed: *'I think employers want to change but are looking for support to do so'* (outreach, University 2).

University and policy influence

This brings us on to the responsibility of other actors to influence and support employers to widen participation and the diversity of those taking degree apprenticeships. Whereas employers tend to recruit based on ability to do a job, universities are more inclined to recruit on potential as well as having specific agendas to widen participation and diversify their cohort. Universities have a role in challenging employers in terms of recruitment and practice. As one policy maker claimed, universities, as part of their business engagement activity, must advocate for certain candidates in the employment setting and support employers with recruitment decisions. They also accepted that the Department for Education has a role to play in this, and currently the government actively engage with a number of larger employers with regards to the skills system and apprenticeships. Part of the dialogue here includes encouraging more positive activity around WP.

One of the significant factors that can help influence employer behaviour is having key individuals at the university to build and manage the relationships with employers. One university explained their specific staff roles who link to an employer that is offering DAs and helps to influence their behaviour. Universities play a varying role in terms of how much influence they have and support they offer in the recruitment of DAs depending on the employer requirements. As one interviewee explains:

So where an employer wants to recruit a new apprentice, my team will advertise that role and sift the applications to check eligibility and then collect CVs and put them forward to the employer (employer engagement, University 2).

The interviewee goes on to explain that they support employers in the recruitment process as much or as little as they want, so the university can exert some influence in some cases, and for instance ensure they put forward a range of candidates from diverse backgrounds. However, they clarified that many employers carry out their own internal interviewing and the final selection process:

We can't influence who applies for the job and who's eligible to apply. And then it is down to the employer, you know, when it's the employer's selection process. If I'm sending them four or five really good CVs, the employer has to make that decision. We can't sort of influence who they should choose. (employer engagement, University 2)

Conversely, other interviewees explained that in the case of health-related DAs the university plays a greater role and often are part of the interview process. One of the universities (Uni 2) indicated that they place an inclusion statement on their adverts for DA roles to encourage applications from underrepresented groups, stating that they welcome applications from those that have encountered barriers to education. Again, this has shown to have little to no influence and the above still applies; the university can try to provide a diverse shortlist but ultimately the decision lies with the employer and other barriers exist (e.g. entry requirements), which can be a hurdle for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A final consideration when determining universities' level of influence on employers is highlighted by the fact that universities do tend to work more closely with larger employers for ease, since working with SMEs tends to be time consuming as they require more support that larger firms have internally. This means that their level of influence may be more limited when working with SMEs.

In conclusion the influence of the university is somewhat limited in terms of widening participation to DAs. Employers are the stakeholder who decide if a DA will be offered and who will be in that role. As a policy maker summarises:

Ultimately, it's the employer that's got to hire somebody. And that requires quite a lot of work and advocacy on the part of providers... So yeah, that's the number one challenge.
(policy maker)

If an employer is engaged and really wants to reach out to a particular community, and they have the resource to do so, then they can help to support the widening participation agenda. That decision and practice lies with the employer and the university can offer that support based on the employer's decision.

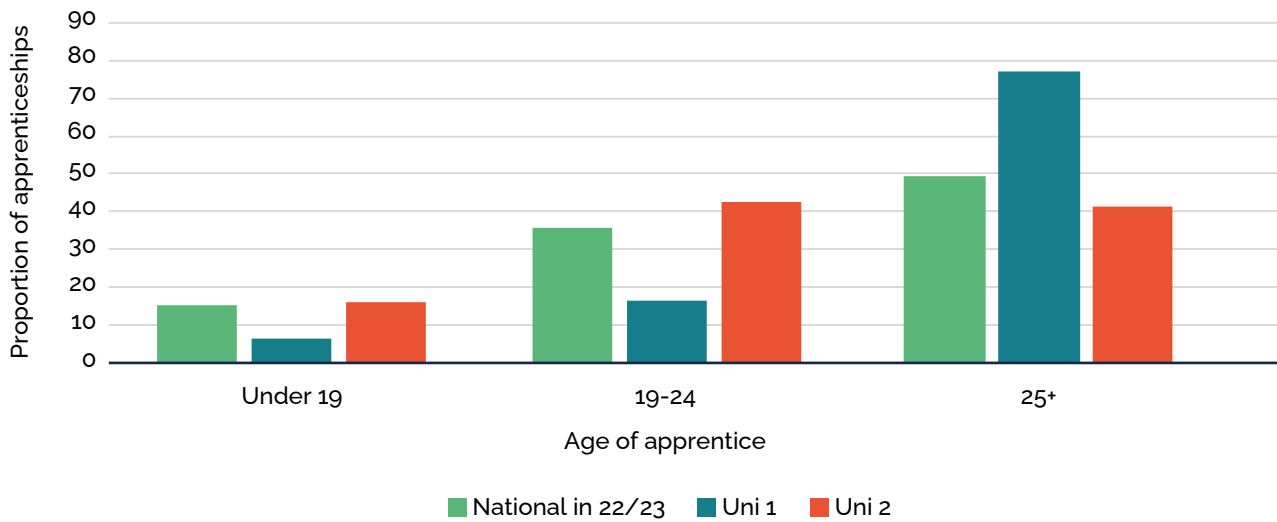
4.3 Degree apprentices on programme

As noted above, University 1 and 2 have quite different profiles, with University 1 being a smaller institution broadly in the south of England, and University 2 being a larger institution broadly in the north of England. In terms of degree apprentices, University 2 is one of the larger providers, with around 10% of its undergraduates being on degree apprenticeships. This means that, alongside a wider range of undergraduate courses on offer than at University 1, there are relatedly, a wider range of degree apprenticeships on offer. These range from more common degree apprenticeships in the public sector, aligned to health professions and emergency services, to private sector courses in professions aligned to engineering and design, and business and digital programmes. At University 1, there are similar types of courses, albeit with a bias towards the health, business and digital DAs, but a smaller range, and smaller overall numbers. This context of the institutional aims and DA coverage is reflected in the profile of degree apprentices.

4.3.1 Profile of degree apprentices

There has been some concern about the high proportion of apprentices that are over 25, mostly those studying at higher levels, although the proportion of apprentices in this age category has not changed significantly in the past decade. However, there has been a significant reduction in apprenticeships in general, and particularly Level 2 apprenticeships for 16–18-year-olds. Degree apprentices, because they typically have a Level 3 qualification prior to starting their degree apprenticeship, as highlighted above, are almost all 18 or over. Figure 2 shows the age breakdown into the 3 standard categories – those under 19, those aged 19 to 24, and those aged 25 or over. We have been able to include national data in this figure, but degree apprenticeships are not a specific category, so all apprenticeships at Levels 6 and 7 have been considered in the national figures.

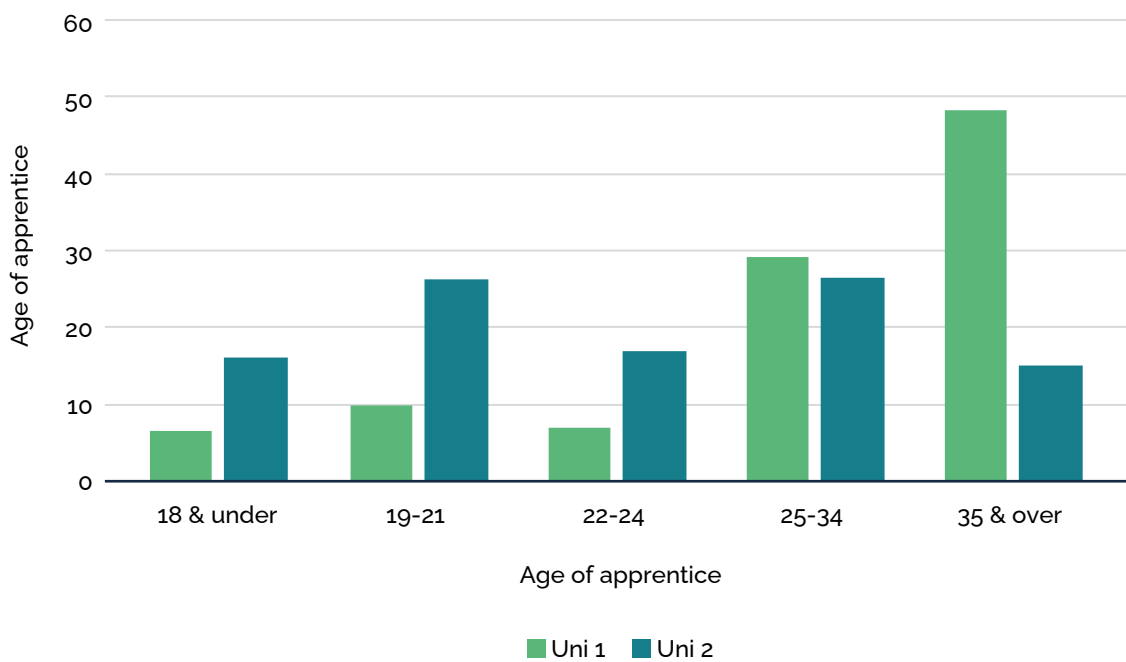
Figure 2: Age of degree apprentices



Source: DfE data on apprenticeship starts in 2022/23, and data provided by each university. For university 1, this is all current apprentices in 2023/24, for university 2, it is all apprenticeship starts in 2021/22, 2022/23, 2023/4.

As can be seen in figure 2, University 2 has more younger students than the national averages, while the smaller institution, University 1, has more older students. This is particular the case where students are over 35, as shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Degree apprentices by age category in more detail



Much of these differences in age are related to the sectors where degree apprenticeships were offered. Nursing and other health-related degree apprentices are most commonly existing staff who have progressed onto a degree apprenticeship from jobs that required lower levels of qualification. In our discussions with staff at both institutions, it was clear that there are large sectoral differences in recruiting degree apprentices. Sectors like health typically attract existing staff wishing to progress, and this is encouraged by employers, notably the NHS. At University 1, which had high numbers of health and related degree apprentices, the average age was almost 34 years old, with two-thirds of the apprentices starting between the ages of 25 and 42. At University 2, 80% of the apprentices on health and related programmes were over 25, with 36% of the total over 35. It is increasingly considered a common career path and allows individuals who would not otherwise have the opportunity to progress at work to obtain higher skills and progression. It also helps to tackle staff shortages in these areas.

Sectors including engineering, manufacturing and digital, therefore, see degree apprenticeships as a way of recruiting young people into the business and training them up. These companies can have ageing workforces, particularly in engineering and manufacturing, and see these new recruits as the future of their businesses. Digital companies generally have a younger workforce but can struggle to get individuals with the skills they want from day one when recruiting. So, in order to get fully qualified staff, they are prepared to spend their levy on training new recruits and helping them grow. At University 2, amongst degree apprentices on business, technology and engineering related programmes, 66% were aged 21 or below, with 31% of the apprentices in these sectors starting at age 18. It is notable that much of the debate around the age of apprentices does not reflect this nuance and sectoral disparity.

In terms of social background, we have information from University 2 on the parental education of degree apprentices, but no information from University 1 while there is also limited information at the national level. At University 2, of those who provided information on their parental education, 57% of degree apprentices' parents did not have degree level qualifications. In health and related areas, this was higher at 64%, likely a result of these individuals being older and more likely to be existing staff. Conversely, in business and digital courses, only 53% of degree apprentices' parents had no degree level education. Again, this likely reflects the age profile, as these apprentices are more likely to be younger and new recruits. This is similar to the figure for undergraduates at the university, where slightly more than half of students come from a family where their parents do not have degree level qualifications.

4.3.2 Support for degree apprentices

Interviewees told us that a key difference in terms of the support needs of degree apprentices versus traditional-entry students is the level of support needed for academic skills, as well as the development of functional skills, such as English and maths. Degree apprentices were more likely to need support with the theoretical learning, particularly in developing academic and study skills rather than practice-associated support. In these cases, the universities offer maths refresher courses for example or study skills sessions, since for some mature students it may have been 10-15 years since they sat in a classroom. There is also a noticeable difference depending on the age group; younger students are more like traditional undergraduates and require more support from the employer with the work experience elements. Whereas older apprentices, who are existing staff members, have more experience in the workplace so are easier for employers to manage, but may require additional academic learning support. Some degree apprentices may also have had previous negative experiences of academic study. Nevertheless, one interviewee stated that with the appropriate study support from the university, these apprentices '*can do incredibly well*' (employer engagement, University 2). A further factor affecting the level of support required was associated with those who are more socially and economically disadvantaged. It was suggested that personal circumstances such as being a carer or having a lower family income can make it more challenging for an apprentice to study and work in a job role at the same time.

University stakeholders discussed a number of ways that their institutions support degree apprentices. For example, to support disadvantaged learners, University 2 have a scheme offering financial and personal support as well as contextualised offers to certain groups of students (e.g. care leavers, those from a refugee background, or who are from a certain ethnic background). The scheme has since been extended to include degree apprentices. Additionally targeted support is offered to young apprentices from certain communities, such as those from certain Asian backgrounds whose families may have no experience of office environments and therefore struggle to envision themselves in one. The employer engagement team member from University 2 described mentoring support they have in place for these individuals to help them adapt to an office environment.

Other personal support factors were also discussed. One University 2 interviewee described the 'support triangle' in place which ensures apprentices have both a student support careers advisor and academic advisor allocated to them alongside their mentor at work. Monitoring systems were discussed to help check if issues with engagement arise for apprentices, and therefore allow for targeted support interventions which can be introduced when needed. This ultimately helps with retention and progression of degree apprentices. In both our case study universities' Access and Participation Plans, a support model was discussed broadly for the whole student body including catering for the needs of a diverse student population to allow for greater access to the support systems. This in turn should impact the retention and achievement of students. However, throughout the APPs specific support is not discussed in terms of apprentices, and the particular needs that they may have, instead it is discussed in terms of all students across the university.

During the interviews however the universities discussed a range of support that they make available to degree apprentices, including the same support they offer to traditional students, such as mental health and counselling services, as well as additional support to smooth their journey back into learning or into the workplace for those new to it. However, despite some support systems being in place, interviewees discussed the relatively low level of engagement degree apprentices have at university with anything beyond their immediate learning experience. Although apprentices can join clubs, societies and take part in extra-curriculum activities offered by the university and union, in reality they tend not to, instead coming into the university for classroom purposes only. Interviewees reasoned that apprentices do not have the time for these additional activities and support systems, and are more likely to be doing a course primarily to progress their career. Therefore, the additional 'student experience' is not of interest to them and so they engage with the university in a different way:

a lot of students are more mature, they've got lives and they've got commitments, responsibilities, they've got kids at dance camps, they do their work from community centres...they probably feel that they live in their workplace and the university is secondary to that and so therefore access to things like support systems or just tapping into knowing where to go and ask for support, I think is all that much harder (outreach, University 2).

This suggests a lack of awareness that also plays into the lack of engagement with support systems and other university services. Another interviewee suggested that there may be a lack of ease in navigating the support system for an apprentice:

I'll think all the appropriate level of support is there, but the question will be how quickly can they access it? Because there's two things, isn't there? You know. How keen is the learner to ask for help when they need it? And when they do ask for help... You know, you'll hear from a student support advisor and then they get passed around the houses a bit and think, do you know what? I'll just carry on anyway. (employer engagement, University 2)

Another area of support that was discussed in relation to degree apprentices was that provided by the employer. Primarily employers have a responsibility to create a workplace mentor for their apprentices, however there are issues around how quality can be assured with these and how the mentors can be monitored. For example, one university interviewee noted that in some cases workplace mentors are not experts in the specialist field of the apprenticeship and so suggested the level or nature of support they are able to give may not be sufficient for a high-quality apprenticeship.

As discussed previously universities tend to have a higher level of consciousness when thinking about recruiting degree apprentices in line with the WP agenda. Likewise, there are various instances of additional support they offer to students and apprentices from certain disadvantaged backgrounds to help them succeed in the university environment. However, one participant highlighted that the same level of support cannot be ensured on the employer side, for example ensuring apprentices from minority backgrounds having a positive experience of the workplace when with the employer is beyond the university's control. One way that University 2 discussed trying to overcome any issues with employers is through an account management model. If there are issues with the employer, in that they are not being supportive enough or not giving the right amount of work, this should be raised through the university contact, which can be escalated to the apprenticeship team to start a conversation with the employer. The work-based learning coaches based at the university are also engaging with and supporting each apprentice and therefore should escalate any concerns which can be managed between the university and employer. These interventions attempt to bring about a more holistic and high-quality experience for degree apprentices across both the off-the-job and on-the-job elements.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, DAs are becoming an established part of the HE landscape, and there is increasing demand from schools and young people to understand and apply for DAs as an alternative to traditional full-time study. However, the system of apprenticeships, with levy and standards, creates a situation where the employer is the primary recruiter, as an apprenticeship is a job first and training at a university or other provider second. Outreach staff at both our case study universities explain how private schools have been more aware of the possibilities of DAs for their students, leaving young people at state secondary schools at a disadvantage with less awareness of different levels of apprenticeship. Employers selecting apprentices can recruit in any way they choose and are most focused on getting the best employee for the job role. In many cases, the best recruit to a DA will be an existing employee who is offered the chance to develop and learn higher skills. The age profile of apprentices suggests that this is particularly true in sectors like healthcare. The limited information available on parental background indicates that it is older apprentices who are more likely to come from homes where their parents did not attend university. Currently, existing measures of social mobility do not consider these older workers, who may have missed out on higher education at 18, as 'disadvantaged', although as noted above, mature and part-time students were the focus of WP work in the early 2000s. Our research, albeit on a small scale, suggests that this definition should be reviewed and consider including those older workers who would otherwise not be able to access higher education.

As noted, employers make the final decision on whether to employ an apprentice, and this means that universities can influence but do not have ultimate control over areas like recruitment to address certain shortages of disadvantaged or underrepresented cohorts. Therefore, although there is a move to include DAs in access and participation plans, targets may not be appropriate as it is not in the providers' control to meet those targets. Similarly, certain sectors are more likely to recruit directly to a degree apprenticeship, particularly digital technology, engineering, and a range of business-related programmes. So, in terms of widening participation and outreach, any inclusion of DAs might be most successfully focused on those sectors where new recruits are the majority. Additional support from schools and universities to help prepare all young people for these opportunities is needed. However, outreach and awareness raising for DAs in sectors like healthcare, which are more likely to support existing staff to become degree apprentices, to young people may be less appropriate. This kind of nuance can be difficult to explain.

While DAs may enhance social mobility by creating career advancement training opportunities for some who had missed out on higher education at age 18, they do not contribute to widening participation as currently envisaged by competing HE providers or by the OfS which sets priorities and targets. As such, DAs cannot offer *'particular value for students from disadvantaged backgrounds'* that could discursively *'benefit most: young people whose social and financial position currently deters them from degree-level study'* in the words of the former minister' (Halfon, 2023). It remains to be seen whether the Labour government elected in July 2024 will adopt a different approach. Certainly, it should seek to decouple the elision of social mobility and widening participation in policy discourses. While WP almost always will lead to enhanced social mobility for the individual, social mobility via degree apprenticeships per se does not necessarily widen participation, particularly if DAs mainly divert young people who would otherwise have undertaken an undergraduate degree towards such provision.

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