



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

Evaluation of the Degree Apprenticeship programme: scoping report (summary)

The report includes a literature review and initial engagement with stakeholders involved in the planning, implementation and delivery of the programme.

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Introduction and background

In February 2020 the Welsh Government commissioned Wavehill and the Learning and Work Institute to undertake a formative evaluation of the Degree Apprenticeship programme in Wales, to assess its effectiveness, efficiency and impact. This is a summary of the research findings from the scoping phase of the evaluation carried out between August 2020 and February 2021.

Following its identification as a key aim in the [Welsh Government's Apprenticeship and Skills policy plan \(2017\)](#) and as an explicit recommendation in the Diamond (2017) [review of Higher Education Funding, the Degree Apprenticeship programme](#) launched in Wales in January 2018.

The Welsh Government initially grant funded the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) approximately £20 million for the first three years of the programme, with the first Apprentices enrolling on the programme in September 2018.

The Degree Apprenticeship programme delivers against a wide range of policy objectives; however, the initial focus has been placed on supporting:

- the realignment of the apprenticeship system to deliver higher-level skills driven by the needs of employers and the Welsh economy, as articulated through ministerial priorities

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- progressions from the existing apprenticeship programme into higher education, and in turn greatly improve the credibility and accessibility of the Welsh Government's apprenticeship offer for those with higher aspirations; particularly for those who have not followed the sixth form/college route

Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) have identified a series of key areas within priority sectors where there are skills shortages in technical and highly skilled occupations. Following this process, Degree Apprenticeship frameworks in Digital, and Advanced Manufacturing were commissioned by the Welsh Government.

HEFCW has overseen annual competitive bidding rounds to fund individual programmes of delivery by HEFCW funded HEIs within these frameworks (although delays in the completion of the Advanced Manufacturing framework meant proposals in the first year of the programme were associated with the Digital framework only). Collaboration in delivering the degree apprenticeships between HEIs, Further Education (FE) Colleges and other work-based learning (WBL) providers is prioritised by HEFCW within the guidance.

All but one^[1] HEFCW funded HEI submitted a proposal to the programme for each academic year since the programme commenced. The initial phase of funding for the Degree Apprenticeship programme comes to an end in 2021.

In November 2019 the Senedd Cymru launched an inquiry which examined the operation of the initial phase of the Degree Apprenticeship programme and the future direction and potential of **Degree Apprenticeships**. The report, published in November 2020 included 12 recommendations for the programme. These included the range of degree apprenticeships available, how they are financed, widening participation and promoting the Welsh language within degree apprenticeships. The **Welsh Government has now issued its response to these recommendations** accepting or partially accepting them all.

[1] The following HEFCW funded HEIs are delivering degree apprenticeships: Bangor University, Cardiff University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, The Open University in Wales, Swansea University, University of South Wales, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Wrexham Glyndwr University.

The evaluation

The evaluation is being delivered over two phases.

1. A scoping phase (this phase) which has involved gathering evidence via a literature review and through initial engagement with 22 stakeholders involved in the planning, implementation management and delivery of Degree Apprenticeships. The evidence gathered in turn informed the development of a theory of change for the programme. To assist in the development of the theory of a change, a workshop was held with representatives from the Welsh Government, HEFCW and Universities Wales.
2. A final phase which will involve fieldwork with employers, apprentices, HE providers, FE Colleges and work-based learning providers to capture feedback on the experiences of delivering and participating in the Degree Apprenticeship programme.

Main findings

Degree apprenticeships internationally

The literature review identified that internationally, there has been a trend towards expanding apprenticeship opportunities with programmes incorporating higher level skills and training provision that traditionally formed part of undergraduate or postgraduate degree courses[2]. However, there are significant differences in the nature and extent of apprenticeship system reforms internationally including in the range of tertiary academic content and in the role of HEIs in coordinating and delivering apprenticeships. Pre-existing relationships between HEIs, vocational education and training providers, and broader industry and business have all served to shape the nature and direction of reforms to apprenticeship differently in each nation.[3]

There appears to be little rigorous international research exploring the impact of

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degree apprenticeships. There is, however, broader research on the economic returns to training and education (and specifically, apprenticeships) which typically find large, significant positive wage and employment gains to individuals who have participated in apprenticeships, versus individuals that did not.[4]

[2] Govender, C.M. and Valand, T.I. (2021) Work Integrated Learning for Students: Challenges and Solutions for Enhancing Employability, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle.

[3] Bauer, W. and Gessler, M., 2016. Dual vocational education and training systems in Europe: lessons learned from Austria, Germany and Switzerland in Vocational Education and Training in Sub-Saharan Africa, p.48

[4] Overman H. et al. (2015) Apprenticeships, Evidence Review, What Works for Local Economic Growth.

Degree apprenticeship programme in Wales

In the 2020/21 academic year 1,160 apprenticeships were allocated to the initial phase of the Degree Apprenticeship programme in Wales. 660 apprentices are enrolled on the programme, representing 57 per cent of that allocation. Both frameworks have fallen short of their allocations with a total of 320 apprentices participating in degree apprenticeships within the digital framework whilst 340 apprentices are participating in degree apprenticeships in the engineering and advanced manufacturing framework.

The theory of change for the degree apprenticeship programme has been informed by the development of an outcomes pathway, which is structured around four key stakeholder groups (i.e. the Apprentices, HEIs and FE Colleges, and employers). A proposed overarching goal for the degree apprenticeship programme is to develop 'a workforce equipped with skills to meet the opportunities and challenges of the future'.

The Degree Apprenticeship programme in Wales contributes to a breadth of Welsh Government policy and has been designed in a targeted manner, to focus on specific areas within two sectors (IT/computing and engineering/advanced

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manufacturing), where higher level skills needs are considered most acute and productivity gains most likely.

The programme is broad in scope with the potential to widen participation in higher-level skills provision, increase social mobility, improve productivity and increase levels of innovation and competitiveness. However, as an initial investment there are numerous risks and barriers that may impact upon its success.

Determining funding allocations for the programme and establishing the infrastructure to deliver (particularly the Apprenticeship Frameworks) has proved challenging and active marketing of the programme was avoided due to concerns that levels of demand may be unfulfilled based on the resources made available. The initial evidence would suggest that, at a programme-wide level there has been an overallocation in apprenticeship places for this initial phase with the latest data (2020/21 academic year) showing 43 per cent fewer degree apprentices than places allocated. However, the three-year initial programme, annualised funding announcements and the tight timeframes associated with responding to these, and more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic have all influenced progress. These factors have reportedly led to uncertainty (amongst employers and HEIs) on whether the programme will be sustained and therefore the level of response.

Recommendations

- If annualised funding continues, earlier (within the year) announcements of the annual allocation, and implementation of the proposal and approval process would support the progress and success of the programme.
- That management information held by each HEI is analysed (through the evaluation) to identify patterns of progress and performance and to shape subsequent discussions with HEIs, FE Colleges and WBL Providers.

The governance structure for the programme appears to be a particular success and is understood to have led to a strengthening in the partnership between the Welsh Government and HEFCW. A thorough review of options led to the allocation of grant funding HEFCW to enable delivery of the programme and this would still appear the most appropriate model to adopt. Risks identified in

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adoption of this approach will be explored through fieldwork in the next phase of the evaluation.

Recommendation

- That FE Colleges and the WBL providers alongside HEI representatives are included in the next round of stakeholder consultation for the evaluation.

There is evidence that the programme is supporting increased engagement between HEIs and employers and has also cemented partnerships between HEIs, FE Colleges and WBL providers. How these partnerships are structured, how they are evolving and the aspirations for these will all be areas of consideration in the fieldwork with these groups.

Existing employees dominate those enrolling on to a degree apprenticeship in Wales which contrasts with the evidence on degree apprenticeships in England. Their journeys into the programme (including the key drivers for their engagement) compared to those individuals who are newly recruited employees will be a key area for the remainder of the evaluation.

Next steps

The next phase of the evaluation will involve gathering management information from HEIs to enable analysis of performance patterns and trends and to identify further areas of exploration in subsequent engagement of those involved in the management and delivery of the programme. This data will also inform the sample frame for fieldwork with employers and apprentices.

Interviews are then planned with stakeholders involved in delivering the programme including representatives from HEIs, FE Colleges and work-based learning providers to discuss the processes involved in delivering Degree Apprenticeships. These interviews will be supplemented by wider stakeholder engagement with RSPs, Universities Wales and the NTFW and other organisations to capture their perspectives on the programme.

A survey of apprentices (with the aim of engaging up to one third of current

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apprentices) is planned alongside a series of employer interviews. The surveys aim to capture motivations and experiences of those engaging with the programme.

The fieldwork, alongside thematic analysis of key issues emerging through the fieldwork will also inform the development of a framework for assessing the value for money and longer-term impact of Degree Apprenticeships.

Collectively, the delivery of these tasks will generate a comprehensive evidence base for analysis which will help shape the final report, the value for money modelling and the framework for assessing the longer-term impact of the programme.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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