

# Consultation Response

## Degree Apprenticeships

This is a joint response from the National Union of Students Wales (NUS Wales) and National Society of Apprentices Wales (NSoA Wales) to the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's inquiry into Degree Apprenticeships.

### About NUS Wales and NSoA Wales

NUS Wales is the representative body of students in Wales, made up of 20 member students' unions across further and higher education, and advocating on behalf of more than 250,000 students. As of January 2020, the National Society of Apprentices (NSoA) is a full member of NUS, providing a national voice for apprentices.

### Consultation Response

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

Degree apprenticeships represent a vehicle to drive social mobility and have the potential to deliver economic benefits. Fully realised, degree apprenticeships can contribute to bridging the gap between vocational and academic education, while delivering on widening access goals within higher education.

We recognise that Welsh Government is attempting to deliver in areas of skills shortages by limiting the number of degree

apprenticeship frameworks, and this has avoided many of the problems experienced during the rollout in England. Ofsted found that a significant amount of apprenticeship levy funding in England has gone to education providers delivering "rebadged" graduate schemes which tend to benefit those who are already well qualified and well paid<sup>1</sup>. The Office for Students found that just 13% of degree apprenticeships in England in 2016/17 were accessed by students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> If Wales is to avoid making these mistakes, we believe an approach that limits the kind of degree apprenticeships available is beneficial.

However, we believe the extremely narrow nature of the rollout so far in Wales has meant the social benefits of degree apprenticeships have not yet been realised. The facts that 80% of the 155 degree apprenticeships startups in 2018/19 were men, and that almost none declared a disability, demonstrates that the potential for degree apprenticeships to widen access has gone unfulfilled.

We would particularly advocate for the expansion of degree apprenticeship frameworks in health and social care. Welsh Government's

<sup>1</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/761606/29523\\_ofsted\\_annual\\_report\\_2017-18\\_041218.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/761606/29523_ofsted_annual_report_2017-18_041218.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/analysis-of-degree-apprenticeships/disadvantage/>

'A Healthier Wales'<sup>3</sup> plan for the health and social care sector acknowledges the need to strengthen workforce training and development, and we believe expanding degree apprenticeships into the sector would be an effective way to contribute to this.

We also believe anyone in Wales should be able to access a degree apprenticeship regardless of geography, and research shows that the most disadvantaged students often have to travel the furthest to access education<sup>4</sup>. A select number of sites currently offer the training side of a degree apprenticeship, and we believe provision should be expanded to guarantee opportunity is evenly distributed across the whole country.

We believe there is a lack of guidance on the process that a degree apprentice would follow if their employer or education provider ceased operating. We would also welcome more guidance on how degree apprentices can access the same level of learner support at their education provider as their peers undertaking more common forms of study. We believe those undertaking degree apprenticeships – and apprenticeships in general – should have the same access to advice, advocacy and support that HE students traditionally receive through university services and their students' union.

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

Learner partnership – sometimes referred to as student partnership – needs to be enshrined, both in the approval process and the delivery and experience of degree apprenticeships. Proposals should include learners in the drafting process, and those proposals should address how learners will have access to representation structures akin to those found throughout other post-16 education and training providers. NUS Wales and NSoA Wales, as a member, should be involved in assessing whether degree

apprenticeships provide an adequate level of learner partnership.

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

Degree apprenticeships should be accessible to anyone regardless of geography. The most successful vocational education systems in the world ensure that supply keeps pace with demand; Germany have introduced bachelor's and master's level apprenticeships in response to demand and ensure these are available across the whole country<sup>5</sup>.

The development of apprenticeship frameworks should have buy-in from learners, as well as employers and education providers, to guarantee co-creation of qualifications. We believe that while Regional Skills Partnerships have a role to play in their current form, their recommendations should be backed up by an improved data analysis supported by Welsh Government and followed through.

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

Widening access should be central to degree apprenticeships policy. HEFCW's finding that four in every five degree apprenticeship starts in 2018/19 were from men shows that this has not been realised. This ambition has not been met in England despite degree apprenticeships launching in 2015, with 87% of apprentices in programmes receiving support being white according to OfS data.

**Question 5. Do you have any comments on the cost of degree apprenticeships, how**

<sup>3</sup> <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-10/a-healthier-wales-action-plan.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/disadvantaged-students-have-to-travel-12-times-further-29-jan-2019>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/bachelor-professional-101.html>

## **degree apprenticeships are funded and the level of funding committed to them?**

The degree apprenticeship pilot, which has seen Welsh Government cover the cost of the apprentice's tuition and employers cover the cost of their wages, represents a route into higher education that allows a learner to maintain a full-time job and does not involve them paying fees. We support any initiative that varies routes into HE and provides for those less able to access a traditional university education. We fully support Welsh Government's approach to the pilot and encourage it to continue to fully fund tuition.

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

We do not have enough data available to make an accurate assessment of the impact of degree apprenticeships on other apprenticeships. As there were only 155 degree apprenticeship starts in Wales in 2018/19 it is unlikely there would have been a significant impact. We believe Welsh Government should follow the leads of the UK and Scottish governments in its presentation of data on apprenticeship participation.

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

Developing learner experience and partnership within degree apprenticeships will be an important next step in developing qualifications which work for the learner, employer and education provider. The 2018/19 apprenticeship pay survey<sup>6</sup> shows that the illegal underpayment of apprentices is an ongoing issue which is not going away, and we believe that stronger learner representation and advocacy structures should be in place to safeguard our apprentices and prevent

employers taking advantage of public funding for apprenticeships.

Learner and student partnership is the key to ensuring the upcoming reforms to post-16 education and training in Wales are successful. We are advocating that within the coming PCET legislation the requirement for student partnership is enshrined. This includes within all settings where degree apprenticeships are delivered. Whilst student partnership looks different within different education contexts, NUS Wales knows that successful student partnership structures in any form are politically autonomous, structurally independent, and fully funded.

We also believe that if Welsh Government wants the skills system in Wales to maintain alignment with European systems there must be an increased focus on increasing the proportion of off-the-job training apprentices receive during their apprenticeship. The apprenticeship pay survey also found that women in Wales are the least likely to receive any off-the-job training than anywhere else in the UK – with only 23% benefiting.