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Higher vocational qualifications: differing approaches within the United Kingdom to meeting skills needs for the 21st century

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the opportunities associated with the introduction of a new generation of higher vocational qualifications in the United Kingdom (UK), namely higher and degree apprenticeships in England and graduate apprenticeships in Scotland. Very different policy contexts have emerged in Scotland and England and the implications of these for the types of provision which have been developed are considered. The different policy frameworks have both strengths and limitations and the implications of these for the range of programmes which are now being established are analysed.

However, the first section of the chapter also considers the earlier generation of higher vocational qualifications. The limitations of these qualifications have helped create the context in which there is a perceived need for these higher level apprenticeships as a response to the education and training needs of the UK in the twenty-first century.

This comparison between Scotland and England can also provide an opportunity for 'policy learning'. David Raffe and his colleagues have advocated the value of 'home international' comparisons and the idea that the UK can be a 'natural laboratory' for policy learning (Raffe and Byrne 2005). Given that England and Scotland are now developing graduate level apprenticeship schemes, in quite different ways, there may be an important opportunity for 'policy learning', which could improve developments in both countries and further afield.

Higher vocational qualifications in England and Scotland

England and Scotland have developed quite different approaches to the provision of higher vocational education and training over the last 20 years. These differences began to emerge clearly in the early 2000s. However, these developments cannot be seen as producing a very strong tradition of vocational education at this level in either country. In England, foundation degrees (FDs) were established in 2001 to provide a new form of vocational qualification. This was associated with a growing concern about a perceived skills deficit at the intermediate (associate professional and technical) level. In the past, Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) were the main higher level vocational qualifications in the college sector in both Scotland and England. These are at level 5 on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) and can be seen as examples of short-cycle tertiary education. They could be studied on a part-time or full-time basis. However, there was a

perception in England that HNC/Ds were failing to address this skills deficit problem, and a view that there was increasing dissatisfaction with these qualifications amongst employers. This led to the conclusion that a new qualification was needed to respond more effectively to these issues (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE] 2000). As a result, new FDs, also at level 5 on the ISCED, were to be designed in ways which, it was hoped, would have greater impact in responding to these concerns. The importance of work-based learning was emphasized, and the contribution of this to the students' learning experiences was seen as crucial. A related theme was to encourage employers to take an important role in the development of these qualifications, ensuring their vocational relevance. Finally, it was emphasized that 'partnerships' between employers, universities, colleges and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) would be seen as vital in providing programmes that were relevant, valid and responsive to the needs of learners and employers.

While the numbers on FDs grew rapidly in the period up to 2010, partly as a result of funding incentives to encourage their growth, they did not achieve the impact as vocationally focused qualifications which had been hoped for. This was partly because an important additional objective built into these qualifications was to enable students to progress to bachelor's degrees in universities. While many FDs were delivered in colleges, they had to be validated by a university (although several colleges eventually received FD awarding powers). A number of college staff involved stated that this led to an emphasis on academic criteria in the validation processes rather than vocational and work related ones (Gallacher et al. 2009). Additionally, while work-based learning was welcomed by students, its extent and type varied considerably between FDs. It was also often difficult to secure the level of employer involvement in these programmes which had been anticipated, so the idea that they were employer led and focused on preparation for employment was an ideal that was not achieved in a number of these programmes (Gallacher et al. 2009).

Establishing FDs had been an important policy initiative associated with the Labour government which was in power in the UK from 1997 to 2010. However, this government was replaced by a Conservative led coalition in 2010 that did not provide the same level of support for FDs. As a result, while in 2007-08 there were almost 72,000 students registered in FDs (Higher Education Funding Council of England [HEFCE] 2008), this figure had fallen to just over 60,000 by 2015-16 (RCU 2018). Although FDs remain the single largest qualification type at ISCED level 5 in England, HNCs and HNDs have remained a significant part of the vocational qualifications landscape, accounting for around 34,400 students in 2015-16, with a further 26,000 students registered in bachelor's degrees in English colleges. However, concern has been expressed regarding the continuing decline in enrolments at this short-cycle level and the impact on skills gaps, particularly in technical subjects. This was highlighted in the Augar Report, a major review of post-18 education and funding commissioned by the UK government (Augar 2019). This report also noted that in competition with a more prestigious university sector, and with finance mechanisms favouring full degree study, short-cycle courses are now less attractive to learners.

There was no similar radical reappraisal of higher vocational education in Scotland, and confidence was expressed in maintaining HNC/Ds as the main qualifications. However, a five-year 'modernization' programme was initiated in 2003. As part of this

modernization, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) referred to the role of HNCs and HNDs in supporting ‘... technician, technologist and first line manager occupations for over 75 years ...’, and the need to ensure that the new or revised programmes will ‘continue serving these occupations’ (SQA 2005: np). As a result, HNC/Ds have continued to be the main short-cycle qualifications in Scotland. These programmes are concentrated in colleges rather than universities and, in 2018-19, 35,835 students were registered on HNC/Ds, accounting for 72 per cent of all of the higher education students in colleges (Scottish Funding Council [SFC] 2020). However, the nature of HNC/Ds has been changing over the years. While many of the HNC/D programmes were traditionally a means to obtain vocational qualifications through part-time study for those in work, these programmes are now mainly full-time. Many students use these qualifications to progress to bachelor’s degree programmes in universities, rather than as terminal vocational qualifications (Gallacher 2017). Some indication of this change can be seen from data published by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) showing that in 2016-17, 70 per cent of full-time qualifiers from higher education programmes in colleges proceeded to further study. Many of these students progressed to complete bachelor’s degrees in universities, while only 26 per cent went directly into employment (SFC 2018). There is a range of work-based learning in HNC/D programmes, with some having it as a key aspect of the course while others have none (Gallacher et al. 2012).

A new approach to providing higher vocational qualifications: Higher/degree apprenticeships and graduate apprenticeships

These earlier approaches to providing higher level vocational qualifications in both England and Scotland have not created a strong tradition in either country. This has led to a new interest in developing higher level and degree apprenticeships in both England and Scotland. However, the policy framework within which these new initiatives are emerging is now quite different in the two UK countries, with significant implications for what is emerging.

An English quasi-market

The policy context within which higher vocational qualifications have been shaped has been identified as a ‘highly marketised path’ (Hodgson and Spours 2019: 226). This is traced back to the history of incorporation, beginning in 1993, which resulted in further education (FE) colleges becoming independent institutions with charitable status, and competition between providers emphasized as a means of reducing costs. Keep (2017, 744), notes the ‘overt shift towards the organising principle of market ...’ that occurred under recent Conservative administrations. He also observes that the situation within English FE diverges from definitions of a market in key ways: in the role of public funding, regulation and policy. This means, in reality, a more bounded version of a market prevails (Keep 2018). Hodgson and Spours (2019) also note the importance of central policy steering through funding and inspection regimes. They identify phases of reform encompassing the setting up and abolition of government funding agencies and the increasing importance of the Office for standards in education, children’s services and skills (Ofsted) (which inspects the quality of FE provision). Through these waves they suggest marketized education provider relations prevailed, which, they argue, resulted in a reactive competitive national sector. They express hope that the recent devolution of some of the adult education budget to a small number of Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority, and plans for local strategies

and agreements, might introduce some limited devolution and create space for greater collaboration between providers.

The Augar Report also argues that post-18 education cannot be left entirely to market forces. It argues for a 'managed market', with additional capital funding that might lead to a 'strong national network of high quality provision of technical and professional education' (Augar 2019: 134). While FE colleges compete in multiple markets, at the higher education level they are in competition mostly with post 92 universities.

The Scottish context: A 'managed' system

Scotland has developed a more 'managed' approach to skills policy reflecting a strong steer from government with respect to policy, planning and provision. Keep (2017) has drawn a distinction between the retention of an education and skills 'system' in Scotland, arranged as a series of linked levels and types of provision, with the creeping marketization of English education and skills provision. Two key agencies in this skills system are Skills Development Scotland (SDS), which is responsible for the apprenticeship system in Scotland, and the Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education (SFC), which funds all Scottish colleges and universities. The idea of a skills system has been further strengthened through the Enterprise and Skills Review which established a Strategic Board for Enterprise and Skills to ensure that the various agencies involved work to a common agenda. This supports the Scottish government's objective of securing greater alignment between the elements within the skills system. Alongside the theme of alignment, has been the recognition of the varied, and sometimes provisional, nature of what is deemed the 'learner journey'. This has generated a policy ambition to draw together different providers and agencies, to coordinate, support and maximize progression. Recent developments with respect to graduate level apprenticeships can be seen in this context.

Apprenticeship renewed

It is in context of these very different policy developments that the interest in developing higher level apprenticeships has emerged. Apprenticeships are a feature of vocational education and training (VET) across the UK and have been the focus of renewed interest in both England and Scotland in recent years. They are identified as a key feature of the UK wide Industrial Strategy (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy [DBEIS] 2017), as a vehicle for developing the technical skills which the economy will require as it adapts to technological change and an ageing population. The key starting point is that an apprenticeship is a job with a formal programme which includes on-the-job and off-the-job training. The learner is primarily an employee, either newly recruited to a role or an existing employee who is reskilling (to a new role) or updating. While apprenticeships vary between one and six years, in practice, the average lasts 1.69 years in England (DfE 2019a) and typically two years in Scotland. Both are shorter in duration than many European comparators (Kuczera and Field 2018).

To support the expansion of apprenticeships, a UK wide levy was introduced in April 2017. This requires those employers with an annual payroll of over £3 million to contribute 0.5 per cent of their wage bill towards funding apprenticeships. That much holds true across the two nations, but how that money is spent, how apprenticeships are created and supported, and the role played by colleges and universities in

supporting apprenticeships diverges significantly as a result of devolution. In England, employers can reclaim their levy payments to contribute to the cost of their apprenticeships. In Scotland, the levy funding contributes to the overall cost of the apprenticeship programme and to a Flexible Workforce Development Fund. This enables employers to develop a tailored programme with their local college to address skills gaps in their workforce. We will explore the implications of this divergence for apprenticeships at the higher levels below, taking opportunities for policy learning across the two systems.

England

As an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) review of English apprenticeships noted 'Few countries can match the energy and range of reforms currently being pursued in England' (Kuczera and Field 2018: 10). Indeed, this major reform in 2017 was the latest in a series of changes which had seen the redevelopment of the system in England from the mid-1990s with the aim of promoting growth. The expansion of the system included the announcement in 2010 of the introduction of higher apprenticeships at level 4 (at a similar level to an HNC) and then level 5 (at a similar level to an HND) in the English system (BIS 2010). However, concerns that the system was not responsive to the needs of employers or the labour market culminated in the *Richard Review of Apprenticeships* (2012). This review was influential in shaping subsequent changes (Augar 2019; Kuczera and Field 2018). These included moving from multiple apprenticeship frameworks towards a single 'standard' for an occupation which would specify the skills, knowledge and behaviours required. A minimum length of one year, a requirement that 20 per cent of the time be spent in off-the-job training, and an independent end point assessment are features that were intended to improve quality (Augar 2019; Kuczera and Field 2018). Standards could, where justified, include the provision of a relevant existing qualification.

The launch in 2015 of degree apprenticeships was significant in extending the scope of apprenticeships to the highest levels (Business Innovation and Skills [BIS] 2015a), thereby making a claim for equivalence of the high-level skills and knowledge within them. Degree apprenticeships combine study for a bachelor's or master's degree with employment as an apprentice. Thus, in summary, apprenticeships have been expanded to cover levels 4 (equivalent to the initial level of higher education learning) through to level 7 (equivalent to master's level), with proposals in development even for level 8 (associated with a doctorate). These apprenticeships may incorporate a recognized higher education qualification, such as an FD or a degree, but there are apprenticeships at these levels that do not take this option. It is worth bearing this in mind as we look at the number of apprenticeship starts at these levels, as shown in Table 1. The picture is generally one of decline in the lower level apprenticeships and consistent growth in those at level 4 and above, with rapid growth in level 6 (bachelor's degree) and particularly level 7 (master's degree level). While the vast majority at level 6 are bachelor's degree apprenticeships (about 90 per cent in 2018/19), at level 7 only a minority confer a higher education master's qualification, at 33.7 per cent in 2018/19 (DfE 2020a). Equivalent figures for the level 4 and 5 apprenticeships that incorporate an HNC, HND or FD are not accessible.

Table 1: Apprenticeship starts by level – England

Level	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Level 2	298,280	291,330	260,650	161,390	143,590
Level 3	181,760	190,870	197,66	166,220	174,727
Level 4	7,090	9,510	11,920	16,800	25,006
Level 5	12,590	16,870	22,960	20,480	27,573
Level 6	100	740	1,650	6,370	10,824
Level 7	-	30	50	4,500	11,655
Total	499,900	509,400	494,900	375,800	393,375

Source: For 2014/15 to 2017/18 (DfE 2019a, Table B) and 2018/2019 (DfE 2020a)

A quasi-market approach to apprenticeships in England

The expansion of apprenticeships is shaped by the quasi-market approach to VET in England, which we outlined earlier. Here employers are put in the ‘driving seat’ as ‘nobody knows the skills employers need better than the employers themselves’ (BIS 2015b: 2). Employers must lead what have been described as ‘trailblazer groups’ that develop proposals for a new ‘standard’, identifying the duties of the specific occupation, the skills, knowledge and behaviours it requires and demonstrating demand from the wider sector (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education [IfATE] 2019). While they may well work with educational providers, including universities and colleges, to develop their proposals, employers are promoted to the crucial role in designing a new standard. Within the apprenticeship reform, the reliance on employers to commit to trailblazer groups raises a number of issues, including the danger that the current needs of industry are the focus rather than future skills needs (Higher Education Commission [HEC] 2019: 15). Employers themselves argue that they need more pedagogic and administrative support to fulfil their key role, and that standards will need to be easier to tailor to local needs and will require efficient updating (ISE 2019, 35). Many of the frustrations of employers involved in trailblazers stem from the features that make apprenticeship a quasi-market. All proposed standards need to be approved for use by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), which also makes crucial recommendations on funding bands (level of costs that will be met from the levy) to the government. Despite criticism of the slow and drawn out approval process (House of Commons 2018; Universities UK [UUK] 2019) and the lack of transparency in its decision-making, particularly around funding bands (UUK 2019), the IfATE remains a key government gatekeeper as levy funding can only be used on approved apprenticeships.

Within this approved range, employers decide on their apprenticeship numbers and are ultimately responsible for the recruitment of learners who are either new or existing employees. The distribution of apprentice numbers resulting from employer demand has raised questions about whether the system is meeting the expectations for high-level technical skills that policy created (DBEIS 2017). In practice, the most popular apprenticeships with employers are those in the fields of business, administration and law. These dominate at level 4/5, with 24,997 apprenticeship starts in 2018/19. In contrast, engineering, manufacturing and construction together had only 3159 starts (DfE 2020a). At level 6 the picture is more even, with 4030 starts for business, administration and law against 3174 for engineering, manufacturing and construction.

However, the disparity is at its most extreme at level 7, with 10,584 compared to 229 starts. Such apprenticeships are clearly vocational, but they are not the technical subjects which have been promoted as most beneficial to the economy. Employers now find themselves criticized by ministers for their free market choices. In ordering a review of the senior leader master's degree apprenticeship by the IfATE, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said 'I am unconvinced that having an apprenticeship standard that includes an MBA paid for by the levy is in the spirit of our reformed apprenticeships or provides value for money' (Inews 2020). Alternative voices may reflect a degree of self interest in arguing for the principle of employer choice and that leadership and management are vital to enhancing productivity (UUK, 2019). With 3410 starts on that level 7 apprenticeship in 2018/19 (DfE 2020a), it is an attractive market for universities. The concern is not just one of principle or 'spirit', but the disproportionate funding such high band standards might capture from the levy pot, leaving little for other purposes, including supporting non levy payers (Augur 2019; Association of Colleges [AoC] 2019). As the OECD report predicted, it was the levy funding arrangements themselves that promoted rapid degree apprenticeship growth (Kuczera and Field 2018: 108). In light of this, and in order to restrict costs, the gatekeeper IfATE is applying keener scrutiny of plans to embed higher education qualifications within new standards (UUK 2019).

The nature of higher and degree apprenticeships as vocational programmes

So far, we have looked at the rapid expansion of higher level apprenticeships and the role of the market and regulation in shaping where the expansion has taken place. Now we will look more closely at the nature of the higher and degree apprenticeships as vocational programmes. The key starting point is that 'an apprenticeship is a job with a formal programme of training' (IfATE 2019). There are roughly equal numbers of employees with less than three months' experience and more than 12 months' experience within the system (DfE 2019a), suggesting it is balanced between these two learner groups. As indicated above, the content of the programme is now specified in an occupational standard. A key stipulation for the new standards is that at least 20 per cent of apprentices' normal working time must be spent in off-the-job training (IfATE 2019) for the purpose of achieving new knowledge, skills and behaviours. In this way it is differentiated from on-the-job training for immediate performance in their role. Off-the-job training can take place at the workplace or off-site, for example at an educational provider or via supported distance learning (DfE 2019b). The focus on ensuring off-the-job training takes place and is directed at new skills reflects concerns about the quality of prior apprenticeship systems. Writing as the new approach to standards was developing, Kuczera and Field (2018) wrote (on behalf of the OECD) that, in contrast to other systems, there is limited focus on employer provided learning. Instead, financial flows (to training providers) drive the system in England and absorb the policy focus. Work-based learning they suggest, was at that time relatively undeveloped in English apprenticeships. There was scope for greater collaboration between providers and employers, with a need for better guidance for the workplace supervisors on blending work and learning. Kuczera and Field (2018) also note that close alignment of on-the-job employer and off-the-job provider training will be crucial for degree apprenticeships.

Higher and degree apprenticeships embed a higher education level qualification: HNC, HND, FD, diploma of higher education, bachelor or master's degree. These can either be 'integrated' apprenticeships, in which the overall programme is designed to support and test off-the-job and on-the-job development, or 'non-integrated', in which the off-the-job training is largely separate to workplace activity. End point assessment is necessary in both cases but in integrated apprenticeships it can attract credit within the embedded qualification. Thus, integrated approaches reflect the kind of closer alignment called for in the OECD report. UUK (2019: 27) suggest degree apprenticeships are 'catalysing transformative developments' as employers and universities collaborate. They highlight the flexible forms of delivery and new approaches to content, such as individualized learning models and content tailored for employers offered to 'closed cohorts' (UUK 2019: 33), as well as support for workplace mentoring. UUK (2019: 37) does, however, note some employer concerns about inflexibility and communication with universities, with some employers reporting that degree apprenticeships were considered perhaps an 'add-on' to the main focus of the university. The report and earlier work on skills shortages argues for the importance of higher education level skills across the whole range, from level 4 to master, and makes a claim for universities' existing and necessary involvement in vocational education. This opposes calls from Augar for the expansion of apprenticeships to be focused at levels 4 and 5, and restrictions on funding for level 6 and above to those employees who have not already undertaken a publicly-supported degree (Augar 2019). The focus in the Augar Report on further education as a key provider of higher level technical skills suggests the policy tensions that are emerging. The Association of Colleges (AoC) anticipated that colleges would be strong contributors, particularly for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and for niche markets (AoC 2016). As it stands, general FE and tertiary colleges had 9170 higher apprenticeships starts in 2018/19 (DfE 2020b), representing 12 per cent of the total. In the same year there were 13,587 degree apprenticeship starts (DfE 2020a), requiring university involvement and indicating that universities are already significant providers. The opportunity for university college partnerships in apprenticeship delivery is raised by both UUK (2019) and the AoC (2018), particularly with regard to progression to a degree apprenticeship. However, the notion of progression from a higher apprenticeship to a degree apprenticeship may conflict with their vocational purpose. Given the standards are tied to a particular occupation, progression will only make sense where there is a ladder in terms of jobs and the associated vocational knowledge and skills.

Scotland

Scotland has also expanded its apprenticeships programme, albeit more slowly. Whilst retaining the core of 'modern apprenticeships' frameworks (ISCED level 4), two new options have been added: the lower foundation apprenticeship (combined with school) and the graduate apprenticeship. Officially launched in 2017, the graduate apprenticeship has been used to refer to apprenticeships at the higher education levels, incorporating higher education awards at short-cycle (HND) up to degree and master's levels. While the term higher apprenticeship has been used to refer to a framework containing an HND, this is very limited in terms of visibility and actual use, as we shall see. Graduate apprenticeships are aimed at key sectors, and a series of pilots gradually expanded the offer to 12 frameworks by 2018/19, as shown in Table 2. A further two pilots 'Early years and childcare' and 'Accountancy' started in September 2019. As in England, at least 20 per cent of the apprentice's time must be spent on off-the-job

learning. In contrast to the English approach, however, there are no apprenticeships at these higher levels that rely on industry qualifications, all incorporate a higher education qualification.

The expansion of the graduate apprenticeship is at an early stage and numbers remain small overall (see Table 2). A third phase is planned for 1300 starts in 2019/20 (SDS 2019). The vast majority of apprentices are on frameworks that incorporate an honours degree (bachelor) (see Table 2).

Table 2: Scottish graduate apprenticeship frameworks in 2018/19, number of delivery partners, and learner numbers in 2018/19 (Phase 2)

Graduate apprenticeship programmes offered	HND level (no. of delivery partners)	Honours degree level (no. of delivery partners)	Master's degree level (no. of delivery partners)	No. and % of learners (2018/19)
Business Management & Business Management: Financial Services		8		314 (34%)
Civil Engineering	2	6		125 (14%)
Construction and the Built Environment		4		64 (7%)
Cyber Security		4	2	80 (9%)
Data Science		2		17 (2%)
Engineering: Design and Manufacture		6		123 (13%)
IT: Management for Business		4		48 (5%)
IT: Software Development		8		126 (14%)
Engineering: Instrumentation, Measurement and Control		1		24 (3%)
Total				921 (100%)

Source: SDS 2019

A managed approach to graduate apprenticeships in Scotland

The development of graduate apprenticeships is shaped by the managed approach to skills policy outlined above. SDS manage the budget for the overall apprenticeships programme and they set out their commissioning requirements on an annual basis. Funding is allocated by the Scottish government so, in contrast to England, employers cannot draw on their own levy account. SDS award apprentice funded numbers to providers on the basis of their bids, including evidence of employer demand. The Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board, an employer-led body, sets the overall apprenticeship strategy. At the more detailed level, the content of sector apprenticeships is developed by technical expert groups, which consist of employers alongside other interest groups such as universities and professional bodies. Thus, in contrast to the English approach the employers contribute to a more collective process of development, rather than taking the leading role.

Instead of allowing apprentice numbers to follow the market, SDS mediate employer demand to steer towards sectors, particularly STEM sectors, which are seen as critical to the growth of the Scottish economy. While business and management has a significant number of learners, it is less dominant than in England. Programmes serving the public sector are not a focus for these early developments in Scotland, in contrast to the role these play in England. The final, and potentially crucial, aspect of the managed system has been the concentration on the bachelor's degree level, almost to the exclusion of other options. Despite being an early part of the programme, there is only one apprenticeship at the HND level currently (Civil Engineering), and SDS confirm that there are no plans to create any further higher apprenticeships (Personal communication).

Nature of the graduate apprenticeships as vocational

Learners on graduate apprenticeships are employees, with over 70 per cent being existing employees (of more than nine months) rather than new recruits. This picture does vary, however, across the frameworks: from 89 per cent existing employees in business management to 63 per cent new recruits for information technology software development (SDS 2019). Time spent in off-the-job training represents at least 20 per cent of the employee's time. Given the graduate apprenticeships are all new programmes, there is an emphasis on incorporating academic and work-based learning into the programmes as credit bearing, reflecting the more 'integrated' strand seen in England (SDS 2019: 23). Employers have a role in supporting work-based learning and assessment and must provide workplace mentoring. Examples of considerable employer support for study skills and reflective practice are promoted (SDS 2019). Two new pilot programmes have been identified by SDS to test a model for the teaching and assessment of 'meta-skills' to 'create adaptive learners'. The clear focus on graduate apprenticeships at bachelor's degree level suggests that SDS see these higher level skills as the priority.

It is suggested that graduate apprenticeships are transforming the 'learning and skills landscape' by drawing Scottish universities into work-based learning (SDS 2019). The widespread take up of the opportunity by 12 universities so far, including the oldest and most prestigious, suggest that graduate apprenticeships represent an attractive opportunity. However, while the new graduate apprenticeship is strengthening the vocational contribution of universities, the same cannot be said for colleges. Only one college is leading a programme (civil engineering at the HND level) and this higher apprenticeship is not continuing beyond 2020. At present there are only two partnerships between colleges and universities to support graduate apprenticeships, and one of these is within the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), where the college involved is itself an 'academic partner' in the university. Despite 'emergent evidence suggesting there is an appetite amongst universities to work collaboratively with colleges on GA [graduate apprenticeship] delivery' (SDS 2019: 7), to date there is little evidence of partnership delivery. Given the very extensive involvement of colleges in other forms of vocational higher education level provision we noted above, this very marginal role for colleges is surprising and could weaken the ability of the programme to support a range of vocational skills in local communities. Despite a commitment to the 'learner journey' through short-cycle higher education elsewhere (Scottish Government 2018), at present there are only limited opportunities for this within graduate apprenticeships.

Looking across the English and Scottish experience of higher level apprenticeships

There are certainly differences in the ways in which these higher level apprenticeships have been implemented in England and Scotland. This provides opportunities for policy learning. In England, the actions of the quasi-market have sparked a tussle over the 'spirit' of the apprenticeships. As we have indicated above, employers have had a key role in shaping the development of higher apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships in England. Whether they are supporting the right types of learners and are aimed at the right occupations and skills levels, is increasingly debated. In the managed system of Scotland, we do not see similar concerns expressed, as SDS determines the match between skills needs and development. In both nations, higher level apprenticeships are offering new forms of vocational higher learning, including some interesting models of integrated vocational and work-based learning. In Scotland, the emphasis has been on degree level graduate apprenticeships supported by universities, with small numbers in this early stage. The role for colleges is limited, despite their greater vocational experience. In England, the higher apprenticeship numbers compare reasonably well to those on existing vocational short-cycle programmes (FDs and HNC/Ds), and these secure some role for English colleges in this new apprenticeship provision (although private providers are actually stronger in the higher apprenticeship market). Degree apprenticeship numbers are growing particularly rapidly in England but remain small overall, representing approximately two per cent of the numbers engaged in traditional undergraduate degrees. Although degree apprenticeships in England and graduate apprenticeships in Scotland are providing new routes to vocational qualification in the university sector, in both countries their impact so far has been marginal. However, the interest in higher level apprenticeships is derived not only from their vocational skills contribution, but also their link to policy concerns for 'parity of esteem' and social mobility. In this way their mission is stretched beyond the vocational.

Parity of esteem

If you choose a degree apprenticeship, you still get to graduate with your cap and gown, along with several years of work experience under your belt. (Which and National Apprenticeship Scheme [NAS] 2020: 2)

In England, the equivalence of the degree embedded within a degree apprenticeship is seen as crucial to the 'brand'. Much emphasis is placed on the double benefit of gaining a degree without the debt associated with studying in England (Which and NAS 2020). A UUK (2019, 15) survey of engaged employers suggested that 'crucially, degree apprenticeships are seen as having parity of esteem with traditional degrees, thus helping to raise the appeal of vocational education opportunities more broadly'. This is a significant expectation to place on one development however, and there is evidence that, so far, recognition of 'parity' amongst potential learners, schools and families is low (HEC 2019; UUK 2019). A Higher Education Commission (HEC) report calls for an urgent increase in the availability of advice and guidance for young people and parents (HEC 2019), with the assumption that, once it is all made clear, concerns will fade. However, the relative complexity of the English system could make it hard to convey clear messages about these options. For example, within this system, level 6 is sometimes described as 'degree-level' but not all apprenticeships incorporate a degree. UUK argue that the value placed by employers and learners on degrees provides a

strong reason for their continued inclusion at this level, despite the concerns of the IfATE in England to restrict them (based, it is assumed, on cost grounds) (UUK 2019). As we have seen in Scotland, SDS has focused almost entirely on the bachelor's degree level within the graduate apprenticeship programme, working almost exclusively with universities. It is emphasized that 'individuals are expected to achieve the same academic rigour required for any university degree' (SDS 2019: 27). Graduate apprenticeships have potentially a clearer identity in Scotland, but with fewer intermediate options. In neither country are parity of esteem arguments made on the basis of short-cycle qualifications of the types often supported by colleges.

Social inclusion

The expectations on higher apprenticeships extend further to contributing towards social inclusion. In England, the Office for Students (OfS) and the IfATE have been asked to 'work together to encourage the growth of degree apprenticeships as a means of widening access to higher education for underrepresented groups of people' (OfS 2019a: 1). Here the advantages of debt free study and a wage are emphasized to potential recruits (Which and NAS 2020), with the assumption that this will be particularly attractive to those from lower socio-economic groups. However, the initial data from 2016/17 indicate higher and degree apprenticeships recruit only slightly more learners from areas which are under-represented in higher education than comparator full-time degrees (OfS 2019b). In terms of ethnicity and disability, the new routes are actually less diverse and less inclusive than the comparators (OfS 2019b). The disappointing initial data have led to some, including the then Minister of State (Education), Ann Milton, to suggest 'Fears of a middle-class grab on apprenticeships are valid' (Milton 2017). The data on higher apprenticeships indicate slightly better results for social inclusion than for degree apprenticeships, suggesting they may make a contribution in this respect. In a recent report, the HEC (2019) is damning, suggesting degree apprenticeships are exacerbating exclusion rather than widening participation. They point in particular to the unequal geographical distribution of opportunities, which sees degree apprenticeships replicate, rather than fill, the 'cold spots' for higher education that already exist.

In Scotland, graduate apprenticeships must contribute to 'inclusive growth and fair work' (SDS 2019: 5, 18) and, to this end, 'widen participation as a key target of recruitment'. Therefore, equality of access is monitored for under-represented groups. The initial data is also disappointing in Scotland, with the 2018/19 cohort having fewer entrants from areas of most deprivation, and fewer black and minority ethnic learners or those with a disability (SDS 2019). Here, the lack of involvement of the colleges, so key to social inclusion for other forms of higher education level learning (Gallacher 2017), may be depressing the contribution graduate apprenticeships can make.

Of course, recruitment to a higher level apprenticeship is not directly to an educational institution but to the primary role, employment. As such, employers are the key influence on social inclusion. As we have seen, roughly half the apprentices at these higher levels are already employees, so here the focus becomes not only on initial recruitment but also selection for participation from within the workforce. Bradley et al. (2018) suggest that for employers, social inclusion is less about the requirements of the OfS and more about achieving a broader, more diverse talent pool, a point echoed in the UUK report (2019). It is also suggested that the differences in conception between

providers and employers, and between employers themselves, needs to be brought to the surface and addressed when co-creating programmes (Bradley et al. 2018). UUK (2019, 21) propose a dedicated fund to develop innovative strategies to support disadvantaged learners (UUK). The initial evidence suggests that the mere creation of the higher level apprenticeships is not enough to increase social inclusion.

Conclusions

The perceived needs for higher level skills and knowledge in the 21st century economy have led to policy developments in both England and Scotland. Rather than working with existing vocational qualifications, new higher level apprenticeships have been created. Here policy learning is relevant not only from one nation to the other, but also from the past.

Development of the graduate apprenticeships in Scotland has been carefully managed to focus on key areas of the economy, particularly STEM sectors. Concerns are surfacing in England that, by following a quasi-market approach, the balance of apprenticeships at the higher levels has been distorted, away from those sectors that are most supportive of the industrial strategy towards the more immediate management and leadership concerns of the current economy. If, as seems likely, the government in England wishes to steer the market away from the latter, they will have to introduce more constraints on employers or on the use of these standards. While Scotland's determination to control the development of graduate apprenticeships has advantages, it has paradoxically led to an over emphasis on bachelor degree level qualifications within the programme, limiting the contribution of technical skills at the short-cycle levels and thereby limiting the contribution of colleges with their vocational experience. In this light, the greater use of level 4 and 5 in the English system provides a more flexible model that may have relevance for the wider economy.

There are also lessons that can be drawn from the past. Introducing the FD in England was designed to provide a more work-based learning experience that would support areas of the economy, as well as provide progression on to bachelor degrees. As we have seen, these hopes faded after funding incentives in higher education changed and the recognition of FDs as qualifications diminished. Despite commandeering the title of 'degree', they remained sub-degree qualifications and their important progression function encouraged a process of academic drift away from the vocational focus. This experience indicates the difficulties of establishing new qualifications. This time apprenticeship policy has incorporated the bachelor's degree and sought to draw explicitly on its status, in a move that is seen as significant for the whole of vocational learning. Yet these attempts to draw together the best of everything give rise to tensions, as the FD experience suggests. Higher level apprenticeships are primarily a preparation for a particular occupation, yet they must also enable completion of a higher education programme, while increasing social inclusion and diversifying the workforce. We can perhaps see the implications of these multiple agendas in the call for degree apprenticeships to introduce 'stop-on and stop-off points' to support a widening participation agenda. These, it is recognized, would also have to 'align with the occupation' (UUK 2019: 23). These earlier experiences suggest that it not just growth and recognition of the higher level apprenticeships that need to form the agenda for the next phase, but also a careful process of research and scrutiny of the tensions in the system.

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