EDGE FOUNDATION

Degree Apprenticeships in England:

What Can We Learn from the Experiences of Apprentices, Employers, and Education and Training Providers?

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Executive Summary

Launched in 2015, degree apprenticeships (DAs) were introduced in the UK as a novel route to obtaining a degree. DAs are marketed as a debt-free, vocational pathway into higher education, through a model that integrates higher learning and on-the-job training, funded by employers through the Apprenticeship Levy. They were intended to support national economic growth, address low productivity and low investment in skills training, and meet higher-level skills shortages.

DAs have grown in scale and stature in the education sector, in policy, and in the public view. While the scale of these developments has stimulated innovative models of delivery and new and productive relationships between employers and education and training providers (ETPs), their growth has been identified as a source of disruption. There are concerns that increases in expensive DAs normally taken by employees already in the workforce are to the detriment of resourcing and support for apprenticeships to help young people enter the workforce. The potential capacity of DAs to act as instruments of social mobility has been simultaneously celebrated and questioned. Employers have raised concerns that the levy is insufficiently flexible to support their training needs.

Given the potential benefits and opportunities DAs are reported to offer, it is necessary to investigate the claims made in relation to economic growth, skills development, and social mobility. It is essential to capture the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders regarding the opportunities and challenges they face, to inform the development of the pathway in a changing political climate.

This research is a timely evaluation of DAs in the context of wider apprenticeship and education policy. The Edge Foundation, with partners from the Universities of Bath, Huddersfield and Oxford, investigated the experiences of stakeholders around DAs. Data collection was conducted between spring 2022 and autumn 2023. Our team conducted interviews with nearly 100 stakeholders, including large employers, SMEs, ETPs, degree apprentices, and policymakers. It garnered these stakeholder groups' perspectives on the opportunities and challenges in the design, recruitment and delivery of DAs. This research reflects on DAs' contribution to economic growth, skills development, and social mobility. Hitherto, much research around DAs has been quantitative, or limited to small case studies with small numbers of ETPs and employers. The data provides a rich, illustrative portrait across employment sectors and actors of the diversity and flexibility of DAs.

Findings

Development and design

- Employers play an important role through trailblazer groups in the designing of new apprenticeship standards and ensuring the responsivity of DAs to their needs. Involved employers were motivated by broad concerns for workforce development, aiming to cultivate consistent arrangements for supporting employees' professional qualifications at a degree level to address existing or upcoming staffing and skills shortages. Strong partnerships with government, and increasingly ETPs, are essential to ensure that occupational competencies fit into technical pathways and design integrated end point assessments.

- Employer trailblazer groups were criticised as unable to effectively engage SMEs, and remain inadequately flexible, with little immediate return on investment for resource-poor businesses and ETPs. Managing the proliferation of standards is highly resource intensive. There was some tension as to whether professional body requirements and standards were able to keep up with current workplace practices.
- ETPs reported much of their activity around DAs is compliance driven and frequently cited overregulation. ETPs are subject to complex auditing and financial reporting processes, which often overlapped with internal monitoring mechanisms. Some of these schemas measured quality in mutually incompatible ways. Providers had mixed views as to whether these activities resulted in benefits to quality. The extra resource required and the administrative burden imposed to meet compliance requirements can lead to some ETPs considering whether to continue their DA offer.
- Delivery structure can vary widely even within sectors, with various patterns of block study (virtually or face-to-face), workplace experience and placement rotations. Apprenticeship standards, compliance, resource allocation, programme capacity, and the evolving educational landscape, all influenced delivery.
- DAs incorporate a wide range of assessment practices. They generally cover core knowledge and skills set out in standards, and secondly, ensure apprentices can relate these capacities to their workplace experiences.

Delivery

- Concerns for the coordination of theoretical educational elements and workplace roles were a high priority but there was variability in the success of interventions. Regular employer engagement and integration of tutoring staff was widely considered of critical importance.
- Apprentices received support from their employers, their ETPs, and their peers. Employer mentors' relationship structures were highly variable. Providers offered a range of mentorship types including personal tutors, delivery leaders, to skills coaches situated within practice. Mentors were often busy, and there is limited training for mentors and guidance on best practice. Coordination could be complex. Tripartite reviews ubiquitously acted as linchpins between all three stakeholders. Those apprentices with experience of engaging with university student support were highly appreciative, though academic adjustments were often inadequately accommodating of apprentices' needs.
- Variability in delivery, while posing issues for the provision of consistent and equitable support, is also reflective of the diverse needs and capacities of stakeholders.

Motivations and recruitment

- Apprentices reported their motivation for pursuing a DA as primarily arising for a preference for practically oriented learning and non-academic settings, especially if they possessed a strong conception of their career aims. Apprentices emphasised the benefits of waged employment while avoiding the burden of student loans. Stakeholders indicated DAs offered an opportunity to engage in education that was not available to them previously, given for example, caring responsibilities, learning difficulties, disenchantment with education, or high opportunity costs. Apprentices reported that their involvement in DAs was largely self-initiated. Satisfaction with careers advice and guidance around DAs was generally poor. School-leavers reported advice they had received rarely prioritised DAs or was absent. Parents' knowledge was also often limited, though this is likely changing.

- Employers we spoke to embraced DAs as a means to secure long-term, sustainable employees while simultaneously addressing skill gaps within their industries. The majority of employers interviewed were levy payers. The levy effectively ring-fences funding for investment in skills and education at a time of severe financial stringency and resource pressures. Large employers frequently reported significant levy underspends, however. Primary obstacles included resource constraints, particularly around inadequate resource to backfill positions for apprentices. Complaints regarding the inflexibility of the levy, particularly its inability to accommodate employers' costs such as travel, wages, or backfill costs, were common. Administrating levy funds was a source of confusion and presented a substantial bureaucratic burden, particularly on SMEs.
- Many SMEs were in receipt of levy transfer funds. Some large levy payers strategically deployed this transfer through their supply chains or partners. Providers increasingly have taken the initiative to coordinate levy transfers. This has cultivated a system based on personal contacts.
- Despite the rising prominence of DAs in the public eye, our interviewees reported a sustained lack of understanding of the purpose of DAs. Providers reported having to manage employer expectations of apprentices. Certain sector engagement was much stronger than others, including for example health with large public sector employers. There was also low awareness amongst SMEs, with SMEs who were engaging often participating by chance.
- DAs' sustainability rests heavily on their financial viability for training providers. Providers often reported DAs were not economically viable, and expensive compared to other forms of provision. Some providers, however, identified them as a strategic opportunity to diversify their offer, and saw the benefits of their design and delivery and the development of new relationships with employers as an effective return on their investment.
- Employers control recruitment; providers' roles were generally limited. Some employers and providers pointed towards DAs as tools to diversify workforces, particularly in attracting women to traditionally male-dominated roles and sectors such as engineering, IT, and construction, and hiring from local, sometimes underprivileged, groups. Some interviewees identified difficulties in using DAs to diversify their workforces in terms of ethnicity. Workforce diversification was not, however, a major consideration of most employers when recruiting.

Collaboration and engagement

- Successful DAs hinge on the collaborative relationships between ETPs, employers, and apprentices. However, the forms and degrees of collaboration are very varied: some partnerships could be close, while others were reported as less effective. Common issues included a lack of familiarity with apprenticeships on the part of ETPs, and employers with limited capacity to contribute to the apprenticeship. ETPs reported making compromises between different employer requirements even within the same sector. Stakeholders stressed the considerable effort needed to develop and sustain good provider-employer relationships to ensure they were coordinating work, learning activities, and providing adequate support structures for apprentices.
- These issues were exacerbated in engagement with SMEs. Their smaller size increases resource needed and makes developing formalised procedures challenging for ETPs. Smaller cohorts also potentially diminished DAs' flexibility and adaptability to employer needs. To ameliorate some of these issues, stakeholders have increasingly taken on new roles in conducting collaborations, for example, providing placements for apprentices across different employers or coordinating levy transfer schemes.

- Effective alignment between apprentices, ETPs, and employers is essential but inconsistently realised. Strong communication mechanisms, such as regular reviews and dedicated liaison teams, were praised, though the onus often falls on apprentices to coordinate between stakeholders. Miscommunication, lack of engagement from line managers, and limited understanding of apprenticeship requirements were commonly identified issues.
- Constructive relationships, characterised by mutual trust and responsiveness, have emerged as DAs become more established. Some employers, particularly large organisations, have created in-house ETPs to deliver bespoke training tailored to their operational needs. These partnerships integrate academic and industry expertise, though tensions occasionally arise when partner ETPs struggle to accommodate employers' co-delivery roles.

Learning on a degree apprenticeship

- Apprentices' experiences of learning in HE are variable. Overall, there can be a tension between expectations of HE courses and the requirements of apprenticeship standards. There were operational and learning advantages and disadvantages of providers delivering DAs separately or together with undergraduates. Stakeholders' experiences varied as to how far lived and work experiences of apprentices mapped to learning activities. The utility of some learning was not always immediately evident to apprentices but became relevant over time. In some fast-moving fields, particularly technological and allied health apprenticeships, apprenticeship content was found to become rapidly obsolete.
- However, both apprentices and employers value the practical benefits that academic study provides. Apprentices reported it enabled them to recall and apply their learning more effectively. Apprentices identified improvements in their immediate workplace functions by instilling an appreciation of their broader sector while simultaneously preparing them for future career opportunities. This was especially widely praised by SMEs. ETPs and employers reported that apprentices were more motivated, had better attendance, and tended to achieve better results academically than fee-paying students. Their education and training cultivated strong theoretical knowledge, proficiency in practical tasks, and an embeddedness in cultures of employment. Apprentices were further recognised for having improved reflexivity, professionalism and confidence, contrasting favourably to new non-apprentice graduates of the same age.

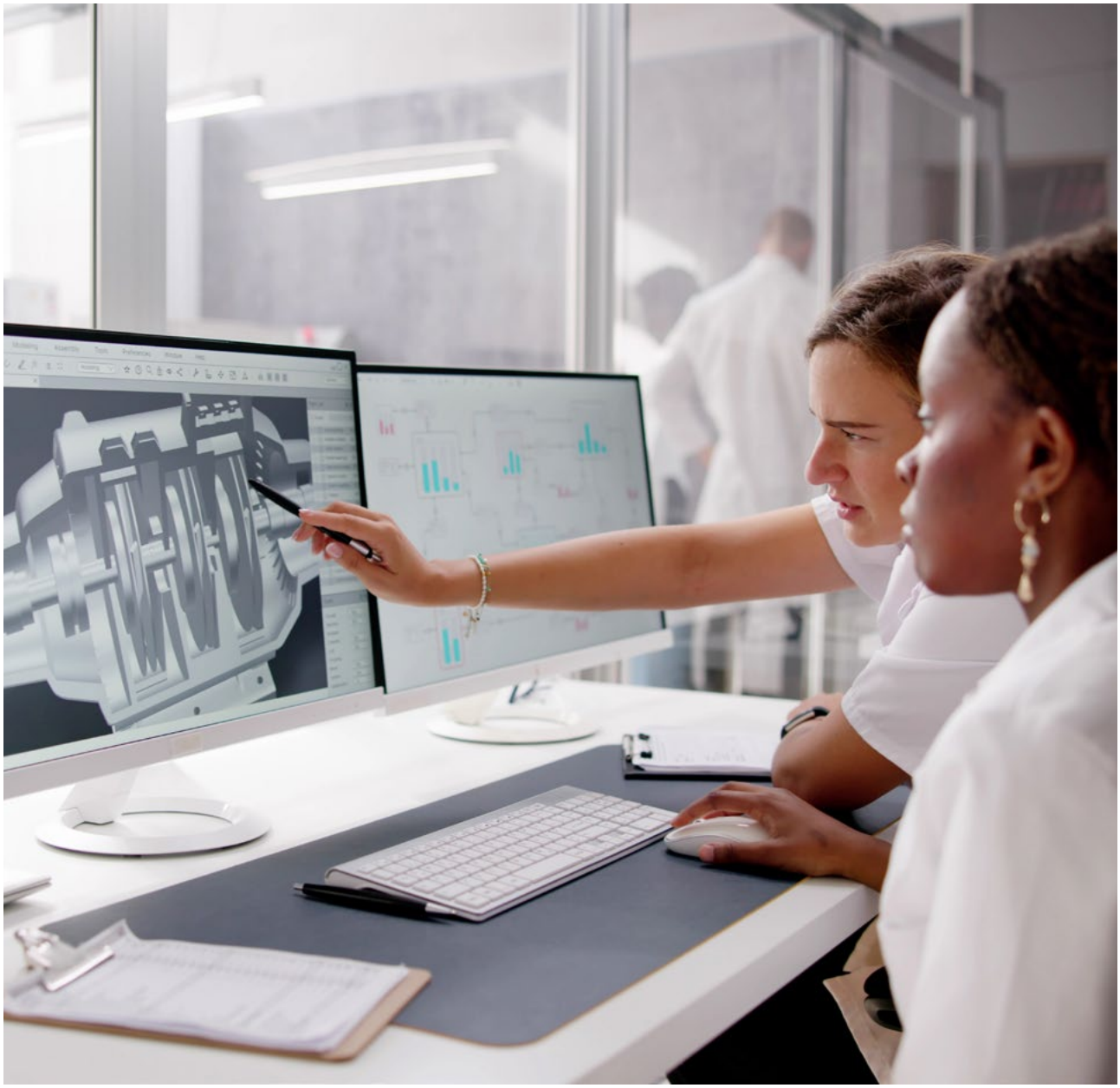
Recommendations

1. The government needs to take stock and consider a more systematic approach that serves to rationalise the way that employers are supported to offer a wide range of work-related and work-based opportunities to create their talent pipeline.
2. Employers and ETPs should work together to share and implement best practice to ensure that the content of the taught elements and the apprentice's learning on-the-job connect and relate to each other as regularly and deeply as possible.
3. With the creation of Skills England, the government should take the opportunity to review and simplify the process of design, delivery and quality assurance for DAs, and ensure regulatory elements work in concord with one another.
4. The government should pilot the introduction of elements of flexibility in apprenticeship standards to enable employers and ETPs to work more closely together to ensure that these opportunities can meet the emerging needs of the fast-moving economy.

5. The government needs to develop a clear and coherent communications strategy about DAs with a particular focus on support for SMEs, improved information for prospective apprentices, sharing of best practice for ETPs, and improved awareness of levy transfer schemes.

6. The government's commitment to adapting the levy into a 'Growth and Skills Levy', offers opportunities to improve DA delivery. However, it should take a measured approach and should consider modelling the impact of differentiating levy funding available for DAs by age and/or staff status, and diversification of the workforce.

7. ETPs should work together to continue to improve the offer of support to degree apprentices and ensure that this is universally available.



List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
APPUG	All-Party Parliamentary University Group
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CMI	Chartered Management Institute
DAs	Degree apprenticeships
DfE	Department for Education
DBIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
EPA	End point assessment
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
ETP	Education and training provider
FE	Further education
FSB	Federation of Small Businesses
GP	General practitioner (doctor)
HE	Higher education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEI	Higher education institution
HND	Higher National Diploma
IfATE	Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education
KSBs	Knowledge, skills and behaviours
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MMU	Manchester Metropolitan University
NHS	National Health Service
NSS	National Student Survey
OfS	Office for Students
PSRB	Professional statutory and regulatory bodies
QAA	The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprises
UCAS	University and Colleges Administration Service
UUK	Universities UK
VLE	Virtual learning environments

1. Introduction

Launched in 2015, Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) were introduced in England as a new form of programme leading to the award of a degree (DBIS, 2015). DAs are marketed as an alternative debt-free, vocational pathway into higher education (HE), through a model that integrates higher learning and in-work training. For successive governments and other advocates, the rollout of DAs was intended to support national economic growth, address low levels of productivity, and meet higher-level skills shortages by establishing a pipeline of skilled entrants into the workforce (DfE, 2020). DA programmes differ from 'mainstream' university degrees in four principal ways:

1. They prioritise combining work-based learning and higher academic learning
2. The system is employer-led and apprentices are employees
3. They are more explicitly aligned with external standards requirements and endorsing bodies
4. They can be funded through the Apprenticeship Levy paid by large employers.

While mainstream university degrees are anchored in academic or disciplinary bodies of knowledge exercised through *'academic tasks'* and delivered by specialised staff primarily on campuses, DAs are oriented towards work-based learning and assessment delivered by academic and practitioner staff (Welbourn et al., 2019).

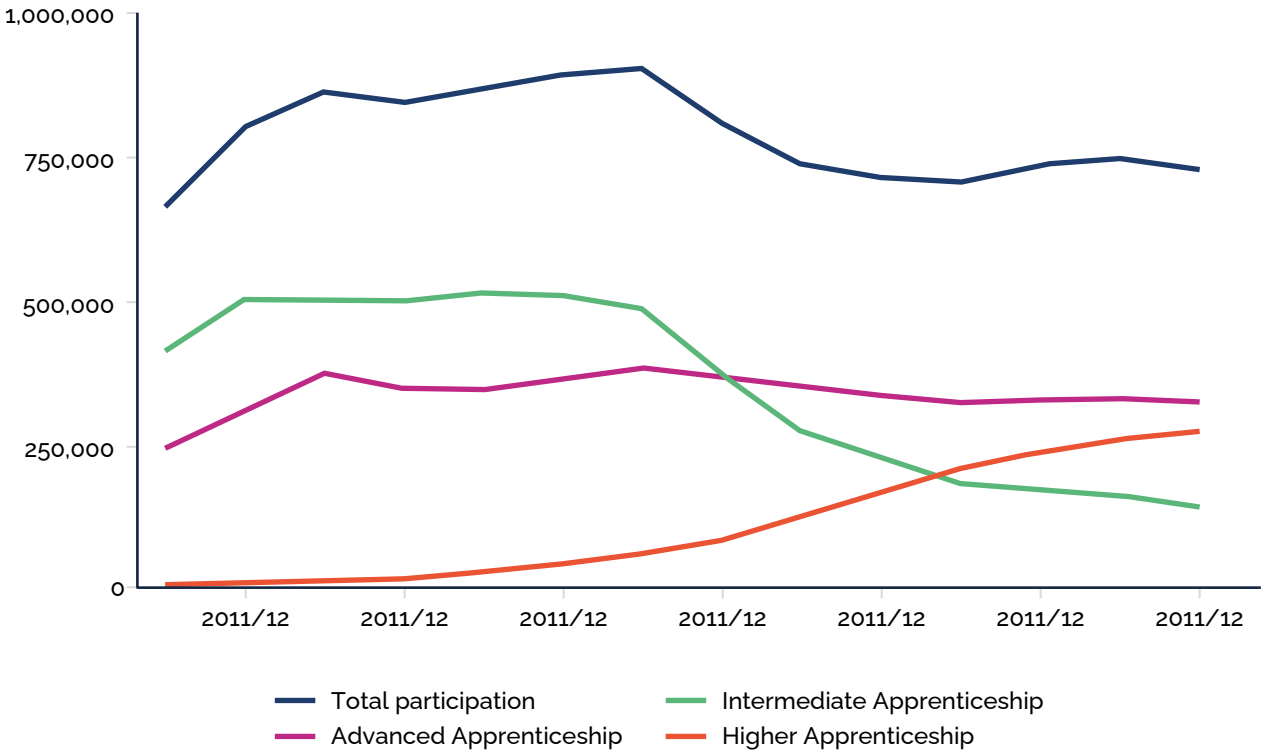
A degree apprentice must have obtained employment with an employer before they are eligible to enrol in an apprenticeship programme offered by an education and training provider (ETP). Apprentices spend most of their time with their employer. For funding purposes, at least 6 hours per week on average should be dedicated to study if they work 30 hours or more per week. Off-the-job training is provided by an ETP. The majority of these ETPs are universities or other higher education institutions (HEIs). The relationship between apprentices, employers, and ETPs is described as a 'tripartite' relationship. Since all apprenticeships are subject to inspections by Ofsted, the delivery of DAs is also subject to this inspection and monitoring regime. For many universities this is the first time they will have engaged formally with Ofsted.

DA courses are intended to be developed through collaborative partnerships between ETPs, employers, and professional bodies. In 2017, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) was established to help employers develop and approve quality apprenticeship standards through 'trailblazer' groups. ETPs are then at liberty to develop apprenticeships based on these employer-driven standards. Where appropriate, professional bodies determine the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to perform a specific job role and assessment plan (Bravenboer, 2016). In July 2024, the government announced that IfATE will be dissolved and a new body called Skills England will take over its functions, and more broadly address the skills needs of the country (DfE, 2024e). How Skills England will operate remains to be explicated.

DAs along with other apprenticeships, can be funded through employers via the Apprenticeship Levy. Employers in the UK with an annual payroll exceeding £3 million contribute 0.5% of their payroll into a digital levy fund, which is supplemented by a 10% monthly government top-up. Employers can use these funds to pay the costs of training apprentices. Any unspent contributions are returned to the Treasury after two years. This money is meant to be used to pay for apprenticeship training for smaller employers (who pay just 5% of the cost of training, or 0% for apprentices under 22) and for any additional payments needed to support apprentices, ETPs and employers. Fifty percent of the pot of large levy-payers can be pledged to smaller businesses (Papworth and Gluck, 2024a). Reports indicate that funding DAs through the levy is an appealing feature for employers (DfE, 2020). It has been anticipated that the number of DAs will continue to expand as

educational institutions develop capacity, but also as employers gain greater clarity and familiarity with the process of spending levy funding (WECD, 2019). The use-it-or-lose-it design of the levy means that employers are often incentivised to use the funds on more expensive higher-level apprenticeships rather than allow unspent money to be returned to the Treasury. Since the Levy was introduced in 2017, spending on Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships has risen from £44 million in 2017/18 to £506 million in 2021/22 (Halfon, 2023).

Figure 1: All apprenticeship participation by level



(DfE, 2024a)

There have also been concerted government efforts to support the development of DAs at Level 6. For example, the Office for Students launched a funding competition to expand new and existing DA provision and is distributing £40 million of funding via three funding waves between January 2024 and July 2025 (OfS, 2024). There have been recent calls for reform the Apprenticeship Levy, and the government proposed Growth and Skills Levy (DfE, 2024d) might offer employers more flexibility in how it can be used.

DAs include Level 6 programmes, leading to bachelors' degrees and Level 7 leading to masters' degrees. It is important to distinguish between other Level 6 apprenticeships often described as 'degree level'. Such courses may involve equivalent levels of training as a DA but do not lead to the awarding of a degree qualification. While this research has focused on *degree awarded* apprenticeships at Level 6, we have interviewed a small number of Level 7 apprentices. As of the end of 2024 as part of proposed reform to the Apprenticeship Levy, the government has confirmed employers will be encouraged to fund Level 7 apprenticeships outside of the levy (DfE, 2024d). Precise details of any changes are yet to emerge.

109

Level 6 apprenticeship standards approved for delivery
(IfATE, 2024)

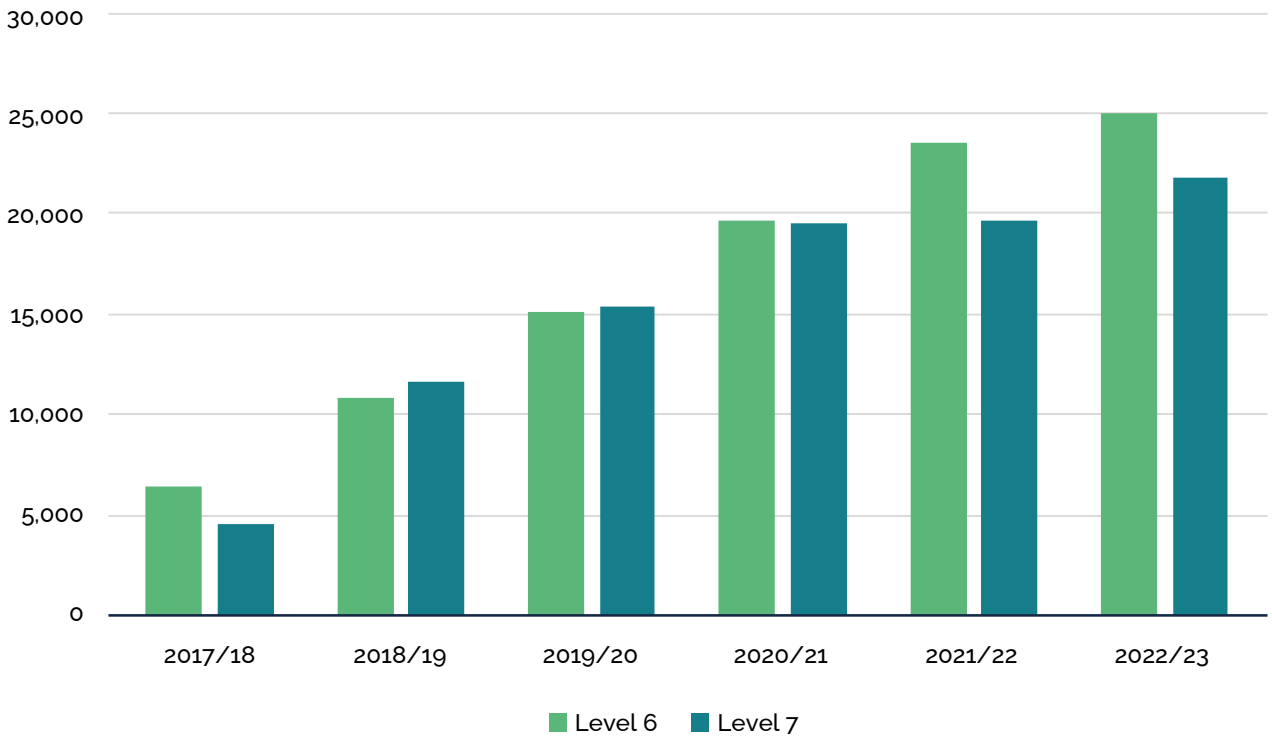
101

Universities delivered
(McLaughlin, 2023)

Growth of Higher Apprenticeships (Level 4-7) in totals and percentage of all apprenticeships
(DfE, 2024a)

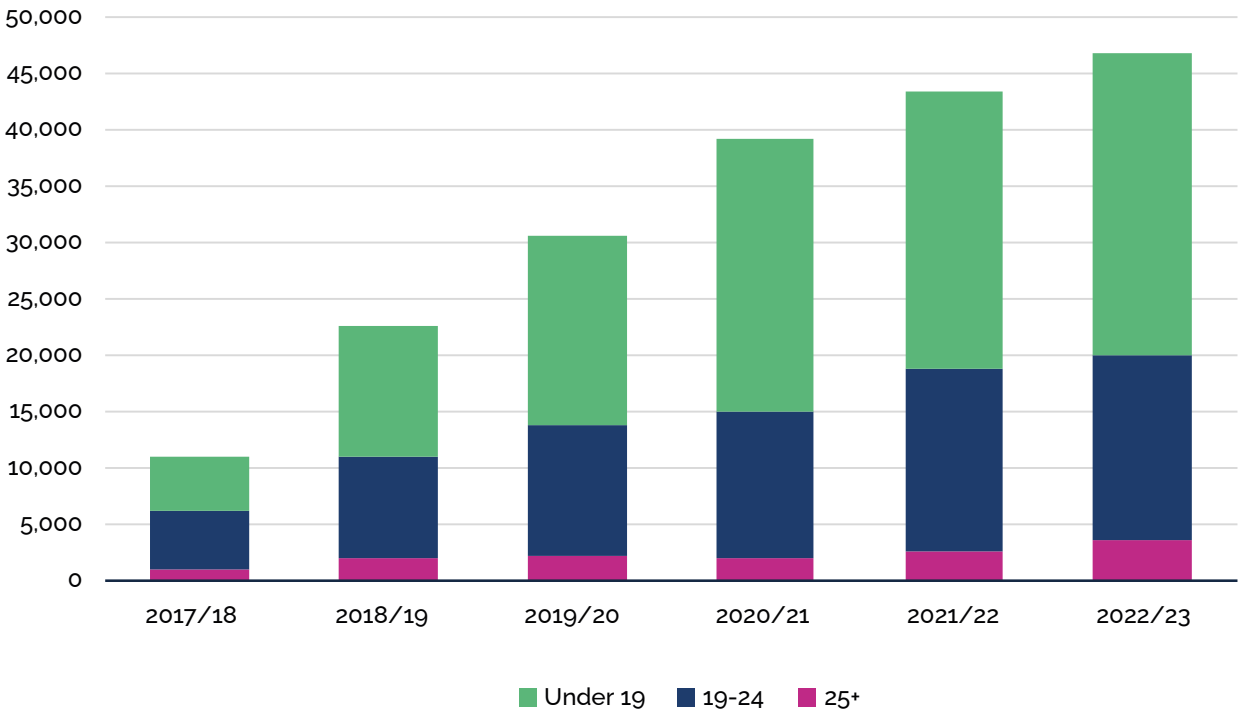
2010/11	**3,500**	**0.5%**
2015/16	**43,800**	**4.8%**
2023/24	**273,700**	**35%**

Figure 2: Number of Level 6 and 7 (with mandatory degree) apprenticeship starts



(DfE, 2024a)

Figure 3: Apprenticeship starts at Level 6+ (with mandatory degree) between 2017/18 to 2022/23 by age group

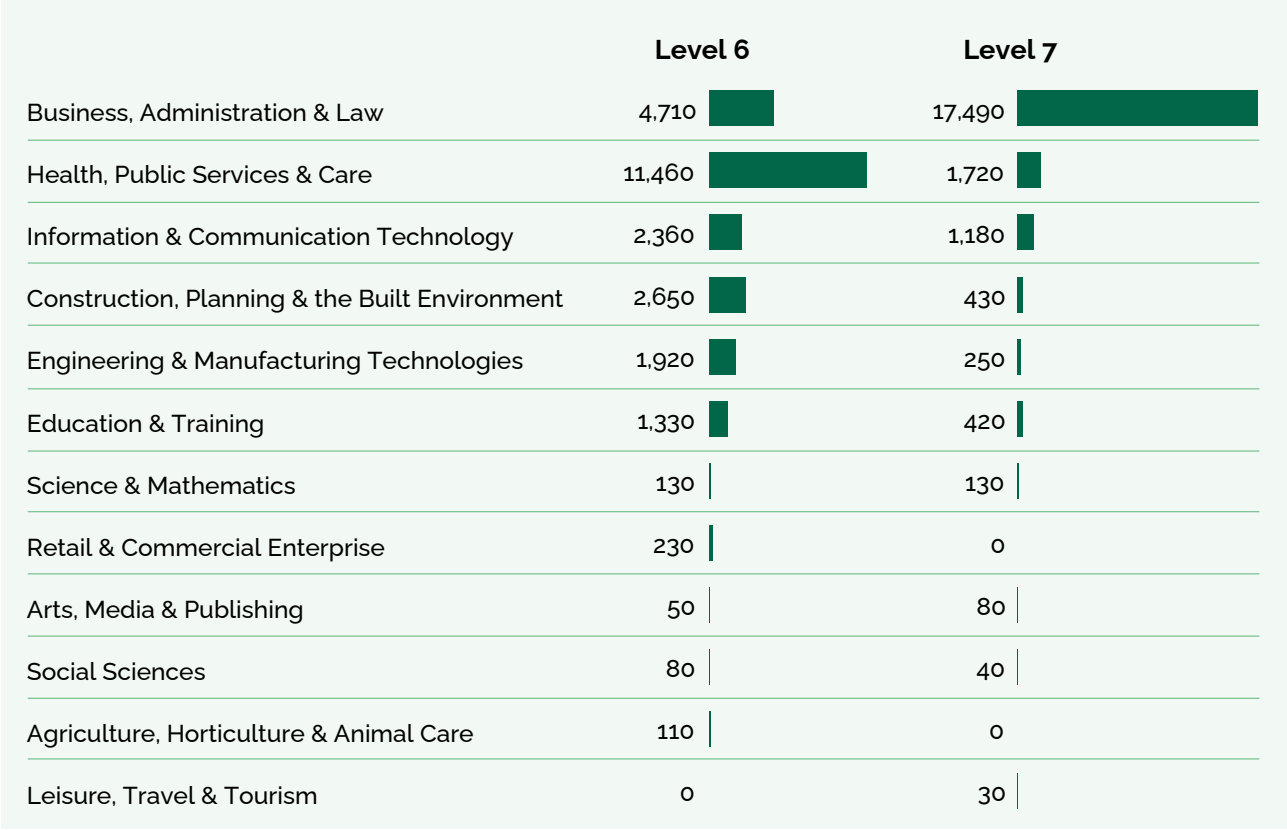


(DfE, 2024a)

Whilst development and take up of DAs was slow in their incipient years, the policy impetus was to support a continual growth of DAs. This growth has since been realised.

Higher and DAs have been revered, particularly during successive Conservative governments, as supporting *'productivity, social mobility and widening participation in higher education and employment'* (Burghart, 2022; Nawaz et al, 2024). DAs are also lauded for their potential to address economic priorities, such as mitigating skills shortages in sectors such as engineering and healthcare, or boosting the supply of high-demand competencies such as digital skills. DAs are increasingly recognised as having *'parity of esteem'* with mainstream degrees (UUK, 2019; Hegarty, 2024).

Figure 4: Degree apprenticeship starts by sector subject area and level 2022/23



(Bolton and Lewis, 2024)

Given the potential benefits and opportunities DAs are reported to offer, it is apt to investigate the policy claims made in relation to economic growth, skills development, and social mobility. It is essential to capture the experiences and perspectives of apprentices, employers, and ETPs regarding the opportunities and challenges they face, to inform the development of the pathway in a changing political climate. This research aims to investigate the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders involved in DAs. First, this report offers an overview of relevant literature followed by the research questions and outlining how the research was conducted. The findings are reported in 5 chapters:

- Development and design of degree apprenticeships
- Delivery of degree apprenticeships
- Motivations and recruitment
- Collaboration and engagement
- Learning on a degree apprenticeship

These chapters offer the analysis of the rich interview data with quotations from key stakeholders. The report finishes with conclusions and recommendations for policy, development and delivery.

2. Literature review

There is a growing body of literature about degree apprenticeships (DAs). In this review, two main issues will be covered; first, motivation, successes and challenges of engaging with DAs; second, evidence for DAs supporting diversity of workforce and widening participation at universities.

2.1 Why engage with degree apprenticeships: motivations and challenges for stakeholders

2.1.1 Employers

For employers, DAs are promoted as a qualification pathway for recruiting, retaining, retraining or upskilling staff with higher-level skills and knowledge tailored to the needs of specific industries (OfS, 2019c). This aligns with a general sense of employer dissatisfaction with existing education and training routes, particularly around their expectation that graduates should be *'ready for work'* and *'able to have an impact'* for employers immediately (Mason, 2020; Rowe, 2018; Spencer et al., 2022). Due to the significant differences between employers, which include large private multinationals, public sector organisations and SMEs, there is considerable variation in employer motivations.

Exploring why employers engage with DAs needs to begin by considering the effects of the introduction of a mandatory Apprenticeship Levy for large employers (those with an annual pay bill of more than £3 million), and the availability of levy transfer funds for non-levy payers. The introduction of the levy was intended to incentivise employers to address what is considered substantial underinvestment in skills and training. Employers' training spend per employee has fallen in real terms by 28% since 2005 (Evans, 2022). Total employer expenditure on training and development has continued to fall since the introduction of the levy, declining 7.7% in real terms between 2017 and 2022 (DfE, 2023). Employer motivation to engage with DAs and other apprenticeships therefore becomes an issue of business necessity rather than alignment with government aims, where levy paying businesses are faced with a *'tax'* that they can claim back by investing in apprenticeship training, becoming in some instances the *'default training budget'* (Welbourn et al., 2019, p. 407). One study found 68% of employers would discontinue using DAs without the levy (Nawaz and Edifor, 2024). Apprenticeships at Levels 4 to 7 are also more likely to be employed by levy-payers than other apprentices (DfE, 2024b).

State incentivisation into investment in skills and training does however align with other employers' purposes in engaging with DAs. It is these rationales which generally appear in research evaluating employer motivations. Employers reported enhanced organisational performance and growth (Nawaz and Edifor, 2024) by fostering staff development (IFF Research, 2022b). This includes firstly, *'soft skill, specific technical knowledge, business awareness, and work experience'* (Fabian and Taylor-Smith, 2021). Secondly, DAs have been shown to enable apprentices to apply academic knowledge in practical contexts (Watkinson-Miley et al., 2022). DAs' flexible skills profiles, shaped by employer co-design practices, ensures the alignment of skills with employer needs, with many employers valuing this collaborative approach (Antcliff et al., 2016). However, some employers expressed reluctance to take the lead in designing DAs, often deferring to academics or lacking experience in academic course development (IFF Research, 2022b; Mulkeen et al., 2019).

DAs' mix of employer-oriented capacities means DAs have been identified as being used to address shortfalls in qualified personnel, for example in the NHS (Green et al., 2022) supporting recruitment and retention (Nawaz and Edifor, 2024), upskilling, progression, and professionalisation across diverse fields such as policing, digital and engineering, thus boosting productivity (Lester, 2020), and to generate supply or *'grow your own'*

talent in highly competitive labour markets (Antcliff et al., 2016). Work-based projects are seen as minimally disruptive to business operations and indeed provide stimulation and tangible outcomes (Rowe, 2018). Antcliff et al. (2016) reported that employers they interviewed perceived DAs as *'excellent value for money'*, though one employer in another study stressed that this assessment included a sense of corporate responsibility for nurturing talent rather than financial considerations such as lower wages (Dziallas et al., 2021).

There are, however, financial and resource barriers for employers. Employing an apprentice and facilitating their apprenticeship includes costs in terms of wages, work-based training opportunities and mentoring, covering practice learning placements, and affording off-the-job learning time equal to 20% of their working week (Baker, 2019; Stone and Worsley, 2022); now, six hours' training per week (DfE, 2022). Effective mentorship in the workplace has been identified as particularly important to facilitating apprentices' skills development, sharing of tacit knowledge, and for encouragement, but incurs costs to employers in terms of time away from substantive roles. There is limited existing literature on best practice (Sevens et al., 2024). Employers also reported struggling to release apprentices for their off-the-job learning especially at busy times (Minton and Lowe, 2019). There is therefore considerable appetite amongst employers to broaden the costs that are eligible through the levy funding (City & Guilds, 2023), at the risk that this might increase *'deadweight costs'* by subsidising training employers would have previously paid for (Tahir, 2023). This is now being debated as the 'Growth and Skill Levy'. Further policy is being awaited in this space (Papworth and Gluck, 2024a).

Employers who did not offer DAs commonly cited a lack of demand from employees, a lack of need for higher level qualifications, and a lack of vacancies (IFF Research, 2022b). Baker (2019) suggests that for employers to engage they already needed an appreciation of the value of apprenticeships. Larger employers are more likely to use DAs (IFF Research, 2022b) and SMEs face greater capacity constraints in terms of time, knowledge and resources to navigate the system (FSB, 2019; CMI, 2022). Employers' investment in training apprentices has been identified as vulnerable to *'poaching'*, as opposed to employer-specific training and accreditation (Smith, Caddell, et al., 2021; cf. Mohrenweiser et al., 2019).

The relevance of the content of DAs for employers has remained under scrutiny. Concerns have been expressed that DAs lack flexibility and responsivity, and focus heavily on future skills gaps to the detriment of meeting current skills needs (Policy Connect, 2019; Mulkeen et al., 2019). While the policy intent for DAs was to act as a gateway to the workforce for young people, the majority of degree apprentices are not new to the workplace. Two-thirds of new level 6 apprenticeship starters in 2018-19 had already been with their employer for more than twelve months (Hubble and Bolton, 2019), though this had fallen to 45% had in 2022-23 (Bolton and Lewis, 2024). These high proportions have cultivated suspicions that employers looking to use levy funds in-house are offering expensive DAs as a perk for existing employees or to develop or accredit existing management skills (Welbourn et al., 2019) rather than integrating young people into the labour market as in other European countries (Field, 2023). Level 7 DAs, including MBAs, have been particularly criticised along these lines. However, current evidence does not indicate that employers are using DAs primarily as a replacement for costly graduate recruitment programmes or other work-based learning (IFF Research, 2022b).

2.1.2 Education and training providers

Compared to the larger literature on policy, employer and apprentice motivations for engaging with DAs, there is comparatively little research into why education and training providers (ETPs) seek to deliver DAs. The rhetoric of the policy literature at least since the Dearing Report (1997) has tended towards ensuring HE is *'responsive to the needs of industry and commerce'* through the development of sustained partnerships with local and national employers and professional bodies (Bravenboer, 2016). Policy interventions have, on the one hand, focused on creating quasi-market systems in higher education. These systems aim to align

undergraduate programme development with labour market demands by incentivising demand for courses that offer higher potential returns for graduates (Palfreyman, 2019). On the other hand, DAs are a more directly interventionist strategy (Fortwengel et al., 2021) to facilitate new opportunities for ETP-employer relationships through the formalisation and bureaucratisation of dialogue and a separate revenue stream via the levy. This cajoling implies a torpidity on the part of ETPs (Welbourn et al., 2019).

Bravenboer identified in 2016 the then developing DAs initiative was an opportunity for ETPs to *'move beyond the traditional separation of work and learning and develop the 'trust' relationships that are required to overcome the barriers to effective employer-university collaboration'* (Bravenboer, 2016, p. 13). Enthusiasm for these opportunities seems to be widely shared by ETPs, though current research lacks a more panoramic perspective of the breadth of ETP motivations beyond universities and other HEIs. Nearly all English HEIs are registered as apprenticeship providers. Universities such as Winchester, Sheffield Hallam, and Middlesex, featured in prior research (Pullen, 2024), positioned DAs as aligned with their local and national economic priorities and social missions. This included widening participation agendas and pedagogic developments and innovation, including work-based and project-based learning (Lester, 2020; Rowe, 2018; Carter and Tubbs, 2019). Mulkeen et al., (2019) in their interviews with 27 ETP representatives in 2015-16, identified that DAs were a welcome continuation in many respects of their work engaging with employers, students and professional bodies, and developing participation pathways with other ETPs. They nonetheless required greater formality in linking learning in the workplace and classroom. Work-based learning strategies to ensure the effective interweaving of on-the-job and off-the-job learning such as reflective practice or learning journals/portfolios feature prominently (Fabian et al., 2022). Existing research indicates ETPs have been active in responding to demands from employers and some have initiated approaches to employers (Welbourn et al., 2019). Evidence indicates that ETPs have responded to the need for collaboration by facilitating a range of touch-points during the development, design, and delivery of DAs including trailblazer groups, stakeholder events, employer and apprentice inductions and ongoing tripartite reviews (Minton and Lowe, 2019). The DA design process was in some instances helpful for ETPs to evaluate possible demand in conversation with employers and determine the course's goals and aims (Dziallas et al., 2021).

Lester in their review of the literature reported the successful delivery of DAs required central leadership, a visible central unit leading and supporting DAs, and empowering staff members across partnerships to act as *'champions'* to secure collaborations (Lester, 2020; Minton and Lowe, 2019; Quew-Jones, 2023). This is not easy to achieve. Delivering DAs represents a possible route for diversification of ETPs' income streams but requires a move away from guaranteed, front-loaded income, therefore increasing risk (Rowe, 2018). The primarily strategic decisions by senior management to pursue provision of DAs (following potentially mercurial national policy priorities and incentives) negatively impacted staff involved in implementation. Internal and external processes were expedited and had to flex to validate awards to quickly address specific market needs and accommodating contrasting stakeholder needs which left staff feeling disempowered (Martin et al., 2020).

Balancing the administrative requirements and monitoring from bodies such as the Office for Students (OfS), Ofsted, IfATE, and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) was also identified as onerous (Lester, 2020; Welbourn et al., 2019). Engaging employers in programme design was considered difficult due to its protracted length (Rowe, 2018), changing employer needs, short-term needs outcompeting long-term needs, and employers' inability to articulate skill and knowledge requirements in academic language (Mulkeen et al., 2019). Employer concerns had to be further balanced between professional body requirements, apprenticeship standards, the generality and specificity of provision, and assessment requirements particularly where the degree and apprenticeship were awarded separately (Mulkeen et al., 2019). During delivery, on and off-the-job learning also needed to be effectively integrated and quality managed, and this was particularly challenging for DA cohorts with apprentices split across many small employers. There is variability in how far an emphasis on theory versus practice enabled better outcomes and how far off-the-job learning was effectively integrated into working practice (Stone and Worsley, 2022).

It has been identified that a considerable level of resource is required to adjust delivery practices and provide adequate, and important coaching and mentoring for learning and assessment of DAs beyond classrooms (Lester, 2020; Spencer et al., 2022; Welbourn et al., 2019). Understandably, case studies have emphasised that ETPs often looked at developing DAs which complemented their existing offer (Dziallas et al., 2021). However, in cases where existing degree programmes have been adapted to be delivered as apprenticeship programmes rather than designed from scratch, they have been criticised as insufficiently attentive to DAs' unique educational requirements (Lester, 2020; Spencer et al., 2022). As a consequence of these various demands on ETPs, they did not report being able to take full advantage of DAs (Russell Group, 2023) as opportunities to further innovative practices or to challenge perceptions around the relationship of higher education and work (Lester, 2020).

2.1.3 Apprentices

Motivations of prospective DAs have been noted to vary considerably by profile, context, workplace, and degree subject. Their experiences also vary depending on whether they self-identify more as students or employees, whether they are new entrants to the workforce or existing staff (Pullen, 2024), and their prior experience of higher education (Fabian et al., 2022; Leonard et al., 2018). A DfE survey indicates that DAs are older in general than undergraduates, with 35% of degree apprentices aged 19-24, and 53% aged 25 and over in 2021 (IFF Research, 2022a). Differences were also pronounced between younger Level 6 and older Level 7 DAs with more experience in the workplace (Engeli and Turner, 2019). There are, however, a number of identifiable headline motivations in the literature.

Just 1% of degree apprentices reported they had begun an apprenticeship as participation had been mandated by their employer (IFF Research, 2022a) suggesting apprentices' intrinsic motivations were of high importance. Apprentices are generally motivated by the prospect of progression opportunities and gaining qualifications, earning while learning, and the enhanced status of being linked to an employer (OfS 2019b; 2019c). 93% of degree apprentices reported gaining a degree was important in their decision to undertake a DA (IFF Research, 2022a). The cultural prestige of the degree award, perceived as more significant than an apprenticeship by employers and apprentices, has been identified as potentially distracting from the award of the apprenticeship (Mulkeen et al., 2019). However, the interests and capacities of prospective apprentices is regularly contrasted to those entering mainstream university undergraduate degrees, and apprentices often defined themselves this way (Taylor-Smith et al., 2019). They are represented and represent themselves as possessing a disposition towards practical and work-based applications than the more general knowledge and skills imbued by *'traditional'* degree qualifications (OfS, 2019c; Watkinson-Miley et al., 2022). Apprentices strongly characterise their courses as featuring a greater emphasis on work experience, work-based learning, and practical or clinical applications.

These motivations are related to the high priority that apprentices placed on the opportunities for entry and progression in a chosen employment sector that a degree can offer. For apprentices new to the workforce or sector, DAs were an opportunity to obtaining work experience in a chosen sector. The motivations for apprentice-starts already in the workforce tend to be different; Smith et al. (2023) in their study of apprentices already in the workforce found they were more likely to be upskilling in their current employment. These apprentices were invested in their personal and professional growth and the new knowledge and skills they could bring to their employment. Apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds, women, and those with dependents were more likely to start an apprenticeship at a later stage in their career, and considered DAs as an important opportunity for professional advancement (Leonard et al., 2018; Smith poor et al., 2023). DAs also offered job security; 80% of degree apprentices in DfE research planned to carry on working for the same employer once they completed their apprenticeship (IFF Research, 2022a).

Apprentices perceive benefits around pay, including the ability to study whilst still earning a salary (Engeli and Turner, 2019), avoid student debt, and have their training costs covered (IFF Research, 2022a). The opportunity to *'earn while you learn'* is ubiquitously contrasted to the costs of loans to pay for undergraduate tuition fees. There is some anxiety as to whether DA pay levels are adequate. Analysis of job adverts for DA new starts showed wide variation in salaries. In adverts posted in 2019-2020, annual salaries ranged from £7,500 to £30,000 with a mean of £16,497, with around half advertising at greater than national minimum wage (Baker, 2019; Fabian et al., 2023). The DfE data indicated average earnings per hour were more like £13.84 (IFF Research, 2022a). Data from social work DAs interestingly indicated that while advancement in careers, learning and finances were the primary motivators for apprentices, the positive possible impact on future earnings was comparatively less important (Stone and Worsley, 2022).

Misconceptions around DAs are found to be widespread. This includes confusion over the level of attainment, employment and career progression prospects of DAs compared to mainstream non-apprenticeship undergraduate degrees, and whether DAs were available for existing employees only (Green et al., 2022). In one poll, 94% of school leavers had heard of full-time degrees and 88% were interested, 91% were aware of DAs but just 25% were interested (APPUG, 2021). Nonetheless, there is some sense that DAs are developing a parity of esteem with mainstream undergraduate courses (Engeli and Turner, 2019; Papworth and Gluck, 2024b) with programmes offered by prestigious employers such as Visa, PwC, and Jaguar Land Rover and by prestigious ETPs including Russell Group universities (CMI, 2022).

Apprentices themselves valued the knowledge and skills that apprentices developed and their improved capacity to apply theoretical knowledge in practice (Taylor-Smith et al., 2023; Nawaz and Edifor, 2024). On top of remunerative benefits apprentices reported high job satisfaction, greater loyalty to the employer, stability, and resilience having obtained permanent roles more readily, and advanced career progression compared to other equivalent graduates (Engeli and Turner, 2019; Jones et al., 2023). Degree apprentices reported the highest levels of satisfactions (90%) amongst all apprentices (IFF Research, 2022a). Another study found 82% of apprentices reported their studies were facilitating their career progression (Nawaz and Edifor, 2024). Despite their high reported overall satisfaction, DAs had comparatively low (80%) satisfaction with the quality of learning from their ETP (IFF Research, 2022a) and NSS data indicates DAs were less satisfied than undergraduate students with their course (Stein, 2023).

Apprentices have been found to face barriers to participation, including achieving a work, study, and life balance (Taylor-Smith et al., 2023). Mature DAs (over 23 years old) often had to balance responsibilities to dependents (Konstantinou and Miller, 2021). Research has also indicated difficulties in ring-fencing time for work-based learning (Taylor-Smith et al., 2023) and off-the-job learning, and a lack of recognition for prior learning (Smith et al., 2023). The loss of some traditional experiences of higher education are also reported to be potentially disadvantageous, including important aspects of belonging to a community, the social and social capital benefits of student life, and moving away from home (Fabian et al., 2022).

2.2 Diversity and widening participation

DAs have frequently been associated with improving levels of upward social mobility. Given their lower opportunity costs, it has been suggested that DAs may attract disadvantaged school leavers who may have previously been deterred by university study because of concerns related to the cost of studying and value for money as a mainstream HE entrant (OfS, 2019b, 2019c). DAs are also suggested to potentially improve the skills of the older workforce without existing degree level qualifications, enabling career progression and increased salaries.

Evaluations of the impact of DAs on social mobility are fragmentary and not overwhelmingly positive. Only 17% of new DA starts were drawn from people from disadvantaged backgrounds in England in 2017/18, and that proportion is not increasing. Sutton Trust research identified that just 5% of those starting a DA in 2021 were eligible for free school meals (down from 6% in 2018/19), which contrasted unfavourably to the 6.7% going to university (Cavaglia et al., 2022). Data published by the OfS on DAs in relation to deprivation is disaggregated according to areas and not of the individual apprentice (Policy Connect, 2019). The OfS (2019b) uses POLAR quintiles to suggest that apprenticeships in general attract lower proportions of disadvantaged learners the higher their level, with the majority of Level 6 and 7 apprentices being from areas with higher levels of HE participation already (POLAR 5 and 4). The relative advantaged composition of DA cohorts is echoed in further studies sampling the DA population (Jones et al., 2023). These poor metrics have been reported in the press and literature as evidencing an intensification of a *'middle-class grab'* of degree level apprenticeships (Camden, 2022). It was further reported in the media that the growth of Level 6 and 7 apprenticeships accounted for 21% of the Department for Education's apprenticeship budget, up from just 2% in 2017/18. There is growing concern that this is *'squeezing out opportunities for younger workers and threatens the sustainability of the apprenticeship budget'* (Camden, 2023). For apprenticeships at Level 6 and 7, the majority of starts are aged 25+ (57% of the total in 2022/23), with the proportion of this age slowly growing from 51% of starts in 2018/19 (DfE, 2024c).

There is debate around proxies for measuring apprentices' backgrounds. Lillis and Bravenboer described POLAR data as *'highly misleading and simply wrong'* in their survey from over 1000 Middlesex University apprentices (2022, pp. 7, 37). There is evidence that DAs attract a higher proportion of mature learners, further education students, and workers otherwise unlikely to access HE opportunities (UUK, 2019; WECD, 2019; Engeli and Turner, 2019; Lester, 2020; MMU, 2021). Employers, especially public sector employers such as NHS trusts, have been identified as recognising at least the potential capacity of DAs in widening participation and social mobility to professional roles (Green et al., 2022; York, 2020).

While there is a lack of clarity around the measurement capacity of DAs to contribute to social mobility, criticisms of the operationality of DAs to deliver social mobility are prominent. DAs have been criticised as utilising the same selective academic entry qualifications as undergraduate courses. For instance, the average young degree apprentice at Russell Group universities achieving AAB at A Level, and the equivalent of CCC outside the Russell Group, in both instances matches the entry requirements for undergraduate courses (Cullinane and Doherty, 2020). Competition for entry to DAs can also be high (Rowe, 2018). Limited opportunities for recognition of prior learning to enable experienced entrants expedited progression has been criticised as limiting DA's capacity to contribute to social mobility (Fabian et al., 2023; Lester, 2020). Recognition of prior experiential learning, such as through work experience, has further been identified as poorly defined and more complex for ETPs than recognition of prior credited learning (Gardner, 2022; Spencer et al., 2022). Similarly, limited pathways into DAs from Level 4 and 5 apprenticeships and between professional and academic awards also compounds problems with accessibility (Policy Connect, 2019; Smith et al., 2020, UUK, 2017). A further issue relates to the lack of awareness and knowledge of DA opportunities amongst young people, parents, employers and education providers (e.g. schools). Careers guidance and advice has been identified as providing inadequate information around DAs compared to the prominence of academic routes, despite statutory requirements since 2015 (Holt-White et al., 2022). Evidence has also found that private schools are more inclined to give guidance for DA opportunities to their pupils compared to state schools (Pullen et al., 2024). There are also considerable spatial inequalities in where DA opportunities are available (OfS 2019b, UUK, 2017). A number of 'cold spots' across England have been identified in existing research such as the North East, and Norwich, with the East Midlands, South West and East of England reported as having the lowest number of DA places (Policy Connect, 2019; UUK, 2017). Further, it is noted that apprentice salaries may not be sufficient to cover the costs incurred through long distance travel, relocation and/or family responsibilities (OfS, 2019c; UUK, 2017).

3. Research Methodology

This piece of research aims at increasing our understanding of degree apprenticeships (DA) through the experiences and from the perspectives of the key stakeholders: employers, education and training providers (ETPs), and degree apprentices. More specifically, the following research questions guided the study:

- How are DAs perceived and experienced by stakeholders; employers, education and training providers, degree apprentices, and policymakers?
- How have stakeholders experienced the design and development of DA programmes? How did they ensure consistency and quality? What were the reasons for challenges and how did they overcome them?
- How was delivery organised and experienced by employers, education and training providers, and degree apprentices? How did support structures and processes set up ensure degree apprentices' needs were met?
- What are the motivations amongst different stakeholders for engaging with DAs? What are the barriers and opportunities for engaging with DAs?
- How does recruitment support or hinder diversity of DAs? What works well and what are the barriers to diversify new recruits or existing employees on DA programmes?

Answering these questions will also help inform discussion about how DAs align with the needs of local employers and the national economy, and how DAs may support upwards social mobility and social equality.

The research took a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of covering the same themes with each stakeholder group while allowing questions to be tailored to the specific experiences of the stakeholders. All interviews lasted between 30-70 minutes, were conducted online, recoded, transcribed, and anonymised.

Data collection was conducted between spring 2022 and autumn 2023. Following the conclusion of data collection, a new Labour government came to power in July 2024. It has since introduced changes to the skills system (see Introduction). Consequently, this has implications for some of the findings, for example, in relation to IfATE and the Apprenticeship Levy.

Interviewees were identified through purposeful, convenient, and snowball sampling. Originally the study focused on four geographical areas in England. However, due to the slow uptake of interviews from these areas, the research team decided to broaden data collection to the whole of England. In total, 92 interviews were conducted. All interviewees were actively engaged with DAs, except one SME, which initially considered engagement but ultimately chose not to, citing their employees' disinterest in DAs. Some interviewees fell into two stakeholder groups (for example, employer and ETP), hence offered experiences and perceptions of both. From among the 'Policymaker' and 'Other' category, one key stakeholder decided to withdraw their interview data. Table 1 demonstrates the breakdown of interviewees according to stakeholder groups and signals the dual role of some interviewees.

Table 1: Interviewee stakeholder categories

Interviewee stakeholder categories	Total
Apprentice	19
Apprentice (SME)	5
All Apprentices	***25***
Large Employer	18
SME Employer	12
ETP-Employer	5
All Employers (including ETP-Employer)	***35***
ETP	29
All ETPs (including ETP-Employer)	***34***
Policymaker	9
Other	2
All interviewees	**99**

Some interviewees fell under multiple stakeholder categories.

Similarly, while a special focus was envisaged on the health care sector originally, the latter part of data collection included interviewees from a number of different industry sectors. Nevertheless, just under half of the interviews were conducted with representatives of Health and Social Work. Table 2 offers a breakdown of interviewees according to industry sector.

Table 2: Interviewee industry sectors by stakeholder category

Interviewee industry sectors by stakeholder category		*Total category*	Health and Social Work	Education	Construction	Financial and Insurance	Information and communication	Manufacturing	Professional, scientific and technical	Public administration	Water supply	Other Service Activities
Apprentice	19	*25*	10	3	1	1	1	3	1			
Apprentice (SME)	5		1	1		1	3					
Large Employer	18	*35**	8	2	1	1		5	1	1	1	
SME Employer	12		1	1	2	1	4	4				
ETP-Employer	5		5					ǂ				
ETP	29	*34**	12			1	1		4			
Policymaker	9	*9*	4									
Other	2	*2*	1	1	1					1		1
All interviewees	**99**		**42**	**8**	**4**	**5**	**8**	**12**	**6**	**2**	**1**	**1**

Not all interviewees had a relevant sector. In such an instance these interviewees have been included in the total category figure but not in any industry sector total.
** Includes ETP-Employers*
ǂ One Employer not categorised as ETP-Employer was involved in delivery of off-the-job learning in manufacturing

Table 3: ETP categories

ETP categories	All interviewees	Institutions
Post-92 university	23	14
Non-Russell Group, pre-92 university	2	2
Russell Group university	4	2
Other	5	2ǂ
Total	**34**	**20**

ǂ One employer not categorised as ETP-Employer was involved in delivery of off-the-job learning.

In this research, most ETPs were universities, except two, who were employer providers.

Thematic content analysis was used to identify themes and sub-themes from interview data. A combination of both, inductive and deductive approaches was used (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Deductive content analysis was guided by themes identified in our literature review; similarly, the interview schedule was developed using these. Our inductive analysis ensured that further relevant themes were identified and added to the existing ones. Inductive analysis allows to develop a deeper understanding of the data and leads to identifying patterns and themes in addition to those based on literature. In addition to these approaches to analysis and to increase validity, data were discussed over a period of time by the research team. Analysis sessions were organised in which team members collectively read and discussed the same interview. The process of analysis followed some of the steps Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest in their six-step model. These included, *'familiarising yourself with your data'*, *'searching'* and *'reviewing themes'* and *'defining and naming themes'.*

We used NVivo for the systematic analysis. Given the large number of interviews, NVivo allowed for relatively easy retrieval of data and verification of accuracy while drafting the report. The development of the structure of the coding has been iterative. The initial structure based on the inductive and deductive analysis was further refined through two focused discussions by the research team before it was finalised (see appendix for the coding structure).

The research was conducted in accordance with BERA's (2024) ethical guidelines and received ethical approval from the Universities of Bath, Huddersfield and Oxford ethical boards. Interviewees received an information sheet and signed a consent form before the interviews. The identities of the interviewees and the confidentiality of the interview data were protected. All interviews were based on voluntary participation and each interviewee may have had underlying motivations for volunteering. This must be kept in mind when reading the report. Data sharing agreements were in place allowing secure sharing of interview data.

4. Development and Design of Degree Apprenticeships

This first findings section explores stakeholders' experiences of the development and design of degree apprenticeships (DAs). It begins considering the development process, the creation of national standards detailing the knowledge, skills, and behaviours (KSBs) required for a specific occupational role. These standards are typically developed by employer groups, often called trailblazer groups, in collaboration with regulatory bodies and other stakeholders. Employers' contributions to this process were recognised as vital, yet there was variability in the extent to which SME employers could participate effectively. In its second part, the section explores the process of the design of specific academic programmes by education and training providers (ETPs). Interviewees report a number of challenges relating to processes involved in maintaining compliance with external standards and dealing with accrediting bodies.

4.1 Development and compliance

Throughout our interviews, stakeholders described a multifaceted DA development landscape, discussing their involvement in development, adjustments in funding allocations, advisory roles in policy formulation, and critical reflections on the data-driven aspects of apprenticeship frameworks. The role of IfATE (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education), OfS (Office for Students), Ofsted, Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), and other regulatory and sector specific bodies all contribute to the complexity of development and design.

4.1.1 Trailblazer groups and occupational standards

Trailblazer groups of employers, overseen by IfATE but intended to be led by their members, are used to develop different DA occupational standards. Our evidence indicates that employer leadership is one influential voice amongst a number of other voices informing the direction of development.

Only some of the employers in our study mentioned being a member of trailblazer groups. Those that did were motivated by broad concerns for workforce development, aiming to cultivate consistent arrangements for supporting employees' professional qualifications at a degree level to address existing or upcoming staffing and skills shortages through the levy where appropriate. Interviewed employers differed in their degree of participation in trailblazer discussions. In some circumstances, employers deferred to existing industry standards, as *'we're proactively involved in the thing really, we tend to use those standards that we've been developing'* (Large Employer 15). Conversely, while the Apprenticeship Levy had mobilised employer interest in developing standards this had led, according to one policymaker, to *'all sorts of slightly mad ideas to what you should have an apprenticeship in'* (Policymaker 05), requiring guidance. This could result in tensions. For example, one SME discussed how in the development of a UX apprenticeship;

> *it was batted back by the Department of Education several times to say that it's not relevant, but you've got a group of employees here saying it is – so therefore it is!* (SME Employer 08).

Our interviewees indicated IfATE's management of trailblazer groups had evolved to stress certain shared priorities. For example, while trailblazers had begun developing standalone occupational competencies, there was increasing guidance to outline progression opportunities for occupations and using employer

groups across Level 2, 3, and 5 to create *'genuine technical pathways'* (Policymaker 03). Trailblazer members frequently described the process as acting as *'critical friends'* of IfATE and their ambitions (Large Employer 11; SME Employer 01; ETP 21).

The growth in the remit of trailblazer groups in the development of integrated apprenticeships has also impacted end point assessments (EPAs) into development. EPAs are conducted independently by an external assessor or organisation, separate from the training provider, but their separation from academic assessments has caused logistical and alignment challenges, prompting a shift towards integration to streamline processes and better align occupational and academic standards. For example, where EPA for the apprenticeship award and the award of a degree were separate there were instances where, following the awarding of their degree, apprentices would not complete their EPA, resulting in their being recorded as a non-completion and ETPs being penalised (Large Employer 15). Integration of the EPA required that degree awards were *'not just mapped against any KSBs (knowledge, skills and behaviour) but actually created against the KSBs'* (Large Employer 11) requiring a new approach to development expanding into domains that had previously been held exclusively by ETPs. This, as one stakeholder explained, provides greater reassurance around consistency and quality for employers, but *'has met with quite a lot of resistance within HEIs'* (Other Stakeholder 02). ETPs in our study were more open to integration. One ETP described it as *'far easier […] because we're responsible for the EPA and […] it's part of the final module'* (ETP 06). ETPs were particularly concerned with the financial penalties they incurred following non-completion which, together with other EPA-associated costs, meant that programmes *'probably run at a loss'* (ETP 12). Integration of assessment has prompted trailblazer groups to include universities, to provide advice and guidance on the content of degrees (Policymaker 05). We also heard that course development was becoming part of the remit of dedicated academic-workplace tutors (ETP 17). ETPs felt their involvement with IfATE in particular had evolved, feeling *'more integrated now and feel that we can kind of share and communicate'* (ETP 21).

The development of DAs also includes significant work updating proliferating standards, as a result of delivery issues including low take-up, obsolescence, or more practical concerns such as a lack of EPA organisations being signed up to deliver it. One policymaker described the process as an *'endless hamster wheel'* with, at the time of interview, up to a third of standards in revision: out of 657 standards, 185 were *'currently in revision'* (Policymaker 05). Revisions were less work than developing entirely new standards using *'full-blown trailblazers'* which lacked *'proof of delivery'* (Policymaker 02) – an indication of the complicated interrelationship between development, design, and delivery explored below. Keeping employers engaged was identified as important in assisting in the revisions of standards. Building trailblazers from scratch again was a 'bit of a painful process', one policymaker reflected:

> *In the past, we've made the mistake of allowing trailblazers to sort of dissipate once the job's done, you know, and we realize now that actually the job is not done* (Policymaker 05).

A small number of employers we spoke to mentioned continuing to engage with IfATE route reviews and ongoing trailblazer activities.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of the development process varied. The development process was seen as a way to overcome *'tokenistic'* co-design or employer-led development with effective integration between partners and ETP senior management (ETP 01). However, SME interviewees had a range of views. Some argued industry representation raised the status and increased the relevance and currency of DA programme content (SME Employer 02). Simultaneously, the approach lacked the agility of business, was both inadequately flexible and inadequately specialised, and had little immediate return on investment of energy for especially *'resource poor'* businesses (SME Employer 07; SME Employer 01). Engagement was also variable. Like SMEs, ETPs found engaging in development costly, requiring:

> *at least a twelve-month upfront investment in development and employer engagement activity before we even start to generate any income from it* (ETP 25).

We also heard that the development process inadequately linked to costs and resource. As one ETP explained, there was a mismatch between courses such as:

> *data science, which is £19,000, but it's one of the most expensive course to run with, you know, teaching staff at a premium […] the way that IfATE have designed the trailblazers, and then subsequently the funding bands, they're just not getting a data-driven outcome around the standards and the cost of delivering the standards* (ETP 25).

The complexity of the programme discussed is hinted at, emphasising the limited options in allocating funds, which might affect the quality of teaching and learning experiences.

4.1.2 Professional body requirements and alignment with practice

Some of the interviewees expressed frustrations when professional body requirements and standards do not keep up with current practices in the workplace. In some DA programmes there is a mismatch between aspects of the DA programme that were set up and developed to what can actually be delivered in practice. This was specifically seen in the Nursing DA programme. One employer also acting as an ETP found they were unable to integrate their most current elements of practice into their teaching because *'we are not approved by the Nursing and Midwifery Council to deliver programmes'* (ETP-Employer 01). As another ETP explained, regulatory bodies provide limited flexibility for ETPs and reducing their autonomy to deviate from established pathways:

> *all apprenticeships are regulated by Ofsted and ESFA and IfATE and the Office for Students, [and] QAA. But a lot of ours have also got that professional statutory regulatory […] So our ability to go off-piste if you like is limited […] So what we tend to find is that we- we are working to all of those parameters* (ETP 02).

The challenge lies in balancing these various parameters. The sentiment that DA programmes can often be overregulated was widespread:

> *The paperwork, you know, I've got to jump through. Like you were talking about quality assurance[…] we have our own internal checks for Ofsted, then we have an end-point assessment organisation* (ETP-Employer 03).

One ETP described their experience chairing employer meetings for occupational therapy and physiotherapy:

> *It's significantly overregulated. And that's meant that we've had to potentially bring in more people just to deal with the compliance and overregulation. You know when you've got a sector that's already working well for undergraduate programmes to then bring in others and you know. It becomes tricky* (ETP 02).

We heard that the extra resource and burden required to meet compliance requirements can lead to ETPs considering whether to continue their offer. One ETP described the growing *'fatigue'* in providing evidence to regulatory bodies:

> *I kind of got the impression that there was scrutiny fatigue from a lot of people during that process, because there were multiple professional bodies that we had to satisfy. We also had to satisfy registry, everyone was just bored of trying to create evidence for different stakeholders* (ETP 24).

4.1.3 Compliance, Ofsted, and external audit

ETPs reported to us that much of their activity around DAs was *'quite compliance driven'*:

> *it was quite a kind of piece of work to overcome, to really get the university or to get our practice and process in line with, you know, the funding rules, the Ofsted piece* (ETP 05).

'The complexities of compliance' (ETP 25) in the apprenticeship system require different configurations and arrangements than HE providers are often familiar with. From the perspective of HEIs, quality assurance is often held up as their *'bread and butter'* and embedded within their operations as *'very well long established methods of regulation, quality checks and improvement mechanisms'* (ETP 02). However, because of a longstanding focus on the *'higherness'* of provision within higher education there may be tensions around requirements to share responsibility for quality with external bodies, such as Ofsted, and to ensure that *'main institution quality assurance'* (ETP 14) is maintained, while adapting to the structure and design of apprenticeship. One ETP noted, whilst their institution had:

> *quality cycles […] we've had to potentially adapt them slightly so that Ofsted would see that we are […] doing X and Y and we've got the evidence behind it* (ETP02).

While the institution may *'have the evidence anyway'* it is possible it may be framed or organised *'in a slightly different way'* (ETP 02). For those involved in DAs much of the rethinking around quality assurance relates to *'navigating the Ofsted education inspection framework'* and ensuring that the organisation is *'fit for purpose for Ofsted'*, even if this means *'working with an external organisation'* (Large Employer 11) to put systems and processes in place. The need to put in place *'internal checks for Ofsted'* (ETP-Employer 03) and ensuring that 'everything is aligned to Ofsted' and *'Ofsted-ready'* (ETP 01), prepared in an *'Ofsted friendly format'* (ETP 02), was a concern for employers and ETPs alike. Views of the overall impact of Ofsted on the quality of the apprenticeship itself are mixed. One participant noted that the processes of triangulation between employer and ETP data on apprenticeship progression had dubious benefits, suggesting that:

> *actually the outcome in some ways is exactly the same […] have they passed their module? Are they doing OK? Yes, they are. But you've got all this additional stuff around it now. And does that add to the quality? I don't think it necessarily does* (ETP 02).

Another participant went as far as suggesting that *'the Ofsted inspection framework isn't fit for purpose for apprenticeships, for degree apprenticeships'* as:

> *it's very much focused on children and compulsory education in terms of the way it views things that we have to include such as fundamental British values, you know, safeguarding* (ETP 03).

On the other hand, other participants noted the potential benefit of Ofsted beyond DAs in the case of shared cohorts with suggestions that:

> *traditional degree students might be experiencing some improvement in quality of education or leadership and management of that course because of Ofsted's requirements for quality improvement* (ETP 24).

Employers may also be using Ofsted reports extensively to guide partnering decisions, with one employer participant who works with 35 ETPs scrutinising ETPs via 'what their Ofsted rating is and specifically what they score for apprenticeships' alongside looking *'at the reviews on the government website from other employers'* (Large Employer 17).

In addition to Ofsted there are extensive external reporting requirements stemming from the ESFA's *'compliance regulations'* (Large Employer 11), which requires an *'auditing process'* and *'a lot of paperwork'* (ETP-Employer 03). Such requirements also lead to a drive to *'minimise any risks in relation to ESFA'* (ETP 25). Sometimes this ongoing reporting can be beneficial for internal quality assurance and decision making, with some ETPs reporting they go *'continually, through ESFA and government data, [to] look at what statistically [it] is saying about the quality of our apprenticeships'* (ETP 16). More broadly, many partners within DA programmes are *'really scrutinised financially'* (ETP-Employer 03) due to the context of their sector (for example NHS organisations) and are subject to complex auditing and financial reporting processes. On the one hand, in some cases this can be useful in identifying areas for improvement. One participant noted how *'internal audit flagged all kinds of issues up in terms of governance'* (ETP 20). On the other hand, the extensive *'evidence tracking'* could be burdensome, as one participant noted how they had reviewed *'evidence tracking for audit'* identifying that *'there were ninety-five audit points across every single learner file'* (ETP 25). Some employers noted that it was a challenge to report and record on-the-job learning as part of accountability measures, especially in the NHS under multiple overlapping accountability schema (Large Employer 09, 10).

There are also inputs into the quality assurance process through student and staff engagement, specifically feeding into the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning processes. One participant mentioned the important role of *'programme specific evaluation'* and how this incorporates *'feedback from our students'* (ETP 02), while another stated that *'our students play a big role in the quality processes'* in providing *'that feedback and assurance'* with much organised through the *'student forum'* and *'student council'* (ETP 01). Regular tripartite meetings are also important for gathering feedback on the apprenticeship process, particularly when discussion is *'really transparent'* and build upon *'strength in our relationships'* (ETP 01).

4.1.4 Internal monitoring mechanisms and partnerships

Factors such as *'university regulations*' (ETP 11) and the *'course approval process within the university'* (ETP 12) have a bearing on how notions of quality are constructed. There is also the use of *'the Student-Staff Liaison Committee'* which some institutions use to *'ensure that apprentices are sort of front and centre'* (ETP 14). There are internal monitoring mechanisms related to teaching and learning, that allow for apprentice progress to be monitored. An employer participant noted how they *'receive a monthly report from every training provider that gives me an update on apprentices […] it alerts me if someone looks like they're starting to fall behind'* and this also extends to an alert *'if there's an issue with the line manager'* (Employer 17). An ETP highlighted the use of a *'monthly RAG [red, amber, and green] rating of students'* (ETP 01), which can form the basis for discussion with employers, and another noted how as an ETP they are *'constantly tracking'* the apprentices' learning *'against these 39 standards that we have'* (ETP 14). In terms of scrutiny of the learning process there are also *'peer observations'* (ETP 03) and *'deep dives with our provision'* (ETP 08) to explore ways of improving learning. These mechanisms may also be supported by something like a *'learning advisory group'* (ETP 03), involving subject matter experts or senior professionals who can challenge and review current processes. Importantly, stakeholders referred to the importance of sustaining the expertise of teaching staff, for example:

> *making sure that everyone who's delivering, have the expertise, and not just have the expertise there and then but maintain those, so a lot of our staff will still do clinical shifts* (ETP 03).

Traditional full-time lecturers had good teaching and learning practice, but lacked industry experience and knowledge necessary to deliver effective *'work-based learning'*. As an ETP explained, some academics were unreceptive to expectations they needed to continue to gain experience of the field: *'Well I've done my PhD, then I've done that'* despite having *'never been in industry'* (ETP 20). However, another ETP in the midst of a recruitment freeze was able to cultivate home-grown teaching talent. This was possible because:

> *There are some [academic] lecturers who actually are naturally work-based learning lectures, they're just not aware of it. You can see by the way they teach that they've not been schooled in a pure academic way, and it's about me trying to find those within our pool that we have already and getting them to be earmarked to work with us [on the DA programmes]* (ETP 18).

Resourcing for integrated learning was a significant challenge for ETPs. They relayed to us the initiatives they were taking to ensure that teaching is conducted by those with relevant skillsets and a breadth of experience of relevant industries cultures and practices. This ranged from how the curriculum was designed to stipulating applied, practical teaching and simulation environments, including virtual reality, to ensure that the academic skills and methods by which content was delivered were helpful for apprentices in the workplace.

Productive partnership working is seen as valuable for improving quality and quality assurance. Where ETPs had good relationships with employers or were delivering learning through employers, such ETPs could draw on employer materials and resources to help align learning with workplace conditions. In terms of resourcing, it particularly meant ensuring academics delivering teaching possessed experience of industry either through dialogue and engagement opportunities or new sorts of models to employ lecturers with the relevant experiences. ETP 18, a non-Russell group pre-92 university providing business DAs, reported that their connections with employers allowed them to source hourly paid lecturers with *'very, very extensive industry experience backgrounds' as semi-retired 'directors of companies'*. They were, however, *'hard to work with'.* Few of these hourly paid lecturers had Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellowships, they were, *'very expensive'*, and risky as they were often not contractually obliged to teach for any fixed term.

Some ETPs may undertake *'an education audit'* of employers, so that they *'understand the programme'* and have *'appropriately trained assessors and supervisors to support them'.* This is vital so that 'the capacity of students that they can support' is agreed and that *'we know that they can be well supported'.* This can also be backed up by *'education champions'* in *'partner organisations'* (ETP 13) to ensure continuous engagement with the objectives of the apprenticeship. Nevertheless, there were some suggestions that in some cases employers are putting the *'onus on the training providers'* to run the scheme, because they *'think the university will teach them everything'.* This was seen as *'wrong'* as the employers were *'not taking ownership of a young person's development or their future'* (SME Employer 02).

The proximity of learning to workplace applications in the NHS was especially hampered by resourcing and coordination issues, requiring a number of strategies by employer and ETPs to mitigate. NHS and ETPs struggled to provide adequate numbers and varieties of placements for apprentices, especially in smaller trusts. In response, partner ETPs developed networks to share resources and coordinate placement swaps (ETP 03).

There is potentially something of a tension between developing supplementary quality assurance processes to handle DAs on top of existing institutional frameworks, or rethinking quality assurance more systematically so that DAs are considered a core element of HE provision. One institution (ETP 09) noted that

> *we have the normal quality assurance controls that every university has got for the degree component*

and that for DAs:

> *we're increasingly developing controls, often database controls, for warranty or monitoring output for the apprentice progress reviews […] there's a lot more of that going on than it would be in our kind of core business.*

This resulted a more *'enhanced quality supervision programme for apprentices than there is on a regular degree'* (ETP 09). Another ETP noted how *'additional quality assurance apprenticeship measures and metrics'* supplemented the institutional quality assurance. However, even though the institution *'wanted something that was fully integrated, so it wasn't a separate process'* what seems to have developed is more of *'an enhanced process, that recognised all the additional components'* (ETP 16).

However, there are also ambitions to embed systems of continuous quality improvement across DAs as part of a *'sustainable strategy'* (Policymaker 03) that will work for employers and ETPs. For some leading apprenticeship provision in higher education there is a need for *'root and branch review'* of their existing arrangements to ensure they have the *'right foundations for growth'* so that they can start to climb a *'continuous improvement hill'* (ETP 25) that will move operations beyond a focus on compliance.

4.2 Design of degree apprenticeships

For ETPs involved in design DA courses, unsurprisingly standards were seen as *'central to our curriculum development'*, as well as any relevant professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRB) standards. Increasingly, ETPs saw themselves, as one put it, as *'making sure that we're just not shoehorning a standard degree'* (ETP 01) and changing policies, processes and guidance documents to greater align with apprenticeship requirements. Where ETPs faced difficulties was *'around British values and how we're embedding that concept across our learning outcomes'.* As ETP 01 further explained *'in a college environment it's acceptable to have a poster on the wall with your British values on them, but not so acceptable in a university'* (ETP 01). However, another ETP reflected that:

> *actually, if you break them down into what they are, you have a rule of more democracy, tolerance, [which] probably already happen within curricula somewhere. It's just being able to pull it out and go "that is where we teach it"* (ETP 06).

Other ETPs reported they had established general frameworks to inform apprenticeship design, to some extent dictating structure and other essentials across all apprenticeships.

However, apprenticeship standards and compliance were just two (nonetheless important) elements of a series of factors informing design and delivery facing ETPs, including resource allocation, programme delivery, and the evolving educational landscape. The theoretically distinct activities of development of standards and design and delivery of courses often blurred together. Feedback processes included pilot courses, revisions to programmes and updates to standards, experience of previous programme delivery, various other avenues on *'portfolio and EPA especially'* (ETP-Employer 02) or regular employer advisory boards (ETP 21). A sense of contingency of design is palpable. Apprentices noticed that *'we've kind of had this journey where they are also developing the courses as we go along'* (Apprentice 05). As one ETP put it:

> *we've designed it around the apprenticeship standard, we've designed it with learning in the flow of work in mind, but as we all know one day we could be doing one thing, another day we do something else* (ETP 19).

Another ETP reflected on how their own approach to design had changed: moving from *'quite compliance driven'* to taking greater *'stock of the quality and mak[ing] decisions based on that now'* (ETP 05). As a result, there is great variability in design and delivery of DAs and subsequently on apprentice experiences and quality, as the following section explores.

4.2.1 Structure of degree apprenticeships

DAs follow the same pattern as any other level of apprenticeships; that is degree apprentices spend at least six hours' training per week on off-the-job training and the remaining time with on-the-job training. In terms of the structure and design of DAs it is clear that the higher education element (both in terms of contact time with staff and other students, and individual study time) can be structured quite differently on different programmes. There are various combinations of block study, including regular weekend or longer blocks, and patterns of 3 or 4 days in the workplace with one day on campus or online learning and sometimes a dedicated individual study day. Block teaching may be structured as something like *'8 weeks at work […] then a 2 week study block where it's a week online learning and then perhaps a week or short week in the university'* (Apprentice 02), but shorter study blocks are also common.

Workplace experience can also be structured differently across different apprenticeship programmes and can sometimes be interpreted differently by managers and other colleagues at the workplace. While it is customary for the apprentice to spend the majority of time on work tasks that are relevant to particular roles in their employing organisation (and therefore also relevant to their apprenticeship), placements are also an integral element of many apprenticeships. There are often opportunities to *'rotate different occupational areas'* (ETP 05), in order to experience a broader range of workgroups or departments within organisations, and to develop capabilities that are relevant to the apprenticeship role. It is evident that access to suitable placements is a key aspect of a positive apprenticeship experience, offering opportunities for apprentices to experience a range of aspects of the business activity, and developing a fuller understanding of the overall work process and potential future career avenues. Some apprenticeships have up to *'3 placements of 9 weeks, 10 weeks and 11 weeks'* (Apprentice 01) apiece, offering a considerable range of workplace experience.

As an apprenticeship progresses, in many cases there is a transition from a more theory-based study approach towards more project-based activity. In some apprenticeships there is an emphasis on *'frontloaded'* (ETP 05) conceptual, technical and/or procedural content with the aim of ensuring that apprentices can take on board the foundational knowledge relevant to their role. On the other hand, there are also examples of apprenticeships that are explicitly based around projects from an early stage, where *'every module you do in the university, explicitly maps to a project you'd be doing in the workplace'* (Apprentice 08). However, in such cases extra effort may be needed to ensure that apprentices are engaging with the relevant foundational knowledge through the project activity. Whatever the trajectory of the transition from new apprentice towards fully competent employee, the integration between the education provided and the workplace experience will be a crucial aspect of the process, with an emphasis on ensuring apprentices *'integrate that theory into their practice, in their workplace as well as in placement'* (ETP 15). Efforts are made on many apprenticeships to ensure co-ordination between the educational element covered at any one time and the workplace role and tasks the apprentices are involved in, aiming to ensure that *'tasks and activities that they're doing on-the-job are actually matched to the timing of the curriculum and their timetable'* (ETP-Employer 04).

In many cases, efforts have been made to map the delivery of DA to workplace experiences, attempting to ensure that educational content enhances workplace projects and vice versa. In discussions between educational institutions and employers the integration of content with workplace tasks relies on a degree of co-ordination around when activities are introduced alongside key concepts and skills. The process of co-

ordination between education and workplace may also be enhanced through *'flying faculty'* (ETP 02) who may be doing visits (e.g. hospitals or police stations) to do *'face-to-face teaching with the apprentices'* (ETP 10) and the co-location and integration of tutoring staff within workplace teams for periods of time, although this may only be feasible in the case of larger organisations with substantial cohorts of apprentices. An employer reported on the value of this co-location, stating that they have:

> *a main lecturer who's based with us […]. So she does a lot of teaching with us […] .[It's] nice, because we really get to know her. So it means their experience was really good, because we're so linked, and they can see that she's part of our team* (ETP- Employer 03).

Experiences of collaboration are discussed in more detail in section 7.

The process of ensuring the integration between employers, ETPs and apprentice experience is underpinned in many apprenticeships by regular tripartite meetings which bring these parties together (as tutors, employers and individual apprentices), and these may be supplemented with *'quarterly reviews'* (Apprentice 11) organised by the employer which evaluate progress in the workplace. But at a programme level it is also frequently the case that there are regular meetings, for example *'quarterly employer engagement meetings'* (ETP-Employer 04) and *'regular catch-ups'* (Large Employer 16), at which employers and ETPs review the ongoing running and future development of the apprenticeship.

4.2.2 Assessment of degree apprenticeships

DAs incorporate a range of assessment forms, including those that concentrate on demonstrating grasp of relevant conceptual and technical content, such as for example multiple choice or short responses to specific questions (Apprentice 14), presentations, vivas, projects and portfolios (Apprentice 05). Assignments can be successfully mapped to workplace projects or can be framed as *'individual consultancy projects'* (Apprentice 18) where apprentices act as an internal consultant to the organisation, ensuring apprentices are assessed on the full gamut of skills and knowledge that is required for successful outcomes in the organisational and workplace context. Assessment for apprenticeships can be seen as needing to cover two elements. Firstly, demonstration of core knowledge and skills as set out in apprenticeship standards. Secondly, ensuring that apprentices have successfully understood how their workplace experience relates to the core knowledge and skill requirements, illustrating this sufficiently through practical application and demonstration.

A further issue that arises in the context of DAs is the potential tension between what might be expected in terms of assessment on a higher education programme and what might be considered appropriate assessment for an apprenticeship. On some programmes assessments are *'generic assessments'* which are *'not just for apprentices'* (Apprentice 15). In some cases, there may be a sense that this leads to some lack of validity in the assessments undertaken, in the sense of ensuring the assessment is applicable to the knowledge and skills acquired on the apprenticeship. There is also a risk of an excessive assessment burden, with competence having to be demonstrated both to the ETP and the employer. With portfolios this can lead to a deluge of evidence of competence. One ETP noted that without clear guidelines there can be *'no limit to what you could upload'* with apprentices sometimes *'uploading enormous, you know, like 80 pieces of evidence'* (ETP 13) to meet specific criteria against a standard. Overall, an *'integrated end-point assessment'* of high quality to assure the quality and appropriacy of the apprenticeship is seen as vital (ETP-Employer 04).

5. Delivery of Degree Apprenticeships

In this chapter, factors informing delivery will be discussed. Our interviewees indicated that patterns of delivery varied widely. This included the extent to which off-the-job learning is conducted online or in-person (by design or not), emphases on evaluating and strengthening the proximity of learning to the workplace and employer needs, and mentoring and student support.

5.1 Operations

In terms of the delivery and pedagogy of degree apprenticeships (DAs), a range of models have been adopted, including those that rely extensively or exclusively on online delivery, blended approaches and some with a greater focus on in-person teaching and learning. Apprentices see benefits and disadvantages in each of these models of delivery. For some apprentices, recent moves back in-person after the pandemic have some disadvantages, as institutions *'have maintained now that they are an in-person university'* with each module as *'a three-day teaching block, which has historically, due to the pandemic, been online, which I loved. But now it is in-person'* (Apprentice 04). While there may be considerable advantages in terms of the flexibility and ease-of-access offered by online approaches, in some apprenticeships it is difficult to cover all the necessary knowledge and skills through a virtual approach. Many apprentices value the opportunity to *'meet up and […] do learning pods, or learning groups in a few places across the county'* (Apprentice 01), which is an opportunity to share experiences with others on similar pathways and to pick up much of the informal learning that it is difficult to enjoy virtually.

The experiences of lockdowns have without doubt led to considerable innovation in online learning, although there was already considerable use of online technology to facilitate learning at a distance in apprenticeships pre-2020. There is a sense that the balance between online and in-person pedagogical approaches is constantly subject to evaluation in the interests of ensuring cost-effectiveness and the assurance of quality, while bearing in mind the optimum way to achieve apprenticeship outcomes. One education and training provider (ETP) reported that they *'launched virtually during the pandemic'* and were *'attempting to go back and start that face-to-face induction'* for the DA. However, perhaps partly because of changes in expectations post pandemic the employers involved were considering whether it was worth spending 'a week's worth of hotel money' (ETP 19) as part of the programme. Those apprentices undertaking distance and blended learning reported that new online learning technologies were another source of responsive support and especially of utility to those apprentices living some distance away from ETPs. These included formally established networks using for example through Microsoft Teams, online discussions and learning forums, video and voice calling, and online portfolios to gather and review evidence of KSBs. More informal support arrangements included peer-WhatsApp group chats, though these were often formed spontaneously and could be less comprehensively inclusive. Apprentices also found that returning to in-person learning after the national lockdowns during the Covid pandemic made engaging in learning activities easier. One apprentice explained they could ask for:

> *advice and questions a lot more easier. In-person, in the lecture theatre, you can put your hand up, whereas if there's 300 of you online, it's very hard on a chat function to get your question across'* (Apprentice 15).

Similarly, another apprentice felt that online *'there is no debate, there's no discussion […] so it feels like a bit of a lost learning opportunity'* (Apprentice 21).

5.2 Flexibility, choice and alignment

DAs are designed and delivered with varying levels of flexibility, choice and alignment to the needs of stakeholders. We also must reiterate that degree apprentices are employees in the first instance. Hence, apprenticeships may be seen as designed and delivered with the priorities of employers in mind, and in some cases this may extend to ensuring that apprentices are utilised fully in the workplace as a valuable addition to the workforce. SME employers may value being *'able to access the provision locally'* and improving *'flexibility in the system […] to meet the needs of […] business'*, while finding sometimes that institutions may want to run education and training when work is 'busiest' (SME Employer 03) and the apprentices are needed in the workplace. Some employers have taken the *'opportunity to choose some of the modules'* from the range offered by a higher education institution *'that best align to our organisation or the needs of our clients'* while also trying to:

> *keep an element of choice for the apprentice so that they can choose between a smaller number of modules based on their individual roles, but also their future career ambitions* (Large Employer 14).

However, in many cases the requirements of professional bodies, which may be cemented within the relevant apprenticeship standards, may shape the workplace tasks and responsibilities an apprentice can be involved in. For example, apprenticeships in the health professions where *'registration'* or accreditation are the *'outcomes that we're looking for'* (ETP 10). Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence of DAs being designed and delivered to align sufficiently with specific timings and processes that suit higher education institutions, and this may be justified on educational and practical grounds. Nevertheless, one interviewee noted a problem with apprentices having to come into the university for only part of the day:

> *some recent feedback that apprentices were quite frustrated for having to come in for two hours […] because other students were in for two hours* (ETP 24).

To make a DA cost-effective to deliver for ETPs, and to offer degree apprentices opportunities to make full use of higher education resources, decisions may be taken to offer education and training at times when other students are taught. One higher education institution gave the example of larger modules that *'have apprenticeship students within them'* (ETP 23), where there might be issues with ensuring the learning was sufficiently geared towards the apprenticeship experience. In another example an ETP noted that they had *'initially wanted'* apprentices to be catered for:

> *Separate[ly] but it wasn't viable, because the numbers are small. So you're probably talking, say 10 Physiotherapy apprentices lumped in with a cohort of quite a lot of other degree students* (ETP 24).

In some cases, alignment to the needs of the educational institution may undermine the flexibility that apprentices would prefer, in order to fit their study time around their working lives. Learning in higher education may not always be *'planned to directly map to a project'* undertaken in the workplace, leaving the apprentices to make the learning *'sort of apply'* as best they can. However, in this instance, the apprentice was able to wield considerable flexibility in making a project work well both for employer and their studies. As they explained:

> *the company, because of how small it is, it's just completely flexible to me just saying: "right, I'd personally, for this uni work, I'd like to try this project, for this one I'd like to try this"* (Apprentice 07).

Higher education institutions have often been conscious of the different pressures of time facing apprentices, with some increasing flexibility around assessment. One institution reported that the apprentices:

> *get all their assessment briefs at the beginning as well, so they can be working on those incrementally […] the idea of that is its flexible around the business needs, it's flexible around personal learning styles* (ETP 19).

Flexibility can be easily curtailed due to pragmatic reasons. However, flexibility and making choices that fit with the employer, apprentice and the ETP were considered valuable to progress.

5.3 Mentoring, management, and student support

Our interviewees reported considerable variation in the kinds of mentoring and student support degree apprentices received. Generally, apprentices received support from three main groups: from their employers, ETPs, and their peers. Employers and ETPs recognised that greater regular structured support and progress review, and consistency of mentorship translated into greater pass rates.

Support from employers varied considerably, even within employers of similar type, sector, and size contributing to a diverse range of supervisory roles. Primary support consists of a designated workplace mentor, a line manager, and perhaps a scheme coordinator, which may or may not be distinct roles. Job titles for these roles was rarely consistent between employers. Generally, workplace mentors' main responsibility outside of work-based practice was securing and guiding what on-the-job, and sometimes off-the-job, learning looked like, while line managers provided a *'point of continuity'* to discuss career progression or time off (Large Employer 11). The relationship between a manager and an apprentice might last the entire duration of the DA, or mentoring and management responsibilities could shift especially if the apprentice was required to rotate through the organisation. We also heard that styles of management shifted throughout the apprenticeship, with managers typically becoming more *'remote'* and granting further independence as apprentices' workplace competence grew (Large Employer 02). Support in this way preceded the beginning of an apprenticeship, as mentors and other senior managers played key roles in identifying DA opportunities or guiding candidates to decide whether or not to take on a degree apprentice (Large Employer 12). HR departments, dedicated workplace apprenticeship teams, early talent teams, and professional learning, training, and development departments also contributed to support and management of apprentices, alongside informal relationships with other colleagues.

Secondly, apprentices received support through their ETP. A constant and alternative source of mentorship for apprentices outside their workplaces was seen by ETPs as valuable in providing ongoing evaluation of apprentices' progress, but also identifying safeguarding issues or intervening when rare incidences of bullying and harassment arose in workplaces, for example. Again, there was diversity as to how support was provided. Sources of support in the workplace might include academic mentors, personal tutors, separate module leads, tutorial staff, and a variety of *'link tutors'* with various titles such as apprenticeship mentors and skills coaches. The linchpin of the apprenticeship management in most cases were the formal tripartite or learner reviews between ETP mentors and workplace mentors with apprentices occurring roughly three or four times a year to review progress, clarify the alignment between the learning activities and workplace

applications, consider evidence of competencies, and set goals. Tripartite reviews in this way could be responsive to learners' needs and struggles, and *'make a difference to how supported those apprentices feel'* (ETP 03), but they also ensured accountability to employers (ETP 11). Interviewees reported other formal and informal meetings were sometimes arranged more frequently, and employers and ETPs shared progress updates through for example, monthly updates and concern trackers. Such arrangements required strong partnerships between ETPs and employers to ensure effective co-delivery of a complete learning package. ETPs also provided further support through administrative and student support services. These included dedicated apprenticeship teams, assessment and extenuating circumstances services, library and related services (including online and physical resources, academic skills services, IT support, digital skills, and plagiarism and ethics advice), mental and physical health and wellbeing services, and careers services. Students' Unions were also mentioned as sources of support at a small number of ETPs.

Thirdly, apprentices received support from their peers, ranging from formal *'learning pods'* and buddy programmes and informal cohort groups, comprising apprentices studying on the same course or with the same employer. In some instances, apprentices further ahead in their studies acted as mentors for newer apprentices in a variety of formal and informal arrangements. Indeed, one SME described this as critical for them to enable their business to support more apprentices (SME Employer 02).

5.4 Learning support and adjustments

The learning support provided by ETPs and employers was particularly celebrated by employers and apprentices who had used them. ETPs told us that in their impressions, their degree apprentices had diverse learning needs and educational backgrounds, a high number who had English as a second language and were without GCSE maths (ETP-Employer 03), incidences of neurodiversity (ETP-Employer 02), and a high propensity to undiagnosed conditions impacting their learning, which may have contributed to them not necessarily meeting entry criteria (ETP 13). Older apprentices may have had considerable time away from formal learning, while 18–21-year-olds required support in transitioning into workplaces. These factors were often interrelated. Some apprentices additionally *'aren't confident in declaring that they need some additional learning needs support'*, as one employer told us. It was therefore important to try and:

> *break down those barriers, making sure that they have access to our staff disability advisor, making sure that they've access to all the additional support from the training provider's point of view* (Large Employer 17).

In a telling example, one apprentice described how:

> *there's just a lot of help, and when I first like started […] I literally cried one day because […] my manager and stuff, they were giving me so much help. And I was just like "I don't feel like I deserve this"* (Apprentice 12).

Apprentices expressed heartfelt appreciation for these interventions. Another apprentice described, feeling supported by their ETP:

> *[they] want you to pass, they want you to succeed, […] all of the lecturers. And, I mean, I was diagnosed dyslexic and just dyscalculia, which I didn't- I knew I was dyscalculia, I didn't realize I was dyslexic. […] there's been good support from, you know, having a bit of extra help with things* (Apprentice 03).

ETPs reported their efforts to make sure that *'academics are cognizant of the other pressures that apprentices will be under'* (ETP 11), including academic support staff, library learning, mitigation and extensions. ETPs stressed their efforts to make learning support essentials more accessible for apprentices with limited study time. One ETP reported to us their careers service was adapting to recognise that apprentices were already in work, and to respond to their need for support in their career progression within their existing organisation rather than support looking elsewhere (ETP 08). Another discussed the role of their careers services in advising apprentices with poor experience of their employer (ETP 13) acting as an independent source of advice. Employers felt that they with ETPs were taking joint steps to develop their wellbeing and mental health support particularly since the pandemic.

5.5 Variability in mentoring and management

Apprentices we spoke to reported considerable variation in support that they had access to. As one described:

> *I'm very lucky because at my firm I've got an allocated buddy, I've got a supervisor, I've got a team manager, I've got a mentor, I've got everyone in HR that helped me out. I'm just conscious that not every other degree apprentice has that* (Apprentice 10).

Apprentices had mixed assessments of their experiences of mentoring through their apprenticeship. Many had positive experiences of approachable and supportive work-place mentors even if, as many also reported, apprentice supervision was a small part of a manager's larger remit which otherwise kept them busy. In good practice, as one apprentice described, workplace mentors were active in coordinating the:

> *information flow between us and the course and the course provider, and kind of generally raise issues if we've got them* (Apprentice 05).

They continued, however, that:

> *my manager [has been] quite reasonably involved with it. I think others that I spoke to maybe haven't, and they kind of have been left to their own devices* (Apprentice 05).

Frequently apprentices described having been granted a degree of autonomy from their mentor, which meant as one apprentice described *'there's quite a lot of onus on me to be able to manage my time effectively'* (Apprentice 04). It is unclear how far these sorts of experiences reflect apprentices struggling with the greater independence expected of them moving into workplaces and academic study from secondary education, or whether this independence represents ineffective and distant mentoring. Quite frequently apprentices mentioned mentors they had been allocated but with whom they had little, if any, contact. There was also variability in the willingness of employers to provide expenses for learning materials and travel, and other equipment for learning. For example, in the NHS, some distance learning opportunities were not available as *'healthcare support workers or our nursing associates […] don't earn enough'* to own the necessary equipment (ETP-Employer 03).

Similarly, the picture of support received from academic advisors was also mixed. Generally, apprentices reported responsive and accessible personnel at ETPs, open to questions and treating apprentices as equal to other undergraduate students. Employers praised the personal relationships that many academic mentors were able to foster with apprentices. However, there were difficulties in fostering effective collaborative mentoring arrangements between ETPs and employers. One ETP reported that while there was variability in

how often different tutors were in contact with apprentices, some had *'contact with most weeks actually, even if they're not doing the teaching themselves'* (ETP 13) and provided opportunities to develop important personal relationships with apprentices. This was certainly not universal. One apprentice working for a large employer reported over four years that they'd had no face-to-face meetings with university lecturers, just a quarterly progress check with a university advisor (Apprentice 14). We also heard that particularly in large employers like NHS trusts there were disjunctions in mentorship where:

> *the person who earns the levy money, who receives the reports, like the progress reports from the universities, is not the person who has day-to-day involvement with the apprentices* (Policymaker 07).

Although supporting structures should be established to ensure the progress of degree apprentices, modes of support ETPs and employers provided for apprentices ultimately depend on personal preferences, resources, and availability.

Mentors faced considerable challenges. One of the primary challenges facing the organisation of DA mentorships was coordinating the various elements of the apprenticeship, necessitating *'quite a bit of infrastructure'* (Large Employer 12). This especially included scheduling Ofsted-mandated regular tripartite reviews with *'the right people'*, for example (ETP 03, 17). As one ETP reported, these require considerably more resource than traditional university personal tutorials (ETP 20), ensuring that skills coaches and line managers *'dovetail'* (Large Employer 05) so apprentices gain relevant and timely experiences. This was not always successful. Apprentices reported limited support for their employers from university to help manage review meetings and liaison between workplace mentors and academic advisors (Apprentice 04). We heard from apprentices and employers that work-based mentors were often busy and struggled to make best use of available resources. For example, mentors were not aways available to attend ETP information events and orientations. Workload management was a considerable concern and had further ramifications for quality mentoring. In busy SMEs and in NHS trusts especially with resourcing challenges, supervisory capacity limits the number of apprentices, and also had consequences for protected learning (Large Employer 09). Similarly, programmes with small numbers of apprentices struggled with resources and prioritising staff and time (ETP 18). Mentoring apprentices could offer valuable personal development opportunities, particularly for staff in managerial roles. As one employer explained, it helped *'our people managers to manage where they may not have ordinarily had that'* (SME Employer 08). However, the effectiveness of mentoring was often hindered by a lack of specialised training. For example, one large employer reported that work-based mentor training was largely indistinguishable from line manager training, and that they struggled *'find any literature on what are [the] best ways to support apprentices on programmes'* (Large Employer 08). Quality of mentoring could, therefore, be difficult to manage.

Employers reported some friction between academic expectations and norms for course lengths, layouts, and assessment timescales, while apprentices experienced issues with academic support common to most undergraduate programmes. While extensions were made available, particularly a blanket Covid extension for all assignments, one apprentice explained that mitigating circumstances were only accessible if a learners' situation were:

> *pretty dire. So one of my friends got married right in the middle of an assignment, and the wedding was obviously planned way before the MBA started. And that wasn't a good enough reason to ask for an extension* (Apprentice 18).

Others complained that extension policies of individual lecturers and administrative staff were not always aligned, leading to confusion. Assessments and tasks were often clearly not designed to be completed

in the 20% allocated off-the-job learning time available to apprentices, though there were also reports of concessions being awarded by ETPs permitting apprentices extra time for assessments, for example. Employers of apprentices we spoke to were both committed to protecting off-the-job learning whilst also recognising the long-term benefits to apprentices' development by being flexible to allow apprentices to take more time to study if required. Support for EPA from ETPs seems mixed. Some apprentices reported little assistance; others reported a substantial amount of support that did not necessarily neatly fit into the available limited time apprentices had allocated for their studies. As one apprentice explained, their ETP offered six or seven mandatory online webinars workshops. This added up to an extra day once a month *'which is quite difficult to manage'* within the 20% off-the-job (Apprentice 04).

Delivery of DAs, then, is characterised by a great deal of heterogeneity. This variability, while posing issues for the provision of consistent and equitable support, is also reflective of the diverse needs and capacities of stakeholders.

6. Motivations and Recruitment

Having explored development, design, and delivery of degree apprenticeships (DAs), the next chapter discusses stakeholders' motivations to engage with DAs, before examining the questions of diversity of apprentices, awareness and information about DAs, and successes and challenges of recruitment. Apprentices are generally career-minded, while employers view DAs as a mean to address skills gaps and secure long-term employees; workforce diversification was not a major consideration. Both benefit from the capacity of the levy to ring-fence funding for training. Education and training providers (ETPs), meanwhile, saw DAs as a strategic opportunity despite the uncertain financial viability of DAs.

6.1 Motivations to engage with degree apprenticeships and expectations

The question of why stakeholders engage with DAs and what their expectations are is important to unpack because these impact satisfaction level. These may also influence their lived experiences of DAs. Motivations to engage with DAs and expectations of DAs may or may not connect with stakeholders' experiences. In this section we pay special attention to employers' perceptions of the Apprenticeship Levy as its introduction impacted the number of apprenticeship starts and it keeps influencing stakeholders' behaviour.

6.1.1 Apprentices' and employers' reasons to engage with DAs

Employers and apprentices interviewed cited career aspirations, opportunities for practical experience and skills development, and financial considerations as some of the reasons for offering or taking on a DA programme. There are two distinct groups of people entering into DAs. First, are new entrants to the workplace who have recently left school or college having completed their Level 3 qualifications. Secondly, and more commonly, DAs are taken up by existing employees who often have been working within the organisation for several years where they start a DA programme. Despite the first group likely possessing less experience in the workplace, interviewees commented positively, noting, for example:

> *The undergrad degree apprentices, they might be 18 or 19-year-olds but they are very, very focused. They know what they want, they're a lot more mature, they manage their time, clearly way more efficiently than a traditional student* (ETP 18).

This clarity of purpose means that the motivations of school leavers and existing employees are often quite similar. Apprentices see DAs as enhancing their workplace competencies, and a clear pathway for entry into or upward mobility within industry sectors. As one apprentice put it, *'it really is intended to give my career a bit of a boost'* (Apprentice 20). School leavers possessed clarity around at least their short-term career plans in applying for a specific DA, as one apprentice explained:

> *I knew that I wanted to be like a biological scientist since I was about fifteen or something. So I think when you're sort of presented with the fact that when you're 18 you can just go and do it rather than having to wait three years* (Apprentice 14).

This was closely associated with the perception that DAs offered an opportunity to obtain a degree more attuned to their vocationally-aligned interests and an emphasis on hands-on learning and real-world application of knowledge. This included a preference for learning on-the-job in non-classroom-based settings, and coursework over exams (Apprentice 11). *'I didn't particularly enjoy like classroom learning, so*

I knew that university wouldn't be a suitable route for me', one apprentice told us (Apprentice 09). The joint vocational and academic knowledge components of DAs were considered to effectively prepare apprentices for the workplace gaining the skills they need on-the-job, such as *'working with patients, the realities of that in day-to-day work, what that's going to look like'* (Apprentice 01). As one apprentice explained, DAs were effective at consolidating *'knowledge, skills, learning' and applying 'what you're learning in university to your job role'* (Apprentice 03).

Employers we talked to recognise the value of DAs in cultivating a skilled and adaptable workforce, and the attraction of accelerated progression opportunities. Employers also shared a recognition with apprentices of the value of immersion in one's work environment:

> *I think progression's one element. I think getting time to really, kind of, understand your current role in its context, and therefore being, sort of, more useful to the team, the department, the whole* (Large Employer 03).

Large employers and SMEs alike embrace DAs as a means to secure long-term, sustainable employment for apprentices while simultaneously addressing skill shortages within their industries. As one employer explained, DAs:

> *offer opportunities for people that wouldn't be able to afford them, first of all. You're showing that you're actually investing, and that you're serious in terms of your long-term […] That you've got a long-term vision in terms of […] upskilling local […] staff for the long-term, and hopefully you'll reap the reward* (Large Employer 06).

These rewards could be substantial:

> *The benefit we get from those range of people is the enthusiasm, the buy-in, the sheer energy that some of these people bring into the business* (SME Employer 07).

Moreover, employers and ETPs view DAs as an avenue to develop their talent pipeline and shape future workforce ensuring that apprentices develop the precise skills and competencies required to meet evolving industry demands:

> *So, it was all about supporting the local region to fulfil those skill gaps, provide aspirational opportunities for students to be able to improve their job prospects and their career prospects and thereby improve their whole outlook on life going forward* (ETP 11).

Certain industries, such as the water and healthcare sectors with strong workforce retention, considered the Apprenticeship Levy as a facilitator of valuable, long-term investments (See Section below on The Apprenticeship Levy). This was particularly identified as important for upskilling early- and mid-career employees internally who are currently *'stuck'* in their job (Large Employer 08). However, some industries weighed the potential loss of investment if they were victims of *'poaching'* where competitors offered former apprentices a wage premium upon completing their studies (Large Employer 08).

Employers acknowledge that DAs produce apprentices who are both well-versed in theoretical concepts and also proficient in practical tasks. As an employer noted, *'One of the strengths of the model is that you do combine that, those vocational and behavioural skills, as well as the undergraduate knowledge component'* (Large Employer 02). Some employers even believe that there is less *'catch up'* learning to do compared to graduates coming from undergraduate degrees:

> *Even a graduate who's done industrial placement or summer internships, has a lot of learning to do to catch up to, […] if you're a software engineer, if you went to [name of university], or wherever you went to, and you did placement with us, you know, there's still a lot to learn I think, compared to where a degree apprentice would be. So, they do give us a lot of benefits* (Large Employer 05).

Employers reported that DAs enhance their workforce by infusing fresh perspectives, energy, and enthusiasm.

DAs offer a distinct financial advantage. For apprentices, these programmes provide an alternative to mainstream full-time education, eliminating the burden of student loans and tuition fees. In a typical example, one apprentice describes studying on a DA as obvious route because of the financial benefit:

> *I thought, I don't quite know why I'd go to university, incur all those fees, when there's this all-inclusive package that would give me every single thing, if not more* (Apprentice 10).

The appeal is heightened by the opportunity to earn a *'full-time wage'* while avoiding university fees, as another apprentice observed (Apprentice 16). However, we were also made aware that in at least one case, if an apprentice had to withdraw or failed a year, they would have to fund the extra year themselves (ETP 11). Nevertheless, these benefits could lower the opportunity cost for participating in degree level study, particularly for those with families or otherwise unable to forego income from employment. One apprentice described that they chose a DA because *'I couldn't afford to go to university and stop working, kind of, go full time'* (Apprentice 03). As another apprentice explained, studying as an apprentice meant *'I didn't have to take a pay cut. So obviously, I still kept my full-time wage because I have a young family, I have bills to pay'* (Apprentice 15). Employers frequently gestured to this capacity of DAs to extend opportunities for degree level study as part of their corporate social responsibilities. This is discussed in the section below on 'Recruitment and Diversity'.

6.1.2 The Apprenticeship Levy

Employers who participated in this study regarded the levy as a useful instrument for fostering learning and development within their organisations, although in most cases, they felt that the way the levy was structured made it difficult to access, particularly for smaller businesses. While some employers viewed the levy as a tax, many saw it as an opportunity to support education and skills development for their workforce (SME Employer 09), if *'a little punitive at times'* in how restricted businesses use of levy funds could be (ETP-Employer 05). As one employer explained:

> *it can be frustrating because to a degree you are then dictated to, in terms of what you can use it for, how you draw it down, and what you draw it down for and stuff. But we definitely have never had the amount of development we've had in terms of apprenticeships […] And I'm not sure that would've happened without the levy […] it's done the job, which would be to drive changes and make organisations think about what they offer and how they offer it* (ETP-Employer 05).

Employers acknowledged both the business sense and social responsibility associated with investing in education and skills. Interviewees generally considered it *'free learning […] for people and it's going to help you as a business as well'* (Large Employer 12). The majority of those interviewed who were levy-payers considered that the levy enabled them to fund apprenticeships that they might otherwise not have been able to offer:

> *So having the levy had no doubt prompted several [apprenticeships] […] We could never have put the number through on say CertEd, that we can through the academic professional, because we get paid for the academic professional, whereas we would have to pay the universities to do a recognised CertEd* (ETP-Employer 01).

The levy essentially acts as a ring-fence for funding. Across multiple NHS trusts, for example, in particularly tight fiscal environments, the levy was praised for safeguarding critical financial resources in the face of resourcing pressures (ETP-Employer 02). Policymakers also recognised the levy's role as a *'game changer'* (Policymaker 05), offering a natural incentive for employers to maximise the value of their investments and achieve the best outcomes. However, we also heard that DAs were attractive not necessarily primarily because of their relevance to workplace training needs but because they are expensive, and therefore an easy way for businesses to use available levy funds before their expiration. One national stakeholder reckoned one DA was equivalent in cost to nine adult care workers (Other stakeholder 02).

Nevertheless, even among the participants in this study, presumably inclined to positive sentiments towards DAs, several large employers reported underspending on their levy allocations. The primary obstacles employers faced in spending their levy allocation were primarily to do with resource constraints. This included, firstly, inadequate resources to backfill positions for apprentices on their off-the-job training, and ongoing salary costs, which were not factored into the levy. Non-levy-paying SMEs, in particular, found these factors challenging. Some underspending employers were frustrated that the inflexibility of the levy prevented them from using their funds to cover these additional costs. Secondly, problems arose from the variable cost of delivering DAs over time, with much higher costs in the first year, while the levy is paid at an agreed rate per year. This led to cashflow problems. Third, as levy funds only last for two years, where smaller employers might take on a cohort of apprentices every three years, they reported effectively losing *'a year's worth of levy'* (SME Employer 06).

Convoluted levy fund administration processes remained a point of difficulty for many employers: *'a big reason why organisations aren't fully optimising their levy is because they don't know how to'*, one employer explained (Large Employer 13). Some reported ongoing confusion, especially when onboarding new staff into the apprenticeship system. One reported that *'forecasting what you are going to spend, and what you are going to return to the HMRC is very difficult to do'*, even as an experienced user (Large Employer 15). Employers, both large and small, required several years to fully grasp how to effectively utilise their levy funds.

Levy transfer was seen as a valuable mechanism but similarly administratively troublesome. Employers who were aware of levy transfer or surrender schemes were positive regarding its aims; as one employer explained *'I don't like giving the money back. I'd rather give it to support an SME get some apprenticeships off the ground'* (Large Employer 10). Examples included one NHS Trust gifting levy to a local hospice and a GP surgery to train nurses and nursing associates (Large Employer 09). Other employers in consortiums pooled their levy (Large Employer 12). SMEs found the 95/5 funding contributions particularly advantageous, viewing it as excellent value. They nonetheless faced 'daunting' administrative barriers (Large Employer 06). One SME reported completing the administration in their own time external from work (SME Employer 07), hardly a viable route to engagement. Notably, ETPs were taking on new roles as coordinators of levy transfers, connecting SMEs with multinational companies and local educational institutions. Ultimately, as another SME described, capacity to utilise levy transfer effectively was based on being *'in the know'* (SME Employer 03), and contacts with, for example, local ETPs and county council schemes.

While the stakeholders interviewed for the study considered that the Apprenticeship Levy had created opportunities, many participants also considered that the levy's complexity and compliance requirements represented a barrier for some stakeholders. To reform the system, the clearest desire was to use levy funds to support resourcing, backfill, and ongoing salary costs. Employers sought greater visibility over their levy allocations, as they found the current systems challenging to navigate. Some ETPs and employers called for more data on how employers were using the levy, aiming to enhance transparency and efficiency in the process.

6.1.3 Resourcing issues

For employers, particularly SMEs, finding time and resource required to provide appropriate on-the-job training and effective supervision can represent a significant barrier to DAs. The requirement for apprentices to be absent from the workplace in order to complete off-the-job training could be debilitating for employers. As one SME explained:

> *the funding is not the issue. It's not about the cost, which of course the levy is the solution to. It's the resource drain of […] the loss of the person for 20% of their time off-the-job whilst they're doing the degree apprenticeship, because by their very nature they're important people to the organisation and they're needed here and now […] For a small business, because it's so resource poor and everything is, you know, you're just at the knife-edge of being able to do your job in a business that needs, every person counts. You know, one person that isn't productive is life-threatening for the business* (SME Employer 01).

Other costs could also be incurred. For example, an employer representative reported that their apprentice had wanted to go to an ETP in another city to complete their degree. This would have meant sending the apprentice to another city for one day a week for four years, which was simply not viable for an SME, involving *'excessive'* costs to the business (SME Employer 03). Apprentices themselves had to consider whether the apprenticeship was viable for them in terms of time and having the *'bandwidth'* for the work alongside their jobs (Large Employer 16). Where the environment in which they worked made the necessary *'backfilling'* difficult, and their business was *'resource poor'* (Large Employer 06), this is likely to be a significant concern. Further, an SME (06) noted that where apprentices did not meet the requirements in relation to English and maths, this represented an additional drain on resources for the employer, as apprentices were brought up to the required standard.

Large employers also experienced problems with resource, particularly the case in teams where staff turnover is significant, such as healthcare. One stakeholder in healthcare advised that on some of the wards in their facility, 60% of the team were agency staff, who could not be expected to supervise and develop apprentices or other trainees. In addition, they felt that some nurses who were members of staff might find supervising apprentices *'a little bit overwhelming'* (ETP-Employer 05).

In particular instances, resource factors could be further compounded by PRSB requirements. For nursing apprenticeships, apprentices are required to be *'supernumerary'*, and therefore not part of the workforce (RCN, 2019; NMC, 2023). This is intended to ensure that the nursing apprentice's time in the workplace prioritises their own learning. Practice learning experience hours must total 2,300 hours as part of the apprenticeship requirements. This is in addition to requirement to undertake off-the-job learning. This meant:

> *apprenticeships are not the cheapest way to do things, because you're paying a salary while you're doing the apprenticeship. Depends on the profession, so for nursing you have to be completely supernumerary even though you're an apprentice. And so obviously you're paying a salary for somebody that is not contributing to the work officially* (ETP-Employer 01).

Interviewees form the healthcare sector referred to existing staff being unable to afford to take a pay cut to apprenticeship rates when upskilling through an apprenticeship route. Most stakeholders advised that in fact, they did not reduce pay during the apprenticeship. A nursing apprentice (Apprentice 15) stated that not having to take a pay cut was *'a very big […] contributing factor'* in their decision to take a DA. Further, some departments, such as mental health, had to pay higher rates in order to attract and retain staff. In some instances the *'backfill'* costs could be considerable. Further backfill costs arose from sending apprentices out to placement and hosting placements.

The issue of backfilling also meant that there was a risk of resentment, and a negative perception of the apprentices:

> *I suspect some of the apprentices might find a little bit of pushback at times from colleagues, you know, "oh it's alright for you, you're going off for one day a week"* (ETP-Employer 05).

Apprentices even internalised this perception; *'you feel like that guilt'*, one recalled (Apprentice 16).

The view of stakeholders generally was that the levy had encouraged employers to engage more with apprenticeships, the levy did not necessarily address the resourcing issues associated with offering an apprenticeship.

6.1.4 Education and training providers' motivations

For ETPs, the levy represents an effective stimulant for demand. But ETPs were not confident in the viability of the current model as one reported: *'we lose money compared to tuition fees for some of our programmes'* (ETP 19). It was suggested that DAs are *'heavily subsidised by the other, larger work of the university'* (ETP 11). DAs were *'not as cost effective and are more expensive to run'* than mainstream undergraduate offer due to increased numbers of staff needed to deliver, for example, to engage with tripartite reviews (ETP 24), keeping abreast of regulation and monitoring (ETP 12), and employer engagement activities, particularly with SMEs (ETP 25). Apprentice funding bands also had an ambiguous association with the cost of delivery. For example:

> *If you think about radiography, you need an X-ray machine. We can't use our apprenticeship levy to help contribute towards that X-ray machine. But somebody's got to pay for that X-ray machine for us to be able to run the apprenticeship* (ETP 02).

Financial pressures on universities, particularly capped undergraduate tariffs and rising costs mean that cross-subsidisation options are limited. Financial flexibility is further limited by risk associated with regulatory compliance. ESFA audits, which may extrapolate non-compliance to impose multimillion-pound penalties, can leave ETPs operating at a loss to recover *'clawed back'* funds (ETP 24). Therefore, as one ETP rhetorically asked

> *where is the give? The give is in the innovation for the learner […] the experiences and the opportunities that are then afforded to those learners* (ETP 02).

Often, the cheapest model, and most risk adverse model, was to align as many modules as possible to existing programmes (ETP 20).

As a result, interviewees recalled considerable difficulty in making the strategic case for delivering DAs asking *'how is this viable?'* (ETP 01).

> *Why the heck are we doing this for £21,000 when it would be, you know, £28,000 and a lot cheaper to deliver, because you don't have skills coaches, we don't need to worry about Ofsted?* (ETP 21).

There was anxiety as to whether the levy model represented an enduring business model beyond the existing financial precarity. As one ETP explained:

> *You're always kind of looking over your shoulder with apprenticeships to see whether, whether they're going to be running next year. Which is not great because you can't, universities can't build, or FE can't build for the future* (ETP 23).

Uncertainty is widespread among the interviewed ETPs. As one health ETP described, while in one instance an employer might have twenty apprentices,

> *the next month, they said, no, no, Health Education England's withdrawn the funding, so we're gonna have to fund it all ourselves. So we'll only take five* (ETP 10).

Unpredictability in demand was compounded by anxieties as to possible policy changes that could affect revenue streams, particularly the eligibility of certain DAs under the levy.

Nonetheless, ETPs we spoke to identified that DAs were an area of growth for their institution. This included growth in numbers:

> *lots of investment, lots of prime pumping of funding into the development of staff teams for development and delivery of DAs* (ETP 01).

Many championed the good apprentice evaluation levels, comparatively high achievement and completions (ETP 14), and *'great'* outcomes in terms of employee performance, confidence and ambition (ETP 23), and meeting employer needs (ETP 16).

How far ETPs were seeking to grow their DAs offer depended on institutional circumstances and strategy, and there was therefore great variability. Some had seen growth across faculties; others were emphasising expanding apprentice numbers within their current standards offer as to not *'dilute what we do very well'* (ETP 19). This included sustaining current levels of engagement with employees and apprentices given available resource. DAs however had limits to their potential growth, they had little penetration into non-vocationally linked faculties and for an implied narrower group of *'people who know exactly what they want to do and what they want to go into. So I don't think we see it overtaking ordinary degree provision'* (ETP 21).

Nonetheless DAs were attractive. As one ETP explained:

> *there is an opportunity cost for not delivering it too, that we have to factor in. It's really difficult to quantify that sometimes because we don't know the strength of relationship or [how] commercially advantageous a particular relationship [might be]* (ETP 24).

Such *'opportunity costs'* are also factors that mean DAs fit very well into institutions' medium term strategic plans and civic responsibilities, often towards 2030. This alignment appears to have held across the spectrum of universities. As one ETP told us

> *we've always been a very predominantly vocationally focused university, so as a portfolio it makes perfect sense* (ETP 25).

This included around supporting priority industry sectors in local and regional economies (ETP 16), addressing HE cold-spots, and strategy around *'work-based learning, widening participation'* (ETP 02). DAs enable ETPs to *'articulate [the] societal, social mobility, economical, impact of our provision, our relationship with employers, and what we do'* (ETP 06), including the *'greening agenda'* (ETP 11), and addressing *'skills shortages'* (ETP 21). For example, multiple ETPs argued their contribution to addressing *'absolutely ridiculous'* staffing levels in NHS nursing necessitates them becoming *'more proactive in what we do'* (ETP 04). DAs were described as instrumental in educating enough *'nurses to meet that 50,000 target that the government set. You're not going to get it through fee paying students'* (ETP 10). One ETP argued that government organised target-led missions for DAs would help stimulate

> *some aspirations, a sense of vision about what we want for that would, I think, help to give confidence to the university sector and provide some financial security* (ETP 21).

Improved and sustained local, regional and international employer relationships were a further key opportunity for ETPs (ETP 04, ETP 11). These relationships became more than merely transactional relationship but provided beneficial input into the broader work of the ETP. Offering DAs was therefore a strategy to defend employer relationships from other ETPs that might otherwise monopolise that relationship (ETP 24). These relationships, and how they informed teaching and learning in DAs, align with developments in pedagogy and delivery. Multiple ETPs explained that it made sense to move *'into a more formalised apprenticeship because we were literally delivering it that way anyway'* (ETP 02), including new balances between classroom study, practice, and placements (ETP 03). DAs also meant that through teaching and learning environments some ETPs gained a *'lot of people who worked in industry'* with a beneficial breadth of experience involved in delivery of the curriculum than otherwise (ETP 17). One ETP estimated that this was still an area for development of their full-time staff, *'I would probably say less than half know what they're doing in terms of work-based learning'* (ETP 18). The experience of designing and delivering DAs was redeployed to expand the offer of ETPs, including practice on other undergraduate courses, *'standalone online degrees'* or other apprenticeship formats for the international student market (ETP 20). DAs are therefore a valuable tool in the diversification and development of ETPs' wider offer.

6.2 Recruitment and diversity

Despite government and policymaker enthusiasm for DAs for school leavers, we observed that DAs tend to be targeted internally towards existing employees. Open DA opportunities targeted at school leavers are less common. Recruiting internally through existing employees was seen as a way of minimising the risk to the employer as an investor. As one ETP explained:

> *If you're not employed by them, you're unlikely to get on to an apprenticeship, you have to sort of prove your worth and that you got there you're going to invest a significant amount of time and energy into you* (ETP 10).

This does however mean that opportunities for school leavers to participate in a DA were limited:

> *So there is no option for people who want to do nursing or speech and language therapy or occupational therapy as a degree apprentice locally because the employers just don't advertise those posts. They're just not available. So the school leavers would make a choice between choosing an undergraduate degree or coming in and doing a job like a healthcare support worker to get some experience* (Other stakeholder 01).

For example, in the healthcare sector, online job listings were mainly the first port of call and for the most part these were internal facing job listings. There was not always a binary choice between offering DAs to school leavers and those already in the workforce. Some existing employees were moving into DAs as a route up from lower-level apprenticeships within the company, and the DAs were seen as the natural next step, being beneficial to *'help upskill our existing apprentice community'* (Large Employer 08). DAs were also potent tools for recruiting external talent already in the workforce. Other organisations meanwhile were committed to the idea of DAs as part of their social corporate responsibility and were not just about upskilling their existing workforce, but *'taking a young person, moulding them and growing them for the future'* (SME Employer 02). We heard from a number of sectors that recruitment patterns were shifting towards increasing new recruits:

> *I think we're beginning to see that shift. We had 60 occupational therapists start with [university] and I would say at least 30% of those were brand new recruits, so it is beginning to shift. I think we're starting to exhaust the talent pool of existing staff that can quickly progress, so now we're going wider to attract brand new recruits. And I think for some of the other subjects, you know, for the level six manager for example, they tend to be brand new recruits* (Policymaker 06).

However, a prerequisite for recruitment is awareness of DAs in general and DA opportunities more specifically.

6.2.1 Awareness

For both existing employees and school-leavers, awareness of DAs was patchy. Awareness was hindered by barriers such as limited awareness of DAs in schools, but awareness of specific professions was also a barrier. As one industry stakeholder pointed out *'people don't know what an orthotist is because they've never even heard of one. So, to recruit into some of our jobs is a challenge'* (Other stakeholder 01). Apprentices reported confusion around the content of the programme. One described that while information was available for their application *'I didn't quite understand how it all like fitted together or like what it meant'*, particularly with limited information about *'day-to-day life of what your apprenticeship would look like'* (Apprentice 12).

Apprentices were reported as encountering DA opportunities in various ways. Large employers, for example, in healthcare, reported they undertook in-house recruitment activities, including evening events and social media. We heard in a small but not insignificant number of instances, employees discovered the existence of DAs and their potential to pursue them almost entirely by chance. Sometimes employees had conducted their own research to identify ways that they could upskill or develop themselves professionally, approaching the employer with a *'business case'* (Apprentice 04) for pursuing a DA. A lack of clarity was even present in the case for large employers where progression routes would supposedly be more prominently signposted. One nursing apprentice described their engagement with DAs as a consequence of a chance encounter when they were an assistant practitioner:

> *I spent a morning with our Director of Health. […] she came out with me on some of my community visits, and I thought, while I had her in the car, I'd approach her and say, what is there in terms of progression for us if we wanted to go into nursing. And she said, "you know, if I'm honest, at the moment, we don't have anything. However, I'll promise you, I'll go away and have a think, because we do have access to what is called the Apprenticeship Levy" […]. And it took a couple of months after I spoke to her, and she did get back to me, and we had a few informal meetings. And that was when they decided that they would then look into doing the degree apprenticeship* (Apprentice 15).

The internet was an important source of information for apprentices about DAs, sometimes through specific searches, guided by careers advisors, or postings on the internet on social media or other recruitment websites.

Some degree apprentices who were recent school leavers and new to the workplace reported to have received reasonable information through the education system while others found information elsewhere. Some schools and colleges were identified as having provided information on apprenticeship routes, though apprentices indicated that *'this seems to not to be very common'* (Apprentice 10). As one employer recalled: *'they are advising kids that there's only one route to university, and that is, you know, just the normal route'* (Large Employer 06). One apprentice recalled they were not *'really given the opportunity to go and explore them [DAs], I was very much pushed down the "you'll apply to UCAS" route'.* They reported the (inaccurate) impression they received was that they would be: *'at the bottom of the company […] Actually, you won't really add any value to the company until you've done your degree'* (Apprentice 23). There are indications that awareness of DAs is improving over time:

> *There was a changeover of like the careers department whilst I was in upper sixth, so it kind of went from a head of careers that was very university-focused to a careers team that were more like open to apprenticeships* (Apprentice 09).

Employers also reiterated this, saying:

> *I think apprenticeships are going to grow, because I'm getting asked to do more and more talks now at colleges* (Large Employer 10).

When apprentices did not receive advice through the education system there was a mixture of ways they heard about DAs, usually through peers, family members or other personal contacts. The paucity of effective information, advice, and guidance in this area appears to have entrenched advantages for those with prior awareness or privileged access to knowledge.

> *This one I've managed to get because my auntie is an apprenticeship trainer. She creates apprenticeship programmes for companies. And she was able to help a friend of hers create an apprenticeship scheme. I applied for it and that's how I got it* (Apprentice 07).

Some interviewees claimed that DAs are becoming a route for those with more advantaged backgrounds with the social capital and awareness of opportunities and how to successfully pursue one. As one employer admitted:

> *Are we attracting people from more of the disadvantaged areas? Are we attracting care leavers? Are we, you know- do we have a diverse pool of candidates? Now, my instinct is to say we probably don't at the minute and it's very much that people tend to know about the apprenticeships, if their schools really promote it, if their parents are supportive of it, and that they have access to, you know, social media, that they have, you know, they have that digital network that around them kind of in their home life as well, that allows them to see opportunities* (Large Employer 17).

The theme of diversity in DAs is considered further below.

6.2.2 Recruitment of school leavers

Where employers were recruiting school leavers for DAs, strategies included targeted messages, advertising or outreach activities. These included talks or presentations at schools and colleges. Apprentices frequently volunteered to act as ambassadors to share personal experiences with prospective applicants (Apprentice 08). Such outreach was aligned with diversity agendas by engaging underrepresented communities, often using role models, such as female ambassadors, to challenge stereotypes in male-dominated sectors like IT. Large employers particularly have the capacity to do outreach and recruitment activities. Mostly these activities are focussed in the local area but for some larger employers this may even be done on a broader scale.

> *We email out to every school in [the county], when we have a job vacancy live. And then we go to a number of kind of careers events and fairs where we promote our roles as well. So we just try to do as wide as possible across [the county] as we can* (Large Employer 17).

Despite the encouraging work done by pockets of industry, we found many employers did not have the time and resources to actively recruit and work with the education sector. This is a significant issue for many SMEs but can also affect larger organisations.

A further challenge with recruitment of young people is reaching the parents of these potential degree apprentices. Some noted that engaging with schools can also help reach teachers and parents in terms of messaging, yet sometimes these different stakeholders require different approaches and different channels (Large Employer 15).

Other employers discussed that the parents can sometimes be the ones who are more difficult to convince of the benefits of DAs. There is a general lack of understanding and still a perception that they are the *'poor relation'* (Policymaker 06) of a mainstream university education. Employers noted that online channels were often used to recruit school leavers. Various job recruitment websites were mentioned along with government-led sites, such as the National Apprenticeship Service.

Not all employers found the methods discussed above successful, however. Again, SMEs faced greater challenges due to limited resources:

> *So, like any other sort of SME, it's particularly challenging to hire people. Because you're up against larger businesses, you have deeper pockets and more resources to penetrate the labour market than you do. Added to which the sector that we're in, which is in technology and digital, has a demand for skills that is always going to outstrip supply* (SME Employer 08).

Other employers discussed these more general issues with workforce recruitment, either because of lack of general skills and workforce shortages or because they are unable to reach suitable candidates with the right skills because of a lack of awareness of both DAs and broader job opportunities. For example, as one SME explained:

> *Often, especially in degree apprentices, it appears you need to find a person or the person needs to apply to you. Now I can put up a job advert on LinkedIn and say, I want to hire an apprentice. Right? That's great, but how many 18-year-olds use LinkedIn? How do I find the people? Now I could get a relationship with a local college or school and see about trying to get 16- and 18-year-olds, for the various levels of apprentice, but 18-year-olds for degrees? I could do that, but that again, that's an administrative burden. How do I find people?* (SME Employer 07)

ETPs often reported a desire to assist in *'career pathway building'* (ETP 08). This was key where local circumstances meant, *'there is a lack of Level 2 and Level 3 qualified people who want to go on to do degree level apprenticeships'* (ETP 11). One ETP, for example, described:

> *We've got a T Level in [local FE college] that then can feed into, but we […] then can feed into our nursing associate and assistant practitioner programme that feeds into the registered nurse programme* (ETP 08).

Others emphasised broadening possible early exit routes with avenues for the awarding of qualification in instances where PSRB standards had already been achieved (ETP 10).

6.2.3 Diversity

The characterisation of DAs as primarily intended for those in the workforce who had not previously engaged in degree level study meant they were identified as contributing to their corporate social responsibility agenda. This was particularly prevalent in the health sector. As one employer summarised, DAs:

> *capture a demographic that might otherwise not enter our company. So often I interview people who say, "I just knew university wasn't right for me, that's not the way I learn. I'm a practical learner or I need to see it - see that theory in practice and have experience using what I've learnt". So, I think it captures people that learn via different routes to maybe traditional options […] as a result, it brings in diverse talent to the organisation* (Large Employer 14).

Most interviewees had the impression that degree apprentices tend to represent an older demographic than students taking mainstream university degrees. They are also more likely to be returning to education after a sustained break from studying. There was some variation across different employment sectors. One apprentice reflected on their experience of the healthcare sector, telling us:

> *The average age of the course is like substantially higher in my eyes. […] You know, we really do have a good third […] maybe more of people who are plus 25, maybe plus 30. In that kind of age range. I don't think- I don't know, we might have a few over the age of 40* (Apprentice 07).

Gender was one of the most frequently cited considerations, with certain roles and sectors finding that through DAs they were able to, and hope to further, attract females to traditionally male-dominated roles. This particularly included engineering, IT and construction:

> *I've got a keen interest in diversity. […] there are too many people in the IT industry that are like me. Okay, so we're talking middle aged white guys. […] Now, degree apprenticeships allow people who don't necessarily, wouldn't consider getting into this industry from a variety of backgrounds, creeds, colours, you know, whatever it is. I want to increase the diversity in IT* (SME Employer 07).

Recruitment to DAs could also be associated with addressing skills gaps in areas of deprivation. One provider described how:

> *It was very much the local industries who were telling us very loudly that they wanted degree apprenticeships. They really felt that that was an important way for them to be able to grow their own and to bring on new staff* (ETP 11).

Interviewees often had powerful anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of DAs to provide degree level learning opportunities. One employer, for example, recalled on nursing associate interviewing for a DA position who:

> *She had worked for health for her whole life. 15-16 years, I think it was. She was early 40s. She had really struggled with mental health, she had some personal issues. She had essentially been told by her maths teacher that she'd never amount to anything because she couldn't do maths. So, she came to us with huge anxieties around maths. We talked to her about the fact that we believe she could do it and she burst into tears and said she'd never had a conversation like that. She subsequently did both her maths and English whilst doing her foundation degree and all the way along they talked about how clinically competent she was she was incredibly skilled clinically. […] And she will stay with our trust forever. […] And, if we want to attend to the 40,000 vacancies we've got or whatever it is in the country, she's the kind of person we have to invest in* (ETP-Employer 03).

DAs featured as important elements of access agendas for ETPs. One ETP reported that of their degree apprentices *'two thirds of them are first in family to come to university'* (ETP 13). The range of personal circumstances of apprentices was often celebrated:

> *we have a range of kind of early career people, we have up-skillers, the more mature ones, and they all get something different out of it* (ETP 17).

While positive about the capacities of DAs, employers reported varying degrees of success in diversifying their workforces. As one employer explained:

> *What we struggle with, and I know it's also true across the industry, is with attracting non-White candidates. Okay, that's very hard. Now admittedly we're in [county] and it's not the most ethnically diverse place anyway […]* (SME Employer 12).

Ultimately however, diversity was only discussed by a limited number of employers, and not a major consideration for the majority of employers when recruiting to DAs. Some stakeholders within healthcare remarked that diversity is not a big issue they need to consider because they already have a diverse workforce, for example a large number of ethnic minorities within nursing *'is there because there is a skills need'* (Large Employer 14). As discussed above, a lack of effective careers advice and guidance on DAs tended to mean those with social capital or good fortune were privileged in accessing DA opportunities.

7. Collaboration and Engagement

Degree apprenticeships (DAs) were intended to be collaborative in nature, in terms of both their design and their delivery. Interviewees acknowledged the tripartite relationship between the education and training provider (ETP), the employer, and the learner, as critical to a *'successful apprenticeship'* (Policymaker 05). However, evidence indicates that forms and degrees of collaboration between ETPs and employers was *'very varied'* (Large Employer 12), with some participants describing very close relationships between different stakeholders, and others indicating that these relationships needed to improve.

While inevitably ETPs engaged with multiple employers, employers also frequently partnered with multiple ETPs. This ranged from anywhere from three ETPs for one SME (SME Employer 11), to *'four or five'* (Large Employer 14) and up to *'40 or so training providers'* (Large Employer 08). Variation in modes of collaboration could therefore be considerable and could further vary even across different faculties of the same ETP (ETP-Employer 03). Large employers, such as in health, had local or national procurement exercises (Large Employer 10); others relied on *'forums'* (Large Employer 13), *'word-of-mouth'* or personal networks (Large Employer 12). While large employers with bigger cohorts often had clearer workforce plans, SMEs could engage more on a reactive basis, typically to support individual apprentices pursuing HE opportunities. Considerations primarily included relevance of offer to business needs, location, mode of delivery (particularly on the suitability of virtual delivery or arrangements of day release or block delivery), and reputational matters, sometimes including Ofsted reviews (Large Employer 17). Reputation, as one employer explained was less about:

> *the sheer academic horsepower of the degree that sits behind the apprenticeship […] but the pragmatism and the will to work with us and do things that make the apprenticeship work for us is really quite important* (Large Employer 15).

While some ETPs pursuing business development were proactive in recruiting employers by identifying gaps in the market, most novel partnerships seem to be initiated by employers approaching ETPs.

7.1 Tripartite collaboration

Generally, the interviewed ETPs and employers recognised the importance of regular tripartite alignment in ensuring compliance and quality in delivery and mentoring as one employer described:

> *You've got to have the apprentice, the line manager, the course tutor, and the training coordinator all kind of aligned and meeting and communicating regularly* (Large Employer 16).

'Solid communication' across stakeholders was also important for apprentices (Apprentice 05). For some large employers, ETP liaison was primarily conducted through dedicated apprenticeship teams with a *'clear escalation process'* (Large Employer 10), HR, or line managers at small employers. ETPs reported engaging employers through frequent, mainly monthly or quarterly, progression boards, dashboards, and reviews as well as local business meetings, quality assurance processes, learning advisory groups, and quality reports. Liaison activities could be coordinated by dedicated partnership and apprenticeship development teams as the importance of such activities has grown (ETP 25). ETPs also reported utilising external employer contacts to generate industry input into elements of apprentices' studies while assignments *'would be based on their own employer'* (ETP 22). Some used *'joint recruitment'* practices (ETP-Employer 02).

While tripartite communication could be strong, there was widespread concern for *'closing the triangle'*, as an apprentice (04) put it. They felt that the *'onus'* was almost entirely on the apprentice to act as the node of communication. In their view:

> *my workplace mentor hasn't fully understood, whether that's because of me explaining it or the university, about their particular role within the apprenticeship. […] I know that I'm supposed to go to my workplace mentor and say "I've got this upcoming module on the academic side, but there are these elements of KSBs which I'd like to put into practice to try out during my work". And I think the driver is on me to do that. But […] there's no support from […] my workplace mentor, to remind me of that, and I think that's because of that misconnection between them and the university* (Apprentice 04).

Another employer explained that coordination at a management level was essential:

> *I think you can't have enough liaison between the service and the college. Clarity around what's required from assessments. Exactly what's needed in terms of placement. You need a good local coordinator in the department who understands the time constraints versus what they're going to need in terms of practical experience* (Large Employer 02).

This was also the case from an ETP perspective, as:

> *even the organisations that have learning and development departments with apprenticeship leads, that might be fine on one level, but if the apprentice's line manager, on the shop floor in some cases, is not engaged then the apprentice is not getting the experience that they've signed up for* (ETP 17).

The responsibility for monitoring off-the-job training was identified as inadequately owned by both ETPs and employers. Dedicated and consistent primary contacts with *'great account management'*, and not a contact who is *'also the head lecturer who has a million other things to do'* was essential (Large Employer 08). *'Staff change'* was identified as a significant barrier, as one ETP noted that *'messages become lost'* in the process (ETP 19).

7.2 Collaboration in design and delivery

Particularly around design and development of DA programmes, dialogue appears to be important but challenging. One ETP described competitors in their local area as having:

> *had monopoly of the area, and unfortunately have been renowned for being inflexible, to not only admissions and recruitment but also to the design of the programme […] you hear a lot of universities, you know, saying that they co-design or are employer-led when that's absolutely […] tokenistic* (ETP 01).

The lack of familiarity of ETPs with DAs could also cause problems. Some ETPs just *'don't get'* apprenticeships and saw it as a way to *'substitute maybe falling graduate numbers or international learners'* (Large Employer 08). For example, one employer involved in delivery described how:

> *we'd negotiate things with their [partner ETP's] apprenticeship hub, and we'd all be on the same page. And then the lecturers would be like, "No, that can't happen". And you say, "but it's an apprenticeship, it has to happen!" So definitely, they haven't […] taken on board the apprenticeship rules* (ETP-Employer 03).

This particularly included negotiating protected learning (Large Employer 09). Fundamentally, as one SME described, there was a time-consuming mutual unintelligibility:

> *It's been quite difficult to sometimes understand the sort of the language and technicalities that's used by the education sector, as employers* (SME Employer 08).

Conversely, ETPs also faced challenges in engaging with employers. One identified that employers:

> *don't necessarily want or have the time or the capacity to have lots of conversations about curriculum design, assessment, the things that we would really welcome* (ETP 22).

While others:

> *don't really engage with us or don't cooperate with us in order to set up a meeting* (ETP 07).

One SME explained this is a consequence of apprenticeship schemes that *'put the whole onus on the training provider'* (SME Employer 02) and deprioritise employer partnership in delivery. Apprentices noticed this as well, with one suggesting that:

> *I think my company should be a bit more involved […] maybe the university has to be more upfront with the employer as to what it requires they need to do* (Apprentice 07).

ETP representatives also indicated in some instances while there were high-profile policy incentives and support from executive boards to engage with DAs, the importance of constructing effective employer relationships was not always understood. One ETP described how it was necessary to explain that:

> *Yes, we can back this, which is great, but we need to get industry on board in order to actually make this work* (ETP 20).

As another ETP summarised:

> *stakeholder relationships are really important, and challenging and rewarding all at the same time. But they're very time-consuming. And that isn't always factored into the university programme. Well, it's not factored in* (ETP 17).

Where there was good employer engagement, competing and sometimes contradictory requirements of different employers even within the same sectors made things, according to one ETP, *'just impossible'*. They described how *'we just had very open conversations with employers and got them to come up in a workshop'* to agree compromises (ETP 13). Inflexibility could consequentially cause issues for employers. As one explained that if a contractor wants to recruit a DA:

> *in October or November and they say, you know, "we want to take somebody on and we've got three years' duration on this site, I can't wait until September, for a September start"* (Large Employer 06).

Employer misunderstandings were prominent. One policymaker noted:

> *we had employers that had joined the trailblazer that didn't understand that we couldn't change the way that the apprenticeship was run* (Policymaker 02).

One ETP reported that employers:

> *struggle with some of the compliance aspects with some of the infrastructure that's needed to be able to support apprentices appropriately* (ETP 11).

While success was reported in relation to collaboration there were clear shortcomings discussed, some of which linked to inadequate possession of information.

7.3 Collaborating with SMEs

These difficulties meant that some stakeholders worried the current system may inadvertently favour larger employers at the expense of SMEs:

> *it's the volume, and the system at the moment just doesn't incentivise you to work with young people in an SME as opposed to working with a large employer with adults, where you can get volume* (Other stakeholder 02).

As one SME explained, ETPs *'preferred model is to have a big employer with a big cohort, where they can just do it all under one umbrella'* (SME Employer 03). The volume of engagement of larger cohorts with smaller numbers of contacts minimised extra resource needed and formalised procedures. One ETP described they were:

> *trying to pedal back from working with SMEs because it's so expensive, so hard to get hold of […] We have a lot of SMEs on our books. If you ask me, "do I want any more?", the answer's no* (ETP 09).

As one ETP admitted:

> *Our relationship with the employers, again with the big ones it's more formal and more established because what they want us to report is greater* (ETP 17).

The sustainability of ETP provision necessitated prioritising larger cohorts, or where DA provision was *'bolted on'* to existing delivery (Large Employer 02), potentially diminished their flexibility and adaptability to employer needs. Employers recognised, however, that:

> *is it viable to run a program for three or four learners? It's not. Unless they embed it into the degree programme that they already run* (Large Employer 03).

Small employers could also struggle to provide the breadth of *'relevant experience for the apprentice to achieve the end-point assessment'* (ETP 03; ETP 07). Barriers further emerged from the more volatile business climate of SMEs. As one SME described, contributing design and development of a DA *'doesn't give me any benefit now and I'm impatient'* (SME Employer 07).

As ETPs explained however, SMEs were the site of particular targeted efforts to educate employers and stimulate demand. There were opportunities for ETPs to act as *'the glue'* that connects multinationals with leftover levy with SMEs and provide support to deal with *'admin burden'* (SME Employer 10). In at least one instance levy transfer schemes also included additional funding arrangements to cover elements such as salary that fall outside the levy (ETP 18; ETP 11) For SMEs we spoke to, awareness was driven by initiatives such as levy transfer schemes, sometimes organised by external social enterprises, without which, as one SME explained, *'we wouldn't have known'* about DAs (SME Employer 04). Providers and other stakeholders were also

developing roles in facilitating forums and supporting existing employer networks to enable placements and breadth of experiences for apprentices, for example, across:

> *large NHS partners, the small NHS partners like GP surgeries, with the local authorities and with an assortment of other partners like training provider organisations and social care partners, like nursing homes and small businesses* (Other stakeholder 01).

This would enable:

> *apprentices from the different organisations [to] kind of rotate round on their placements. So, you know, an NHS trust will still need to have that placement in primary care and vice versa* (Policymaker 06).

SMEs reported specific issues about collaboration and, according to interviewees, they often rely on the support they received from ETPs and large employers.

7.4 Strong relationships and co-delivery

Despite the mutual difficulties involved in collaboration, interviewees reported examples of constructive and mutually beneficial dialogues. As one employer explained, in general:

> *the organisations that we've worked with have wanted to mostly listen to our perspectives and our viewpoints […] when they say, you know, we want to deliver it like this, and we say, that will not work for us, we need to do it like this, that they have heard that and have attempted to make those changes* (Large Employer 07).

Effective relationships often developed and *'built up a bit of credit over time'* (Large Employer 08) often described as *'trust'* (Large Employer 13), and there was a general sense that, as DAs had become more established, listening was improving (Large Employer 10). SMEs in this research often reported strong and *'proactive'* collaboration and communication with ETPs (SME Employer 09). One SME described how they *'don't see them [ETP] as a supplier, we see them as a partner'* (SME Employer 08). There was also some recognition that while the specificity of DA programmes could be stronger to meet employers' needs, there were also important considerations around their *'responsibility to the market'* to foster talent in their sector generally. One large or influential employer exerting their own interests on training requirements could have a distorting influence on the supply and flexibility of talent more widely (Employer 13). Other stakeholders recognised the need for some flexibility to ensure broader applicability to a wider spectrum of employer contexts.

Listening to employer needs informed provision in a number of ways. It could, for example, as one ETP explained, provide a *'steer on expectations'.* They gave the example of a construction business, where:

> *we've got a construction standard, but they wanted to raise the level of customer service across their business. So, across every module, we're able to build in this element of customer service* (ETP 06).

For other employers, this could involve becoming partners in delivery. One employer for example mentioned:

> *we've actually been approached by a few universities […] to help them with course content. And I think we'll actually start delivering parts of the course as well, because we've got the specialists. Because sometimes, in my opinion, they're more experienced than the HEI's tutors and lecturers* (Large Employer 10).

ETPs involved in these processes described how they also benefited from these arrangements:

> *I was able to bring my employer partners with me to the university […] So it's been great to sit down and […] say "what is it that is missing?" […] And them saying "can you do this? Can you do that?" […] so I can truly say, from the heart, this is for the first time, we are truly, truly, kind of, employer-driven* (ETP 03).

We heard at least one example of the stimulation employers could provide:

> *it was great for me to sit back at that validation, and have somebody from [aviation manufacturer] telling the academics in the room how the pedagogic approach for apprenticeships was different than an undergraduate degree programme* (ETP 08).

Some employers had taken the further step of founding *'in-house'* ETPs to deliver apprenticeship training. For example, one interviewee explained that they had:

> *our kind of validating university, so they rubber stamp the certificate, but otherwise we do all the delivery* (ETP-Employer 03).

These employers reported that this more *'bespoke'* training was more *'representative'* and conducive to linking *'employment, the job, more closely to the learning'* (ETP-Employer 01), with a richer appreciation of the context than in classroom-based learning. Delivery in house also enabled them to more effectively keep learning up to date with expert subject matter, current practice, and current legalisation in a rapidly changing employment field. These employers saw their input as shifting the balance of how good practice was developed back towards employers, identified as something of a change over the last 10-20 years (ETP-Employer 05). There were numerous examples of design and delivery of apprenticeships where employers' needs, facilities, resources, and ETPs' capacities and expertise, were heavily interwoven. One multinational manufacturer explained the process of the design of a DA:

> *We had a number of conversations with universities about "can we put our training and embed it inside of a degree solution?" Of which most institutions said "no, that's not what you do and it's what we do". But [university partner] have a very proactive industrial collaboration zone initiative […] We could take everything up to HND [Higher National Diploma] via a local college provider and then top-up to a degree with the [university partner], of which we embedded our training […] it meant that we could deploy our training content and expertise into an academic programme, that could be then badged onto, locked into, a DA. So it worked in all sorts of ways, that sort of brings industry and academia together as a total training solution […] It's an Institute of Technology by any other name* (Large Employer 11).

These sorts of employers also had DAs delivered by other ETPs in areas they did not possess expertise, for example, in finance and accounting and digital and technology (Large Employer 11). Employer ETPs were also afforded freedom to pursue *'creative with things like resources, functional skills'* (ETP-Employer 03). However, this was not always an effective relationship. One employer ETP described how their partner university was:

> *very frustrating […] they really don't get it, that they're working with us as joint education providers. And they see us as employers and not actually always recognising that difference* (ETP-Employer 01).

Collaborations presented some challenges, often based on the specific nature and role of the stakeholder in DAs. However, collaboration between partners was seen as necessary to deliver quality DA programmes and offer degree apprentices quality experiences.

8. Learning on a Degree Apprenticeship

This final section of the report reviews the learning experiences of apprentices. Degree apprenticeships (DAs) are developing a distinctive form, including benefits such as workplace integration and tailored learning, though challenges remain in aligning curriculum design, delivery, and cohort integration. Both apprentices and employers value the outcomes from their studies, which bring in new perspectives, enhanced problem-solving abilities, and improvements in reflective abilities, project management, and sector knowledge, benefiting apprentices' workplace performance and career prospects. Some stakeholders reported success in the application of learning to work-based projects, while others faced challenges in connecting to their specific work contexts. Challenges particularly remain where fast-moving industrial developments mean that there can be discrepancies between teaching and learning and industry practices.

8.1 Experiences of learning and balancing work and study

It is notable how variable the experiences of balancing work and study can be amongst apprentices. This variability may be in terms of how study time (away from formal training) is organised, with some apprentices having considerable flexibility in terms of how they determine this. One apprentice (in a senior role on an apprenticeship leading to an MBA) stated that *'I self-imposed a day release. So I used to work every Friday. Every Friday was my study day. So that's how I did it. And that that worked for me'* (Apprentice 18). On the other hand, one apprentice noted how it *'would be nice'* if study time for exams was *'standardised […] so then everyone has got sort of the same opportunity'* (Apprentice 14), while another bemoaned being *'forced back to work'* (Apprentice 17) because of workplace demands. The extent to which allocated study time fully materialises is likely to be affected by how apprentices are seen in the workplace and the extent and volume of work that their employers expect from them, and how they are seen in the workplace. For some apprentices this works very positively. As one interviewee put it:

> *I can choose to work if I want to pick up, you know, extra few shifts and that, but there's not that expectation on me, which again, it's so nice because I can completely focus on the degree […] And there's no expectation: if I'm on a theory block, I'm on a theory block. You know, I don't have to. I'm not counted in the numbers at work* (Apprentice 15).

How the employer sees the apprentice (as more of an employee or very much as an apprentice, and thus in a distinct category) may significantly influence whether apprentices can get maximum benefit from their study time. There is no doubt that the apprenticeship experience can be *'very intense'* with *'a high expectation'* (Apprentice 02), and therefore the role of the employer in supporting the integration of work and learning is vital.

Apprentices tend to perceive considerable benefits from the workplace experience over and above a traditional full-time undergraduate education. The benefits of knowing how things work within an organisation are heralded as offering a dimension to learning that could not be replicated on a non-apprenticeship HE programme. As one interviewee put it:

> *I get what a workplace is like, how it operates, which is something that - there are some of my friends doing a full-time computer science degree - they don't get that […] some of them don't even know how development processes actually function in companies* (Apprentice 07).

DAs can also be said to offer benefits in taking apprentices and their employing organisations beyond existing work practices, as they potentially allow for a confluence of innovative ideas to come together from education, the employer and the wider sector. The possibility of placements, either within different parts of the employing organisation or potentially outside in other organisations allows for the apprentice to build a broad understanding of workplace processes connected to their role in addition to being directly relevant to it.

Apprentices' experiences of learning in higher education are also variable. Overall, there can be a tension between expectations of HE courses and the requirements of apprenticeship standards, and this may result in some duplications and replications. One apprentice noted the contrast between assessment: *'for the degree I think it's exams, and then for the apprenticeship qualification it'll be like presenting what you've done and kind of collecting all that evidence'* (Apprentice 09), but these contrasts could also be seen as complementary. Differing expectations may also result in apprentices being offered HE learning that is not sufficiently adaptable to the context in which they are working. There may be problems with the content and pedagogy, with these not sufficiently attuned to the dynamics of apprentice work and learning. One apprentice complained that:

> *all of our learning is online in like sort of like textbook format, so it's literally just text. So it's like a study guide that we just click though, make notes on, and that's sort of it. It isn't very good, if I'm being honest, in terms of like it's very hard to learn that way, we are teaching ourselves the entire time* (Apprentice 14).

How virtual learning environments (VLE) are used to organise learning is significant here, with the organisation and pacing of work set on VLE a significant factor. There were certainly some good examples, with one apprentice stating that:

> *the beauty of Moodle is that they don't give you too much of a workload. They only assign you what you can complete in those eight to ten hours study that you're allocated a day* (Apprentice 08).

It could be argued that study activities need to be fully integrated with the working pattern experienced by the degree apprentices, which are somehow co-ordinated in a mutually beneficial way. Again, for some apprentices this is working well, with one commenting that:

> *even though I'm getting a degree at the same time it's very integrated into the work week, so I'm not having to do too much and like overwork myself, which is really nice* (Apprentice 09).

It is also recognised that there may be a need to offer opportunities to tackle gaps in knowledge in intensive on-campus sessions when workplace experience does not offer everything relevant to the DA. One apprentice noted that:

> *there are some apprenticeships where there's a summer school type thing, and it's only for like a week, where if there's like gaps in your knowledge […] your tutors will fill in that knowledge gap for you* (Apprentice 08).

8.2 Distinctiveness and co-delivery

The issue of the distinctiveness of DAs and their equivalence with mainstream undergraduate study is central to how these programmes are viewed by stakeholders and the wider general public. Apprentices themselves are mindful of the comparability of DAs in the context of other undergraduate study options. Apprentices noted that the DA involves:

> *quite high expectation […] because it's only a 30-month programme, as opposed to the three or four-year degree* (Apprentice 05).

By contrast, in the case of a legal apprenticeship you do *'the exact same modules as everyone else does'* and *'we align with those who went the university traditional way'* (Apprentice 10). Some apprentices noted that other apprentices are:

> *the only people I ever see. I don't really, we don't share lectures with people doing full time degrees in our course. We only just have our specific group.* (Apprentice 07).

From the point of view of ETPs, there may be aspirations to achieve greater coherence between DAs and mainstream undergraduate study. Some education and training providers (ETPs) stressed that apprentices and mainstream undergraduate students do *'the same modules just run in a slightly different structure, but they do the same modules, the same assessments on our virtual learning platform'*, while also emphasising that *'there are real benefits of being able to bring them together in the classroom to do some joint teaching and learning'* (ETP 13). However, integration with other undergraduate HE study varies considerably across apprenticeships, with some programmes sharing a great deal in terms of resources and learning time with other HE programmes, and others kept on a separate distinctive pathway. One ETP noted that they currently have:

> *10 apprenticeship programmes, only one is a true apprenticeship with nobody else on it. The rest are shared cohorts, with shared learning materials and shared learning sessions* (ETP 24).

There are advantages and disadvantages in teaching apprenticeship cohorts separately in contrast with organising shared cohorts with other undergraduates – with issues related to cost effectiveness, ensuring a critical mass of numbers, and aligning the timings of any content delivery. Some ETPs noted the advantages of having a:

> *super module that cuts across […] there are certain students that are apprenticeship students that also sit on that module* (ETP 23).

Others stressed that some distinctive apprenticeship provision was not possible because while they:

> *initially wanted them to be separate but it wasn't viable, because the numbers are small. So you're probably talking, say 10 Physiotherapy apprentices lumped in with a cohort of quite a lot of other degree students* (ETP 24).

A shared cohort with degree apprentices may also have the unexpected ancillary benefit for mainstream undergraduates of having part of their provision quality assured by Ofsted. As ETP 24 continued:

> *there is a benefit of having a shared cohort because […] traditional degree students might be experiencing some improvement in quality of education or leadership and management of that course because of Ofsted's requirements for quality improvement* (ETP 24).

No doubt this would be a controversial point with many working in higher education.

There is a sense amongst some that attempting to integrate expectations in terms of a mainstream degree with those relating to an apprenticeship standard is equivalent to trying to insert a *'square peg'* in a *'round hole'*, and that therefore they were not *'shoehorning a degree into the standard'* (ETP 19). As a consequence, the curriculum design and delivery arrangements need careful planning and innovation to ensure that

the programme is optimised to meet both degree and apprenticeship standard expectations and offers apprentices themselves and their employers the maximum benefits.

8.3 Proximity to workplace applications and abstraction

Stakeholders have variable experiences as to how far they appreciate specific workplace-focused content versus general and broader studies. There seems to have been considerable variation across apprentices' experiences. Some reported what they studied had a strong relevance to their work environments and their future workplaces, while others reported limited overlap. This varied even within employment sectors. Several apprentices called for greater alignment between certain units and their work but this was by no means simple or universal. One nursing degree apprentice, generally positive about the applicability of their formal learning felt that broader modules such as *'sustainable public health'* were *'wishy washy'* (Apprentice 13). Another apprentice, studying chemistry, appreciated the 'generic' science provision despite that this was *'not always totally relevant to [my] exact work'* (Apprentice 14). One software degree apprentice reported feeling concerned before they applied for their DA that their study would compromise of just the *'boring stuff'*, mundane practical every-day work-based necessities shorn of the supposedly more interesting academic work. Instead, they found that course units were *'much more applied'* and more engaging, rather than *'spending hours upon hours doing binary calculations that you'd never do in the workplace'* (Apprentice 07).

The utility of some learning was not always immediately evident to apprentices but became relevant over time. One Level 7 MBA degree apprentice reflected on their initially combative encounter with academic theorising of a practical area they considered themselves already an expert in (*'why do I need to learn all this rubbish? Why can't I just get on with it?'*). However, while still sceptical, they described how they came round to the idea of developing a dialogue with the material using it to inform their practice and evaluating the knowledge in their practice (Apprentice 18). Other apprentices at postgraduate levels but also at undergraduate levels similarly reported through their apprenticeship they had come to appreciate using academic knowledge as *'theoretical tools'* (Apprentice 21) to justify and inform their practice. As one apprentice working for an SME described, they were otherwise *'making things up as we go along'*, and that it was helpful to *'justify some of the reasons why we're doing something'* (Apprentice 04). Some stakeholders reported significant business benefits derived from DA study, showcasing its operational relevance. As one provider summarised:

> *we have huge amounts of anecdotal discussions from employers about the very real, not just skills and talent impact, but the business benefits that students are bringing. You know, saving hundreds of thousands of pounds, generating capacity, in some cases saving lives when we're talking about the NHS. But degree apprenticeships are still relatively new, the numbers who've graduated are relatively small, and so I think building that robust evidence base about, you know, what is the impact that this is having, I think is something that we're doing, we're talking to other universities about* (ETP 21).

DAs therefore did exhibit instances of excellent integration of learning with workplace practice and contributing to tangible business outcomes.

8.4 Broader development of knowledge and skills

On the basis of the evidence we collected, both apprentices and employers value the practical benefits that academic study provides. Off-work learning raised novel perspectives and fields employers and apprentices may not have realised were relevant and brought them back to their employers. This benefit was especially

widely praised by SMEs. As one technology apprentice at an SME explained:

> *when it comes to stuff like the cybersecurity module, it's stuff that's completely brand new to me and stuff that I can share with others in the workplace. So actually, it allows me to talk with my senior developer about stuff that, you know, maybe we need to look out for or stuff that is going to come up in the next few weeks, or a few months* (Apprentice 23).

Their employer explained that work-based learning was *'good for practical problem solving'* but this would mould them into:

> *specialists with only the stuff that we do right now. What I actually want from them is to be a broad-based developer, which means that they actually have to understand the breadth of computer science. So the fact that that isn't directly applicable, doesn't bother me, I actually like that!* (SME Employer 12).

Similar benefits were accrued by large employers. As one put it:

> *this is one of the reasons why I love apprenticeships, is that ability to merge that theory into exactly what they're doing* (Large Employer 09).

This style of learning, *'the opportunity to learn the theory, apply it, evaluate it, ask questions, come back to it, practice it, develop skills'*, was further endorsed by ETPs. It aligns with *'theories of learning'* resulted in *'quicker'* learning (ETP-Employer 01) and apprentices also felt this enabled them to more easily recall and apply their learning.

Apprentices reported that broader academic study had developed their *'soft skills'* including project and time management, data communication (Apprentice 20), understanding of how best to *'add value'* (Apprentice 05) for their employer, and especially *'self-reflection'* (Apprentice 23) whether through evaluating existing practice or deploying new theoretical tools. Employers also reported similar benefits, along with providing workplace confidence and enhancing their capacity to evidence good practice. Apprentice 22, for example, discussed how the general syllabus, while not entirely focused on their day-to-day responsibilities or the programming languages they used, was more applicable to languages in general and developed their capacity to tackle general problems. Apprentices were also reflective of the importance of the degree in preparing them beyond their immediate workplace functions by instilling a broader appreciation of the sector as a whole and arming them with knowledge relevant to future career development, and preparing them for further professional opportunities and to make future choices. This, many reflected, gave them an advantage on the labour market particularly in fast-moving fields such as technology.

8.5 Integration of lived and work experiences to learning

Conversely, it was variable how far lived and work experiences of apprentices mapped to learning activities. ETPs we spoke to emphasised their efforts to tie learning back to learners' lived experience in the workplace. One ETP was deeply enthusiastic about how:

> *it is not unusual to see somebody who's worked for a long time at a particular place, coming to discussion, or disagreements or arguments with somebody who works for the fire service or a completely different organisation. You can see them, you can see the sort of, you know, people making connections in the room* (ETP 23).

This was described as a mutually beneficial and productive exchange of ideas and approaches between apprentices with different backgrounds, employers, and levels of experience. Stakeholders reported efforts to build on and deploy this expertise in their learning and in assessment by designing authentic assessments and live briefs especially around projects, and revising feedback integrated with work performance. For example, Apprentice 05 discussed how they had used data and systems that belonged to their employer as part of assessed work-based projects, and that this enabled them to gain an appreciation of its place in their team's priorities and organisational needs, simultaneously enabling them to learn and provide *'value'* to their employer. Apprentices also reported applying knowledge from their studies improved their recall and enable them to *'build on it and research it that little bit further'* (Apprentice 23). While this proximity to operational needs was welcomed by some employers, Apprentice 18 reported that the findings of their project on sustainability had been resisted by their (large) employer. In other instances, apprentices reported that case studies and case work tended to be drawn from commercial operations and large employers rather than SMEs or the third sector.

This lack of specificity could be navigated with initiative. ETPs reported if an element of study did not align precisely with an apprentice's work area they expected and encouraged them to:

> *just go and have a chat with someone and find out who in your organisation does that, and how that links to your department or team, just for that further awareness, so that they can start to understand what sort of impact those skills could have in the workplace* (ETP 19).

Apprentices we interviewed did indeed take the initiative to both pick up projects aligned with their university studies and their employment (Apprentices 07, 15). Workplace mentors also played an important role in these negotiations, as well as explaining to apprentices how academic study linked to workplaces and helping apprentices decide which specialisms to pursue. Other stakeholders believed that where ETPs had taken responsibility for off-the-job training but not on-the-job training or inadequately aligned work-based projects to their employers, Ofsted was well placed to expose and address areas of concern.

8.6 Keeping 'up to date'

DAs despite efforts to align and engage with employers to design and update the curriculum, it is still criticised as being out of date in fast moving fields. A sizeable proportion of ETPs, employers, and apprentices felt that learning on their courses, especially off-the-job learning, was obsolete. This was especially strong in technological and software DAs and health-allied DAs, including mental health services. In these areas the knowledge and skills required have changed rapidly over the past 10-20 years. One employer reported with frustration the story of a colleague encountering university lecturer teaching apprentices:

> *stuff that has not been delivered in mental health for 15 plus years, [they] literally had to go in and stop [the lecturer]! [The lecturer] hadn't been a mental health nurse, or hadn't been in clinical practice, for more than 10 years! And it was like, how are you teaching this stuff?* (ETP-Provider 01).

Resourcing appropriately was one issue, but approaches were also criticised as out of date. One apprentice described using *'pen and paper'* for operations, where in industry software was used. This apprentice also identified a discrepancy between the academic theory, what was considered *'best practice in the office'*, and other approaches by other apprentices, resulting in around three or four different approaches to a task (Apprentice 06). Employers and ETPs tended to stress that the sorts of dialogue opportunities that the design of DAs foster were valuable in mitigating some of these problems. Even so, in cases where the KSBs from apprenticeship programmes were mapped to PRSB standards, employers reported tensions between what these standards specified should be taught and what aligned with contemporary practice. One employer

delivering learning reported that:

> *we're very much able to say "we have to teach you this so you get through your apprenticeship but actually in practice that is not the way it's done any longer"* (ETP-Employer 01).

Nonetheless, there were instances where DAs provided *'dynamic and a lot more relevant'* learning than what could be *'productised into a learning programme'* for mainstream undergraduates (SME Employer 08).

8.7 Peer networks

We heard reports that there was some characterisation of DAs as not fully integrated into a university community compared to mainstream university degree, particularly for young degree apprentices. One employer suggested:

> *there is a lack of understanding of how important engaging in that fuller academic life, that fully university experience would actually add huge value to the apprenticeship programme. And that's really hard to build in* (ETP 11).

This, for young apprentices, particularly included social elements. As one apprentice told us:

> *my parents were worried for me about the social side of an apprenticeship, like that was their main thing. They were like "if you're at uni you'll have loads of friends, you'll enjoy your life".*

However, the apprentice found that this had:

> *definitely not been the case. Like I've got plans every weekend, we do stuff in the week. Because of that induction week I made so many friends, and even though I've had to start a whole new life I'm really enjoying it* (Apprentice 09).

While some apprentices did indeed participate or were curious about more traditional university social experiences such as participating in student societies, living in residential student accommodation, and participating in night life, many others and especially older apprentices were disinterested in this representation of student life. Apprentices did nonetheless frequently report they had formed important and supportive relationships with other apprentices. As indicated above, apprentices particularly valued orientation and induction events and subsequent reunions as especially helpful and enjoyable in this regard. Apprentices at large employers reported supportive peer support networks and supposed that peers employed at smaller employers had less access to similar collegial groups of apprentices at similar career levels. Again, this does not seem to always be the case, as smaller work teams of SMEs were praised as particularly supportive, described by one apprentice as *'a genuine family sort of group'* (Apprentice 06). Peer groups were important not just for sharing and clarifying learning but also reportedly self-policing professional behaviours such as punctuality (SME Employer 02) and generating an independent work ethic (SME Employer 12).

8.8 Outcomes

There was general consensus amongst the stakeholders we talked to that degree apprentices were more professional than similar graduates. ETPs and employers reported that apprentices were more motivated, had better attendance, tended to achieve better results academically than fee-paying students, and displayed a

higher degree of maturity, professionalism and confidence. In employment, they were better integrated and understanding of the corporate culture, *'probably a slightly higher degree of pragmatism'* (Employer 15) and were more *'malleable' to employers'* needs (Employer 13). By contrast, as one healthcare employer noted, nurses coming out of local universities needed *'a lot of support, despite being on placement with us, needing a lot of clinical skill development still upon qualifying'* (ETP-Employer 02). These comparisons seem to be between apprentices of the same age, and ETPs reported these differences were only appreciable between undergraduate degree apprentices and their undergraduate counterparts, as opposed to at a postgraduate level. From these accounts, degree apprentices were perceived as possessing both better general skills and better applied skills in the workplace than graduates.

9. Final Reflections

It has been ten years since the introduction of degree apprenticeships (DAs) in England and, since then, they have significantly influenced both the higher education and apprenticeship landscapes. DA provision fosters pathways to degree level study, offering distinctive and flexible opportunities for work-based learning (WBL). They serve as a strategic instrument for stakeholders to align business skill needs and employee development with effective training practices, while furthering the civic responsibilities of employers and education providers (ETPs). While challenges around implementation, operations, and sustainability persist, their strengths mean they offer benefits that mainstream degree pathways often struggle to realise.

All research participants consulted in this report have engaged with DAs, except for one SME representative. Their perceptions and experiences varied across all aspects of DAs, providing a constructive account. Generally, DAs were perceived positively, with clear suggestions for improvement emerging from the findings.

Stakeholder experiences of the collaborative process of developing DA standards reveal key tensions between maintaining relevance to workplace practices and navigating regulatory compliance. The development of degree apprenticeship standards follows a similar process to other apprenticeships. Employers, including SMEs and larger organisations, engage in trailblazer groups to define the knowledge, skills, and behaviours required for specific occupations. Industry representation helps raise the status and increase the relevance and currency of DA programmes. Regulatory bodies and sector-specific organisations collaborate with employers when developing DA standards. However, questions have been raised about the extent to which professional body requirements and standards can keep up with current workplace practices. The inability to include the most current elements of practice has led to frustration in some cases. While quality assurance processes are necessary to protect the interests of all stakeholders, including degree apprentices, over-regulation of DAs was criticised. ETPs of DAs have voiced concerns about the complexities of compliance, for example posed by Ofsted and funding rules. ETPs' unfamiliarity with apprenticeship delivery requirements often amplified these anxieties.

One of the primary characteristics of DAs this research has exhibited is the heterogeneity of DAs in their design and delivery. These differences reflect, for example, the varying needs of stakeholders, different approaches to collaboration between employers and ETPs, and distinct support processes for ETPs, employers, and apprentices. Expertise in offering and delivering DAs can also lead to further variations. There are many reasons for these differences, but they are not necessarily problematic; in fact, they often highlight the pragmatic flexibility of DAs. This varying degree of flexibility of DAs is considered a positive feature when it comes to structure and delivery. For instance, apprentices with caring responsibilities may negotiate their working, learning, and caring duties based on their availability due to this flexibility. Nonetheless, the variability of DAs did lead to challenges around consistency and quality of provision. The flexibility of DAs often responds to individual and organisational needs rather than broader systemic needs, such as national and local economic priorities.

Our findings suggest clear shortcomings in communication regarding DAs, which appears to affect most aspects of the programme. Among participants, we found varying levels of awareness and understanding of DAs. The lack of communication about the existence of DAs in general makes the pool of potential interested stakeholders — particularly employers and degree apprentices — considerably smaller. The growth of DAs hinges on employer investment, as degree apprenticeships are jobs. If policymakers wish to drive expansion, employers must be assisted in recognising the tangible value apprentices bring to their businesses, alongside a clear understanding of the practical challenges in delivering these programmes. Often, school

leavers (and school staff) are unaware of the opportunity to pursue a degree via WBL routes. Pullen et al. (2024) suggest that private schools tend to inform their students more effectively about these opportunities than their state counterparts. Similarly, many employers discover DAs by accident rather than through proactive communication.

Indeed, our findings suggest that clear and accurate information is crucial both for engaging with DAs and for successfully completing the programme. Managing expectations and ensuring that apprentices have a realistic understanding of the time commitment, end point assessment requirements, and their capabilities upon completing their degrees is essential. Similarly, employers and ETPs need to fully understand the requirements and responsibilities involved in offering DAs.

Employer engagement with DAs is not currently systematic, nor do DAs fully accommodate the needs of all employers. Only a small number of employers engage with the development of apprenticeship standards by participating in trailblazer groups, questioning the representativeness of employer voices in these processes. Large employers are often better positioned to engage with these initiatives and offer support to apprentices due to their available resources. While some employers in our research were mindful of this and spoke of their corporate responsibility to foster appropriate training throughout their industry sectors, such efforts remain largely voluntary and lack systematic oversight. Our evidence indicates that SMEs require targeted support in areas such as accessing information about new opportunities and navigating the Apprenticeship Levy (and any future changes to the levy) to fully engage with and benefit from DAs. One ETP acted as linkage between a large employer with 'left-over' levy and an SME that could make use of that, offering a valuable example of support. Currently, SME engagement in exiting Levy transfer schemes is often dependent on existing connections, networks, and chance.

Motivations for involvement in DAs are often quite narrow and pragmatic, reflecting individual or organisational needs rather than addressing broader issues, such as national or local economic priorities or social structures. Each stakeholder group identified specific reasons for their engagement. Employers and degree apprentices often cited similar factors from different perspectives, such as utilising the Apprenticeship Levy, avoiding tuition fees for degree studies, becoming better acquainted with employees and/or employers, or providing work-based learning opportunities. These motivational factors were often seen as (anticipated) benefits of DAs.

ETPs identified different motivational factors compared to employers and apprentices. Those ETPs that historically offered vocationally focused courses saw DAs as an opportunity for portfolio development and support for priority industry sectors. Others viewed DAs as instruments to help to advance their civic responsibilities. However, many ETPs lacked prior experience offering work-based learning programmes and had to establish the necessary infrastructure. While the Apprenticeship Levy has been considered a key motivator for employers to engage with DAs, it was not seen as a major factor for many ETPs. Although offering DAs could generate income, these programmes were often regarded as tenuously sustainable, underfunded, and requiring considerable additional resources, administrative structures, and staff. Instead, the primary motivation to engage with DAs was to secure valuable employer relationships and address local and national priories in specific industries, skills shortages, green agendas. DAs strongly aligned with existing developments in delivery towards WBL.

Some employers consciously aimed to diversify their workforce, believing DAs would help achieve this goal. However, DAs do not necessarily lead to diversity and diversity is not necessarily considered when recruiting degree apprentices. Employers have the autonomy to choose their degree apprentices and determine how they develop their talent pipeline. Some employers do exercise corporate social responsibility by offering DA opportunities to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, our research encountered multiple examples in the healthcare sector where DAs play a key role in up-skilling employees without prior

opportunities to access degree level study to addressing skills shortages. However, in many cases, it was difficult to discern a clear motivation for pursuing diversity or supporting marginalised groups. This often intersects with degree apprentice candidates' social capital and privileged access to knowledge, which can lead to the engagement of more privileged individuals. Evidence suggests that for existing employees DAs can offer social mobility for those who did not have the option to go into higher education at the traditional entry point. DAs can support both diversity and social mobility, but this largely depends on individual employers and their understanding of DAs. However, there does not appear to be a clear internal or external incentive structure that encourages a systemic link between DAs and diversity or social mobility.

WBL is a key factor for degree apprentices engaging with DAs. DAs clearly serve those individuals who prefer experiential learning over classroom-based, textbook-driven 'academic' style of learning. There is also evidence of greater sector-specific interest among young people, particularly those who pursue DAs after completing A Levels or secondary school. The backbone of the DA programme is the strong connection to the workplace and relationships between on-the-job and off-the-job training. While this model makes DAs powerful and distinct, the alignment between the content covered by ETPs and the skills practised in the workplace remains a key area of (sometimes productive) tension. WBL requires specific conditions to be effective, such as strong partnerships between ETPs and employers, teaching staff with up-to-date industry experience, and robust support mechanisms for degree apprentices, such as mentoring. Each of these elements presents its own challenges. Apprentices' experiences of the quality of teaching through the off-the-job training was mixed, varying from some whose learning was all online through non-interactive methods (e.g. reading online material and watching videos), to those that were fully in person and included project work. Nonetheless, there is evidence of excellent integration of learning with workplace practice and contribution to tangible business outcomes. ETPs and employers reported learning outcomes and capacities that exceeded mainstream undergraduate achievement and capacities, and apprentices identified they possessed substantive advantages for their current and future careers.

10. Policy recommendations

The Edge Foundation has been a long-term supporter of degree apprenticeships (DAs) and it has been heartening to see in this research report so much positive progress to build on. As with any establishing programme, there are also a number of ways in which the development, design and delivery could be improved. It is also important to remember how interconnected the vocational education and training (VET) system is, rather than seeing individual programmes in their own separate silos. This research has revealed several issues relevant to DAs that are equally relevant to other programmes such as T Levels, as Edge research has recently explored.

The first recommendation draws on the findings of both the current research report and T Levels reports, that the volume of opportunities (be they apprenticeships or work placements for T Levels or other programmes) is limited by the number of employers willing to engage. As highlighted in the Flex Without Compromise report on the Apprenticeship Levy, this challenge will increase even further with a return to universal work experience through the government's Youth Guarantee and programmes like Foundation Apprenticeships. It is clear that launching these and asking individual education providers to just 'do more' to contact the same employers to offer more opportunities will not work. A new approach is needed. The government needs to take stock and consider a more systematic approach here that serves to rationalise the way that employers are supported to offer a wide range of work-related and work-based opportunities to create their talent pipeline.

The second recommendation also draws on these broader findings – as with any other vocational programme, including T Levels, real attention needs to be given to the way in which the on- and off-the-job elements of DAs fit seamlessly together. The ability for apprentices to understand a concept with their ETP, apply it in the workplace with their employer, then reflect and develop with their ETP is the engine of apprenticeship pedagogy. There is much evidence of good practice in this space. However, there was also a great deal of variability. There were still instances where apprentices felt that they were quite separately doing a job and doing a degree in related fields but with little practical linkage. The quality of learning on a DA programme is directly related to the quality of collaboration between employers, ETPs, and apprentices. Employers and ETPs in particular should work together to share and implement best practice (some of which has been identified by this research) and ensure that the content of the taught elements and the apprentice's learning on-the-job connect and relate to each other as regularly and deeply as possible.

Thirdly, as with many other areas of the education system, the process of design, delivery and quality assurance for DAs has become extremely complex. As they cross over the traditional boundaries of 'vocational education and training', and 'higher education' for DAs this draws in a particularly large number of bodies including the OfS, IFATE, regulatory bodies, professional bodies and Ofsted. ETPs told us that this had created a complex landscape where lines of accountability are blurred, innovation is stifled and ETPs, employers and individual programmes are trying to serve 'many masters'. The viability of DA programmes for ETPs is threatened by these circumstances. With the creation of Skills England, the government should take the opportunity to review and streamline the process of design, delivery and quality assurance for DAs and ensure regulatory elements work in concord with one another.

Fourthly, as is clear from The Edge Foundation's Skills Shortages Bulletins, the economy and working practices are changing more rapidly than ever. It has therefore never been more important for VET to keep up or even get ahead of the curve of technological and practical changes. The findings of this research indicate (particularly in IT and mental health provision) that the speed of change of apprenticeship standards and complex process of quality control (recommendation 3) are severely limiting that opportunity for DAs. In

other countries, such as the Netherlands, a proportion (up to 20-25%) of an apprenticeship standard is kept flexible to be agreed between the employer and ETP so that it can take better account of the current and changing situation in that particular industry, location and employer. This would also help to strengthen the relationship and collaboration between employers and ETPs (recommendation 2). The government should pilot the introduction of a similar level of flexibility into DAs to enable employers and ETPs to work more closely together to ensure that these opportunities can meet the emerging needs of the fast-moving economy.

Our fifth recommendation relates to the clear ongoing challenges that this research has found around the communication of DAs to all stakeholders. Despite significant efforts from government and others, it is clear that the level of knowledge and understanding about DAs is very variable and is not helped by the intricacy of the system (recommendation 3), which can make messages complex and confusing. The government needs to develop a clear and coherent communications strategy about DAs with a particular focus on four key groups and messages identified in this research:

- Providing direct information advice and support to SMEs, who are crucial to the success of apprenticeships more generally. This could be done by including skills and apprenticeships explicitly within the work of the new Business Growth Service set to be launched this year. It should include direct support for SMEs to engage in the trailblazer process in significant numbers to ensure that the standards are relevant to their work.
- Continuing to improve the information available to young people about DAs and the specifics of what the courses entail (including making better use of the resources that have already developed by university recruitment outreach teams, as research by the Edge Foundation has recently explored through careers education, information advice and guidance. This should extend to tailored support with the application process.
- Sharing practice amongst ETPs to directly address the variability of delivery and encourage all ETPs to learn from each other in this important area.
- Providing much wider information to both large employers and SMEs about the levy transfer process, which was found to be very effective and helpful when used but not widely known about or fully understood. Evidence of the new roles ETPs are playing in this regard are encouraging. More should be done to share this good practice and promote better overall coordination of levy transfer opportunities.

Sixthly, the government's commitment to adapting the levy into a 'Growth and Skills Levy' provides a number of opportunities to further improve the delivery of DAs. As explored in the Flex Without Compromise report, it is important for the government to take a measured approach to changing the levy in order to minimise the risk that a broadening of scope waters down the opportunities available, particularly for younger people and newer entrants to the labour market. However, the findings of this report suggest that as part of this new approach, government should consider modelling the impact of differentiating levy funding available for DAs by age and/or whether the apprentice is a new or existing member of staff at the organisation. This could be a powerful mechanism to encourage employers to focus DA opportunities on younger people and on new recruits, but would need to be considered carefully so as to allow for continued expansion of DAs and avoid any other unintended consequences.

Finally, from the perspective of apprentices themselves, DAs are a complex and long-term commitment involving challenging work and study. It is essential that they get the support they need to make the most of this opportunity. The findings of this report show that there are many instances of strong practice including tripartite meetings between apprentices, employers and ETPs, and high-quality support for mature degree

apprentices. The Edge Foundation has published further research exploring the dimensions of high-quality work-based mentoring. However, such practices were not consistently implemented across all cases. Tt is important that ETPs work together to continue to improve the offer of support to degree apprentices and ensure that this is universally available.

We would welcome the opportunity to continue to work with government, ETPs, employers to further develop and implement these changes to further support the success of DAs.

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Appendix

Coding structure

Code	Description
Barriers to growth and participation	in/with DAs
Development of Degree Apprenticeships	
Assessment and feedback on work	Note distinction with feedback/dialogue on programme/delivery
End-point Assessment (EPA)	
External compliance, standards, and quality assurance	Developing the quality of the programme/ understanding of standards and understanding of compliance; external
IFATE and Office for Students	
Ofsted	
Professional Statutory Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs)	For example: Nursing and Midwifery Council
Tripartite reviews	May be discussed around delivery
Developing apprenticeship standards	
Updating standards	
Capacity, infrastructure, and resources (to function)	Capacity and additional staffing requirements, student support in terms of resources, using existing modules and expertise in provision, administering of DAs for employers and SMEs
Feedback on Degree Apprenticeship programme and delivery	Dialogue on DA; note distinction with feedback on work

Code	Description
Economy and Skills	
Assessment and feedback on work	Note distinction with feedback/dialogue on programme/delivery
Local economy and skills	Including future skills
National economy and skills	Including future skills
Private sector and skills	
Public sector and NHS and skills	
SME and skills	Questions of skills of relevance to SMEs.
Engagement and Collaboration	
Relationship between employers and higher education	
Relationship with SMEs	
Relationship with other stakeholders	
Funding	
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
Levy	Including Levy Transfer
Other funding sources and considerations	
Motivations and expectations	Why stakeholders are engaging with DAs. Motivation of employer, ETP and prospective or current apprentices.
Participation pathways, progression, talent pipeline	Types of pathways offered by employers and areas for progression such as career opportunities beyond and/or talent pipeline. Including progression routes via vocational education and training to postgraduate studies.

Code	Description
Opportunities, vision, and growth	in/with DAs, including questions of sustainability in institutional strategy
Participation	
Belonging and identity of Degree Apprentices	How far is the apprenticeship experience similar or different to other student experiences other than academic, and 'who/what am I as an apprentice?'
Demography and diversity	
Widening Participation and corporate social responsibility	Limits on or initiatives to increase diversity
Social mobility	Including debate around capacity to enable, and middle-class capture
Demography	Apprentice identities and characteristics
Recruitment	Primarily interested in employers' approaches; questions of pools of talent. Including information, advice and guidance, esp. to apprentices
University requirements	Including accreditation of prior learning
Recruiting school leavers versus existing workforce development	A Level, T Level and other Level 3 apprenticeships and vocational qualifications, new recruits and up/reskilling existing employees.
Retaining Degree Apprentices and attrition	
Perceptions and prestige of Degree Apprenticeships	Any view by interviewee of views of DAs
Policy context of Degree Apprenticeships	Any background information, including historical context
Health related	Any health-focused information in non-health categorised/attributed interview discussion

Code	Description
Programme design and delivery	A distinction between design as intended operation, and delivery as realised course programme and experiences
Degree Apprenticeship course names/labels	Used to record mentions of specific DA courses to compile a list
Numbers and details of Degree Apprenticeships	Of which the interviewee has direct experience
Structure of DA programme	Set up of the apprenticeship (timetabling, roles, duration, etc).
Distinctiveness of the DA provision (incl. relationship with mainstream UG entry routes)	Including the distinctiveness of DAs as an offer in higher education institutions (or integrated with existing provision)
DAs in comparison with existing delivery at workplace and education sector	Including distinctiveness of offer, including relationship of DAs and pre-degree and post degree qualifications, and changing roles of ETPs.
Internal quality and quality assurance	Quality of delivery and quality of experiences by all stakeholders
Peer-learning	University and workplace
Proximity to workplace and abstraction	Including debates around 'academic and vocational', 'theory versus practice', questions of 'up-to-dateness', and quality of work-based learning.
Student support, mentoring, and line management	Mentoring broadly understood, including pastoral care, supervision, and wellbeing.
x Misc.	Points of interest that do not fit under any other categories

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