

Developing Higher Apprenticeships in England

**Lifelong Learning Networks National Forum
Policy Paper**

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Executive Summary

Over the past four years, Lifelong Learning Networks across the country have been working to support the progression of vocational learners into higher education. A key group of vocational learners included in these efforts are Advanced Apprentices whose 4% rate of progression to higher education is very low compared to 41% for BTEC students and 90% for A level students. (Carter, 2009) This is a major national issue of equity and social mobility and one that LLNs have already begun to tackle through a range of work including employer led development of higher apprenticeships, development of bridging modules and enhanced IAG. The issue has been recognised nationally with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills announcing some funding to start to address it. LLNs have also been in dialogue with the National Apprenticeship Service, Sector Skills Councils and employers. This paper outlines the main issues and makes a number of recommendations about how they can be addressed from both a policy and an operational perspective. Key messages include:

1. **SOCIAL MOBILITY** - The lack of progression of apprentices into higher education is because there is a lack of flexible, part-time discrete work-based higher education pathways open to these learners who made a decision at 16 or 18 to take up a work-based learning route rather than a full-time academic route. To put such higher apprenticeship routes in place has the potential to dramatically open up access to the professions to young people from lower socio economic groups, who are more than twice as likely to undertake vocational qualifications as those with parents in professional occupations. Higher apprenticeships are the missing link in the apprenticeship family, the component that provides for apprenticeships, parity of esteem with academic routes. Without clear work-based progression pathways, leading in appropriate sectors to professional or para-professional accreditation, apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships will always be seen as having a ceiling at level 3, only leading to technician occupations.
2. **DEMAND** - The demand is there. There are potentially 70,000 apprentices interested in progressing to higher education for whom progression routes do not currently exist. Higher Education needs to meet this need by engaging proactively with employers, Sector Skills Councils, the National Apprenticeship Service, Trades Unions and apprentices to address this with innovative and flexible provision. Demand is there from employers who need to develop higher apprenticeships to fill skills shortages, for example in engineering and manufacturing (Kent and Medway LLN, 2010 b) and to fill skills gaps, for example in the creative and cultural industries (Creative and Cultural Skills and Skillset, 2010).
3. **COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS** - LLNs are in a unique position to facilitate this work because of their experience of working with Sector Skills Councils, employers, professional bodies, universities, colleges and training providers and they are equipped to develop higher apprenticeship frameworks through their partner networks. This would mean that local, sub regional and regional solutions could be developed collaboratively, bringing a coherence which currently does not exist.
4. **EXPERTISE** - There is a significant body of expertise and evidence available through LLNs and also through its centrally organised research forum (Kent and Medway LLN, 2010) which provides comprehensive information and data on which to make informed decisions about provision for apprentices and work based learners. This information base and the facility LLNs have through the National Forum for sharing best practice through national Work Groups and shared training means that LLNs are already poised to take this agenda forward with minimal delay.
5. **BRIDGING** - LLNs have developed and validated bridging modules specifically for advanced apprentices and there is substantial evidence of their success in enabling learners to progress and achieve (Kent and Medway LLN, 2010 b). There is the capacity to identify a common module which could be embedded within frameworks to ensure that apprentices are able to access the skills and knowledge they need to succeed with confidence.
6. **WORKING NATIONALLY AND LOCALLY** - There is the opportunity to work nationally with Sector Skills Councils, employers and Professional Bodies to develop Higher Apprentice Frameworks specifically for sectors, to meet sector-wide skills shortages and also to work locally with employers, Sector Skills Councils, the national Apprenticeship Service, universities, colleges and training providers to draw up flexible local higher apprenticeship routes validated and developed locally to meet local demand.
7. **FUNDING** - The opportunity through the Browne Review of Fees to create a new funding model that supports the delivery of flexible discrete part-time higher apprenticeship programmes is a real possibility. This should take account of where the apprentices are currently located, the relationship they, and their employer, has formed with the FE provider and the experience that these Colleges and Training Providers have in delivering apprenticeship programmes and discrete part-time provision for employers including evening, weekend, block and work-based programmes. Many FE Colleges offer suitable HE provision for apprentices but find the funding model difficult and unrewarding to operate. Any changes to this funding model for higher apprenticeships must examine the relationship between the FE provider and its HE partner and recognise the need for onward progression from Foundation Degrees or Higher Nationals allowing top up to Honours Degree.

The Background

Higher apprenticeships are not new, they are already being used by companies like Airbus, Rolls Royce, BT and Vodafone. Frameworks have been developed in Engineering Technology, ICT, Accountancy, Purchasing and Supply and Contact Centres. For employers, the business case is very strong allowing them to grow their own staff with the skills, motivation and attitudes required for their business at less cost than many graduate development schemes. They are also seen as an important way of ensuring greater diversity in some industries. For apprentices, having a work-based progression route that seamlessly links to their existing apprenticeship, overcomes a huge barrier to progression to higher education.

The National Apprenticeship Service quotes research showing that 50% of apprentices who complete an Advanced Apprenticeship show an interest in pursuing a degree-level equivalent course. LLN funded research has the figure at 41.5% (Sussex Council of Training Providers, 2010). The Data Service statistics which are accessible via the Apprenticeship website, show that Advanced Apprenticeship achievements have increased from 28,400 in 2005-06 to 45,200 in 2008-09. The total figure for advanced apprentices achieving 2005-2008 is 143,200. If 50% of these were interested in higher education if it was available, then there is a potential pool of over 70,000 young people and adults who will benefit from this work. To develop work-based routes for this group will not only help the nation reach the Leitch workforce qualification targets but it will provide a huge impetus for social mobility and fairer access to the professions. The Government has announced that it will "make £5 million available to SSCs working with employers and Higher Education Institutions to develop more higher apprenticeship frameworks and to pilot new composite Honours and Masters frameworks (DBIS, 2009) p16. This paper from the LLN National Forum has been written to provide a contribution to developing policy in this area and to offer some recommendations about how this work can practically be achieved.

LLNs have a unique position to support this work by bringing together employers, Sector Skills Councils and employers on a sub-regional, regional and even pan-regional basis. Over the past four years, LLNs have engaged in work to improve progression for apprentices including producing excellent examples of IAG materials, the development of bridging modules, progression agreements between training providers and Higher education Institutions (HEIs) and even the development of a higher apprenticeship with large engineering and manufacturing companies in SE England (Kent and Medway LLN, 2010).

Higher Apprenticeships and Social Mobility

Research carried out by UVAC in 2005 on apprenticeship progression (Anderson and Hemsworth, 2005) suggested that progression from Advanced Apprenticeships to Higher Education is poor. More recently, the Skills Commission's inquiry into apprenticeships (Skills Commission, 2009) and HEFCE's report on apprenticeship progression (HEFCE, 2009) indicate that this situation remains largely unchanged. This is confirmed in UVAC's recent report on vocational progression where the figure is 4% (Carter, 2009). It is important to note that for advanced apprentices, many of whom at 16 chose this route rather than taking full-time A levels or BTEC qualifications, the question is not about why they are not progressing to full-time degrees, it is a question of there not being a work-based degree or Foundation Degree route available to them. With the Government wanting to increase the numbers of apprenticeships by 35,000 in the next two years (DBIS, 2009), opening up sustainable progression routes for this growing number of work-based learners is becoming urgent and the announcement of some funding to advance this is welcome.

The issue of developing work-based progression routes for apprentices is one of social mobility and equity. The Milburn Report (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, July 2009) recommended that advanced apprenticeships be given UCAS tariff points and this work is under way. This will go some way to achieving a parity of esteem for young people and adults who choose a work-based pathway. But to truly open up access to the professions to young people from lower socio economic groups, who are more than twice as likely to undertake vocational qualifications like apprenticeships than young people with parents already in professional occupations (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, July 2009), it is the higher education *offer* that needs to be changed and higher apprenticeships provide that opportunity.

Recommendations on developing higher apprenticeships to increase social mobility

1. That higher apprenticeship policy be guided by the principles of fair access to the professions
2. That the demographic background of apprentices be researched to provide baseline data
3. That progression routes for advanced apprentices be seamless, building in the expectation of progression to higher level technician, para professional and professional roles and occupations
4. That apprenticeships overall be marketed with the clear message of parity of esteem with academic full-time programmes so that they are “sold” as a valid alternative route for bright school and college leavers
5. That access to higher apprenticeships be open to the large pool of technician level staff already in the workforce, many of whom might be ex-apprentices
6. That high quality IAG is available for both school and college leavers and people in the workforce to promote apprenticeship progression backed with good case studies – see for examples (Kent and Medway LLN, 2010 b)

What might Higher Apprenticeships look like?

The existing higher apprenticeship frameworks vary. The SEMTA framework combines an NVQ4 with a Foundation Degree and includes the opportunity to top up to a BEng. The Financial Services Skills Council bases its framework on the Level 4 AAT NVQ in Accounting. It is up to the Sector Skills Council and employers what qualifications provide the knowledge and competence required. At present there are funding issues because NVQ4 is ‘non -prescribed HE’ and thus traditionally funded by the LSC whereas the Foundation Degree is HEFCE funded.

There are two levels of work in developing higher apprenticeships. A national level with employers and universities working with Sector Skills Councils to develop Higher Apprenticeship Frameworks and a local level working with employers on the ground to scope demand for higher level progression routes, to feed this demand up to relevant Sector Skills Councils and professional bodies if relevant, and also to develop higher apprenticeship programmes with local universities to meet this demand. A demand-led methodology is critical for this work and LLNs are well placed to bring the right parties to the table to scope demand on a local regional and possibly pan-regional basis and feed it back nationally to inform policy.

The Foundation Degree is a combination of work-based learning and academic study and because it is validated by universities, it can be developed collaboratively with employers on a local basis to ensure it covers both the knowledge and competence elements both employers and Sector Skills Councils require. The best Foundation Degrees are those that are demand led and where they are a part of a higher apprenticeship framework, this can be built in to provide a core curriculum, practical skills, optional specialist units and delivery modes that are in demand by employers on a local or regional basis.

Given the centrality of employers in this work, and the experience that LLNs have gained in working with employers, it would be sensible to focus the development funding for higher apprenticeships in local areas. LLNs are well placed to scope demand for higher apprenticeships through their sector based work and ensure that local solutions involve employers and Sector Skills Councils at every step. Once demand has been articulated, then it is important that local solutions are arrived at collaboratively. It is also important that this provision is delivered in discrete groups rather than through the traditional practice in universities of infilling part-time students into full time provision. This also means that this provision can run through the calendar year providing an accelerated programme.

It would be sensible to build on the existing model of apprenticeship delivery using the expertise of Further Education Colleges and Private Training Providers. This would provide more continuity for apprentices and

employers. Colleges are experienced in providing higher level courses like Foundation Degrees, AAT Level 4 and Higher Nationals to discrete groups of work-based learners and can build in preparation for and expectation of higher level study within their advanced apprenticeship programmes. They and Private Training Providers also have existing relationships with the employers of apprentices which will provide a more seamless service. To build in higher apprenticeship progression beyond Foundation Degrees, further bridging and IAG will need to be integrated into programmes to support transition to top-ups to Honours Degrees.

For advanced apprentices, it has already been suggested that IAG is available to build in an expectation of progression as well as the information and advice that will be required. IAG in this context will be best provided through their training providers and their in-company training staff. This will mean that good quality information must be available training providers and training staff about HE progression to enable them to provide reliable and meaningful information. Part of the IAG offer to support progression should include visits to the university and college they might progress to, it should include access to higher apprentices possibly acting as mentors, and it should ensure that apprentices are prepared for the fact that there will be a step change in the level of study. Learners progressing from NVQ level 3 need support for the type of academic approach required on degrees. To address this, bridging modules have been designed across the country by LLNs, which although different, have the same focus on preparing work based learners for work based Higher Education. Apprentices would benefit from the systematic embedding of these modules within a Foundation Degree with the endorsement of Sector Skills Councils. Within LLNs is a body of evidence based on both quantitative and qualitative data which identifies the benefits of these modules and particularly their impact on progression and achievement (for examples, see the Case Studies from Greater Manchester in (Kent and Medway LLN, 2010 b).

Recommendations on the Shape of Higher Apprenticeships

1. That development of higher apprenticeship frameworks be pump primed using the funding announced through a range of regional pilots
2. That the development be employer led, based on well researched short and long term demand for higher level skills and informed by Sector Skills Councils, any Sector Skills Agreements and Sector Qualification Strategies
3. That LLNs be commissioned to facilitate this work bringing together Sector Skills Councils, employers, the National Apprenticeship Service and Professional Bodies where relevant along with their universities and colleges and private training providers
4. That frameworks are based on what is affordable and thus fundable. This will mean that Foundation Degrees will be developed with work-based assessment to measure competence in the workplace as well as the academic knowledge required
5. That the Foundation Degree includes a bridging module at the start and support at the end for progression to a top-up honours degree
6. That delivery of the higher apprenticeships be agreed locally and that consideration be made of the need for discrete groups, timetabling over the calendar year and using the experience and expertise of FE Colleges

The Range of Higher Apprenticeships

There are at least three avenues for developing higher apprenticeships that should be considered:

1. If higher apprenticeships are an alternative route to the professions, they also need stopping off points for para professional and higher technician roles, depending on the industry. Work-based routes to many professions already exist, for example accounting technicians can progress to becoming accountants and waste management technicians can progress through part-time study to professional recognition as waste management officers. There are a number of such routes already recognised by the professional bodies. To build these into the frameworks for higher apprenticeships involving both Sector Skills Councils and Professional Bodies would

provide for some sectors the “seamless” work-based progression routes for Advanced Apprentices that employers would welcome.

2. For some industries, higher apprenticeships provide an answer to skills shortages, for example the interest by employers in Kent and Medway, like Eon, National Grid and the paper industry was because of the difficulty recruiting people with relevant level 4 and 5 skills. In some industries, higher apprenticeship frameworks will be required to fill skills gaps. In the Creative and Cultural industries and the Creative Media industry, skills shortage is not a problem but significant skills gaps exist including workskills with new entrants and digital technical skills that apprenticeships are being developed to cover (Creative and Cultural Skills and Skillset, 2010). In these cases it will be a question of working with Sector Skills Councils and employers to meet to address skills gaps in industries characterised by fast moving and dynamic technological change. This might challenge the traditional occupational structures in some industries that are being overtaken by technological change and working practices.
3. A third area of development for higher apprenticeships is likely to stem from the demand for new types of integrated professional and para professional roles, evidenced in the integrated children’s workforce, in some associate professional roles in the NHS and new roles that combine similar elements in some public sector professions. This work will require a high degree of coordination as it will cross Sector Skills Council lines as well as involving different public sector employers.

Recommendations on the range of higher apprenticeships

1. That research into demand be undertaken to reveal a range of needs from the more general, for example public finance or public administration, to the more specialist such as waste management, environmental health and TV Production
2. That in more specialist areas, professional bodies will be important stakeholders and there will need to be some national work by Sector Skills Councils to engage professional bodies in this work
3. That the opportunity be taken to explore higher apprenticeships as routes to new composite occupations such as the integrated children’s workforce
4. That once developed, the opportunities and range of employers, Sector Skills Councils, professional bodies and universities involved be publicised widely to schools, colleges and to the workforce through intermediaries like the Adult Advancement and Careers Service and skills brokers

Engaging and Working with Employers

The task of increasing the number of learners progressing from apprenticeships to higher education needs to be placed in the wider context of fair access to the professions. It is about parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways and between part-time, work-based and full-time pathways. This is not easily achieved because it will require a culture change where work based learners are treated the same as learners engaging in more traditional modes, where apprentices, rather than being disadvantaged by choosing a work-based route instead of an academic full-time route, will be able to achieve the same goal: a degree level qualification and potential to access a professional career.

The promise of this culture change to make social mobility a reality has been recognised by the Government in taking so seriously the recommendations of the Milburn Report (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, July 2009). Crucially, this change needs also to engage employers so that the potential for developing their workforce through apprenticeships includes the opportunity for progression through technician roles into para professional and professional roles through a structured framework. Local employer-led solutions will work if employers are involved in the development of curriculum and in how it is delivered within the overall agreed frameworks.

Trades Unions have an important role to play in underpinning a culture of progression for apprentices from level 2 to advanced apprenticeships and from advanced apprenticeships to higher apprenticeships. The progression pathway will not be travelled by all and at each point there are skilled roles that apprentices can take up. But significantly more than 4% of advanced apprentices should have the opportunity to progress into higher skilled roles and the opportunity to reach their potential and apprenticeships must never be allowed to be *cul de sacs*. The TUC provide comprehensive resources for Union Learning Reps and negotiators on apprenticeships which include reference to higher apprenticeships and the importance of progression (Trades Union Congress, 2010). It is important that Union Learning Reps are involved in local developments through Unionlearn because of their crucial advisory role in the workplace.

To engage employers in developing their apprentices beyond the advanced apprenticeship will require formative work on the ground locally with individual employers on a sector wide basis. This will be opening up new potential for employers and while Sector Skills Councils may be able to outline national and regional skills gaps and shortages, it is at the local level that the business case needs to be made. LLNs are well placed to work with Sector Skills Councils locally in setting up a dialogue with employers to address higher skills issues and scope out the demand for higher apprenticeship progression pathways. An example of how this can be achieved on the ground is current work in Kent and Medway in the south east of England to scope demand from across the public sector for progression pathways to fill skills gaps and this will be reported on in the summer 2010. The work is being undertaken jointly by Kent County Council, Medway Council, the Strategic Health Authority and the Kent and Medway LLN. It is involving employers in dialogue with each other and with Sector Skills Councils and the National Apprenticeship Service initially and with universities, colleges and other providers once the demand is known.

Practical issues engaging employers include:

1. Convincing Employers - Not all apprentices will wish to move on to HE and it is important to put the business case to employers that developing higher level skills in appropriate employees will enhance business efficiency and profitability. The relevance of the programme is key to this as employers need to know that if they are to support progression from apprenticeships their business will benefit. Arguments about the economic impact of apprenticeships are provided by the National Apprenticeship Service and from Sector Skills Councils through their Sector Skills Agreements and Sector Qualifications Strategies.

2. Information about Provision - Employers require a realistic understanding of the time, management and financial support required from them. Employers who train at level 4/5 tend to have a better understanding of Higher National programmes (HNC and HND) and there is still more work needed to raise the profile of Foundation Degrees. The work based element of Foundation Degrees and the fact that employers can have input into their content and delivery as they are locally accredited is seen by many employers as valuable. The design of Foundation Degrees should be flexible enough to allow modules to be taken discretely if necessary and to build up credit to a full award at a time which suits both employers and employees (Carter, 2009). Assessments must relate to the workplace and have the capacity to be of direct benefit for the employer and where relevant, employers could be involved in the delivery utilising specialist skills. But this is not to rule out the fact that some Sector Skills Councils may prefer to include Higher National programmes or NVQs in their frameworks. The support and endorsement of the employer trade or professional body and Sector Skills Councils will be crucial in persuading employers that progression onto a Foundation Degree, NVQ4 or Higher National is the most appropriate way forward.

3. Cost — It is hoped that the Browne Review of Fees will look at the issue of funding of higher apprenticeships so that it will be possible to put together a cost effective package for employees, employers and government. It is important that funding for these programmes is clear so that if, for example, an NVQ4 was also required as part of a higher apprenticeship framework, that the funding source was available. At present, additional co-funded student numbers are available for universities to access for apprenticeships and there is not a cap on part time numbers. What needs clarity is the contribution that employers *and* employees might make to the fee for these programmes and what qualifications government will fund. It is hoped that the Browne Review will consider funding models which provide an incentive to employers and apprentices to make progression a reality.

4. Delivery — It is expected that delivery of higher apprenticeships will be largely through Further Education Colleges which have experience in delivering discrete provision for employers and will already have links with many

employers and apprentices. Delivery through colleges is often more cost effective than delivery through universities and in many cases they are more flexible geographically. Foundation Degrees are validated and quality controlled through Universities and this provides for local responsiveness and can achieve local employer buy-in within an agreed higher apprenticeship framework. For some frameworks, covering a standardised cross regional industry need, the feasibility of validating foundation degrees through a centrally organised body such as FDF or regionally through a cluster of universities is also a possibility. LLNs are in a good position to provide information and advice to employers about options and help facilitate solutions with universities and colleges as well as give advice on the most cost-effective solutions.

Recommendations on engaging and working with employers

1. The National Apprenticeship Service provide employers with information about work based higher level awards such as foundation degrees and of the support and commitment needed by employers to support the achievement of their apprentices
2. That clear reliable information is collected to illustrate to employers the correlation between higher level qualifications, increased efficiency and higher productivity
3. That the Browne Review of Fees considers funding models to support higher apprenticeships taking into account the fact that once rolled out, there should be increases in volume year on year. One significant factor that the review might like to consider is that these learners will be earning and they will most probably be living at home so requirements for learner support will be minimal. There is also the fact that employers will expect to pay either the whole fee or at least a contribution to it, and as the higher apprentice is benefiting, there might be a case for them contributing to the fee as well
4. That the existing and significant expertise which Lifelong Learning Networks have should be used to drive forward this agenda. As existing networks, LLNs will provide a cost effective way of piloting higher apprenticeships initially with a view to a planned roll-out over the next few years keeping pace with the increased numbers of advanced apprentices. For Lifelong Learning Networks, this work fits as a natural part of their remit to improve the progression of vocational learners. As part of the maturity of LLNs nationally, in assessing demand for different frameworks with employers locally, LLNs will be able to communicate easily with neighbouring LLNs to add smaller pockets of demand for specialist areas to ensure viable groups across regions

Conclusions

The recent report by UVAC (Carter, 2009) recommends many of the actions that the LLNs have already very successfully undertaken for example, developing innovative teaching and assessment for vocational learners, guaranteed interviews for apprentices and the development of bridging courses. This report is welcomed and the LLNs are in a position to take these recommendations forward in an extremely proactive way. They can provide leadership in this very important area and the body of systematically collected information which it has now collated through its research forum will serve to answer some of the questions presented in the report.

It is hoped that this contribution from the LLN National Forum will help focus debate on how to move forward to develop higher apprenticeship opportunities. It has been disseminated widely to Government, the National Apprenticeship Service, Sector Skills Councils, professional associations, Regional Development Agencies, regional university associations, UVAC, the CBI, the TUC and HEFCE.

The authors, representing the National Forum are happy to discuss further any or all of the recommendations made.

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