

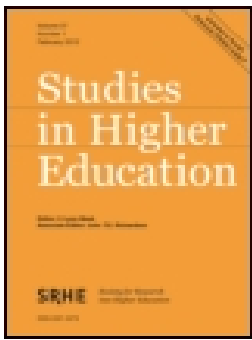
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# Degree and Higher Level Apprenticeships: an empirical investigation of stakeholder perceptions of challenges and opportunities

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## ABSTRACT



The aim of this paper is to explore the challenges and opportunities of designing and delivering Degree and Higher Level Apprenticeships (D&HLAs) at levels 4–7 from a multi-stakeholder perspective namely employers, Universities, independent training organisations and professional bodies. Twenty-seven face-to-face interviews were undertaken and thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. The following three themes emerged from the data analysis: programme design; programme delivery; and graduate attributes. We conclude that whilst there are increasing numbers of trailblazer groups developing higher level standards, the uptake of apprenticeships at these levels remains relatively low. Although stakeholders support the principle of D&HLAs, we identify a number of challenges and opportunities facing those who seek to successful introduction of these programmes. Our policy recommendations include the need for all stakeholders to work collaboratively to co-create a flexible system to support the validity and relevance of D&HLAs. This will include streamlining and mapping the variety of qualifications currently available in order to promote a platform for parity of both esteem and opportunity for those achieving degree qualifications through the apprenticeship route.

## KEYWORDS

Degree and Higher Level Apprenticeships; work-based learning; British higher education; university teaching; professional bodies

## 1. Introduction

Degree and Higher Level Apprenticeships (D&HLAs) were introduced in 2014 with the aims of increasing the apprenticeship community to over three million by 2020, offering an alternative way to professionalism and extending parity and equality of opportunity for those choosing to undertake an undergraduate or postgraduate programme through a non-traditional route. The concept of apprenticeship training in a particular area of practice is not new. For example, in the 1860s Florence Nightingale set up the first School of Nursing that adopted a largely unregulated system to provide ‘on the job’ training. The tripartite partnership agreement between administrators (matron), doctors and nurses (Rivett 1988) was the collaborative training model she used to operationalise this apprentice style training (Leigh 2014). What is new in terms of apprenticeship models is the concept of D&HLAs. As such, the main aim of this paper is to explore the challenges and opportunities of designing and delivering D&HLAs at levels 4–7 from a multi-stakeholder perspective. To achieve our aims we undertook one to one interviews that critically

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explored the experience of key stakeholders involved in developing and delivering D&HLAs. The stakeholders we engaged with included employers, Universities, independent training organisations and professional bodies. Our paper provides evidence-informed recommendations for best practice principles in developing and delivering these programmes. The rest of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature; Section 3 outlines the research methodology; Section 4 discusses our results; and Section 5 concludes the study and suggests areas for future research.

## 2. Review of literature

The development of D&HLAs at levels 4–7 heralds a new approach to collaborative working between Universities, employers, students, professional bodies and independent training providers. The focus on collaborative working means that the new programmes must fulfil a variety of different stakeholder expectations (Hall, Hugh, and Ward 2010; Fuller and Unwin 2011; Chankseliani and Relly 2015; Lambert 2016; Saraswat 2016). For some, the focus is on putting employers at the centre of new developments, for others it is about achieving three million apprenticeships by 2020, for others it is about the apprenticeship levy, whilst for another group D&HLAs offer a potentially new market segment to expand student numbers and professional body membership. The diversity of stakeholders involved with D&HLAs means that each must clearly articulate their minimum expectations and ensure that these are reflected in the standard if the programmes are to be successful.

Developing on the wealth of experience gained from offering apprenticeships at lower levels, D&HLAs offer employers the opportunity to develop their business through filling higher level skills and knowledge gaps and improving employee motivation (Creative and Cultural Skills 2010). Within D&HLAs employers play a central role not only in terms of developing and co-delivering the programme but also in terms of funding them through internal and external cost activities (BIS 2014; Hogarth et al. 2014). Employers are responsible for the apprentice's wages, work-based training opportunities and mentoring (internal costs), and they have co-responsibility with government for contributing to the external costs of training and assessment. The Richard Report (2012) suggested that these financial obligations result in a more effective and efficient way to maximise value for money as a free market approach forces providers to lower the price they charge and improve the quality of provision.

There is no consensus on the benefits of offering apprenticeships and specifically offering D&HLAs. For example, Antcliff, Baines, and Gorb (2016) concluded that employers who engaged with D&HLAs regarded them as good value for money and they highlight the positive contribution apprentices make to business organisations. Alternatively, some have questioned employer's ability to fulfil their obligations as central stakeholders in developing and providing D&HLAs. For instance, Hogarth et al. (2014) concluded that whilst employers welcome the opportunity to influence the quality of apprenticeships, they have concerns over the levels of administration the new apprenticeships programmes may result in. This includes the number of organisations that a company may have to engage with and the regularity of that contact. Concerns over employer commitment to D&HLAs were also raised by Chankseliani and Relly (2015) who highlighted the low level of apprenticeship uptake. The low level of apprenticeship uptake was also highlighted by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES 2012) who suggested that approximately 10% of all English businesses offer apprenticeships. As such, it may be concluded that whilst employers appear to be committed to the principle of increasing employee training, they do not want to be involved in what they perceive is unnecessary administration that requires the apprentice being away from the business for prolonged periods of time. Consequently, those designing D&HLAs must ensure that they are aware of each employer partners' operational characteristics to ensure a valid learning experience that is comparable to the learning experience of apprentices in other organisations and to the learning experience of those studying on similar degree programmes on a full or part-time basis.

Carter (2010) and King et al. (2016) highlighted flexibility as being a critical factor in the design of work-based programmes. This view was also supported by Bravenboer (2016) who suggested that

whilst a collaborative approach to programme design and delivery is desirable, current degree apprenticeship initiatives maintain the assumed differences between academic learning and on the job training. He suggested that co-designing and delivering degree apprenticeships should ensure that the expertise of Universities in designing and assessing higher level learning is not excluded from the process. The significance of flexibility in programme design and delivery was also highlighted by Lester (2009) in his review of routes to professional qualification where he comments on the flexibility of approach being demonstrated by professional bodies.

In addition to demand problems associated D&HLAs, there are also a number of supply challenges and opportunities for programme providers. One of the challenges and opportunities is the role of private providers and the FE sector in delivering D&HLAs. Chankseiani and Relly (2015) concluded that over 60% of training at lower levels is provided by independent training providers. In addition, the CBI (2014) highlighted that feedback from employers about independent training providers was favourable with satisfaction rates of 77% compared with 61% satisfaction rates for College of Further Education (FE). If D&HLAs require apprentices to be registered on an undergraduate or postgraduate programme this may limit, or exclude, many independent training providers from delivering these qualifications; unless the qualifications they deliver are integrated and accredited as part of a degree award. Rowe, Perrin, and Wall (2016) concluded that a critical success factor for D&HLAs is that University infrastructures acknowledge and respond to the nuances of work-based programmes. They recommend that in general University structures need to become more flexible in terms of collaborative provision and the way in which resources are allocated, arranged and assessed when delivering D&HLAs.

Common concerns expressed by employers, providers and professional bodies relate to their specific responsibilities and obligations in terms of designing, delivering and quality assuring programmes. For instance, Lester (2009) suggested that self-governing professional bodies should move from a delivery system based on experts providing solutions to a system where practitioners and clients work collaboratively to co-design outcomes and/or modify delivery systems. Those developing and delivering apprenticeships may benefit from such a collaborative approach as Lambert (2016) suggested that a multi-stakeholder arrangement provides a more holistic approach to assurance when compared to systems that focus primarily or exclusively on output matrices. Given the developments identified from the literature relating to these new programmes, this study uniquely and freshly explores the challenges and opportunities perceived by those who have designed and those who have started to deliver D&HLAs.

### 3. Methodology

Given the need to identify stakeholder perceptions of the challenges and opportunities facing those who design, deliver and assure D&HLAs at levels 4–7, an exploratory approach was adopted (see e.g. Creswell 2007). The qualitative design focused on uncovering stakeholders' perceptions, opinions and experiences of designing and delivering D&HLAs.

#### 3.1. Participants and sampling

Our study was conducted over 18 months during 2015–2016 when UK Universities were developing and delivering their first D&HLAs. Adopting purposive sampling techniques (see e.g. Creswell 2007; Silverman 2010) resulted in the identification of a range of multi-stakeholder groups who were experienced in designing and delivering D&HLAs and whose views are instrumental for the future development of these programmes and qualifications. Our sample included 27 participants covering different stakeholders from various institutions as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sample details for different sectors and participants.

Sector	Number from sector	Participant	Number of interviews
University currently delivering D&HLAs	3	Programme leaders	5
University seeking to deliver D&HLAs	3	Programme leaders	3
Colleges of FE which currently offer lower level apprenticeships	3	Programme leaders	6
Independent training companies which currently offer lower level apprenticeships	3	Trainers	3
Professional bodies	3	Training managers	4
Employers who are currently offering apprenticeships	5	Employers	6
Total	20	Total	27

Note: Three participants refused to be interviewed as they felt colleagues were more qualified to respond.

### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Our approach was operationalised within the context of one to one interviews and comprised questions that explored participant's perceptions of D&HLA development and delivery. The themes identified from the literature review informed the content of the interview schedule and the interviewees were free to raise additional issues.

We used the six stages of thematic content analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006, 87) to structure our analysis. This provided a rigorous data analysis framework whereby links were made between the empirical data and the claims made by the researchers. All the interviews lasted for approximately 40–50 minutes and were recorded and transcribed with coding schemes being generated from a line-by-line analysis of the interview schedules (see e.g. Graneheim and Lundman 2004; Braun and Clarke 2006). Typical and atypical recurring areas were identified and drawn together into themes to gain an understanding of the emergent key areas around D&HLA design and delivery. Interviews were recorded with permission, and were mainly conducted in each individual's place of work.

## 4. Results and discussions

The results from the interviews were categorised under three main themes namely, programme design, programme delivery and graduate attributes, as shown in Table 2.

### 4.1. Programme design

For many of those involved in designing D&HLAs, engaging with multiple stakeholders was not a new initiative. Specifically, all respondents from the University and FE sectors suggested that engagement

**Table 2.** Summary of the thematic content analysis outcomes based on 27 interviews.

Theme	Sub-theme
Programme design	What are Level 4 – 7 D&HLAs?
	Transferability between professional and academic awards
	The award of apprenticeship separate from the academic qualification
	Ownership of apprenticeship
	Introduction of toll booths
	Employer engagement
	Rebadging programmes or new programmes
	Flexible entry and exit points
Programme delivery	Responsibilities and support for delivery
	Assessment
	Financial models
Graduate attributes	University challenges/opportunities
	Employer challenges/opportunities
	Parity of esteem
	Parity of opportunity

with key stakeholders such as employers, partner and feeder Colleges, students and professional bodies was a mandatory aspect of their programme approval process:

We are required as part of our programme approval process to not only evidence engagement with students, alumni, other schools and partners, professional bodies and employers but also to evidence how the programme proposal reflects their comments. (Female, University Sector)

There were differences in stakeholder perceptions on the level of involvement of the University sector in designing D&HLAs with some from the University sector suggesting they would welcome involvement whilst respondents from other stakeholder groups, such as private providers, suggested that the University sector could be more proactive in developing standards.

I have found it difficult to find any detailed information about degree apprenticeships but would welcome becoming more involved with them. (Male, University Sector)

The University sector is playing catch up and as far as I can see have limited involvement in higher level apprenticeships. (Male, FE College Sector)

These views highlight the significance of involving the University sector in designing, delivering and assuring D&HLAs, and were previously highlighted in the literature findings (see e.g. Bravenboer 2016).

#### **4.1.1. What are level 4–7 D&HLAs?**

A variety of descriptions including higher level apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships were provided by the respondents in relation to ‘what are level 4–7 D&HLAs?’ A significant factor raised by respondents relating to such descriptors was whether level 4–7 apprenticeships were ‘degree apprenticeships’ or ‘apprenticeships at degree level’. The former view was preferred by those in the University sector whilst the latter was preferred by those employed in the independent training and FE sectors. Whilst the terminology between the two variants is similar, the implications are very significant with degree apprenticeships requiring those with degree awarding powers to be involved in the award whilst an apprenticeship at degree level opens the market to other providers who do not have Royal Charter to make degree awards. Concern over this confusion is reflected in the following statement:

FE Colleges and the private sector have great experience in delivering apprenticeships. At the moment we don’t know if we have a role to play in higher level apprenticeships. (Female, FE College Sector)

A distinction between degree apprenticeships and apprenticeships at degree level was raised by one respondent who suggested that apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5 are higher apprenticeships as they do not have to be linked to a degree whilst those at levels 6 and 7 are degree apprenticeships as they require a degree award. Some respondents were critical of this distinction suggesting that explicitly linking a higher level apprenticeship to a degree may result in the apprenticeship becoming primarily an academic programme:

If you can only link a higher level apprenticeship to a degree, then you are going to lose all of the current knowledge and skills developed with employers and training providers. It’s the Universities trying to make apprenticeships into academic programmes. (Male, Private Training Sector)

Respondents from the University sector raised a different interpretation:

The clue is in the title ‘degree apprenticeships’; employers and apprentices will expect to get a degree. If this is not the case we are likely to face a mis-selling situation similar to the current PPI crisis. (Male, University Sector)

This confusion over the extent to which a degree must be included in a D&HLA is further intensified as there is no common framework on which all academic and technical qualifications are based.



A surprising concern expressed by one of the professional management bodies was the need for further information to be presented to convince them that there would be value in D&HLAs being linked with professionally accredited qualifications and degrees:

The panel (professional body) were very concerned about the description of the (new programme) as a pathway to an apprenticeship, and do not believe that the positioning is in keeping with the global reputation of the (professional body) qualification. (Male, Professional Body representative)

#### ***4.1.2. Transferability between professional and academic awards***

Some of the University respondents highlighted that UK degrees are developed in compliance with the principles of the Bologna Process and specifically the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS, European Commission 2015). Here ECTS is the credit system designed to enable students to move between institutions and countries. A bachelor degree (level 6) normally requires a student to successfully complete a minimum of 120 credits at levels 4, 5 and 6 in order for a degree award to be made. Postgraduate qualifications (level 7) normally require 180 credits to be successfully completed for an award to be made. In comparison, not all qualifications offered by the professional bodies, FE Colleges, employers and independent training providers comply with these principles:

I am not aware of the University credit systems or how our programmes would map to them. (Female, Private Training Sector)

This presents an immediate problem where, for example, an apprentice achieves a level 4 qualification, but does not secure 120 credits at level 4. They would not be eligible to enter level 5 of a degree until this requirement was met. This problem has already been encountered by one of the University respondents who suggested that their institution requires such students to complete additional modules before they can progress to the next level. We identify an obvious need for further work to be undertaken on the comparability of different awards and the way they map to a degree programme. Failure to synchronise awards and map routes through to a final degree may result in both employers and apprentices not being awarded with the level of qualification they thought they had registered to. The need for formal progression points between levels within programmes marks a distinction between D&HLAs and lower level apprenticeships. In selecting level 4–7 programmes it is essential that employers are fully aware of the potential problems of registering to a programme that does not comply with the Bologna Process as a student may be prevented from progressing to the next level of study or being awarded an accredited degree:

I think one way forward is for each University offering degree apprenticeships to have a catalogue of other organisation and examination body awards that they will give advanced standing to. This will offer a more flexible approach allowing employers to continue to use qualifications they are familiar with and which they know respond to their needs to be included in a degree programme. (Female, University Sector)

#### ***4.1.3. The award of apprenticeship separate from the academic qualification***

Whilst there was general agreement that a degree apprenticeship award should be linked to an academic qualification, stakeholders expressed different views in terms of how this could be achieved. At one extreme a majority of respondents suggested that the Universities should award both the degree and apprenticeship at the same time, whilst at the other extreme a smaller group expressed the view that Universities should award the degree with 'another' body, such as a professional body or employer, awarding the apprenticeship. A significant criticism and potential problem of separating the academic and apprenticeship awards was student perception. Respondents generally agreed that employers and apprentices see the academic qualification, BSc/BA/MSc/MA/MBA as an example, as being more significant than the apprenticeship standard. As such, separating the two may mean that apprentices may not submit for the final assessment for the apprenticeship if they already have successfully been awarded the degree:



What happens when the student gets their degree? Will they be bothered about submitting the apprenticeship bit? Most students and employers will be more interested in the degree. (Male, University Sector)

An additional problem of separating the degree award from the apprenticeship standard is where the decision to award the apprenticeship standard conflicts with the decision to award a degree:

This is a potential nightmare. What happens if the examiner undertaking the final assessment decides the student has not met the standard yet the student has passed all degree learning outcomes for knowledge skills and behaviour? (Female, Private Training Sector)

#### **4.1.4. Ownership of apprenticeship**

There was general criticism where professional bodies had sought to brand a specific apprenticeship standard as part of their professional body portfolio of products and awards. Further criticism was levelled where maintenance of a D&HLA award and any subsequent letters was dependent on an annual membership fee to a professional body. It was generally felt that these two practices should be discouraged.

Given level 4–7 apprenticeship standards must be applicable to a number of industry sectors, it was suggested that a variety of organisations might wish to use a specific standard. As such, there was general agreement that D&HLA standards should be generic. For instance, one trainer who deals with risk management in the food and drink sector believed that the proposed level 7 leadership standard would be applicable to his work. In comparison, a trainer who works in the health and social care sector expressed a similar view. The application of a generic standard across a variety of sectors is not without problem. For example, problems with consistency of application may emerge as different assessment bodies apply a standard in different ways within different industry sectors. There are also problems in terms of who keeps track of what programmes are linked to a specific apprenticeship standard. It was suggested that an effective way to resolve problems relating to ownership of a standard would be for professional bodies to accredit programmes that would be used as part of specifically named D&HLAs. It was felt that this would also allow professional bodies to maintain a register of academic programmes and the apprenticeship standards they relate to and to link programmes and standards to specific levels of professional membership exemption:

Given the uncertainty over final assessment and who will maintain a register of which programmes are linked to which standards, I would suggest that professional bodies undertake this role. This would mean that where we accredit a programme as a professional body then there is no need for a separate final assessment. It would also allow apprentices the opportunity to pursue relevant professional body membership. (Female, Professional Body representative)

#### **4.1.5. Introduction of 'toll booths'**

There was general agreement that D&HLAs should not be seen as a means to introduce unnecessary 'toll booths' for either employers, apprentices, Universities or other providers. For a majority of respondents, reflecting all stakeholder groups, the final assessment was seen as an unnecessary 'toll booth'. It was further suggested that where a professional body accredits a programme, the award of degree should also result in the award of the apprenticeship standard with no additional assessment being required. There was a general belief that this would resolve the confusion, variety and unnecessary expense of additional end-point assessments:

The assessment system must be clear to both the employer and apprentice. Assessments that seek to confirm the outcome of previous assessments seems unnecessary. All it will do is confuse employers and apprentices and result in higher costs to them. (Male, University sector)

Those in the University sector further suggested that the cost effective system of external examining which currently exists within that sector could easily be adapted to cover apprenticeship assessments:

This looks like we are introducing unnecessary assessments and costs. The University sector has a perfectly effective and efficient system of examining at degree and postgraduate levels so what is the point of another assessment body just confirming what has already been agreed? (Female, University Sector)

#### 4.1.6. *Employer engagement*

A majority of respondents suggested that engaging employers in programme design is difficult for a number of reasons. Firstly, there was confusion in terms of what employers want and need as this is constantly changing. As such, what is designed within a programme may satisfy a short term need only or a need that has already been satisfied by different coping strategies being developed by employers. Secondly, respondents suggested that not all employers have the skills and expertise to develop academic programmes or to articulate skill and knowledge requirements in academic language. Thirdly, some employers stated that they felt uncomfortable in being the 'lead' in curriculum design when they are working with individuals they class as 'academic' and more comfortable with developing programmes. These concerns reflect further the factors identified by Hogarth et al. (2014), and Chankseliani and Relly (2015) in relation to employers engaging and leading the development of apprenticeship standards:

What we do in our training is excellent for us, but as an employer I have no experience of writing or delivering degrees. I will have to rely on you when it comes to writing the apprenticeship. (Male, employer)

Employer respondents suggested that they faced a number of challenges and opportunities around delivering degree level knowledge and skills within the workplace. They suggested that most employers were entering formalised and assessed work-based learning for the first time and many were anxious. Of real concern was their ability to support individuals to a degree level and to develop a competent body of work-based mentors who could assure Universities that their QA has been met within the workplace. This places increased emphasis on the training of mentors and the joint management of work-based learning:

Higher apprenticeships will put an added pressure and cost on us (employers) to train work-based mentors and ensure that they are qualified and competent. (Female, employer)

#### 4.1.7. *Rebadging programmes or developing new programmes*

Universities tend to either adapt existing programmes or develop new programmes to satisfy the requirements of D&HLAs. Whilst both options have strengths and weaknesses what was considered essential by a majority of stakeholders was the use of teaching, learning and assessment strategies that enable students to achieve intended learning outcomes within a work-based environment. Respondents highlighted the need to be supported by a University or an academic organisation in terms of regular contact with those delivering the programme and for the academic provider to make materials available in a variety of formats with less emphasis on 'death by PowerPoint'. The concept of 'edutainment' was highlighted by some employers:

we want a flexible delivery method allowing apprentices the opportunity to access learning materials on their way to and from work so that it fits in with their lifestyle. We want lifestyle learning not death by PowerPoint. (Female, Employer)

Whilst there was general acceptance of both designing new programmes and using existing programmes as part of D&HLAs, respondents raised general concerns about the period of time required to complete the apprenticeship programme. Infilling students into a full-time programme over two semesters was seen to be undesirable as it disadvantages apprenticeship students who must also work full time. Reflecting the recommendations of Carter (2010), Bravenboer (2016) and Rowe, Perrin, and Wall (2016), respondents generally agreed that, at a minimum, providers must design flexible structures and teaching learning and assessment strategies. There was general agreement that students should be able to complete the academic component of the apprenticeship in a similar

timeframe to full-time students but with an option to extend the period by allowing them to register on a part-time route:

We are in the first year of operating our degree apprenticeship programme. It requires a more flexible way of working with employers and students. We have flexible systems in the University but we have tested them. (Female, University sector)

At another level, respondents suggested that D&HLAs allow those designing programmes to be innovative in the way they work with employers stressing opportunities for cooperation, collaboration and co-creation. This approach was highlighted as good practice.

A majority of respondents articulated the difference between part-time routes, sponsored degrees and apprenticeships. Apprenticeships were seen to require a more formal link between learning in the workplace and learning in the classroom. This presents a number of challenges and opportunities to employers and Universities including coordinating the activities of the apprentice so that work-based and classroom learning are complementary. An additional challenge/opportunity that was highlighted by respondents was the need for both employers and Universities to continually update what knowledge, skills and behaviours are essential for the learning experience to be valid, relevant and appropriate. Respondents suggested that for these reasons, there was a need for standards to be generic with contextualisation being verified by academic awards that are accredited by a sector-specific professional body.

#### **4.1.8. Flexible entry and exit points**

All respondents highlighted the desirability of creating flexibility in programme design allowing students to enter and exit at a variety of points and where appropriate being awarded a recognised qualification. Those from the University sector confirmed that this was currently available within degree programmes with students completing 120 credits at level 4 being eligible for a Certificate in Higher Education; those achieving 120 credits at level 4 and 120 credits at level 5 being eligible for a Diploma in Higher Education, a HND or Foundation Degree; and an Honours Degree being available for those who successfully achieve 120 credits at level 6 in addition to 120 credits at both levels 4 and 5. At undergraduate level students can enter and exit at each level, subject to successfully completing the required number of credits. Similar entry and exit arrangements are also available at postgraduate level (level 7) where achieving 60 credits enables a student to exit with a Postgraduate Certificate, achieving 120 credits enables a student to be awarded a Postgraduate Diploma and 180 credits enables a Master's Degree to be awarded.

There was confusion amongst respondents, and especially amongst employers, in terms of whether they could draw down funding for single a module and level or whether they had to register students on a full degree.

Can I use my apprenticeship levy to train employees in one module or do I have to register them for a full degree programme? If it's a full programme then I would not be able to give the commitment for that. (Female, employer)

Being able to utilise the levy to link to modules that constitute a programme was seen as a desirable way to respond to employer training needs whilst enabling an employee to build up confidence and a portfolio that could be used as part of a formal qualification.

## **4.2. Programme delivery**

Sub-themes relating to programme delivery were summarised in terms of stakeholder responsibilities and support for delivery, assessment, financial models, challenges and opportunities for Universities, and challenges and opportunities for employers, as discussed below.

### **4.2.1. Responsibilities and support for delivery**

For most respondent's models of workplace learning tend to divide responsibilities in terms of those relating to employers and those relating to the academic institution. Employers generally were seen

as being responsible for professional competencies and skills whilst academic institutions take responsibility for academic knowledge and skills. Respondents generally agreed that D&HLAs require these traditional boundaries to be rethought and for stakeholders to at least accept a level of cross over or blurring. Employer respondents suggested that mentors in the workplace require close working relationships with University colleagues so that they are aware of module requirements, material content, assessment requirements and support mechanism.

Having spoken to those who are offering degree apprenticeships I realise the importance of training mentors and making sure the University is aware of how it needs to change its practices. (Male, University sector)

This represents a new form of working for most employers and Universities especially given the high level of academic input. As such, support will be required for and from, both employers and academics to increase their knowledge and skills of effective workplace learning in order to support D&HLAs. Those providing effective methods of mentor support may be able to gain competitive advantage, at least in the short term, in providing D&HLAs.

#### 4.2.2. Assessments

There was general agreement that the assessments used in D&HLAs should be structured in a way that can be easily understood by different stakeholders. A majority of respondents believe that the award of degree should also result in the award of apprenticeship. Respondents were unanimous in their criticism of additional assessments especially where they incurred additional costs. Stakeholders were also critical of the current lack of clarity about end-point assessments which they believe present a number of problems and concerns including how they will be undertaken? who has responsibility for quality assuring the apprenticeship aspect? and what qualifications will be required by those undertaking the end-point assessment?

Hopefully by the time the students enter the final year there will be more clarity about end point assessments and exactly what is expected of us all. (Female, University sector)

The lack of involvement of end-point assessors in other assessments associated with the degree award may cause problems in terms of the validity, reliability and relevance of the end-point assessment. This is more acute where a student achieves the academic, skill and behavioural intended learning outcomes associated with the academic award but fails to achieve the apprenticeship award. In such situations where would the student appeal? If the apprenticeship standard is not awarded at the same time as the academic award then the appeal would not be considered by the University provider as the University may wish to appeal the decision in addition to the employer and apprentice:

How will they work? and who does the student, employer and University appeal to if they disagree with the end point assessor's decision? (Male, University sector)

Who will quality assure the qualifications of end point assessors and their decisions? (Female, University sector)

An additional criticism of end-point assessments being undertaken by a party not involved in other aspects of the degree assessment is that it ignores the current external examiner system used throughout the UK Higher Education sector. This process is effective and low cost so those who support it see an additional assessment method as unnecessary, costly and potentially ineffective in that it may not achieve the benefits of the current system and at best would only verify the result of the academic programme but at an additional cost:

If the apprentice passes their degree why would they be required to do another assessment? To achieve what? (Male, employer)

#### 4.2.3. Financial models

Employers expressed concerns over the potential increased cost of offering D&HLAs. The cost of upskilling mentors and those working with apprentices was seen as one that should be paid for out of

the apprenticeship levy. Employers also expressed concern over other 'hidden' costs that may discourage them from offering level 4–7 apprenticeships. Respondents from the University sector who have started to offer degree apprenticeships acknowledge that the running costs of D&HLAs were different to those of full-time programmes and often involve reimbursing employers for part of the workplace-training element of programmes. It is clear that providing D&HLAs will require both employers and academic institutions to engage with alternative commercial models of programme delivery.

Whilst as an employer we are committed to degree apprenticeships, my concern is the cost. Who will pay for training mentors and for the time they spend doing mentoring work? This looks like it will be very expensive. (Male, employer)

#### 4.2.4. University challenges and opportunities

University respondents suggested that challenges and opportunities could be divided into: administrative; student-centred problems; parity and equality issues; and teaching, learning and assessment. In terms of administration, respondents from the University sector suggested that their administrative systems were playing 'catch up' with the requirements of D&HLAs. Examples of such administrative challenges and opportunities include: managing multiple entries; interruptions of study; and tracking students taking modules out of sequence. Such factors have resulted in Universities restricting entry to apprenticeship programmes with some offering entries once a year whilst others have moved to entries at the start of each semester. Whilst flexibility of approach was previously highlighted by Carter (2010), Bravenboer (2016) and Rowe, Perrin, and Wall (2016) as a key factor for success, respondents from the University sector suggested that flexibility and being responsive to employer needs are two of the main challenges and opportunities facing Universities wishing to deliver D&HLAs.

In terms of challenges and opportunities to students, respondents suggested that whilst D&HLAs were in their early stage, they felt that apprentices often did not associate with the University or being a student of the University in the same way as full-time students. As such, there was acknowledgement that more work needed to be undertaken in this area in order to avoid problems of disengagement often associated with students who do not have a sense of belonging. Failure to address issues of engagement with the University may inhibit the delivery of anticipated advantages for those seeking to offer an alternative route to degree education. This reflects previous literature findings, see for example, Hall, Hugh, and Ward (2010).

There was general agreement that D&HLAs require distinctive teaching, learning and assessment strategies when compared to those applied to full-time programmes. For example, the increased significance of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) was seen to present challenges and opportunities to some module teams who may not have the skills to deliver effectively through a blended approach. Providers of academic programme must invest in this area:

There is a need to up-skill those delivering degree apprenticeships. (Female, University sector)

University respondents suggested that offering academic support to apprentices presents challenges and opportunities, as they are required to support not only the student but also the work-based mentor. Work-based mentors require access to the University VLE so that they are able to support the apprentice during their period of study. The significance of supporting the workplace mentor and student is also applicable in the assessment process. Formally supporting work-based mentors through a recognised mentorship programme may provide competitive advantage to a University and also enable them to demonstrate due diligence in terms of quality assurance. Those representing the University sector raised concerns over stakeholder responsibilities and specifically 'how this may affect NSS scores and accreditations'. This area requires further investigation and specifically 'how quality assurance is managed from each stakeholder perspective'.

What is becoming clear is that there is still a lack of clarity around degree apprenticeships in terms of who is responsible for what? What assessments need to be developed? ... (Male, University sector)

This probably is one of the most significant changes in higher education. Are we ready for it? (Male, University sector)

#### **4.2.5. Employer challenges and opportunities**

Employers highlighted a number of challenges and opportunities in relation to designing and delivering D&HLAs. The challenges and opportunities were grouped into information requirements, logistics, mentor training and cost implications. In relation to employer information requirements, employers require an understanding of the time, resources and financial commitment that they must make in delivering D&HLAs. Whilst many employers were aware of the requirements of work-based learning and apprenticeships at lower levels, they were concerned that D&HLAs will require more collaboration, cooperation and co-creation between the employer and those providing the degree aspect of the programme. This will be a new style of working and will require considerable investment by both employers and academic institutions. Employers were concerned that this may move resources away from their core business and will increase costs.

In terms of logistical challenges and opportunities, employers stated that whilst they were committed to ensuring that the students learning experience was relevant and high quality, 'the requirements of the business will always come first'. For instance, whilst employers suggested that they would plan to ensure apprentices were in work areas relevant to the modules they were studying, they could not guarantee this. In relation to work-based mentors, employers suggested that this is an area that requires additional resource. Employers were generally of the view that appointing employees as mentors would require them to develop new skills that may not be necessary for the role they were employed to undertake. In addition, employers suggested that Universities need to provide support for work-based mentors in terms of their expectations of the mentor role. Such factors underpin employers' general concerns relating to whether they could draw down funding to cover such costs. Employers were of the opinion that they should be eligible for a proportion of the levy given a large proportion of training would be taking place within the workplace and this requires appropriately qualified staff.

What is important is that the finances stack up. We need to get value for money. (Male, employer)

#### **4.3. Graduate attributes**

Respondents highlighted a number of factors relating to the graduate qualities of apprentices when compared with other graduates. The factors were divided into: parity of esteem and parity of opportunity.

##### **4.3.1. Parity of esteem and parity of opportunity**

Managing stakeholder perceptions of degree apprenticeships, when compared to traditional degree programmes, was seen by respondents as being critical for the success of D&HLAs. This includes: managing stakeholder perceptions of the skills and knowledge of those achieving a degree through an apprenticeship route when compared to those studying using more traditional routes; the capabilities of different graduates; career opportunities; the value placed on each qualification; etc. Traditional degree programmes already have an established reputation with employers, students and parents whereas apprenticeships are often associated with technical/vocational skilled occupations. Changing perceptions will require educating stakeholders about what D&HLAs are and the benefits of achieving qualifications through this route.

We have to make sure that students, parents, schools and employers are aware of the benefits of doing a degree apprenticeship. We have to make them work. (Female, University Sector)

In addition to parity of esteem, respondents highlighted equality of opportunity for D&HLA students when compared to those achieving a degree through a traditional route. Although there is no



universally accepted definition of parity of opportunity, some of the common themes raised by respondents include parity whilst at University and parity of opportunity on graduation. In terms of parity of opportunity whilst at University popular sub-themes that emerged include quality of student experience; ensuring validity, reliability and appropriateness of assessment; and acknowledging the different learning and teaching strategies required to support apprenticeship students. Some respondents suggested that there may be benefits for full-time students where they engage with learning technologies that may have been developed for apprenticeship students:

Get paid whilst you study for a degree. Have the opportunity to get promotion. Have no student debt. What isn't there to like about degree apprenticeships? (Female, employer)

## 5. Conclusion and areas for future research

Our investigation identified three main themes that are critical for the future success of D&HLAs, namely programme design, programme delivery and graduate attributes (see Table 2 for a summary of specific area that requires clarification). Whilst D&HLAs will provide a new way to finance and deliver higher education knowledge and skills, their success is dependent on collaboration, cooperation and co-creation between employers, Universities, professional bodies, students, independent trainers and Colleges of FE. Respondents clearly identified how level 4–7 apprenticeships carry a variety of descriptions, but the key question is 'whether such apprenticeships are degree apprenticeships or apprenticeships at degree level'. Whilst the terminology between the two variants is similar, the implications are significant. Degree apprenticeships require those with degree awarding powers to be involved in the award whilst an apprenticeship at degree level opens the market to other providers who do not have Royal Charter to make degree awards. The variety of awards at levels 4–7 means that there is a need for mapping exercises to be undertaken which will allow for apprentices and employers to select the most appropriate modules that can be used to make up a degree award. This will facilitate Universities, Colleges of FE, private providers, professional bodies and employers to work more collaboratively to co-create relevant curricula. The emphasis on work-based training will necessitate close working relationships between employers and those involved in delivering the academic content of programmes. This will require Universities to develop more commercial costing models which will see 'cost and profit sharing' with other stakeholders. One of the biggest challenges and opportunities is identifying the role of the final assessment. Employers and stakeholders in general were critical of additional 'toll booths' and questioned what a final assessment would assess or achieve over the assessments undertaken as part of the degree programme. There was general agreement that where a programme is accredited by a professional body the award of apprenticeship should be made at the same time as the award of degree. Future research could be extended to evaluate the student learning experience, the students' sense of 'belonging' to a University, and the attrition and progression rates of apprentices. Finally, further research needs to be undertaken to map different awards and how they relate to degree programmes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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