

Economy Infrastructure and Skills Committee - Inquiry into Degree Apprenticeships

Consultation response from Swansea University

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

One of the main issues identified during the rollout of degree apprenticeships relates to the timescales and the impact on providers and employers. The timing of the consultation, approval and publication of the two frameworks did not afford providers sufficient time to develop and approve degree apprenticeship programmes. In addition, the process for bidding for funded places occurred too late in the year to allow employers sufficient time to assess training needs, engage with providers and recruit staff apprentices.

Announcements on successful funding awards to providers during the summer period and so close to the potential start of the delivery in September also made the process of confirming commitment from employers and providers difficult.

Clarification on future plans and longer timescales would allow for improved strategic planning and resource development to support degree apprenticeship delivery.

Further clarification on information that may be needed for reporting outcomes or for audit purposes would also be helpful from the perspective of forward planning.

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

Notwithstanding issues with timescales, the process for approving proposals from providers was satisfactory and welcomed in comparison to the process operating in England.

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

There is clearly a demand for degree apprenticeships but this demand is hindered by a general lack of understanding and awareness of degree-level apprenticeships and the very limited provision available in terms of sectors and levels of study. A more co-ordinated approach to marketing degree apprenticeships aimed at parents, schools, school leavers employees, and employers, particularly SMEs would help to raise awareness of degree apprenticeships as an valued alternative route through higher education.

Even at this early stage of delivery of the pilot schemes, there is interest from degree apprenticeship graduates for Level 7 provision. The two frameworks available in Wales are aimed at sectors, which traditionally employ more male staff. Although evidence from England and Scotland suggests that the number of women undertaking degree apprenticeships is increasing, the focus in Wales solely on the manufacturing and digital sectors accounts for the bias toward male participants.

Given the wide range of standards available in England, opportunities for developing skills through degree level work-based learning is limited and limiting for Welsh businesses.

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

The University welcomes the focus on widening access, noting that this delivery is particularly suited to upskilling existing employees. However, recruitment is driven by employers rather than providers and providers have no real input into the characteristics of a cohort.

It should also be recognised that in addition to “widening” access, degree apprenticeships are providing “alternative” access into higher education, particularly where new talent is being recruited.

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

The current funding levels for degree apprenticeships adequately reflect the cost of delivery, noting the additional administrative requirements and the need to engage with employers and apprentices in the work place.

One of the key issues for providers is the uncertainty around the funding and the sectors to be funded beyond the pilot programme. This uncertainty is impacting on provider's ability to forward plan and further develop apprenticeship activity.

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

Progression routes into degree apprenticeships are flexible and allow for the recognition of learning acquired through apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5. At the request of employers, the University is continuing to provide a higher apprenticeship in Engineering/Advanced Manufacturing, supporting the notion that there is demand for skills development at a range of levels.

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

It would be helpful to the sector for a more co-ordinated approach and drive from Welsh Government on degree apprenticeships - raising awareness and understanding in order to attract more employers and apprentices.

Improvements in the timescales for the bidding process and funding allocation would enable the sector to effectively plan for and execute delivery and undertaken valuable engagement with business.

A longer term plan with provision for multiple cohorts, to include potential new subject areas and levels beyond 2020/21 and funding allocations, should underscore the future direction of degree apprenticeships in Wales.