

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a
Sgiliau
Gradd Brentisiaethau
EIS(5)DA14
Ymateb gan Grŵp Llandrillo
Menai and Bangor Univeristy

National Assembly for Wales
Economy, Infrastructure and
Skills Committee
Degree Apprenticeships

Evidence from Grŵp Llandrillo
Menai and Bangor Univeristy

RESPONSE TO NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES: ECONOMY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND SKILLS COMMITTEE ENQUIRY ON DEGREE APPRENTICESHIPS

Founded in 1884, Bangor University has a long tradition of academic excellence and a strong focus on the student experience. Around 10,000 students currently study at the University, with teaching staff based within fourteen Academic Schools. Bangor University has achieved a Gold Award, the highest rating possible, in the national Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014 recognised that more than three-quarters of Bangor's research is either world-leading or internationally excellent, ahead of the average for UK universities. The institution has strong mission commitment to the economic, social and cultural well-being of Wales and the wider world.

Grŵp Llandrillo Menai is the largest Further Education group in Wales, and one of the largest providers in the UK with 21,000 students including 1,500 Higher Education Students and over 2,000 apprentices. The Grŵp's mission is to Improve People's Futures through inspiring all learners to achieve their potential, creating a highly skilled workforce to support employers, and advancing our position as the leading education and training organisation.

Bangor University and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai maintain a strong strategic relationship to develop and deliver Higher and Further Education, with a long history of positive collaborative working in order to meet the needs of North Wales. Through the Degree Apprenticeships pilot we have built further upon this relationship to offer new opportunities across the region which integrate the benefits of Further and Higher Education and we are confident that the provision developed for the pilot is stronger because of the collaborative way in which it has been designed and is being delivered.

Bangor University and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai note the sector responses to the review that have been submitted by Universities Wales and Colegau Cymru and have chosen to put forward a response to the enquiry which amplifies some of the points made in the responses above as well as highlighting both organisation's shared views and experience based on our collaborative approach.

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

The rollout of Degree Apprenticeships as a pilot, particularly given the growing awareness of the Degree Apprenticeship provision in England, has led to some specific issues when implementing the pilot.

In particular, the timeline for approvals of various aspects of the pilot, including confirmed numbers for providers, has led to reduced windows for confidently marketing the apprenticeships to employers and therefore on the uptake of provision. We note the high number of existing employees within organisations which have begun Degree Apprenticeships under the pilot versus new recruits and suggest that earlier approvals would give a longer time to work alongside employers to support the recruitment of new staff directly in to Degree Apprentice roles.

We also suggest that employer awareness and understanding of Degree Apprenticeships has been a barrier to uptake. Our experience has been that the greatest response during the pilot has been from organisations which have significant prior experience of other forms of apprenticeships however the overlap between degree-level apprenticeships and other apprenticeships and qualification options (including part-time degrees).

The small number of frameworks available has also impacted on the rollout during the pilot. Employers in Wales, including those who are also significant employers in England, have expressed interest in a wider range of frameworks where they would wish to offer apprenticeships alongside or in place of graduate roles.

Finally, we would welcome a greater link to regional skills planning and strategies and a mechanism to allow providers to develop new frameworks which are linked to the needs of regions. Our approach has allowed us to respond to regional needs within the existing pilot frameworks, however we feel that the collaborative HE-FE nature of a Degree Apprenticeship, in the context of other forms of learning and skills development, offers further opportunities for developing frameworks which meet regional priorities and needs.

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We are confident that if the scheme is made permanent, and the range of apprenticeships extended, Degree Apprenticeships will develop in to a productive additional route for higher level skills and education which is needed within the region and across Wales.

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

At the start of the framework development process, providers were asked to be agile in their approach and to ensure that they remained responsive to employer needs. We feel that this agility is particularly important for this form of provision and delivery, however the process for approvals has not always matched the level of agility that was aspired to. This, alongside the complexities of framework development in Engineering resulted in a significant delay of a year to the delivery of those qualifications.

We feel that these issues are largely resolved for existing frameworks however the learning from the pilot should be applied to future upscaling of Degree Apprenticeship delivery.

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?

We believe that the potential demand for Degree Apprenticeships amongst employers and potential learners is high, however that demand is likely to grow over time as employers integrate Degree Apprenticeships in to their existing recruitment, training and development strategies or gain a better understanding of the benefits and requirements of apprenticeships at this level.

We feel that the strongest growth will be through the introduction of a wider range of frameworks which can be adapted by providers to meet employer demand. These frameworks need to be clearly articulated against other potential apprenticeship options (specifically, Higher Apprenticeships) in order to ensure employers make an informed and appropriate choice.

The future expansion of apprenticeships to also include Masters level would be welcome as it would provide employers an additional route to developing the higher-level skills they need to develop as organisations. It would augment the apprenticeship offer and would be attractive to employers in sectors outside of the

pilot, however it will need to be managed to understand the impacts on other professional qualifications.

As noted above, regional prioritisation and planning offers an opportunity to define and manage demand – including through regional input in to the development of new frameworks.

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?

Widening access is an important element of the mission of both organisations and is integral to our approach to learner recruitment. Apprenticeships represent a particular challenge in this area because the process of recruitment predominantly sits with the employer. However, experience of Work-Based Learning delivery has indicated that the apprenticeship provider can positively influence employers to support wider access both through growing their understanding of apprenticeships as a route for diversifying and expanding their workforce, and through the collaborative recruitment of specific cohorts which are tailored to increasing the number of under-represented groups taking up apprenticeships.

Timescales during the pilot have encouraged employers to focus on their existing staff base. We anticipate that once Degree Apprenticeships have moved beyond the post-pilot phase, and employers and providers can work on future recruitment and workforce planning over an extended period, there will be more opportunities to widen the cohorts of apprentices.

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

The funding mechanism is substantially different from other levels of apprenticeships and is an attractive proposition for learners and employers. The relationship to other apprenticeships (particularly Higher Apprenticeships) will need to be carefully explored to ensure that Degree Apprenticeships complement and extend the existing apprenticeship offer rather than simply replacing Higher Apprenticeships.

As highlighted in the response from Universities Wales, the difference in approach to the employer level between Wales and England has caused concerns with cross-border employers who have expressed an entitlement or preference to engage with the English model which perceived as better value.

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

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Although it is difficult to provide solid evidence at this stage, there is a perceived impact on Higher Apprenticeships in particular. The value to learners of earning a degree is likely to also impact their decision making in to the future when selecting an apprenticeship to apply for.

Given the increasing focus on delivering Higher Apprenticeships within Work-Based Learning contracts, it is possible that without careful explanation and differentiation, the progression routes for other apprentices could be unclear or that an over-supply at Level 4/5/6 occurs.

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

We are fundamentally supportive of the development of Degree Apprenticeships and of the positive outcomes that collaborative curriculum development and delivery between Further and Higher Education providers has on the learners and employers.

As the delivery of Degree Apprenticeships matures, we would suggest that thought is given to the following five areas:

1. Increasing the diversity of frameworks and the agility of frameworks to deliver against employer needs;
2. The role and value of essential skills elements and proxies, particularly Digital Literacy where no proxy exists;
3. The mechanism for developing provision to meet regional priorities;
4. Opportunities for SMEs to influence the creation of frameworks, either directly or via providers, given the current level of input required from employers;
5. Coherent national marketing of the Degree Apprenticeship 'brand', particularly within the context of other apprenticeships and the Degree Apprenticeship offer in England, in order to educate employers on the value of the qualification.

Based on the experience of the pilot, we also believe that providers and employers are increasingly understanding the potential of Degree Apprenticeships as a mechanism for developing existing staff who may not have considered undertaking a Higher-level apprenticeship.

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