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## Higher-level Skills and Work-based Learning

Special Issue: Higher and Degree Apprenticeships: creating the future workforce

**Title:** *Why co-design and delivery is 'a no brainer' for Higher and Degree Apprenticeship policy*

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to contend that collaboration between employers and universities in the design and delivery of programmes of work-based study is an effective way to align the higher-level skills needs of employers with the aspirations of individuals who wish to gain university qualifications in the workplace. In mapping the fluctuations of UK higher-level skills policy through workforce development to degree apprenticeships it is argued that the facility for employers and universities to co-design and develop degree apprenticeship standards should be extended to the development of Higher Apprenticeships in England.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper provides an analysis of a broad range of higher education (HE) skills related UK policy documents to map the fluctuations in policy that underpin the opportunities for employers and universities to collaborate in the design and delivery of HE programmes in England, including degree apprenticeships.

**Findings** – It is noted that the approach to collaborative employer-university development signalled for degree apprenticeships described in policy documents unhelpfully perpetuates the presumed distinction between “academic learning” and “on the job training”. However, it is also concluded that despite this, the rationale for co-design and delivery should equally apply to the development of all higher apprenticeships to ensure that the expertise that universities can bring in designing and assessing higher-level learning is not unnecessarily excluded from the process.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides value through its analysis of how the fluctuations of HE and skills policy has affected the basis upon which employers and universities can collaborate in the design and delivery of work-based HE including higher and degree apprenticeships in England. It also seeks to inform HE policy and practice in the development of employer-responsive provision.

**Keywords:** Workforce development, Work-based learning, Higher education policy, Employer-university collaboration, Higher and degree apprenticeships, Higher-level skills policy

### Introduction

United Kingdom (UK) Government approaches to raising skills levels and encouraging employers to invest in their workforce are anything but new. Strategies to encourage collaborative working between universities (taken here as referring to all higher education (HE) providers) and employers have come and gone with some successes along the way (Little, 2005; Birds, 2010; Kewin et al, 2011; Hordern, 2012, 2013). However, none of these initiatives have brought about the major shift in cultural mind-set required to make employer investment in professional learning a standard expectation of being an employee. In the shifting policy emphasis from ‘employer involvement’ in design and delivery of Foundation Degrees, through ‘demand-led’ workforce development initiatives to ‘employer ownership’ of skills and ‘employer design’ of Apprenticeship Standards the landscape of employer-university collaboration has been challenging for all parties to navigate.

Industry levies have been under pressure for some time to justify their continuation (Greenhalgh, 2002; Abdel-Wahab et al, 2010), however, the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy has the benefit of having a clear purpose at a macro economic level. The Apprenticeship Levy is explicitly positioned as the means to tackle head on the lack of willingness of UK employers to invest in higher level skills and workforce development which is perceived as a major barrier to enhancing UK productivity (BIS, 2015). Raising a projected £3bn per year from large employers (with a payroll of over £3m), it has the potential to shift strategic workforce development to the centre stage for the first time. Previous approaches such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded university led workforce development projects, the Skills Funding Agency (SfA) Higher Apprenticeship Development Fund or the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) Employer Ownership of Skills initiatives, are all perceived as insufficiently meeting employer needs. Whether it is the largely supply-led approaches of the university sector, the complexities of mediated approval of apprenticeships via Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) or the bureaucratic irrationalities of HE/Further Education (FE) funding regulations, arguably none have sufficiently put the employer in the purchaser driving seat. While many of the previous approaches have concentrated on the 'pull' of attempting to make sure that the education and training 'product' is appropriately related to employer need, the Apprenticeship Levy has the potential to provide the 'push' that has hitherto been avoided.

This paper argues that it makes political sense for employers to be given the means to determine the 'standards' that they require as they are expected to pay for the expansion of apprentice numbers. It is also welcomed that the potential for integrating professional body requirements within Higher and Degree Apprenticeships has remained despite the major shift in approach from Apprenticeship Frameworks to Standards. However, the paper also identifies a risk that much of the good work undertaken in aligning Higher Apprenticeships with university qualifications built into the revised 2013 Specification for Apprenticeship Standards in England (SASE) (BIS, 2013) could be lost if universities are not afforded the opportunity to collaborate with employers who are setting the standards. While the advent of Degree Apprenticeships opens the door for explicit employer-university collaboration in England, which is welcomed, the process of development of non-full-Degree Higher Apprenticeship Standards does not provide a space for automatic university involvement.

### **Higher education responsive to the needs of industry**

Even if we restrict ourselves to fairly recent policy history, as Birds (2010) has pointed out, there is a track record of policy interventions since the Dearing Report *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (NCIHE 1997) that have sought to ensure that HE is "responsive to the needs of industry and commerce" (NCIHE 1997, recommendation 38). In following up on the Dearing Report recommendations for sub-degree qualifications, the HEFCE launched its *Foundation Degree Prospectus* a few years later (HEFCE, 2000/27). The 'essential features' described included a requirement that employers were involved with the 'design and regular review' of the programmes, 'recognition from employers and professional bodies', involvement with 'local organisations and national sectoral bodies, to establish demand'. In addition, the new Foundation Degree qualification would also require the demonstration of skills applied in the workplace and work experience should be assessed (HEFCE, 2000/27, p7). Lastly, the Prospectus also stated that "it would be highly desirable if employers took an active part in the delivery of foundation degrees" (HEFCE, 2000/27, p8).

Subsequently, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) requirement that all Foundation Degrees "are underpinned by work-based learning" (QAA, 2010, para. 24), has also been identified as a key feature (Longhurst, 2010) as it necessarily involves actual learning in the workplace rather than 'work-related' or simulated learning experiences. It is this feature that provided the opportunity for employers to contribute directly to the delivery of this new work-based qualification. While, it has been argued that the expectation for employers to be involved with the design and delivery of Foundation Degrees may not have, in all cases, been fully adhered to in practice (Morgan et al, 2004), it is clear that the policy intent was to encourage collaborative working between employers and HE providers. Little (2005) has also argued that the advent of students using the Foundation degree primarily as a stepping stone towards Honours degree qualification rather than entering the workplace, undermined its efficacy from a skills policy perspective.

### **The rise of the workforce development policy and flexible higher education**

While the Lambert Review (HM Treasury, 2003) identified the need for closer business-university collaboration in relation to research and 'knowledge exchange', the theme of higher-level skills was picked up in the Government White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003). The rationale for the expansion of HE was aligned with "the economy's need for higher-level skills" indicating that "universities need strong links with business and the economy" (DfES, 2003, p4). In addition to promoting the need for HE providers to collaborate with employers to develop more Foundation Degrees and other 'flexible courses', the White Paper also saw a key role for SSCs. It stated that the UK Government would support SSCs to "forge stronger alliances between businesses and relevant departments in universities and colleges" (DfES, 2003, p7).

The Leitch Report (HM Treasury, 2006) again related the prosperity of the UK economy with the need to raise higher-level skills. In pointing out that 70% of the UK workforce of 2020 had already (in 2006) left compulsory education, Leitch argued that there was a clear need to raise the skills levels of those in work and proposed a target of 40% of adults that should be qualified to HE level by 2020. To achieve this target, the Report argued that partnerships would need to be forged between Government, employers and individuals to promote investment in the development of the workforce and that this would require an increase in employer engagement and workplace delivery. The engagement of employers in higher-level skills would, it was proposed, bring about the provision of 'demand-led' rather than 'centrally planned' education and training. The relationship between economic prosperity and the provision of higher-level skills can of course be questioned. Birds (2010) mounts a critique of the Leitch Report's 'unanalysed and oversimplified assumptions' about the drivers for change and argues that unless the relationships between employers and universities are addressed that the Leitch recommendations were unlikely to be realised.

The UK Government's response and plan to implement the Leitch Review entitled *World Class Skills* (DIUS, 2007) described a broad range of policy initiatives designed to address the issues raised by Leitch. *World Class Skills* signalled the need for vocational qualification reform and the introduction of new 14-19 Diplomas. It also indicated that SSCs needed to be reformed and announced the creation of the UKCES. To support the achievement of basic or functional skills, *World Class Skills* also promoted the voluntary 'Skills Pledge' and the 'Train to Gain' initiative designed to encourage employers to invest in the skills development of their employees. It proposed a review of the 'apprenticeship blueprint' that set the standards for apprenticeship frameworks to make sure it met the needs of employers and did not operate as a barrier to employer engagement. In describing the need to address higher-level skills needs, the document stated that:

In creating the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills [DIUS], we recognised that the UK needs to foster greater and more sustained engagement between universities, colleges and employers in training, skill development and innovation. This implies a culture change within HE as well as FE. (DIUS, 2007,p50)

The document acknowledged that many universities had “excellent working relationships with employers through their research and enterprise programmes” (DIUS, 2007, p50) but identified that “all HE institutions need to grow their capacity to engage on a large scale with employers” (DIUS, 2007, p50). To address this perceived need, *World Class Skills* announced that the UK Government would support ‘Higher-level Skills Pathfinders’ in the North West, North East and South West regions and would be funding ‘demand-led’ projects and making available employer ‘co-funded’ additional student numbers (ASNs) for HE providers to encourage greater employer engagement in HE.

At this time, although both apprenticeships and other significant higher-level skills policy initiatives are both included in *World Class Skills*, they are not explicitly related in the text. This may be because the apprenticeship system had been set up almost exclusively to support work-based further education (at levels 2-3) rather than (levels 4 to 8) at this point.

During 2008, DIUS also conducted a consultation with a broad range of stakeholders to inform the UK Government’s higher-level skills strategy. The groups participating included: higher education institutions (HEIs); further education colleges; employers (including SMEs); students; employer, business or student organisations; government departments. The report from the consultation, *Higher Education at Work* (DIUS, 2008) stated that:

The Government’s high level skills strategy has two main goals: to generate more, and more employable, graduates (quality and quantity) and to raise the skills and capacity for innovation and enterprise of those already in the workforce. (DIUS, 2008, p2)

One of the themes from the consultation concerned fostering cooperation and collaboration between HEIs and employers (Hordern, 2013). The outcomes from the consultation identified that developing on-going working relationships between employers and HEIs would be preferable to the often ‘transactional’ nature of existing relationships (Bruneel et al, 2010). The role of SSCs received a mixed response but was thought ‘pivotal’ to encouraging employer engagement. The report identified that respondents thought it important that the HE sector ‘speak the language of employers’, identify a ‘single point of contact’ for employers, provide opportunities for employer delivery within HE programmes, secondments of HEI staff in industry and upskill the HEI workforce “to be more responsive to employer need” (DIUS, 2008, p4). This seemed to indicate the need for more comprehensive collaborative arrangements between employers and universities to achieve the Government’s higher-level skills strategy goals through the ‘added value’ of public funding initiatives (Parsons and Rowe, 2007).

The 2009 Government strategy document, *Higher Ambitions* (Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2009) positioned raising the qualifications of those in work to HE level not only as of benefit to economic prosperity but also as a vehicle for fair access and widening participation in HE. To do this, *Higher Ambitions* explicitly promoted an increase in flexible approaches to HE provision including increasing vocational Foundation Degrees as well as part-time and work-based HE. The strategy document proposed a

new role for UKCES in working with SSCs and Regional Development Agencies to identify skills gaps and more opportunities to progress to HE level from apprenticeships and 'technician level' vocational qualifications. *Higher Ambitions* also promoted business collaboration with universities as 'active partners' rather than 'passive customers'.

As the key definers of the skills needs of our economy and the key beneficiaries of the skilled workers produced by higher education, businesses have a crucial role in the funding and design of programmes. (BIS, 2009, p10)

The HEFCE 'Higher Education Transforming Workforce Development Programme' signalled in *World Class Skills* (DIUS, 2007) included Government investment of £103m in thirty-seven workforce development projects, £11.8m in three regional Higher-level Skills Pathfinders and £48m in support of employer co-funded HE students (Kewin et al, 2011). The HEFCE programme was initiated by the HEFCE Grant Letter for 2007-8, which asked HEFCE to establish a "new relationship between higher education and employers" (HEFCE CL, 03/2008) and deliver 5,000 HE places that were part funded by employers. The evaluation of the HEFCE Workforce Development Programme identified that significant success had been achieved in meeting the objectives set by Government but also recommended that:

HEIs should approach working with employers as a collaborative venture and engage in a dialogue to better understand the nature of their business and the challenges they face...It will require a shift away from the 'product push' approach that HEIs have tested in the past by bringing together the HEI's wider employer offer (applied and near-market research, consultancy, education and training, graduate recruitment, etc.) as many have begun to explore. (Kewin et al, 2011, p118)

### **A new focus on fees and the demands of students**

However, the significant progress that had been made in this regard was undermined by a change in policy with the advent of the new coalition Government in 2010, as signalled in *Skills for Sustainable Growth* (BIS, 2010). This new Government direction removed the workforce qualification level targets established by the previous administration and the employer co-funded model was dropped. The emphasis in the report shifted strongly towards apprenticeships, mostly prioritising level 3 but also progression opportunities for "further learning at higher levels including, but not exclusively, Level 4 Apprenticeships" (BIS, 2010, p18). The report identified that SSCs should work with providers of HE to ensure there were 'clear ladders of progression' and that this was likely to require 'more flexible provision'. The document emphasised "internships, work experience opportunities and fully integrated work place training" (BIS, 2010, p19) as examples of what such flexibility might look like.

At the same time that higher-level 'workforce development' was dropped, the skills agenda focussed on apprenticeships, which were at the time not perceived to be particularly relevant to the provision of HE by most universities (Anderson et al, 2012). The result was a vacuum of policy incentives for universities to work collaboratively with employers beyond those relationships that had previously been established. In any case, the prime preoccupation for universities in 2010 was the outcomes of the Browne Review into HE funding and student finance, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* (Browne, 2010).

In paving the way for a major change in the funding of HE, the Browne Review proposed that individual students, as the main beneficiaries of HE, bear the majority of the cost. The Browne Review referred to

UKCES evidence that the current HE system was not meeting the skills needs of business and the “need for a closer fit between what is taught in higher education and the skills needed in the economy” (Browne, 2010, p23) but did not recommend compelling businesses to invest more in HE. The rationale for this stance was that such a move would detract from placing ‘students at the heart of the system’ because employers would expect a return on their investment, or as the Report states:

Asking businesses to contribute through a new tax is also likely to mean that the higher education system will have to be more responsive to their demands; and there is a risk that these may displace the choices made by students. (Browne, 2010, p54)

Whereas previous HE policy initiatives had sought an increasing alignment between the perceived needs of business and employers with HE, including clear information on ‘return on investment’ (Bartel, 2000, p523), the rationale for students bearing most of the costs of HE places the ‘demands’ of students in tension with those of employers. However, it has been argued (Cognard, 2011) that compulsory levies can be useful if employer representative organisations (such as SSCs) are not able to effectively coordinate financial support from employers for skills development.

### **Vocational education and employer ownership of skills**

*Skills for Sustainable Growth* (BIS, 2010) also announced that the *Wolf Review of Vocational Education* would take place in 2011. The resulting Wolf Report (DfE, 2011) explicitly focused on vocational education for 14-19 year olds. Universities are referenced as important progression end points for level 3 vocational qualifications or as a comparator for the market value that qualifications (per se) bring but not specifically as providers of vocational qualifications. Apprenticeships feature strongly in that they necessarily provide access to the experience of work, which is seen by Wolf as having value above and beyond qualifications per se.

The Wolf Report also questioned the appropriateness of apprenticeships being approved by SSCs as employer representative organisations. The Report recommends rather that “employers are involved directly in development and specification of qualifications” (Wolf, 2011, p18) but does not indicate how this might take place. Earlier research had also questioned the legitimacy of SSCs as employer-led bodies given the general lack of employer willingness to fund them (Payne, 2008). Ryan et al (2006, 2007) had also argued that the low availability of apprenticeship places, even from larger employers, in ‘educationally impoverished’ sectors such as construction and retail indicated a lack of willingness on the part of employers to take responsibility for skills development.

Around the same time, UKCES published its report into *Employer Ownership of Skills* (UKCES, 2011), which identified that one third of employers in England offered no training at all to their employees and only 8% offered apprenticeships. However, the UKCES Report proposed the problem be resolved through a change from government and provider led, employer engagement focused skills policy initiatives “to employer-owned adult workforce development” (UKCES, 2011, p6). The distinction between the idea of ‘employer-owned’ and ‘demand-led’ (as promoted by the Leitch Report) lies in that the former promotes public funding incentives channelled through employers, rather than public providers. It is argued that such incentives would encourage employers to further invest in the skills development of their employees and that the binary markets of publicly funded qualifications and private training should be better aligned and combined to create:

A single market for skills development, where further education colleges and training providers respond to genuine demand rather than state funding incentives, would deliver more economically valuable skills, for which people and businesses would be prepared to pay. (UKCES, 2011, p4)

Whilst *Employer Ownership of Skills* does not actually mention universities at all and focuses entirely on colleges and private training providers, it is the clearest indication of a policy sea change away from demand-led but provider-funded strategies such as the HECFE Workforce Development Programme.

### **The bifurcation of higher-level skills policy**

The UK Government White Paper, *Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system* (BIS, 2011), focused on the shift of emphasis from block teaching grants from HEFCE to individual tuition fee loans. The White Paper signposts the forthcoming Wilson Review into Business-University collaboration and does state that:

Graduates are more likely to be equipped with the skills that employers want if there is genuine collaboration between institutions and employers in the design and delivery of courses.  
(BIS, 2011, p39)

However, this issue is not substantively discussed in the White Paper itself beyond reference to the Wilson Review. The main vehicle for ensuring that HE provision is appropriate in meeting employer needs seems to be through opening up the HE market place and providing better information for the purchaser (the student). The White Paper proposes that a broader range of HE providers will be able to gain access to this market and that where employers are offering to sponsor students this will not count towards institutional 'student number controls' that regulate the places available. Apprenticeships are mentioned a total of four times in the White Paper and this is either as an aspect of provision that colleges can offer or as an alternative route into the professions. The relative exclusion of apprenticeships from the White Paper made it very clear to all universities that this and other areas of skills policy were not central to the purpose of universities. The combined effect of a requirement for universities to demonstrate to student customers that their product was 'excellent' and as such worth the maximum £27k tuition fee, together with the effective separation of universities from the skills agenda, resulted in significant changes in many university's missions (Hordern, 2012). As an indicator of this, several universities at the time sought to become members of the elite Russell Group of universities to better signify their 'academic excellence' to the student market through brand association (Marginson, 2006). For example, when the University of Surrey left the 1994 Group to join the Russell Group, the University was reported to say that the decision was the "university's response to the changing higher education environment" (Grove, 2012).

In announcing the Wilson Review of Business-University Collaboration, the White Paper (BIS, 2011) made it clear that the purpose of the review was to "inform the Government's research and innovation strategy" (BIS, 2011, p39). This remit seemed similar to that of the previous Lambert Review into business-university collaboration (HM Treasury, 2003). However, following submissions from the Higher Education Academy's Employer Engagement Exchange Group (which was still active at the time of the Review) the Wilson Review when published did in fact include workforce development activity as examples of good practice in business-university collaboration. For example:



Halifax Community Bank and Middlesex collaborate to deliver an innovative and sustainable approach to workforce development. The bank identified the need for higher-level training for around 1,000 of its managers. This major investment in workforce development, called 'Journey in Practice' (JIP), was designed to raise the standards of retail banking practice across the company. The combined use of the University's accreditation services and work-based learning framework has meant that Middlesex has the academic infrastructure to deliver high-quality learning that is responsive to the needs of the employer and their employees, and award credit towards university qualifications: Advanced Diploma and Postgraduate Certificate in Retail Banking Practice programmes. (Wilson, 2012, p44)

While the Wilson Review promotes the active involvement of employers in defining the knowledge and skills that they need, it also re-emphasised the academic autonomy of universities to design, develop and approve the degrees awarded in their name as "a fundamental role of academe" (Wilson, 2012, p41). Perhaps as a consequence of the explicit Government policy shift away from workforce development strategies, the Review's recommendation related to this area of collaboration is telling in its ambivalence:

This government-subsidised scheme has now finished, and future in-house corporate programmes will fall within the new funding environment. HEFCE should monitor the sustainability of university activity in this field and report trends and significant market failures to government. (Wilson, 2012, p44)

The Wilson Review recognises that Higher Apprenticeships can play an important role in meeting the 'long term skills needs of employers' and provide "a highly valued alternative for school leavers who wish to combine work with gaining a higher qualification" (Wilson, 2012, p46). The Review also goes on to recommend that work-based pathways to HE qualification such as higher apprenticeships should become 'a priority development'. However, the Review also makes it clear that Higher Apprenticeships, along with professional qualifications, "are not congruent with the requirements of an honours degree but are equal in rigour and esteem" (Wilson, 2012, p46). The positioning of Higher Apprenticeships as 'not congruent' but 'equal' effectively 'muddied the water' and arguably marginalised Higher Apprenticeships in terms of 'core' university business. Perhaps one of the reasons for this was that at the time, the highest university qualification that could deliver a Higher Apprenticeships was a level 5 Foundation Degree. The advent of level 6 Higher Apprenticeships that include an Honours degree would challenge the oft repeated policy idea that apprenticeships represented an 'alternative' to university.

Some months prior to the publication of the Wilson Review, the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) had published the Higher Apprenticeship Fund Prospectus (NAS, 2011) which announced the allocation of £25m to support the development of Higher Apprenticeships. This Fund was also referred to in the Government's response to the Wilson Review (BIS, 2012). The BIS response restated the Government's intention to raise the numbers of starts on Higher Apprenticeships from the 2,200 in 2010/11 on 8 frameworks to 25,000 starts on 'many more frameworks' in the following three years.

One of the key aims of the Higher Apprenticeship Fund (channelled through the SfA, not HEFCE) was to address the lack of apprenticeship progression routes for people undertaking (Level 3) Advanced Apprenticeships. The Prospectus noted HEFCE research that indicated that only 6% of Advanced Apprentices progressed to HE compared with 90% of those completing A Levels within four years (NAS, 2011, p11). The

prospectus also presented Higher Apprenticeships as a potential alternative to university education with regards to accessing 'highly-skilled careers'.

The idea of an Apprenticeship as being a route to professional status goes against the grain of universities being the 'gateway to the professions'. (NAS, 2011, p11)

This oppositional positioning of 'apprenticeships' and 'university' was perhaps indicative of a degree of ambivalence, in policy terms, at the time regarding the extent of university involvement with the higher apprenticeship initiative. The Prospectus mentions universities three times including the reference above. The other two references are firstly, in terms of ensuring that universities are "fully able to support Higher Apprenticeships" (NAS, 2011, p12) although it is not clear what 'support' meant in this regard and secondly, NAS wanting universities (amongst other types of provider) to 'work alongside' employers to develop innovative models for Higher Apprenticeships. The Fund aimed at: *co-investment* to 'kick-start' employer contribution to the cost of Apprenticeships; *employer leadership* to drive 'occupational partnerships' and programme development; *transformation* of employer recruitment and training; *innovation* to produce new models of Higher Apprenticeship (NAS, 2011, p15). The kinds of organisations that were eligible to apply for funding included: employers; SSCs; Professional Bodies; National Skills Academies; employer groups; learning providers, including independents; FE colleges and (lastly) HE institutions. Of the 17 projects approved, only 2 were from universities. Given the concurrent exclusion of the skills agenda and apprenticeships from the 2011 HE White Paper (as discussed above), it is perhaps unsurprising that universities' seeming interest in the Higher Apprenticeship Fund was low. It has been argued (Anderson et al, 2012) that this should have been of concern to policy makers given the considerable expertise that a significant number of universities had demonstrated through HEFCE workforce development activity in collaboration with employers that could have been brought to bear to support the development of innovative models of Higher Apprenticeships.

Anderson et al (2012) also argue that other issues were operating as a barrier to university engagement with the Higher Apprenticeship initiative. While the Higher Apprenticeship Fund invited the development of innovative new models, significant aspects of the FE focussed system for approving and funding Apprenticeships discouraged university involvement. Specifically, the presumption that 'knowledge' and 'competence' must be separately delivered or assessed ran counter to the best practice experience of universities who had collaborated with employers to deliver professional and work-based programmes including apprenticeships (Jansen et al, 2015; Bravenboer and Workman, 2016, 2016a; Bravenboer and Lester, 2016).

Perhaps most significantly, the lack of a level playing field in terms of the public funding available for university qualifications compared with 'non-prescribed' SfA funded qualifications (up to 50% of training costs for 19+ apprentices) presented a major barrier to employer 'buy-in'. Keep (2014) identified that "the Byzantine and un-coordinated set of structures that fund, direct and inform skills provision at various levels" (Keep, 2014, p254) represent a 'key stumbling block' in developing skills provision.

The Higher Apprenticeship Fund Prospectus referenced research from the Professional Association Research Network (PARN) that indicated that 70% of Professional Associations thought that Higher Apprenticeships could be an appropriate route to achieve professional status (Williams and Hanson, 2011). However, Williams and Hanson (2011) also identify that the level at which professional status is recognised

for the majority of Professional Associations was at level 6 and above (although this is not mentioned in the prospectus). The limitation of Higher Apprenticeships to level 5, as regulated by SASE (BIS, 2011a), meant that degree level apprenticeships were seemingly excluded. Given that degree level provision was (and remains) the mainstay of university business, it is perhaps unsurprising that most universities (including those previously engaged in workforce development activity) considered the Higher Apprenticeship agenda 'off mission'.

### **The alignment of Higher Apprenticeships with university qualifications**

The limitations of the 2011 SASE in restricting Higher Apprenticeships to level 5 presented a barrier to the aspiration that Higher Apprenticeships could provide an 'alternative' route to the professions. More than this, the 2011 SASE did not significantly emphasise the role of professional recognition as it primarily focused on requiring 'knowledge' qualifications (typically provided by colleges or private training providers) and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) build around National Occupational Standards. Another issue with the 2011 SASE was the significant variation in what might constitute an Apprenticeship. The qualifications required by SASE could range from 10 credits in size to 240 credits for Foundation Degrees or Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). These issues meant that there was a major misalignment between the potential requirements for Higher Apprenticeships and university HE qualifications.

In 2012, NAS conducted a national consultation on *Meeting Employer Skills Needs: Consultation on Criteria for Higher Apprenticeships at Degree Levels* (NAS, 2012) which resulted in significant revisions to SASE that sought to address many of the issues of misalignment with university qualifications outlined above. The revised SASE (BIS, 2013) included changes to raise Higher Apprenticeships Bachelors and Masters degree levels (6 and 7). The qualifications included in Higher Apprenticeships would now need to constitute at least 90 credits at level 4 and 5 and 120 credits at levels 6 and 7 and could be a single integrated qualification that did not require separate assessment of 'knowledge' and 'competence'. The alignment of Higher Apprenticeships with professional status recognition was now also required where a relevant Professional Association existed. Whilst these changes left the matter of the HE/FE apprenticeship funding issue unresolved, the revised SASE opened the door for those universities who had an interest (and expertise) in collaborating with employers to develop degree level apprenticeships (Bravenboer and Lester, 2016).

### **Back to the future of apprenticeships**

During the same period that NAS were conducting the consultation on the revised SASE, the UK Government had also commissioned a separate review of apprenticeships. The Richard Review (Richard, 2012) primarily considered apprenticeships at level 2 and 3 and did not explicitly focus on higher apprenticeships. However, the recommendations from the review were related to all apprenticeships but did not reflect the outcomes of the consultation on Higher Apprenticeships at Degree Levels. The Review does recognise that it would be beneficial if apprenticeships were held in the same esteem as university qualifications but does not consider how they might be integrated with apprenticeships.

This rather schizophrenic approach to policy making may have been a consequence of coalition Government but the outcomes shifted the ground for employer-university collaboration once more. The Richard Review recommended that employers should determine the design of apprenticeship 'standards' to ensure that they meet their needs. This would be a major change, echoing the recommendations made in the Wolf Report (2011), from the arrangements for Apprenticeship Frameworks, which were approved by 'issuing authorities' (usually SSCs). The Richard recommendations also proposed that employers should be given the

purchasing power for apprenticeships rather than routing public funding through education and training providers, as also recommended by the UKCES *Employer Ownership of Skills* report (2011). The Richard recommendations proposed a move away from the complexity demonstrated in Apprenticeship Framework documents to a greatly simplified statement of the 'standard' of what an apprentice should know and be able to do at the end of an apprenticeship. Richard also recommends that the quality of apprenticeships should be assured through rigorous 'end tests'.

The test should be holistic, at the end, and assess whether the individual is fully competent and employable, within their job and their sector. Employers should be directly involved in assessment. (Richard, 2012, p18)

More recently, *The Future of Apprenticeships* (BIS, 2015) describes the 'Trailblazer' process by which new Apprenticeship Standards are approved. In summary, the process involves a consortium of at least ten employers (including at least two SMEs) submitting an Expression of Interest in forming a Trailblazer Consortium to design and develop and 'Apprenticeship Standard' for specified job roles to BIS. Once approval has been given to proceed, the Trailblazer Consortium designs the Apprenticeship Standard, which must define the knowledge, skills and behaviours that are required to perform a specified job role in a simple two-page document. Once the Apprenticeship Standard is approved, the Trailblazer Consortium then design the 'Assessment Plan' that describes how the achievement of the Apprenticeship Standard will be assessed. Once the Assessment Plan is also approved by BIS, the Apprenticeship is fully approved and publicly available.

It is important to note that in the attempt to move firmly away from the perception of supply-led approaches associated with Apprenticeship Frameworks, particularly in sectors like construction (Hogarth and Gambin 2014), the new Apprenticeship Standards do not necessarily require apprentices to undertake any qualifications. As long as there is an approved Assessment Plan that indicates how the Standard will be demonstrated, this could, for example, be through meeting Professional Body membership requirements. While many Trailblazer Consortia have established 'Provider Reference Groups', some of which have included universities, there is no required role for any providers in the design of Apprenticeship Standards. This presented a highly uncertain, if not hostile, terrain for employer-university collaboration in the design and delivery of apprenticeships and arguably constituted a significant barrier to university engagement in the skills agenda once more.

### **The collaborative light at the end of the apprenticeship tunnel**

The Future of Apprenticeships in England (BIS, 2015) also describes a new member of the Apprenticeship family, 'Degree Apprenticeships'. Degree Apprenticeships can be either Apprenticeship Frameworks or Standards but unlike other Apprenticeship Standards, they must include the achievement of a full Bachelors degree or Masters level qualification. Where a Degree Apprenticeship Standard is developed it must be co-designed by employers, HEIs and where appropriate professional bodies. Degree Apprenticeships can be comprised of either an existing or new degree plus a separate 'end-test' or:

Employers, universities and professional bodies can come together to co-design a fully-integrated degree course specifically for apprentices, which delivers and tests both academic learning and on-the-job training. We think this will be the preferred approach for many sectors, as the learning is seamless and does not require a separate assessment of occupational competence.

(BIS, 2015, p13)

This builds on the good work of the revised 2013 SASE to highlight professional body involvement in the co-design process. Degree Apprenticeships also have a specific section within the chapter on ‘Choice’ in the 2016 HE White Paper, *Success as a knowledge economy* (BIS, 2016), which clearly positions the significance of this policy area for universities. The White Paper proposes a review of ‘flexible, innovative and lifelong learning’ the lack of which other studies have described as a barrier to employer engagement (Mazenod, 2013). According to the White Paper, employers will want Degree Apprenticeships as a high quality means to boost their productivity and the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy is described as a ‘powerful incentive’ to work with universities. While the quality of apprenticeships will be overseen by the ‘Institute of Apprenticeships’ (a new, employer led independent body):

The success of Degree Apprenticeships will depend on employers and universities working together. Employers will take the lead in designing the occupational standard taking account of the innovation and excellence universities can offer. (BIS, 2016, p52)

The model presented for Degree Apprenticeship development constitutes a partial resolution to the fluctuating policy position concerning employer-university collaboration and the extent to which policy initiatives that are either employer or provider driven. The table below presents some of the key policy initiatives discussed above, to illustrate their relative positioning in the policy terrain described:

Level of required employer-university collaboration	Development driver	
	<i>Employer-driven</i>	<i>Provider-driven</i>
<i>High collaboration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree Apprenticeship Standards</li> <li>• Workforce Development Programmes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foundation Degrees</li> <li>• Higher Apprenticeship Frameworks</li> </ul>
<i>Low collaboration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher Apprenticeship Standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible higher education</li> <li>• Employability initiatives</li> </ul>

*Table 1: Mapping higher-level skills policy initiatives*

This summary table is designed to be illustrative and not definitive. Some, for example, may argue that the development of Foundation Degrees in practice may not have always included high levels of collaboration with employers (QAA, 2003). Others may argue that workforce development is provider-driven as the public funding for it flowed through universities (BIS, 2012). Whilst the latter is true, those workforce development programmes that have been sustained post HEFCE co-funding are certainly employer-driven in funding terms. The point is that if the ideal state for higher-level skills provision is that it is both employer-driven and requires high levels of collaboration with universities (and/or other HE providers), the other initiatives should also move in that direction, including Higher Apprenticeship Standards.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

This latest policy position presents a major opportunity for those universities that have developed significant expertise in collaborating with employers in the co-design of work-based HE programmes as a consequence of their engagement with the HEFCE Workforce Development Programme. The model recognises that while employers may be best placed to understand the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to perform particular job roles, HEIs are best placed to understand the requirements for achieving HE qualifications, and certainly have the required expertise in designing work-based assessment. Similarly, it acknowledges that professional bodies are best placed to understand what constitutes 'professional competence' in the relevant area of practice. This three-way alignment of employers, HEIs and professional bodies presents the powerful prospect of bridging the perceived divide between the professional competence required by employers and academic qualification (Bravenboer and Lester, 2016). It is also an opportunity to move beyond the traditional separation of work and learning and develop the 'trust' relationships that are required to overcome the barriers to effective employer-university collaboration (Bruneel et al, 2010). The opportunity to have a coherent HE and skills policy has been a long time in the making but the model for three-way collaboration in the design, delivery and assessment of Degree Apprenticeships could be truly transformational.

However, the story should not end there. The evaluation of the successful HEFCE Workforce Development Programme also identified that:

Many of the HEIs in the Programme offered employee learners the opportunity to undertake less than 30 credits. (Kewin et al, 2011, p121)

This can be taken as an indication that employers do not always think that a full degree is required to meet their skills needs. It is also the case that universities do not only design and deliver degree programmes. They also design and deliver smaller qualifications such as university certificates, higher diplomas and graduate certificates/diplomas, as exemplified by the case study cited above in the Wilson Review (2012). The rationale (if there is one) for the separation between the requirement for 'Degree Apprenticeships' and non-Degree 'Higher Apprenticeship' Standards is unclear but it seems unlikely that it is driven by employer demand.

One distinctive aspect of a Degree Apprenticeship is that 'degrees' are fairly well understood by employers in terms of size, i.e. normally equivalent to three years of full time study. The requirement for an Apprenticeship Standard is that it must take place over a period of not less than one year, which potentially means that other non-Degree HE qualifications could feature as the means to achieve an Apprenticeship Standard. No indication is given to date of the required 'intensity' for Apprenticeship Standards (i.e. how much learning within the required year minimum); the only vague indication is that at least 20% of the apprenticeship must be 'off the job' (BIS, 2015). For those university's that have experience of working with employers to co-design programmes of work-based HE study the idea of 'off the job' is largely unhelpful as it only serves to perpetuate the notion that 'on the job' learning is somehow different from 'off the job' learning. Employer-university collaborations in the design and delivery of HE level programmes that include the combination of accredited in-company training and 'on the job' work-based learning (Bravenboer, 2011, Wilson, 2012) significantly undermines this presumed distinction.

The rationale for involving HEIs in the co-design of Degree Apprenticeships in the 2016 White Paper is that universities can provide ‘high quality degrees’ and contribute ‘innovation and excellence’ to the process of co-design. The White Paper also acknowledges that this may “involve changes to the way universities design and deliver courses to meet the standard” (BIS, 2016, p52). The fact that for Degree Apprenticeships the co-designed degree “delivers and tests both academic learning and on-the-job training” (BIS, 2015, p13) perpetuates the distinction between ‘academic learning’ and ‘on-the job training’ but at least would seem to indicate that universities are capable of contributing productively to the design and delivery of Apprenticeships. If the rationale for the involvement of universities includes their expertise in designing and assessing HE, then this surely also holds true for Higher Apprenticeship Standards that might include other HE qualifications in the associated Assessment Plans. It is entirely possible to maintain the ‘employer driven’ requirement for Higher Apprenticeships and at the same time build in a facility to include universities and professional bodies in the consortia undertaking the design of Apprenticeship Standards. The requirements for the Degree Apprenticeship make this clear. However, there is a danger that the process for developing non-Degree Higher Apprenticeship Standards will throw the HE expertise ‘baby’ out with the ‘bathwater’ of provider-led approaches. This will of course also require a corresponding shift in approaches to the development of higher-level skills provision by universities to avoid the sector being ‘blamed for policy failure’ (Keep, 2014). More than this, it seems inconsistent in policy terms to promote a model of development for Higher Apprenticeships that by design limits employer-university collaboration when Government describes this as the preferred approach for Degree Apprenticeships (BIS, 2015). It really is a ‘no-brainer’.

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