

A group of four students, two men and two women, are gathered around a workbench in a workshop or laboratory. They are all looking intently at a smartphone held by one of the men. The background features industrial equipment, including a large machine with a prominent yellow-green light. The students are dressed in casual attire, with some wearing maroon polo shirts.

Progression Pathways 2017: Pathways through higher education

June 2017

UCAS

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Foreword

Helen Thorne, Director of External Relations, UCAS

The extent, consistency, and quality of the advice given to young people about their educational and career choices continue to be subject to vigorous debate. As many studies have shown, teachers and parents tend to be conservative, drawing on their own experiences of education and employment. When it comes to higher education choices, this often means recommending that young people stick to the well understood currency of GCSEs, A levels, Scottish Nationals, and Highers, where there's a clear pathway to a full-time three or four-year degree programme for those students with the aptitude and commitment.

But people learn in different ways and at different speeds. Some of those who enter the workplace after secondary education will want to develop their knowledge and skills later in their careers, and may be attracted to higher education to further their professional development or to retrain. Equally, it's clear that the introduction of degree apprenticeships has caught the imagination of growing numbers of young students who are attracted by the idea of securing a degree whilst in employment, and being able to avoid taking out tuition fee and maintenance loans.

Critically, prospective students, and those advising them, need a good awareness of the many different pathways available and the benefits and disadvantages of each. How otherwise can a teacher advise a student who hasn't done as well as expected whether to resit or take a foundation year at a university, or help another decide between a degree apprenticeship or a full-time undergraduate programme?

In 2016, UCAS published a report called Progression Pathways¹, examining how qualifications other than A levels and Scottish Highers can support access to higher education, and how these qualifications can both open up and close down different higher education opportunities. Accompanying the report, we released a range of information and advice for students, advisers, and higher education providers, to improve understanding about the utility of different qualifications for supporting educational progression.

With the policy interest now focusing on increasing student choice – and in England the reform of technical qualifications and the introduction of a twin track pathway post-16 – we have turned our attention to examining some of the different forms of higher education available, focusing on: degrees with foundation years, foundation degrees, Higher National qualifications, and the many types of apprenticeships involving study at the higher level.

As with our initial study, we find a lack of visibility of the options available and insufficient understanding of how they differ from more traditional pathways. In a complicated and changing landscape of secondary, further, and higher education provision it is not surprising that students and their advisers are struggling to evaluate all the options. There has never been a greater need for all students to have access to high quality careers education to help them understand and explore their choices. Whilst UCAS, schools, colleges, universities, and employers cannot solve this alone, the report makes a number of practical recommendations for addressing current information gaps. At UCAS, we are continuously improving our information and advice capabilities, to ensure learners have access to more relevant information about a wider range of progression pathways, to help them make informed decisions about their future.

¹ www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-and-resources/qualification-reform/progression-pathways

Executive summary

Universities and colleges cater for an incredibly diverse population of students in terms of age, educational background, and ambition, and there have been a number of recent policy interventions to increase the choice of options that prospective students have. These include stimuli to expand the offer of accelerated two-year degrees and more flexible credit arrangements, as well as new higher and degree level apprenticeships. Whilst these changes are to be welcomed, policy conversations tend to overlook the diversity of provision that already exists in the higher education sector.

This report describes and explores those pathways which give students the opportunity to progress to a bachelor's degree in an incremental way, progressively securing qualifications at intermediate levels, and often combining study with work. It concentrates on four main pathways:

- foundation years and degrees with foundation years
- foundation degrees
- Higher National Certificates (HNC) and Higher National Diplomas (HND)
- higher and degree apprenticeships

The report builds on literature reviews and an extensive range of interviews and visits with interested parties. We hope the findings will be of interest to a wide audience including higher education providers, teachers, advisers, employers, and other key stakeholders.

Our main findings are as follows:

- i) **There's a welcome diversity of provision, but considerable change:** in all four countries of the UK, young and mature students have access to a variety of different higher education pathways, which offer flexible ways of gaining higher level skills, often by combining study and work. These pathways help to support people who might otherwise not have accessed higher education, either because of their prior attainment (e.g. foundation years for students with insufficient attainment to enter a degree programme), or because they have chosen to work after leaving secondary education (e.g. apprenticeships). They also enable students to progress at their own pace, accruing knowledge and recognised qualifications as they work towards a degree (e.g. Higher National qualifications and foundation degrees).

However, changes in policy and funding are significantly altering student and employer demand. The competitive nature of the undergraduate market has triggered a boom in universities offering degrees with a foundation year or year zero. Whilst this enables students to study in a higher education setting and to gain study skills and subject knowledge, it extends a typical degree by a year and

incurs an additional year of tuition fees and living expenses. Separately, the introduction of the apprenticeship levy may encourage employers to switch existing employee learning and development support to an apprenticeship model. In England, the Government's focus on apprenticeships – and economic conditions – appears to be driving a decline in standalone foundation degrees and Higher National qualifications. Policy changes and labour market conditions have also led to a well-documented collapse in part-time study.

- ii) **These pathways support widening participation and access, offering an alternative to a three-year full-time degree:** all of the pathways examined in this report have the potential to support widening participation. They offer a second chance to learners who have not studied the right subjects or have missed their grades at school or college. They meet the needs of those who might find the prospect of a full degree daunting, need to live at home or study part-time, or are interested in developing their skills and gaining qualifications after a period at work. The flexibility of many of the pathways allows students to progress at their own pace, and in many cases, combine work and study. Whilst degree apprenticeships, in particular, appear to be an attractive means of widening access because the employer and the Government meet the cost of tuition fees, evidence to date suggests that entry criteria are inconsistent. While some allow for lower than standard entry, others are more likely to favour more academically able and well-supported students.
- iii) **There's confusion about terminology and a lack of robust evidence about outcomes for students pursuing different pathways:** as the report highlights, the proliferation of different courses and pathways is confusing for students, advisers, and employers. In addition, whilst a great deal of effort has been expended on tracking the outcomes and destinations of undergraduate students, there is very little comparable evidence about the study and subsequent employment destinations and salaries of those people taking foundation years, foundation degrees, Higher National qualifications, or degree apprenticeships. This also makes it difficult to determine the value and utility of these pathways.
- iv) **Prospective students, apprentices, and their advisers find it difficult to locate, compare, and evaluate different pathways and learning options:** there is a lack of comprehensive information and advice about these pathways, particularly in comparison to information available about full-time degrees. Even basic information which makes it easy to compare the different learning approaches, modes of study, time commitment, fees and financial support, and qualification and progression opportunities is absent. This contributes to a lack of awareness of these pathways amongst advisers and students.

There is also limited and fragmented visibility of the opportunities available, and applicants admit to being confused about the application process and entry requirements. For example, although UCAS' search tool displays information about foundation years, foundation degrees, and Higher National qualifications, this isn't comprehensive, as many of these options are delivered by colleges. This may not affect visibility or uptake since opportunities will be advertised locally or regionally, reaching their intended audience, who are likely to enrol in programmes directly with their local college, or be enrolled by their employer. However, as part of its wider technology strategy, UCAS is working to make its search tool as comprehensive as possible.

The situation is more complicated with regard to higher and degree apprenticeships. Opportunities are displayed in a number of different places via Government, employers, UCAS, and other organisations' search services, and the application process varies by employer. Our report found that users are confused by these services, uncertain about the level of prior attainment required, and frustrated about the difficulties of application processes. There were calls for a national search service for degree apprenticeships, given the growing level of interest from school and college leavers in this pathway as an alternative to a full-time degree course.

- v) **Each of the pathways has progression challenges which may not be apparent to students or apprentices before they embark on their studies:** our study found that students and apprentices may find challenges with the portability and subsequent recognition of their qualification, which may limit choices for progression to further study and employment. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy and the likelihood that some employers will wrap support for foundation degrees and Higher National qualifications into apprenticeships is a further complication. The main issues identified were as follows:
- **Foundation years:** whether or not an individual secures a recognised qualification or credit at the end of a foundation year. This is important where an individual decides not to progress to a full degree after having completed their foundation year, or if they wish to move to another provider.
 - **Foundation degrees:** when validated by a university, foundation degrees are often delivered by a partner college, which may not always be clear to students when they apply. In addition, our study found that some students experience difficulties in progressing to a one-year top-up, in terms of availability of options and support for transition.
 - **Higher National qualifications:** progression from an HNC to an HND is normally a smooth process, but transition from an HND to a degree can be more difficult in terms of the recognition of prior learning and credit, and therefore availability of study choices.

- **Higher and degree apprenticeships:** apprenticeships are designed to provide skills and professional qualifications for a specific role, or within a specific sector. Apprentices therefore need to be confident about their career goals before they start. Mature learners are likely to be more confident about their goals than 17 or 18 year olds considering a degree apprenticeship as an alternative to a degree. Young learners may also not fully realise, or be prepared for, the challenges of working and studying under an apprenticeship model.

In response to these findings, we make a number of recommendations for different sectors. These appear at the end of each section and, in summary, address the following issues:

Higher education providers should:

- undertake and publish research to evaluate and understand the outcomes for students on different pathways, and how these compare to a standard three-year degree, paying particular attention to feedback from students
- ensure that information about non-degree courses fully reflects Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) advice
- adopt consistent terminology regarding progression pathways and explain this clearly
- publish clear information about the qualifications and/or credit likely to be achieved via each pathway, and how and where these support progression to further study and employment
- have a clear and consistent policy on entry requirements for all pathways covered by this report

Employers should:

- ensure the qualifications and experience required to participate in an apprenticeship are clearly articulated, and take into account newer qualifications like Tech levels
- ensure the channels they use to advertise vacancies, or receive and process applications, are easy and transparent for users

Teachers and advisers should:

- ensure they understand the latest developments in these pathways, particularly in relation to higher and degree apprenticeships, and the pros and cons for students compared to other higher education alternatives

In response, we will take steps to:

- build upon our established role as a provider of information, to help learners make good decisions by giving more personalised content
- ensure our resources allow learners to engage from different starting points – by job area, skills and interests, or subjects – and across pathways
- develop a more inclusive search tool that allows learners to interact better with non-degree progression opportunities, including the ability to search by year of entry
- continue to position apprenticeships as an important component of higher education, developing robust information and advice for potential apprentices, and continuing to improve our apprenticeship search tool



Methodology

We sought to identify the key progression opportunities and challenges associated with four pathways through higher education:

- foundation years, and degrees with foundation years
- foundation degrees
- Higher National qualifications
- higher and degree apprenticeships

In each section of the report, we provide a brief description of each pathway, its current status in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and consider the opportunities and challenges for students, advisers, and further and higher education providers. These have been grouped under the headings of 'Access and availability', 'Recognition', and 'Progression and widening participation'. The current policy context for these pathways is outlined in Appendix 1.

The methodology for the project included desk research and literature reviews, as well as visits and in-depth interviews with:

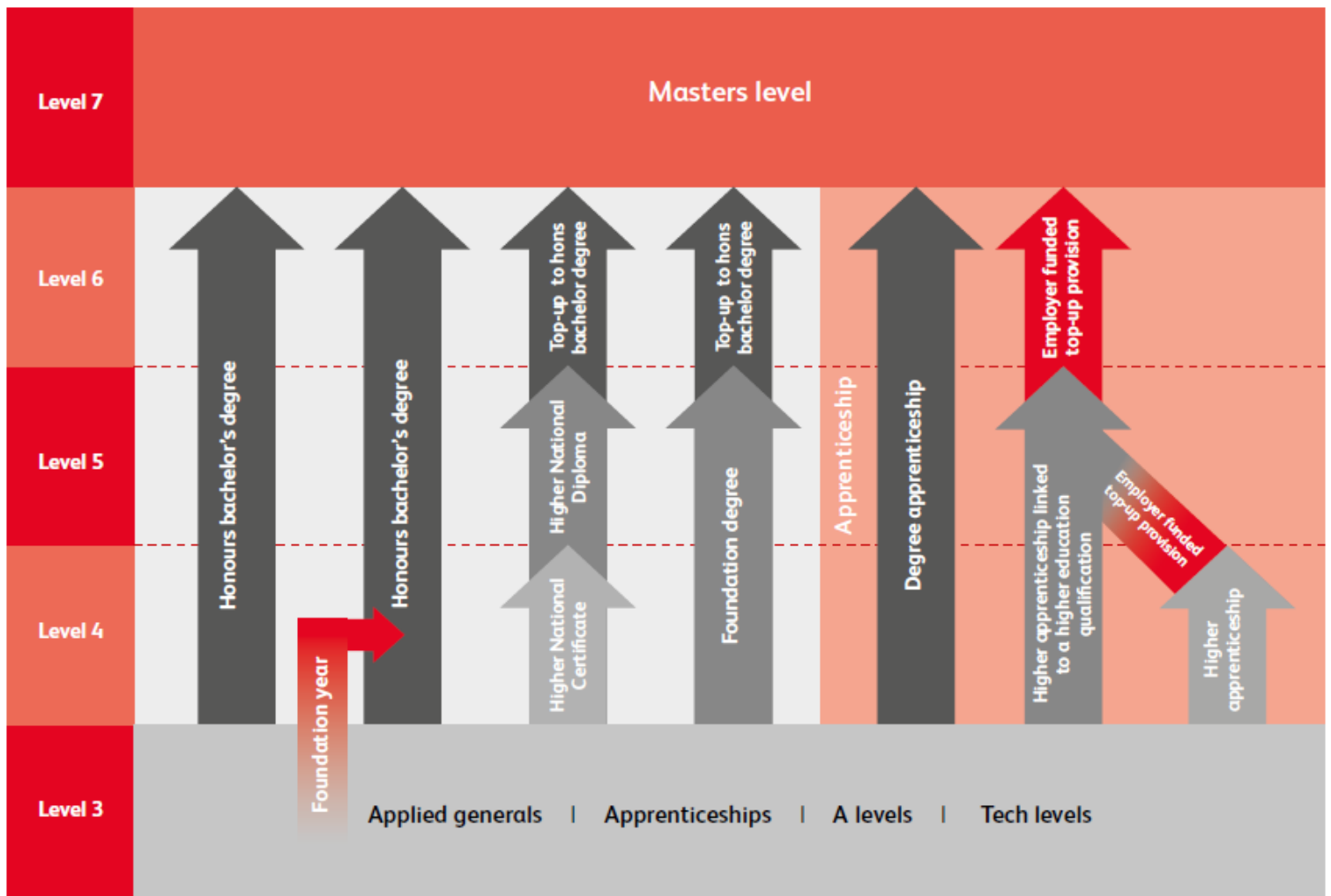
- higher education providers:
 - universities, colleges, and training providers
 - admissions tutors: academic staff responsible for work-based learning, apprenticeships, academic departments, and admissions tutors
 - degree and higher apprentices
- sixth form providers
- awarding organisations
- professional associations and representative bodies: for schools, colleges, training providers, and universities
- government departments in Wales and Northern Ireland
- Scottish Qualifications Authority and Skills Development Scotland

The report presents the findings of this research, along with a range of case studies illustrating the progression pathways discussed. We are very grateful to all the organisations, providers, and individuals who helped us with the research. They are listed individually in Appendix 4.

The four pathways represent progression through Levels 4, 5, and 6 of the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales and Levels 8, 9, and 10 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

There is distinctiveness across the four UK countries, but also alignment and synergy. For reference, diagram 1 below provides an overview of how these pathways fit together in the English context.

Diagram 1: An overview of the progression landscape from Level 4 to Level 6/7 (England)



Section 1: Degrees with foundation years

1.1 Purpose of the pathway

The concept of a foundation year is to bridge the gap between prior learning and degree study, for those whose previous achievement does not yet meet the full entry requirements of the degree course of their choice. This will mean different things in different contexts.

These courses have various names, for example 'foundation course', 'foundation year', or 'year zero', and are generally one-year full-time courses delivered at a university or college. The student is treated as a full-time student with all the responsibilities and privileges of university life. They are subject to the same fee structure as other university students, and are able to access tuition fee support from the Student Loans Company (SLC) as year zero of a four-year course.

The concept is well established in the area of art and design, where a one-year diploma in art and design is a prerequisite for many degree programmes. This progression route, however, is specific to the sector, allowing the student to experience enough specialisation to prepare them for a degree course, which is not possible in the more broad-based curriculum of an A level.

The concept is also well established in medicine. Currently, 13 universities in England, Scotland, and Wales offer foundation years specifically linked to medical degrees; these give students the opportunity to plug gaps in their prior learning before embarking on a medical degree. There are some, like the clinical science foundation year at the University of Bradford, which are specifically related to widening participation, and only available to those who did not have the opportunity to study the relevant subjects at A level.

More generic foundation years fall into two categories:

1. Some are one-year standalone courses, where a student who follows a course at one university can use completion to apply for a degree at another university. A good example is the Certificate in Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS) from Birkbeck College. This programme helps students develop a range of knowledge and skills required for an honours degree. Many of these kinds of programmes have been designed either for mature students looking to engage with higher education for the first time, or with international students in mind and include additional English language teaching. Some place an emphasis on mathematics, often for those hoping to progress to an engineering degree.

2. Increasingly, foundation years have become the first year (year zero) of an extended degree, where the student essentially embarks on a degree programme at a university with lower entry requirements and at a lower level of study than standard applicants. The additional year – the foundation year – enables the student to strengthen their post-18 Level 3 attainment, to give them a stronger set of prior knowledge and study skills to embark on year one of an honours degree. In these instances, the foundation year content will be subject-specific. Many programmes offer a fully integrated degree, e.g. chemistry with a foundation year. These kinds of foundation years are typically targeted at 18 – 19 year old learners, with recent qualifications which are not in compatible subjects or fall short of what is required for direct entry to their chosen degree, typically by at least one grade.

Foundation years share common characteristics with, and can be an alternative to, the Access to HE Diploma, available in England and Wales. The Access to HE Diploma, which is regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), is specifically aimed at learners without traditional qualifications, to help them prepare for studying at the higher level. It covers around 450 different courses in a wide range of subjects, such as nursing, social studies, and law, and offers consistency in terms of curriculum, assessment, and structure. Approximately 20,000 students holding the Access to HE Diploma are accepted onto higher education programmes each year. However, it is not appropriate for all learners; there can be a minimum age requirement of 19 or 20 and an expectation that the learner has had a break from full-time education.

1.2 Status and stage of development across the UK

Foundation years, or degrees with foundation years, are offered by 140 universities in England and Wales. The range of universities includes higher, middle, and lower Tariff universities, and many offer a significant number of courses. They are available across all subjects – the arts, humanities, sciences, languages, business, etc. For instance, at Durham University, where degrees with foundation years are very well-established, they are offered in all their academic departments.

The universities in Northern Ireland do not currently offer foundation years or degrees with foundation years, except for the Foundation Diploma in Art and Design.

The universities in Scotland do not offer degrees with foundation years, except for those providing access to medical degrees, given the standard four degree programmes and the well-established articulation arrangements² with colleges – in

² The Scottish Funding Council defines articulation as follows: *Articulation refers to a student gaining entry into either the second or third year of a university degree course after completing an HNC or HND at college.* This route is explored further in Section 3.

2014/15, nearly 5,000 learners entered a Scottish university with full or partial academic credit as part of an articulation arrangement³.

The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) offers a similar progression pathway to the Access to HE Diploma. Mostly funded by the Scottish Funding Council, its role is to promote access to higher education for adult learners who have been out of full-time education for at least three years. The programme is designed specifically to meet the needs of this cohort. It is distinctive from the English model, in that it is managed through two regional partnerships of colleges and universities, though delivered by the colleges. SWAP programmes are built from SQA units and a Higher Education Profile. They normally involve one year's full-time study, and bursaries and fee waivers are available.

1.3 Key challenges and opportunities

Availability and access

Foundation years have been a growth area in recent years, and are generally viewed positively by both providers and participants. They are offered across a full range of university types and applicants are able to apply to some foundation courses, and degrees with foundation years, through UCAS.

However, the proliferation of different courses, with different names, meeting different purposes, can lead to confusion among students and parents; information, advice, and guidance (IAG) about foundation years can be hard to find, poor, or non-existent. Even some students who are on foundation years and having a very positive experience said they were not given any advice about this particular pathway, and only found out about it by accident.

Students on foundation years have access to the same financial arrangements as other higher education students. However, their financial commitment is for four, rather than three years. In comparison, fees are normally lower for Access to HE Diplomas, and students in England (over the age of 19) can access Advanced Learner Loans to cover tuition fees. Students in Wales can access Assembly Learning Grant funding for both full and part-time courses.

Integrated degrees with foundation years are clearly visible within the UCAS search tool. In respect of standalone foundation years, there is concern that universities do not always advertise all the opportunities available. There is a perception that some students may be offered a foundation year only after they have failed to meet the terms of their conditional offer. While this may motivate students to strive to

³ 4,007 learners with Advanced Standing. 862 entered with Advanced Progression.

achieve their offer, it does not give the opportunity to think through the financial and other implications should a contingency plan be needed.

Progression and recognition

The wide range of programmes that fall into the category of foundation years provide an effective bridge into higher education for applicants with different needs. However, in some instances it is not clear whether the foundation year leads to a free-standing qualification and even if it does, whether it will allow progression to a degree programme at another provider. Students need to understand that they may find themselves tied into a degree with the provider of the foundation year. Whilst it may be technically possible to progress from a foundation year to a degree at another provider, the student may find it difficult to do so. Universities are not obliged to accept foundation years from other providers, even if they offer them themselves, or accept qualifications like Access to HE Diplomas.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects data for those students who have gained admission to a full degree with a credit bearing foundation year. This is recorded as a year zero, and the Level 3 attainment of these students on entry does not contribute towards the average strength of entry calculations used to inform league tables. However, HESA does not collect data for students on some free-standing foundation years which are not credit bearing. Equally, these students are not tracked through when assessing degree or other attainment, or as part of other evaluation programmes, such as the National Student Survey, or Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey.

The purpose of the foundation year is to support progression to an honours degree. There are advantages for the many students who progress directly in the same university as their foundation year. The initial year will have given them the opportunity to settle into student life, make friends, become familiar with the area, get to know the teaching staff, and get used to the university's ethos and structures, as well as raising their level of attainment so they are prepared for the first year of degree study.

However, there are those for whom the Access to HE Diploma may be more appropriate, not least because it allows progression to any university which accepts this qualification. An Access to HE Diploma may also be more financially viable, since successful students can have any outstanding debt from their Advanced Learner Loan written off, meaning if they go on to complete a three-year degree, they only pay three years of fees.



Widening participation

Foundation year opportunities have the potential to support widening participation. They give a second chance to applicants who have not studied the right subjects at Level 3 – perhaps because they were not offered by their school or college, or because they changed their minds about what they wanted to study – and to those who have missed their required grades. They can be particularly helpful in equipping learners from non-traditional backgrounds with the skills necessary to succeed at university. Some learners just need the space and extra year to gain confidence.

However, some of these advantages may be offset by the reality that participating students will take an extra year to achieve a degree, and acquire an extra year of debt.

Success in engineering via a foundation year

Following a reasonable performance in his GCSE qualifications, a student left education at 16 and worked for a year before returning to college to study for a City and Guilds Level 3 qualification in electrotechnical technology. This was a vocational qualification, aimed at those wanting to work in the electrical industry. The student wanted to study for a BEng Hons in Electrical and Electronic Engineering at Sheffield Hallam University, but did not meet the entry requirements, as the City and Guilds qualification did not include the study of maths and physical sciences at the required level.

Nevertheless, the applicant had an excellent reference, and the course tutor felt he had the potential and commitment to succeed. Sheffield Hallam University made him a change of course offer for an Extended Degree in Engineering. After successfully completing the foundation year, he progressed onto the BEng Hons Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Following a high level of achievement, he transferred to the MEng Hons Electrical and Electronic Engineering, and graduated with a first class MEng honours degree.

1.4 Suggested actions

Higher education providers offering foundation years should:

- provide clear, accessible information about the different kinds of foundation programmes on offer alongside standard undergraduate programmes and any foundation degrees, with comprehensive information about tuition fees and financial support
- provide explicit information about whether or not the year results in a formal qualification or accumulation of credit, and whether or not the student can use this to transfer to a course at a different provider
- employ consistent terminology in respect of foundation years, foundation courses, year zeros, and foundation degrees

UCAS and other key stakeholders should:

- undertake research on the relative progression, degree, and employment outcomes for students admitted via foundation years, and those admitted through other pathways

Teachers and advisers should:

- ensure they understand the latest developments in foundation years, and the pros and cons of these programmes compared to alternatives such as resits

Section 2: Foundation degrees

2.1 Purpose of the pathway

Foundation degrees are often confused with foundation years. This is unfortunate as they are quite different, and designed to meet the needs of different types of learners.

Foundation degrees are two-year courses, if taken full-time; they are designed and accredited by a university. They are equivalent to the first two years of an honours degree, and with the exception of some specialised subjects (e.g. veterinary nursing, animal care), have been developed with the built-in option of a top-up to a full honours degree. They provide a clear and specific pathway to Level 5 of the FHEQ, with a defined progression pathway to Level 6. Foundation degrees are not available in Scotland.

2.2 Status and stage of development in each of the UK countries

Foundation degrees were introduced in England in 2001, as a Government initiative to encourage universities and colleges to offer intermediate higher level study to students on a flexible basis – particularly to promote higher level skills in areas of shortage identified by employers. Initially, the number of students taking foundation degrees grew rapidly, as they provided a means for universities and colleges to increase student numbers in a capped environment. However, numbers peaked in 2008 – 2009 and according to HESA data, in 2014 – 2015, just over 2% of higher education students in England were on foundation degree courses – 26,300 full-time and 20,000 part-time. Foundation degrees have not featured in recent policy initiatives, and the agenda seems to have shifted towards higher and degree apprenticeships as the means of addressing higher level skills needed by employers.

There is more policy support for foundation degrees in Northern Ireland, where they are the preferred qualification for apprenticeships at Level 5. Their development in the province reflects that. Initially, foundation degrees were taken off the shelf, the content was mapped against the needs of the apprenticeship, and they were used if deemed appropriate. However, now there is a fundamental analysis of the curricular needs of the apprenticeship and the development of the foundation degree starts from scratch. The Northern Ireland strategy recognises that apprentices need to be geographically mobile within their sector, and the consistency of a foundation degree provides that mobility.

In 2008, the Welsh Government's skills strategy stated that the Assembly Government would consult on a foundation degree policy. This was later reinforced in For Our Future – the Welsh Government's higher education policy. In this

publication, foundation degrees were seen as a key enabler in relation to its twin priorities of social justice and a buoyant economy. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has taken this policy forward by providing additional funding for the development, promotion, and delivery of foundation degree provision. Foundation degrees are widely available across Welsh higher education providers, and in some instances, are the Level 5 qualification used to support higher apprenticeships, with the exception of engineering, which uses the HND.

2.3 Key challenges and opportunities

Availability and access

Applications for full-time study for a foundation degree can be made through UCAS. Applications for part-time study are made directly to the university or college. There are currently 2,502 foundation degree courses listed on the UCAS website. Foundation degrees are generally in vocational subjects and offered by middle or lower Tariff universities and colleges of further and higher education, six of whom have their own foundation degree awarding powers. Entry requirements vary, and employment experience may be accepted instead of formal qualifications.

Fees also vary, but students taking foundation degrees have access to the same finance arrangements as other higher education students, in respect of loans for tuition fees and maintenance. However, it is generally expected that a two-year foundation degree with a one-year top-up will incur lower fees than a three-year degree. In addition, foundation degrees can be taken as part of a higher apprenticeship, in which case the fees will be paid by the employer or sponsor department.

With the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, there is a risk that the standalone foundation degree may disappear, since employers may be unwilling to pay for this in addition to apprenticeship training. However, as our case study shows, foundation degrees may be embedded within higher apprenticeships.

Progression and recognition

Foundation degrees are a recognised FHEQ Level 5 qualification – most often, though not exclusively, in vocational subjects. Graduates typically use them for direct progression into employment rather than further study. The foundation degree provides the flexibility to achieve a higher education qualification without committing to a full degree.

However, foundation degrees can be ‘topped up’ to a full honours degree by undertaking at least one further year of study, normally at a university rather than at a college. Progression to a one-year top-up degree is intended to be seamless,

although this is not always the case, and there can be inconsistencies in how long is needed for top-up to a bachelor's degree. Additionally, a change of provider can be difficult for some students and, for some, geographical location can also be a barrier.

Widening participation

Foundation degrees meet the needs of a range of different learners, who might initially find the prospect of a full honours degree daunting. Some are late developers, and some do not want to commit to a full degree or are not in a position to do so. Foundation degrees can provide an opportunity for those who need to live at home, for a variety of reasons, to do so. They can be a fallback option for some whose grades at Level 3 are lower than expected.

Foundation degrees are frequently taken as part of a higher apprenticeship, and are often associated with that pathway; in both Northern Ireland and Wales this is supported by policy. In England, the development of apprenticeship standards means that qualifications will no longer be required for an apprenticeship, although standards may still include them.

The model of 'foundation degree with higher apprenticeship to top-up degree' is now a well-trodden route, providing an effective pathway to both employment and a degree. This particular pathway will continue to be an attractive option for people in a variety of circumstances. However, it has also provided the basis for the degree apprenticeship. As one provider said, 'these were de facto degree apprenticeships'.

Effective use of foundation degrees embedded in apprenticeships

Gen2 is an independent non-profit training provider, based in West Cumbria. Gen2 got involved in higher education delivery eight years ago, when Sellafield Ltd. came to it with a specific problem. The company needed to increase its technical capability but felt the higher education courses available at the time were not meeting its specific needs.

Foundation degrees were then in their early stages, and Sellafield Ltd. and Gen2 developed bespoke versions in relevant science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, in partnership with University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). Originally offered as part of a structured training programme, the foundation degrees are now embedded as part of a higher apprenticeship, with a number of employers.

Despite difficulties and complexities, after four to five years, they were confident enough to develop a BEng degree top-up. Having been trailblazers for this work, when degree apprenticeships were introduced, their development was straightforward. They already had the rigour and infrastructure, and 38 degree apprentices started in January 2017. The higher apprenticeship pathway with a foundation degree will continue. At present, 60 – 70% progress from a foundation degree to a top-up – the decision to progress lies with the employer.

While delivery of foundation degrees by FE colleges has been very successful, it does mean that learners do not always get the full higher education experience. It is important that applicants understand this before they enrol. They need to find out exactly where they will be studying, and whether they will have access to student accommodation, for example. Since the award of the degree is often made by a university, and applicants for full-time courses apply through UCAS, learners can think they're actually going to study at the university rather than a partner college, so they need to research this thoroughly before they apply.

Foundation degrees with a one-year top-up to a bachelor's degree have provided a secure pathway through higher education for many people, including those with lower grades or non-traditional qualifications. There is less initial time and financial commitment, but with the security that progression to a degree is possible. This is still a valid pathway, and for some has provided the only route to higher education feasible for them.

Progression through a higher apprenticeship and foundation degree

Despite achieving highly in science subjects at A level, this higher apprentice with Gen2 did not want to go to university as she did not want to move away from home. She thought the Gen2 programmes were great, because they are fully funded and she would get a full wage while studying.

She now works four days a week with her employer, Sellafield Ltd., as an analyst in operational research, and studies one day a week with Gen2. She loves that she can study in class and then see what she is studying straightaway on-plant. As she's employed while studying, she can gain real work experience, as well as building confidence, gaining understanding about teamworking, and developing presentation skills.

At the end of her three-year foundation degree, her employer has agreed to allow her to progress on to the BEng honours degree, which will provide her with the next step towards chartered engineer status. Her future career aspirations are to stay with her employer and continue to progress within the company.

2.4 Suggested actions

Higher education providers offering foundation degrees should:

- review the information and advice they provide about foundation degrees, to ensure prospective students can easily see where and how provision is delivered, who is responsible for validating the degree, and where and how top-ups can be achieved
- employ consistent terminology in respect of foundation years, foundation courses, year zeros, and foundation degrees
- consider if, and how, their foundation degree provision aligns with any higher and degree apprenticeship offering, and ensure this information is easily available to prospective students, advisers, and employers
- ensure they offer support to help students transition effectively from a foundation degree to a top-up honours degree, particularly where this involves changing from one provider or location to another

Teachers and advisers should:

- ensure they understand the differences between foundation degrees and foundation years
- ensure they understand how foundation degrees may be aligned with higher apprenticeships and topped up to a bachelor's degree

Section 3: Higher National qualifications

3.1 Purpose of the pathway

The Higher National suites of qualifications – the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and the Higher National Diploma (HND) – are well-established and recognised qualifications. In Scotland they are designed, managed, and awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). In England, Northern Ireland, and Wales they are provided by Pearson, one of the major awarding organisations for regulated qualifications at Levels 1 – 7.

Higher National qualifications have the flexibility of being offered at two levels, the Higher National Certificate at Level 4/SCQF Level 7, and the Higher National Diploma at Level 5/SCQF Level 8. A student therefore needs to commit, initially, only to a one-year HNC course. This provides the opportunity for a step-by-step progression through the higher education levels for those who want or need it, while also giving the opportunity to stop at either stage. Level 4/SCQF 7 can be delivered in a very different way to Level 5/SCQF 8, which should enable students to work more autonomously, and can be effectively delivered by other organisations, for example FE colleges and training providers which also specialise in work-based training.

Higher National qualifications have played an important role in apprenticeships at Levels 4 – 5/SCQF Levels 7 – 8, and although in the new system in England their role may change, they are expected to continue to make an important contribution. Their enrolment may expand in line with the expected increase in apprenticeships.

Higher National qualifications add richness to the range of pathways available for those who want Level 5 qualifications. However, whilst foundation degrees are designed and awarded by individual universities or colleges, Higher National qualifications are designed and awarded by a single awarding organisation for all participating UK centres, engaging with a range of stakeholders, including higher education providers, employers, and professional bodies.

3.2 Status and stage of development in each of the countries of the UK

England, Northern Ireland, and Wales

All Pearson Higher National qualifications are designated higher education qualifications in the UK, but there are three types:

- Pearson BTEC Higher Nationals – regulated as part of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and aligned to the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, and QAA benchmark statements where appropriate.
- Pearson Commissioned BTEC Higher Nationals – these qualifications are on Pearson’s Self-Regulated Framework (SRF) and designed to meet regional or niche sector skills needs. They are quality assured using the same development, validation, and external examination standards as Ofqual regulated Higher Nationals.
- Universities’ Higher Nationals – Pearson gives universities a trademark licence to design, deliver, and award their own Higher Nationals. The universities manage the quality assurance and award their qualifications.

Pearson has recently undertaken extensive redevelopment of its Higher National suites, working with employers and universities to ensure the curriculum content and assessment arrangements will better support progression through higher levels.

The review has seen an analysis of all level descriptors. In addition, the HND now contains a significant research project, recognising that research is an important skill for progression. Pearson has also developed additional resources to support study skills.

Throughout the redevelopment of these awards, Pearson has engaged extensively with employers and professional bodies. As a result, a need was identified to tailor Higher National qualifications to meet the needs and professional standards within individual sectors. Pearson will be working with these audiences to further review these qualifications, to ensure the needs of individual sectors are met.

In England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, a high proportion of universities welcome applicants with BTEC Higher National qualifications and for most they represent a valid, popular, and economically important progression route. Pearson works with universities to map the content of Higher National qualifications against degree course content, and engages with them throughout the process, not just at the end. In these three UK countries, the process is built on voluntary collaboration between universities and colleges. There are progression agreements, but each university makes its own decision on whether to admit a student, and at what stage of the degree they will begin.

Scotland

In Scotland, Higher National qualifications are a more integrated and formalised part of the system, with articulation from HNC or HND to a full degree a well-defined pathway, supported by Government and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

SQA has also taken steps to ensure these established qualifications remain fit for purpose, serve a wider social and economic purpose, and meet the needs of employers, higher education providers, students, and the economy. This follows a five-year Higher National modernisation that started in the mid-2000s when SQA reviewed, updated, and credit rated SCQF HNCs and HNDs. This included the establishment of new design principles, and SCQF levelling and credit rating to ensure fit for purpose assessment in the revised qualifications.

The Higher National Modernisation Project helped rationalise provision where there was a great deal of duplication, while maintaining comprehensive provision across occupational and educational sectors.

Articulation to a full degree is part of Scottish Government policy, and significant work has been done over many years to encourage, facilitate, and improve articulation, particularly to post-92 universities and the Open University. The key articulation issues for higher education providers are how to improve the reception of the transitioning students, sharing best practice, and mentoring.

An interesting development is the granting of associate status by some universities to Higher National students enrolled in colleges – for example, giving them the right to use the library or attend lectures at the partner university.

This was extended in a pilot (2012 – 2017), in which post-92 universities were given the freedom to recruit an additional 1,000 students. They were funded as HE students, and had access to funding that gave them both college and university status, having made a university application specifically for the college pathway. Therefore, the university had more of a stake in their progress – if they did not progress it had a negative impact on the university's retention figures. Guaranteed entry would have been desirable, but universities were not willing to support this.

The pilot has led to general improvements for articulating students, through support to facilitate student articulation from employers, higher education providers, the colleges, and SQA. It has now been embedded in full in the SFC's funding allocations. Colleges and universities are expected to continue to report on articulation numbers in their outcome agreements, and the SFC will be undertaking a full review at the end of the 2016/17 academic year.

The recent work of the Commission on Widening Access (2014 – 2016) has sought to establish improvement in Higher National to degree articulation. This includes seeking to ensure the SCQF is used to provide better efficiency in progression, such as taking only four years to achieve a bachelor's degree including a one-year HNC or two-year HND, instead of the current five to six years – which too many learners experience.

3.3 Key challenges and opportunities

Availability and access

Higher National qualifications are generally delivered by FE colleges, and in Scotland exclusively so. Applications can be made through UCAS if the provider is a member; in other instances, they are made directly to the college. In England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, the numbers following this pathway are relatively small. Fees vary and students have access to the same financial arrangements as for other higher education courses.

According to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 14,725 learners were registered for HNDs, and 18,680 were registered for HNCs in FE or HE providers in 2014/15, compared to a total undergraduate population of 1,402,000. It is not clear if this figure includes all those enrolled with alternative providers. The foundation degree is the preferred qualification of the Northern Ireland Government at this level.

In Scotland, with industry, Government, and funding support, and well-developed articulation pathways, 25 – 30% of students in higher education (around 35,000) are on an HNC or HND. This highlights the particular importance of HNCs and HNDs to Scotland's HE provision.

Progression and recognition

Higher National qualifications have been designed to provide specialist work-related learning and can lead directly to skilled employment, or progression within an employed role. However, they have the dual purpose of developing skills in a particular sector, and giving opportunities for progression within employment or higher education. The Pearson and SQA versions of the qualifications are well-established and recognised.

However, there are issues around progression in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, and articulation in Scotland. Despite the different policy environments, the issues are the same. The improvements made in both suites of qualifications are still working their way through the systems, and may not be reflected in the comments we received from providers or students' case studies.

First, not all learners want to progress/articulate to a degree programme, and for them their Higher National is a valid destination. This is particularly so for the HNC, which is often taken part-time and seen as part of work. It is a valid qualification for an employee to work effectively in a skilled capacity at that level.

Progression from an HNC to an HND is generally straightforward since both qualifications are designed by the same awarding organisation. Progression from a HND to a degree can be more challenging for the provider and the student.

Students are more likely to progress/articulate from a HND to a full degree than go into employment. HNDs are more often studied full-time and seen as a transition into higher education. The progression pathway is more visible than it is for the HNC. Students have had the experience of student life, and progression to a full degree often seems logical.

Since Higher Nationals are regulated qualifications offered by a single awarding organisation, there is a standard curriculum, so the receiving provider can easily see what has been studied, and map it against their degree programmes. However, some universities have described that curriculum as too prescriptive.

Undergraduates develop certain skills as they progress through a degree, such as research skills, critical thinking, etc., which may not have been as highly developed through the unreformed Higher National curriculum. In engineering, for example, a typical three to four-year degree may front-load theory followed by the practical; a HND would tend to front-load skills followed by theory. As a result, considerations need to be made to ensure as smooth a transition as possible, and there are variations in the year the progressing or articulating student is allowed to enter.

These progression and articulation issues may be a factor in the decline in numbers taking Higher National qualifications in recent years, particularly in England. There currently seems to be a renewed interest, which may be tied in with the Pearson redevelopment of Higher Nationals, intended to address the issues raised above, and its increased support for providers delivering its qualifications.

Widening participation

For a variety of reasons, many people want to study on a part-time basis, and some providers report recent growth in part-time provision. Historically, the Higher National suites have been constructed with the flexibility to facilitate part-time study. There is also the option for local study, which can be a more attractive financial proposition for many people than going away to university.

Progression through part-time study and Higher National qualifications

This father of three works full-time as an NHS nursing assistant. Having first completed an HNC and then an HND, he transferred academic credit to an Open University (Scotland) honours degree.

He wholeheartedly recommends this route, since he was able to pursue work and family commitments, while studying and applying the disciplines of hard work, commitment, and dedication. He says the support from his tutors was excellent. Sometimes there were instances in the middle of a course day when he got a call to say one of his children was ill, and he had to take time off. However, his tutors always sent an email to explain what had been missed.

He is now doing a master's degree with the University of the West of Scotland in Paisley, looking to pursue a career in alcohol and drug studies. After his master's he'd like to specialise in addiction work, giving care and advice to people in the community.

Higher National qualifications are frequently taken as part of higher apprenticeships in England, and strongly favoured by some sectors, particularly engineering. This enables those taking them not just to live at home, but to be paid a salary while studying.

While these factors support widening participation up to the level of the HND, it can break down on progression. In some instances, the student's own college may deliver the Level 6, but others will have to move to a university to progress to a degree. However, some universities don't accept Level 5 qualifications unless the college is a direct feeder for the university. If it is not, progression can be difficult.

As a result, colleges are keen to deliver the top-up degree to Level 6 themselves. Where this happens, validation arrangements are done on a one-to-one basis.

As with foundation degrees, with the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, there is a concern that employers' financial support for HNCs and HNDs will wane. However, it is expected they will still have an important role to play in higher apprenticeships.

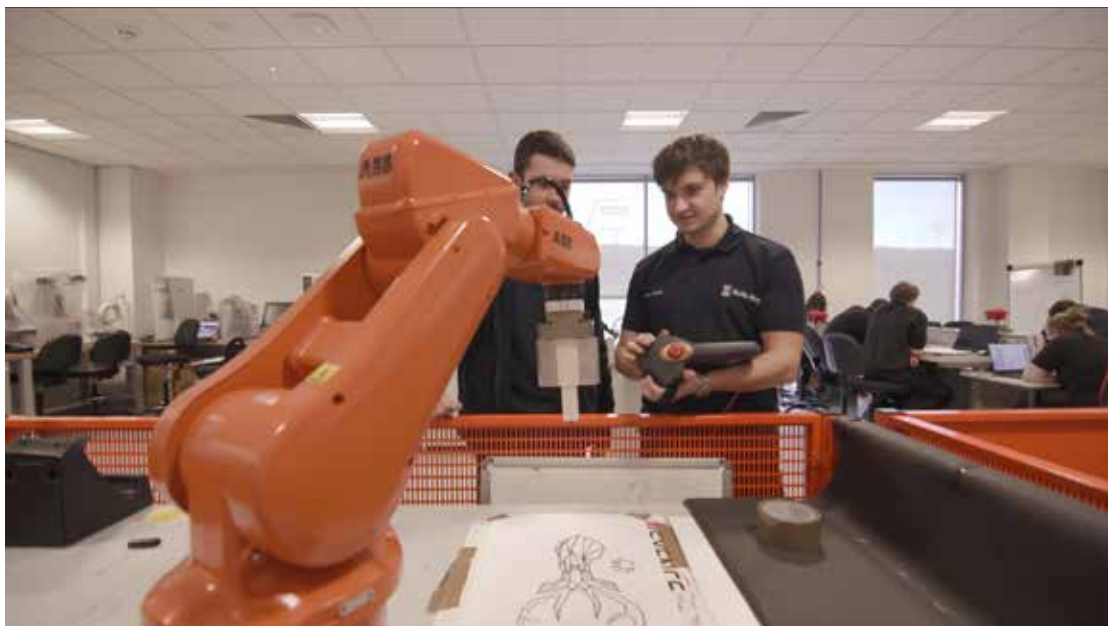
3.4 Suggested actions

Higher education providers offering HNCs and HNDs should:

- consider if and how their HNC and HND provision aligns with any higher and degree apprenticeship offering, and ensure this information is easily available to prospective students, advisers, and employers
- ensure they offer information and support to help students transition effectively from Higher National qualifications to a full degree, particularly where this involves changing from one provider or location to another

Teachers and advisers should:

- ensure they understand how Higher National qualifications support progression to an undergraduate degree, and may be aligned with higher apprenticeships



Section 4: Higher and degree apprenticeships

4.1 Purpose of the pathway

Across the UK there is a range of policy and financial incentives to encourage employers to invest in upskilling new recruits and existing employees through apprenticeships. There is also growing interest in higher levels of learning through higher and degree apprenticeships leading to bachelor's, master's, and even research degrees. Apprenticeships enable employers to develop the higher levels of skills they're looking for in their employees; the employees benefit too, as their tuition fees are paid by their employer and the Government, enabling them to attain higher qualifications or degrees without incurring debt.

As a result of the apprenticeship levy, many employers are likely to switch existing employee learning and development support to an apprenticeship model. However, not all employers will be comfortable investing in higher and degree apprenticeships, given that they can take employees up to six years to complete.

Separately, in the face of rising financial costs, increasing numbers of young people and their families are interested in degree apprenticeships as a way to access higher education at a lower cost, even if this means foregoing the broader university experience.

Universities have a long and proud tradition of offering higher education in partnership with – and for – business and industry, including a wide range of degree programmes accredited by professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies. In many cases, degree programmes have been created in partnership with employers, in response to local or regional skills requirements and shortages. For example, Coventry University and Unipart have jointly invested in an Institute for Advanced Manufacturing & Engineering, offering students the opportunity to study in a dedicated manufacturing hub and work on real shop floor projects. Therefore, in many respects, the development of degree programmes to support degree apprenticeships is a natural progression for universities and colleges, and many are building on their existing provision in response to demand from employers.

4.2 Status and stage of development across the UK

Although apprenticeships are available from Level 2/SCQF Level 5 upwards, the focus in this report is on those at Level 4/SCQF Level 7 and above. In England and Wales, all apprenticeships at Level 4 and above are termed higher apprenticeships, with those which result in the achievement of a degree called degree apprenticeships in England. Northern Ireland has a similar model, but uses the title of higher level apprenticeship for all those above Level 4. In Scotland, modern apprenticeships at SCQF Level 8 and 9 (the level of a HND or an ordinary degree) are called technical apprenticeships. Professional apprenticeships are at SCQF Levels 10 and 11, which is

honours degree to master's degree level. Graduate level apprenticeships at Levels 8, 10, and 11 are based on a degree or other higher education qualification. A table describing apprenticeship terminology across the UK is available in Appendix 2. For the purposes of this report we have used the English terminology.

In **England**, there is currently a strong policy imperative to increase substantially both the number of apprenticeships available, and the number of people engaged with them. There is a target of three million apprenticeship starts across all levels by 2020.

There are also some fundamental changes to the structure of apprenticeships in England. First, they are changing from a collection of qualifications within a framework to new standards, linked to a specific occupational level. These set out what the apprentice needs to know, understand, and be able to do to qualify to work in that job sector at that particular level.

The new standards are characterised by the introduction of an end-point assessment, which is an independent and synoptic assessment across the standard to demonstrate occupational competency. However, qualifications are being written into some standards and, even where this is not the case, it is expected that some employers will continue to require them. There can be mandatory on-programme qualifications linked, for example, to a licence to practise.

Standards are being developed by employer groups, known as trailblazers⁴ and quality assured by the Institute for Apprenticeships⁵. While existing frameworks will continue to be used in the short-term, all new apprenticeships will be underpinned by standards, including all degree apprenticeships.

In England, the development of apprenticeships at FHEQ Levels 6 and 7 is relatively advanced. In April 2017, there were 19⁶ standards in place identified as degree apprenticeships, dominated by chartered management, digital solutions, and engineering, where there are ten different subjects with standards. There are at least 23 standards identified as degree apprenticeships in the trailblazer stage with numbers growing rapidly, not least in response to stimulus funding provided by HEFCE to universities and colleges.

A recent report by Universities UK (UUK) and HEFCE, **Degree apprenticeships: realising opportunities**, anticipates 4,850 degree apprentice starts in 2017 – 2018, an increase of 658% since 2015 – 2016⁷. This is likely to increase further in response

⁴ www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-develop-an-apprenticeship-standard-guide-for-trailblazers

⁵ www.gov.uk/government/organisations/institute-for-apprenticeships

⁶ www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-standards-in-development

⁷ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/degree-apprenticeships-realising-opportunities.pdf

to demands from employers and students, and as standards are agreed for public sector roles such as nursing, the post office, social services, and teaching. However, it is important not to overlook geographical constraints. Local or regionally based employers are likely to want their apprentices to study close to work (particularly if using a day release approach), and this may limit the universities and colleges with which employers collaborate.

At this early stage, it is difficult to assess the extent to which degree apprenticeships could offer opportunities for universities and colleges to expand their higher education provision, or whether new higher and degree apprenticeships will replace existing employer sponsored degrees, foundation degrees, and Higher National qualifications. It will be particularly interesting to see how this dynamic plays out where there are two parallel pathways on offer – a degree or higher apprenticeship versus a traditional degree – for example in nursing.

The **Northern Ireland** strategy on apprenticeships launched in June 2014. It gave Government support for the expansion and promotion of apprenticeships, up to FHEQ Level 8. The most extensive development to date has been at Levels 4 and 5, working with the sectors in priority occupational areas. Apprenticeships are based on a partnership between a university, a college, and an employer, with the employers as key drivers. They are not based on standards, but frameworks, which do require an underpinning qualification. At Level 5, the foundation degree is the preferred qualification.

A partnership between the University of Ulster and Deloitte offers one pilot Level 6 apprenticeship in business technology. There are two cohorts, of 20 and 36 apprentices respectively, and it is anticipated the programme will move from pilot to steady state in 2018.

The Northern Ireland Government recognises that development will involve a cultural change, since a lot of employers have never taken in an apprentice at Level 4 and above. The Northern Ireland economy is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SME), but already there is significant apprenticeship development across the province, facilitated by apprenticeship reforms but driven by the need to satisfy employer demand.

In **Scotland**, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) leads on the development of apprenticeships and supports their funding. Each year 25,000 people start a modern apprenticeship, and there are over 80 modern apprenticeship frameworks across a wide range of sectors. At SCQF Levels 9 – 11, modern apprenticeships lead to a professional qualification at that level. Graduate level apprenticeships are based on a degree or other higher education qualification and are available at three levels: SCQF Level 8 (HND level or equivalent), Level 10 (honours degree), and Level 11 (postgraduate diploma leading to a master's degree). In 2017 there will be 19 courses available across nine of Scotland's universities and colleges. The focus will

initially be on the following subject areas: ICT/digital, business management, financial services, civil engineering, and engineering.

Apprenticeships in **Wales** are also based on frameworks, and lead to underpinning qualifications that integrate both knowledge and competence. All frameworks up to FHEQ Level 5 are delivered by contracted training providers, and there is a move away from apprenticeships at CQFW Levels 2 and 3 to concentrate more on Level 5, with a foundation degree as the predominant qualification (the HND is favoured in engineering).

There is an intention to introduce apprenticeships at Level 6, but since in Wales the FE and HE sectors are separate, this is proving difficult, especially in respect of funding. The Welsh Government is looking to pilot degree apprenticeships in IT and engineering, with a Welsh university badge.

One of the issues is that there are fewer large companies with headquarters in Wales; 60 – 65% of employers are SMEs.

In Wales, the Level 4 and 5 market has grown in recent years, from 200 apprentices in 2011, to 4,000 now. The largest numbers are in healthcare and management, and there is a plan in Wales to develop more technical ones. Priority is given to 16 – 19 years olds for lower level apprenticeships, but higher apprenticeships are open to all.

A key challenge for universities in all countries is being able to offer degree courses which meet employers' needs. For example, is it better to adapt existing provision or to design new degree programmes from scratch to support apprenticeship provision? Many of the early degree apprenticeships are based on partnerships with large companies previously involved in sponsored or sandwich degrees. However, the overwhelming view of the early adopters we talked to is that a degree apprenticeship should not simply be a rebadged degree. The curriculum and assessment need to be closely aligned to the professional needs of the employer, while maintaining appropriate breadth and demand.

Since employers of all sizes will be looking to take on or train apprentices, universities and colleges will need to be adept at working with businesses, ranging from large multinational companies to local SMEs, and clearly these groups will have different needs. Partnerships between employers and universities and colleges require both a high degree of trust and clarity about respective roles and responsibilities. There needs to be strong day-to-day cooperation between the employer and higher education provider, and some universities with experience of providing degrees in collaboration with business already have dedicated relationship management teams to serve employers' needs.

One issue of particular concern to universities is the risk of employers going into liquidation. Some reported examples of where this had happened, but also noted that they had managed this by working with professional bodies to find new

employers to take on apprentices. However, this is likely to become more difficult as degree apprenticeships proliferate. Therefore, it is important that higher education providers have processes in place to accommodate employer issues, such as established networks in specific sector areas, or arrangements to transfer to full-time degree courses.

4.3 Key challenges and opportunities

Availability and access

Data from the Department for Education and the Education and Skills Funding Agency FE data library⁸ indicates that in 2015/16, there were 27,200 framework and standard higher apprenticeship starts.

For existing employees, access to higher and degree apprenticeships is likely to be determined by their employer as part of normal learning and development activities. This will include the determination of patterns of work and study, modes and duration of study, and the university, college, or training provider offering higher education.

Developing a degree apprenticeship in partnership with one public sector employer

The University of Hull has developed a chartered management degree apprenticeship in partnership with Hull City Council, initially aimed at existing employees. The first cohort will start in June 2017, with the focus on enhancing their managerial and leadership skills. The university already offers a full-time and part-time degree in business management. The programme and learning outcomes for the degree map closely with those of the apprenticeship.

The employer decides how many people it wants to support through an apprenticeship, in which business areas, and sets its own eligibility criteria in addition to the university's criteria for admissions – which are exactly the same as for the part-time business management degree. The employer works with the university to interview and select potential apprentices.

For new recruits – typically young people from who view higher and degree apprenticeships as a means to earn and learn at the same time – information and advice about the opportunities available, how to access them, and the pros and cons of an apprenticeship pathway are underdeveloped. Enquiries at UCAS events suggest there is rapidly mounting interest in degree apprenticeships from young people.

⁸ www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships

As outlined above, where a higher apprenticeship incorporates a foundation degree or Higher National qualification, this offers employees flexible opportunities to develop higher level skills, which may in time enable them to progress incrementally to a full degree. For those embarking on a degree apprenticeship, there is the certainty that if they stay with their employer for the duration (between three and six years, with an average of around four and a half) and progress successfully, they will end up with a degree and a professional qualification.

However, those considering a higher or degree apprenticeship, particularly young people, need to understand the commitment they are embarking on, and how it differs from studying for a Higher National qualification, foundation degree, or undergraduate programme. Not only do apprentices forego the opportunity to live as part of a university community and participate in the opportunities this offers, but they need to have a clear idea about what career they want before they start. As employees, apprentices need to be work-ready and able to manage both a job and studying. For a higher or degree apprenticeship, this means being prepared to undertake independent learning, and demonstrate practical and academic skills. Not all young people can manage this straight from secondary education. Young people may also find that acquiring a degree as an apprentice ties them into working for that employer for a period of time after they complete their studies – or face having to pay back some or all of their fees.

Higher level skills development through a degree apprenticeship

An apprentice who started a degree apprenticeship in September 2015 with Deloitte, Northern Ireland, and the University of Ulster, explained how through deployment on a number of live projects throughout the UK, she has developed her professional skills more than she could have anticipated in such a short time. She has met and been influenced by a growing network of clients and colleagues, and by doing this in tandem with an academic degree qualification – an honours BSc in Business Technology from the University of Ulster – with a real vocational application, her experience has been enriched. She says, at times, this bilateral approach has been challenging, particularly when facing academic exams and assignments while balancing travel and the demands of the projects, but she receives strong support from both the company and the university. She is encouraged to continue striving for her ambition to be the first Deloitte apprenticeship graduate in Northern Ireland to become a partner.

School and college leaders' organisations have highlighted a lack of information and advice about higher and degree apprenticeships, particularly in comparison to other progression routes such as foundation degrees and Higher National qualifications. In addition, teachers are concerned about young people leaving school or college to take up an apprenticeship without completing their Level 3/SCQF Level 6 qualifications, as this may harm their later progression prospects.

Apprenticeship opportunities in England are listed on the Government websites www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship and www.getingofar.gov.uk. Employers often advertise apprenticeship vacancies on their own websites. Some sectors (e.g. the automotive sector) have their own platforms, and in some parts of the country, local or metropolitan authorities have their own online search services. UCAS has also introduced a new search service covering higher and degree apprenticeship opportunities, which takes its data from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA).

However, our research found that teachers, advisers, and students are confused by these services. They voiced frustration about the difficulty of finding information on companies' websites (although noted that large employers, particularly large accountancy firms, are exemplars of good practice), and listings do not spell out clearly what qualifications are required or accepted. For example, some employers ask for three A levels or equivalent, but do not explain what might be considered as 'equivalent', and others express requirements using old UCAS Tariff points. Some were concerned that not all opportunities appear to be advertised on national websites, with employers focusing their efforts locally. This may stem from confusion about the difference between apprenticeships – which are jobs with a learning component – and degrees or higher education programmes which are learning opportunities on which an individual enrolls. Advisers recommended that a national search service for degree apprenticeship opportunities by university would be helpful.

From the point of view of young people, we were told that the apprenticeship application process appears complex, confusing, and opaque. There are sometimes very tight deadlines, and a lack of clarity about the application process and feedback.

The growth in higher, particularly degree, apprenticeships, presents challenges to both employers and universities and colleges, particularly with respect to admissions. Whilst employers are responsible for recruiting and putting forward their employees for apprenticeships, how the process works and the extent to which universities are involved vary – not least in differentiating between older apprentices who are established employees, compared to new hires who may be straight out of school or college.

The importance of good IAG and support for students

Huddersfield New College regards degree apprenticeships as a positive progression pathway for those Level 3 students for whom they are appropriate. Staff have actively promoted them, and since getting their first student accepted on a degree apprenticeship three years ago, each year more students secure a place. The college encourages former students to return to tell the current cohort about degree apprenticeships – this informs them of progression and career pathways they may not have been aware of, and raises interest and aspirations.

To support students' success in recruitment, they are prepared as if for a job interview. The college has found that larger employers apply similar principles for recruitment of degree apprentices as they do other employees.

Despite the success of its students in terms of acceptances on degree apprenticeships, there are frustrations for the college's IAG advisers, which they believe are likely to be shared by others. They feel that although there is a reasonable amount of information on degree apprenticeships available, at present there is a lack of coherence and a variability in its quality, accuracy, and transparency. From a student perspective, access to relevant information can be challenging, and a lack of advanced information on opportunities makes early research and planning difficult.

Some higher education providers have indicated that, where they are working with large employers, they are happy for the business to select apprentices. Others are clear they will apply their existing admissions criteria, and reject any applicants who do not satisfy these. Our research also identified some universities who indicated they would be willing to lower their entry requirements for degree apprenticeships, or accept applicants presenting a more diverse portfolio of qualifications, including Level 3/SCQF Level 6 apprenticeships. Some higher education providers will also accept learners with a good portfolio of GCSEs, who do not have Level 3 qualifications, provided they have relevant work experience or recognised prior learning.

A typical degree apprenticeship application process

One degree apprentice described the application process as very challenging, but procedurally straightforward and easy to follow. Firstly, she completed an online application that included a numerical test and a verbal reasoning test, and was delighted when she received the result and was invited for an interview. After the first interview, the next stage was a group exercise, and this was her first real introduction to some of the people she works with today. The day ended with a final interview with one of the company directors. She said it was a challenging and exhausting day, but for her, thoroughly rewarding, as she was successful.

Recent UCAS surveys of applicants suggest that many young people are considering degree apprenticeship opportunities alongside applying for undergraduate courses, and there is likely to be an increase in the numbers making separate, parallel applications. This has the potential to cause practical issues for advisers, employers, and higher education providers, as young people may seek to trade off opportunities, particularly where employers and universities may be prepared to take different levels of entry qualifications for full-time degree students versus degree apprentices.

Progression and recognition

Much has been written about the perceptions that students, parents, advisers, and employers have about apprenticeships. This, in part, reflects beliefs about the value of the skills and qualifications gained, and the extent to which they prepare apprentices for roles in a company or the wider employment market. The changes outlined above, and the introduction of apprenticeships at all levels, particularly higher and degree apprenticeships, should in time challenge perceptions about the suitability of apprenticeships as a route for securing higher level skills and qualifications.

As universities are developing and growing degree apprenticeship provision, they are starting to face challenges about how apprentices are perceived by academics, staff, and students. Some universities reported that apprentices may not be perceived as 'real' undergraduates, whilst others are working hard to ensure that apprentices are – and are made to feel – part of the university community.

Much of this depends on how higher and degree apprenticeships are delivered. The length of a higher or degree apprenticeship can vary between three and six years. Some higher education providers are clear that the demands of a degree apprenticeship mean it cannot be completed in any less than four and a half to five years, without compromising academic standards. However, others are confident it can be achieved within three to four years, depending on mode of delivery, and the extent to which learning and development are integrated into the workplace. These providers emphasise the integrated nature of learning and work.

The balance between work-based and on-campus learning varies considerably, and different approaches are being adopted by different employer-university partnerships, and in different employment sectors. For example, the University of Sheffield's Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) favours the day release model. It has used this approach for foundation degrees, and will continue it for degree apprenticeships, to ensure young apprentices have the discipline of regular study alongside work. On the other hand, both Aston University and Manchester Metropolitan University, who deliver digital and technology solutions degree apprenticeships, advocate a block release approach to help ensure apprentices have sufficient experience of programming.

A delivery model for degree apprenticeships

Aston University is an early adopter of two degree apprenticeships: digital and technical solutions, and chartered management.

The digital and technical solutions apprenticeships take four and a half years to complete. There are two teaching periods each year, with learners able to start on either start date. Apprentices are workplace-based. The initial seven weeks of the apprenticeship are on campus. For most other modules, apprentices are on campus two days every three months, which can be at weekends. They are expected to spend 10 – 15 hours studying each week, largely through distance learning.

The chartered management apprenticeship is similar in delivery, but there is no initial training module, and more evening sessions. There is a requirement for the equivalent of 150 days of full-time study over the programme.

Aston University cites the aligned and applied way of learning as a strength of the provision. Learners apply their learning directly to what they are doing in the workplace. They have examples of students who started an on-campus degree at another university and dropped out, but who are now succeeding in an apprenticeship due to the different, but equally demanding, style of learning. However, learners must also be aware that the student experience is very different, with little interaction occurring with the wider student body. Equally, learners must be mindful that the standard of learning remains the same – it is the delivery method that differs.

In England, all apprenticeships, including higher and degree apprenticeships, are required to have an end-point assessment (EPA), which is the means by which apprentices can achieve the occupational competence set out in the standard. This is a complex issue, since depending on the apprenticeship standard and the sector, a degree may – or may not – be sufficient to meet EPA requirements. For example, in chartered management, an apprentice securing a relevant degree will still need to undertake a separate professional assessment – a standard Chartered Management Institute (CMI) assessment – to secure a licence to practise. Alternatively, the EPA may be fully integrated into the degree assessment, as is the case for degree apprenticeships in digital solutions.

Where there is a separate EPA, the completion of the degree generally comes first, with the EPA following later. The time taken to achieve the EPA after the degree varies, with six months a common timeframe, although it may take several years longer. This could create issues for individuals if they are tied to an employer to secure their apprenticeship certificate, or face repaying tuition fees if they leave. It may drive interest in Level 4 and Level 5 higher apprenticeships, which offer a more flexible progression route.

Widening participation

In theory, higher and degree apprenticeships could contribute to widening participation. They provide an opportunity to achieve a degree or higher level qualification without taking out loans for tuition fees or maintenance, and apprentices are paid a salary whilst they work and study. This may appeal to older individuals who did not participate in higher education immediately after post-secondary education, but who now have a clear idea about their career, and want to invest in developing their skills.

Equally, higher and degree apprenticeships provide a progression pathway for Level 3 apprentices which did not exist before. These people may be paid quite well, and unable to forego their salary to access full-time higher education. Degree apprenticeships also, as UCAS feedback shows, appeal to younger people who are concerned about rising tuition fees and interest rates (where these apply), and are questioning whether a full-time undergraduate degree is 'worth it'.

However, young people need to ensure they are well prepared for the rigours of working and studying for a degree at the same time. Equally, as some of the trailblazer apprenticeships have shown, the selection processes used by large companies for their degree apprenticeships are highly competitive and tend to require applicants to have high academic credentials. In these circumstances, upwardly mobile, well-connected, and well-supported students are more likely to be successful.

Suggested actions

UCAS and other stakeholders involved in promoting information about degree apprenticeships should:

- consider how information can more easily be presented, to make the range of opportunities available clear and transparent, and outline the benefits and disadvantages of the different progression routes

Employers and higher education providers offering higher and degree apprenticeships should:

- ensure the qualifications and experience required to participate in an apprenticeship are clearly articulated, and take into account newer qualifications like Tech levels
- have a clear and consistent policy on entry requirements
- take active steps to ensure that applicants from under-represented groups have access to degree apprenticeship opportunities
- consider the implications if apprentices fail to complete and have strategies in place to mitigate the risks for the apprentice

- recognise the relative value of all pathways through higher education, and when planning degree apprenticeships consider the possible impact on other valid pathways, e.g. foundation degrees, Higher National qualifications, and higher apprenticeships

Teachers and advisers should:

- ensure they understand the latest developments in higher and degree apprenticeships, and the pros and cons of apprenticeships compared to other progression routes



Appendix 1: Policy context

The report is set against a backdrop of significant policy development in relation to technical and vocational education.

In January 2017, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) published a green paper, **Building our Industrial Strategy**. This furthers the post-16 skills plan, and both higher and further education sectors will play a key role in the implementation of the skills pillar, providing additional support to deliver high quality technical education, working in tandem with technical and professional degrees and degree apprenticeships. It includes recommendations that seek to strengthen vocational and technical routes, enhance information and advice around these opportunities, and create wider economic benefits.

Vocational qualifications and routes

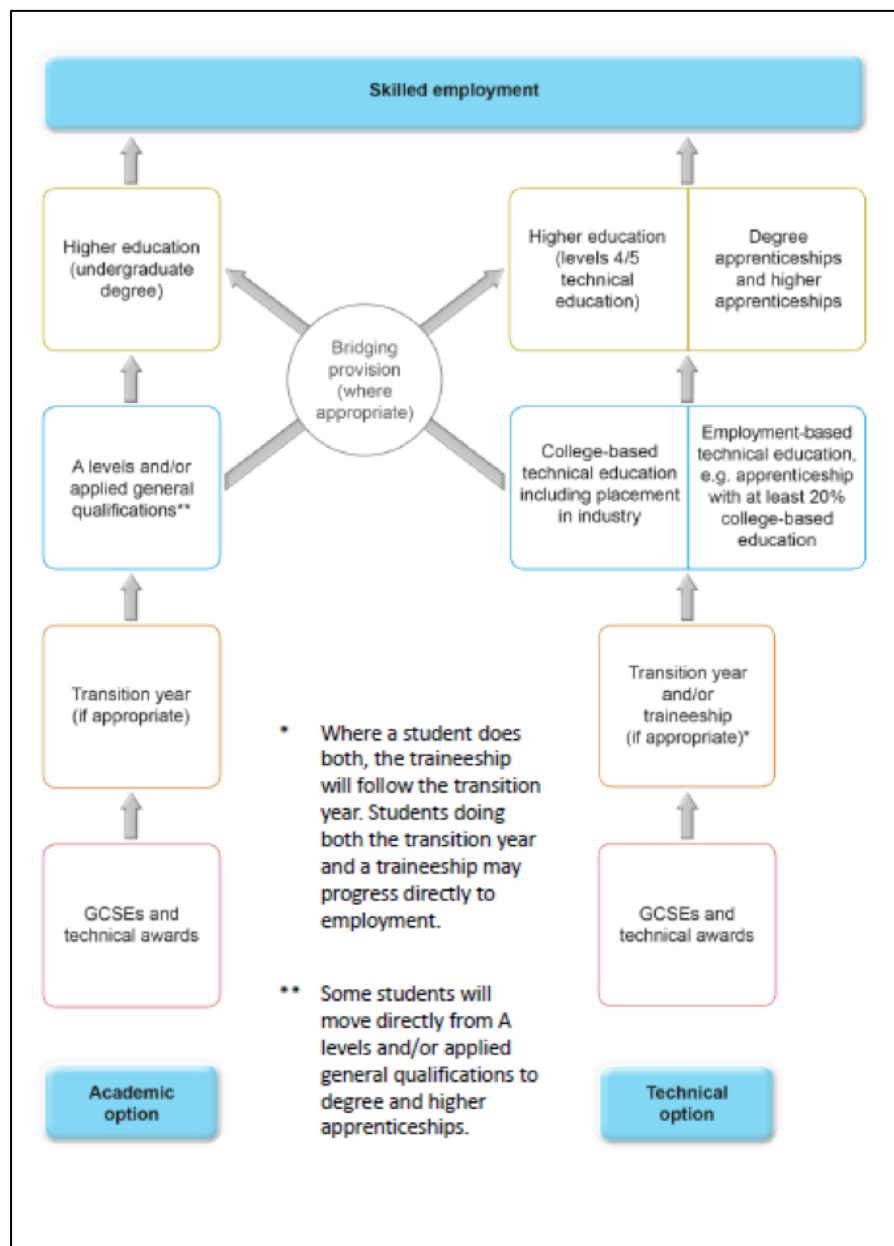
In 2016, the Department for Education in England (DfE) launched its post-16 skills plan based on the Sainsbury Review of Technical Education.⁹ The Technical and Further Education Act (2017) implemented the recommendations of the post-16 skills plan (2016).

As a result, pathways will become more distinguished as academic or technical, and the range of technical options will be reduced to 15 occupational routes. The intention is that this will enable young people to chart and navigate the pathways more effectively, with bridging provision planned to allow learners to transfer if they wish. This is illustrated in the chart below from the DfE's post-16 skills plan.¹⁰

⁹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education

¹⁰ www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536043/Post-16_Skills_Plan.pdf

Diagram 2: How the academic and technical options would work



The Institute for Apprenticeships (IFA) will oversee both apprenticeships and technical education; this is intended to improve coherence across the pathways, including at Levels 4 and 5. The IFA will also maintain a register of approved technical education qualifications at Levels 4 and 5, which meet the standards set by its panels of professionals and will be eligible for funding via Advanced Learner Loans. In addition, the Sainsbury Panel has recommended that the Government undertakes further work to examine how to ensure that clear progression pathways develop from Levels 4 and 5 to degree apprenticeships, and other higher education at Levels 6 and 7.

Many of the vocational qualifications offered in Wales will be identical to those offered in England, and are classified as:

- IVETs (introductory qualifications, suitable for all ages)
- CVETs (continuing qualifications linked to job skills, suitable for learners over the age of 16)

Qualifications Wales has been undertaking a range of sector reviews of vocational qualifications. For example, health and social care and childcare have been reviewed, with a view to developing a new suite of health and social care qualifications in Wales.

In Scotland, SQA accredits vocational qualifications. Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) are based on national standards, and provide evidence that learners can do their jobs well. Studied in the workplace, in college, or with training providers, SVQs are available in a wide range of subject areas¹¹ across five SVQ levels, which broadly map across SCQF Levels 4 – 12.

Since May 2016, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has been the sole regulator of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. However, much of the vocational provision currently available in England is also available in Northern Ireland.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships represent a key priority for each of the four UK administrations. In England, the Government has set an ambitious target of reaching three million apprenticeship starts by 2020, and recently published data suggests this is within reach¹². At the heart of the reform programme is the objective of improving the quality of apprenticeships, as well as supporting the nation to bridge skills gaps and fulfill its productivity potential. Key changes include the formation of new apprenticeship standards, which have been developed by employer groups known as trailblazers.

Apprenticeships in the rest of the UK continue to be based on frameworks and qualifications. For example, in Scotland, modern apprenticeships at SCQF Level 4 are well-established, with over 25,000 people choosing this pathway each year. A key innovation in Scotland is the formation of foundation apprenticeships. These are programmes aimed at senior phase secondary pupils, which sit alongside their profile of Highers and National 5s. Whilst a learner embarking on a foundation apprenticeship is not employed, it provides the opportunity for students to develop skills in a workplace environment.

¹¹ www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/41339.2571.html

¹² researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06113#fullreport

A key component of apprenticeship policy in all four UK countries is the creation of apprenticeships incorporating the attainment of a degree. These would see the individual achieving a bachelor's or master's degree. They will also be qualified to work in the relevant profession, which may be achieved through the degree or through a separate assessment. Universities and colleges are working with employers to design the degree components of these apprenticeships.



Appendix 2: Apprenticeship terminology across the UK

Apprenticeship titles across the UK by level of award

NQF/RQF Level	England		Northern Ireland	Wales
8				
7	Higher	Degree	Higher level	Higher
6	Higher	Degree	Higher level	Higher
5	Higher		Higher level	Higher
4	Higher		Higher level	Higher

Scotland		SCQF
	Graduate level	12
Professional	Graduate level	11
Professional	Graduate level	10
Technical		9
Technical	Graduate level	8
	Modern	7

Appendix 3: Glossary

Access to HE Diploma: a qualification, regulated by QAA, specifically aimed at students without traditional qualifications, to help them prepare for studying at the higher level.

Alternative providers: providers of higher education courses which are not in receipt of 'recurrent funding' from the higher education funding bodies or other public bodies.

Apprenticeships: jobs in which the employer accepts full responsibility for training.

Apprenticeship levy: a charge levied by Government from April 2017 on all organisations with a wage bill of more than £3m in order to fund apprenticeships.

Articulation: the policy in Scotland whereby students completing an HNC or HND are enabled to progress to a degree course at a university.

Awarding organisation: an organisation which designs, develops, delivers, and awards qualifications in the UK.

BEIS: the UK Government's Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy.

BEng: Bachelor of Engineering.

Block release: a model for study within an apprenticeship, where the apprentice attends university or college for a substantial period of time – for example, one month or one term.

Competition and Markets Authority (CMA): a non-ministerial Government department which works to promote competition for the benefit of consumers.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA): the body responsible for advising Government, monitoring educational standards, and awarding qualifications in Northern Ireland.

Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW): the national qualifications framework for Wales.

Day release: a model for study within an apprenticeship where the apprentice attends university or college one day each week.

Degree apprenticeship: an apprenticeship in which the apprentice studies for a bachelor's or master's degree as an integral part of the apprenticeship.

DfE: Department for Education in England.

End-point assessments: an assessment at the end of an apprenticeship in England which qualifies the individual to work in the relevant profession at the level of the apprenticeship.

Extended degree: four-year degree programme that includes an introductory year, known as a foundation year, or year zero.

Further education (FE): the sector that provides education below degree level, for learners over the age of 16.

Foundation degree: two-year courses (full-time), designed and accredited by a university. They are the equivalent of the first two years of an honours degree, and have been developed for most subjects with the built-in option of a top-up to a bachelor's degree. They are not available in Scotland.

Foundation year: one year of university study preceding a full three-year degree programme. It can be taken either as a standalone programme, or as an integral part of a four-year degree. The latter is often called an extended degree.

Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ): the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE): the body that promotes and funds teaching and research in higher education in England.

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW): the body that promotes and funds teaching and research in higher education in Wales.

Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA): the official agency for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of qualitative information about higher education in the UK.

Higher apprenticeship: any apprenticeship in England or Wales at Level 4 or above.

Higher level apprenticeship: any apprenticeship in Northern Ireland at Level 4 or above.

HNC: Higher National Certificate – a work-related qualification provided by higher and further education in the UK, equivalent to the first year of university study.

HND: Higher National Diploma – a work-related qualification provided by higher and further education in the UK, equivalent to the first two years of university study.

IAG: information, advice, and guidance.

Institute for Apprenticeships: a non-departmental Government body in England, sponsored by the DfE, to ensure high quality apprenticeship standards, and advise Government on funding for each standard.

Levels 3 – 7: the levels of the regulatory frameworks in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales between A levels and a master's degree.

Licence to practise: a qualification that meets the legislative requirements to carry out a specific job.

Ofqual: Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation – a non-ministerial Government body which regulates examinations and assessment in England.

Pearson: a UK awarding organisation for qualifications.

Pilot: a qualification or programme which is being trialled and available only to a controlled group of participants.

Qualifications Wales: a Welsh Government sponsored body which regulates non-degree qualifications and the qualifications system in Wales.

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): the independent body that monitors standards and quality in higher education in the UK.

Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF): the framework for the regulation of qualifications in England, introduced in 2015.

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF): regulatory framework for qualifications in Scotland.

Skills Funding Agency (SFA) (Education Skills Agency from April 2017): the body that funds skills training in further education in England.

Scottish Funding Council (SFC): the national strategic body responsible for funding teaching, learning, and research in Scotland.

Skills Development Scotland (SDS): the national skills body which supports the people and businesses in Scotland to develop and apply skills.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SME): businesses which employ fewer than 250 people.

Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA): the body that accredits and awards qualifications in Scotland.

STEM: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Student Loans Company (SLC): the non-profit Government-owned organisation which provides loans and grants to students in universities and colleges in the UK.

Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ): qualifications regulated by the SQA, which provide evidence that learners can do their jobs well.

Trailblazers: groups of employers that work together to design new apprenticeship standards for jobs within a specific centre.

Training provider: a public or private organisation that delivers vocational education and training programmes.

Universities UK (UUK): the organisation which represents the vice-chancellors of UK universities.

Year zero: the term used by HESA in its data to identify the first year of an extended four-year degree.

Appendix 4: List of contributors

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