



Degree Apprenticeships in England: What can we learn from the experiences of apprentices, employers and education and training providers?

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SKOPE Seminar



Outline

- Brief introduction to Degree Apprenticeships
- The changing policy context
- Introduction to the research project
- Focus on motivation, benefits, challenges of degree apprenticeships
- The experiences of two degree apprentices – case studies
- Final thoughts

What are Degree Apprenticeships?

Launched in 2015/16

Funded through the apprenticeship levy introduced in 2017, now Growth and Skills Levy, paid by employers

Apprentice is an employee and must spend at least 6 hours per week of normal working hours on off-the-job training.

Work towards a full Bachelors or Masters degree - Level 6 and Level 7 (RQF)

At least 100 universities offer DAs across around 170 programmes

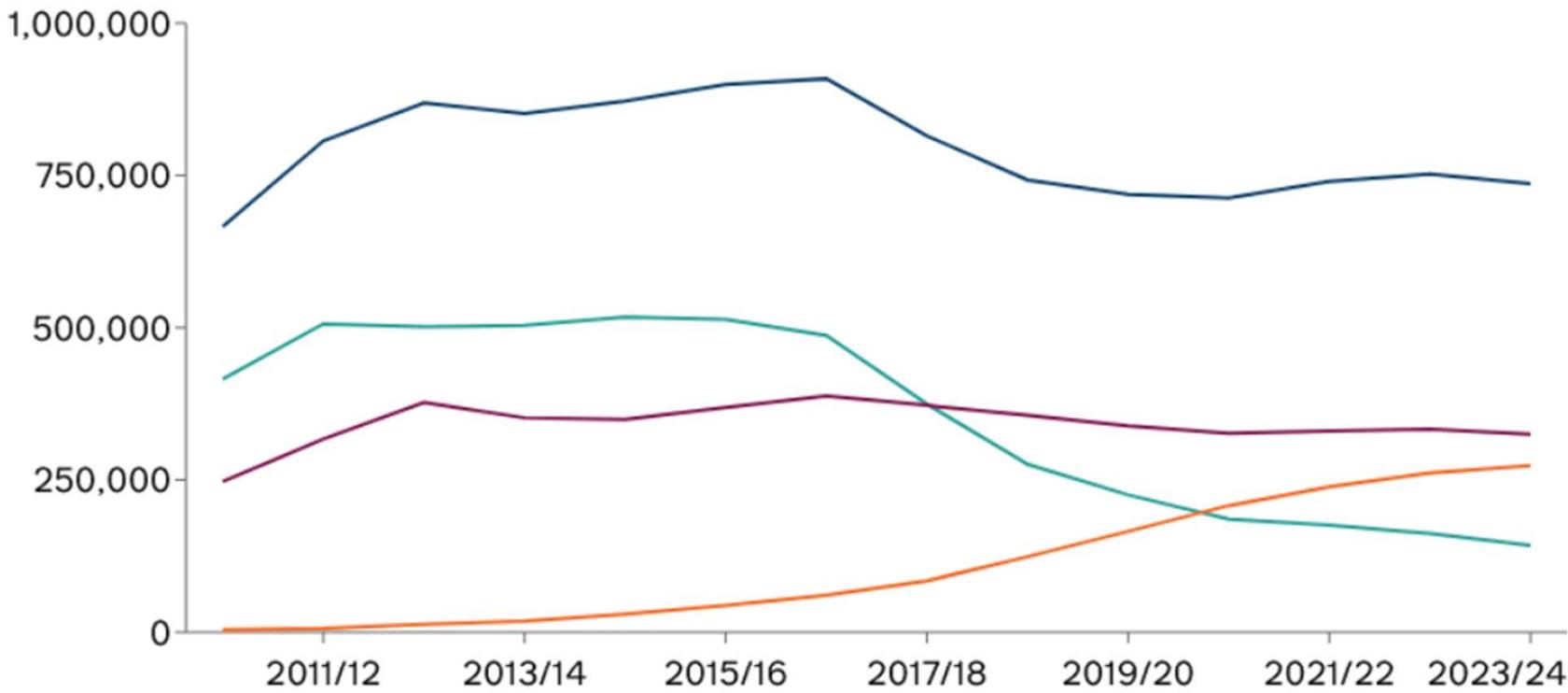
'Employers are in the driving seat' model.

Standards developed by 'trailblazer' employer groups

Programmes designed by training providers (majority HEIs) based on standards

Primarily targeted at 18 to 19-year-olds as an alternative route to gaining a degree. However, also suitable for existing employees and more widely taken up aged 25+.

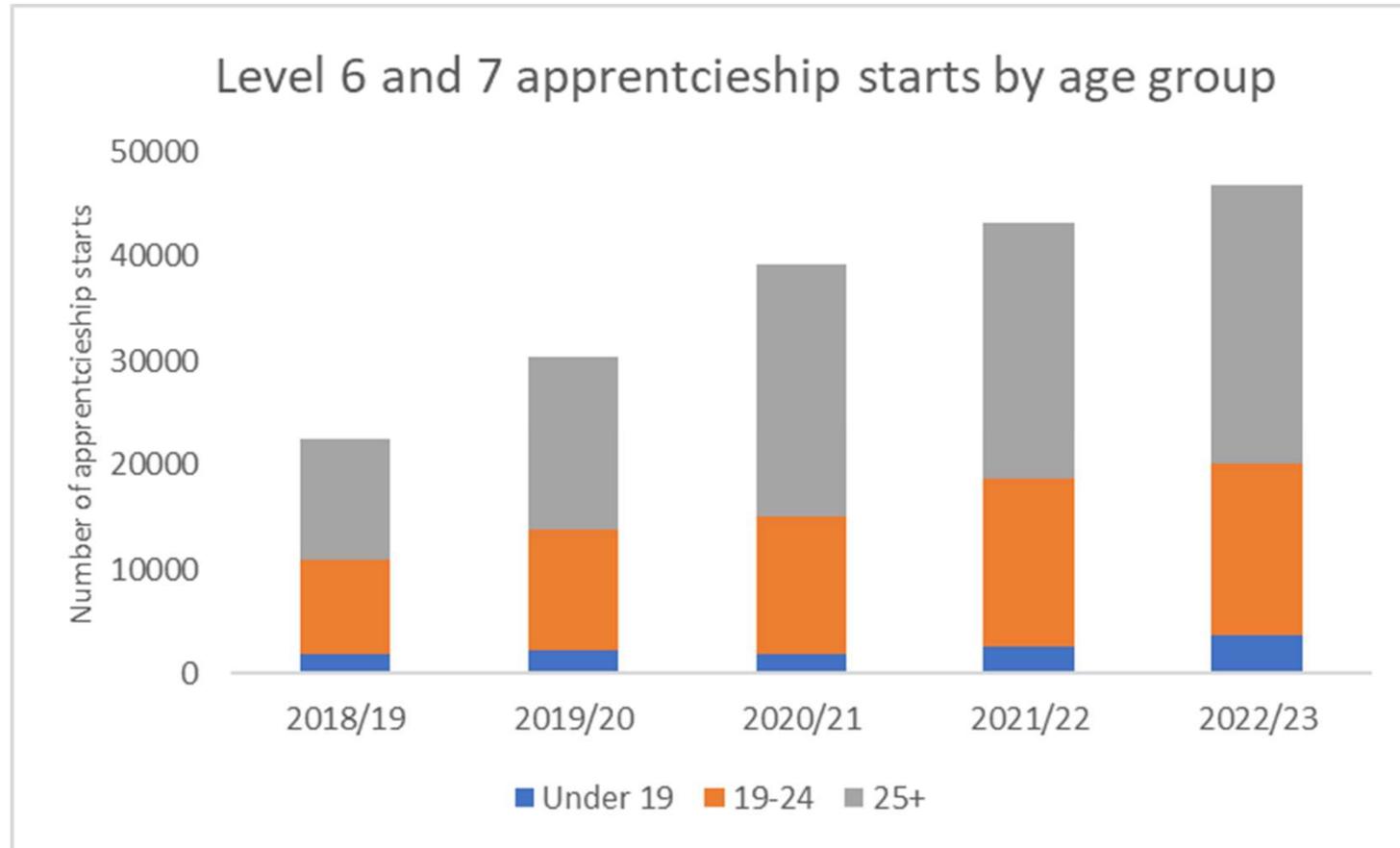
All apprenticeship participation by level



- ◆ Total participation
- ◆ Intermediate Apprenticeship
- ◆ Advanced Apprenticeship
- ◆ Higher Apprenticeship

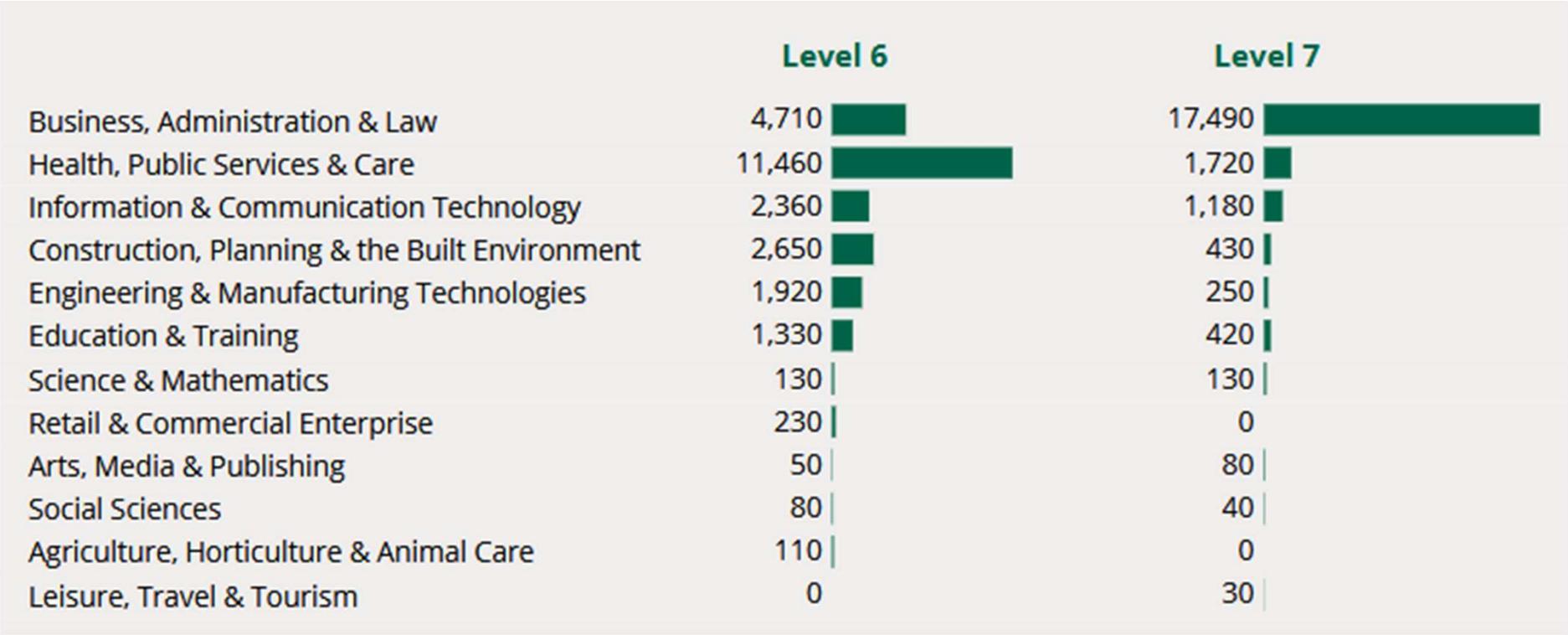
(DfE, 2024a)

Level 6 and 7 apprenticeship starts by age group 2018-2023



(DfE Apprenticeship and Traineeship data library)

Degree apprenticeship starts by sector subject area and level 2022/23



(Bolton and Lewis, 2024, p. 26)

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8741/CBP-8741.pdf>

Apprenticeships reforms

- July 2024, the Government announced that IfATE would be dissolved and Skills England will take over its functions. Skills England was formally established on the 2 June 2025.

'identifies skills gaps in the economy and uses this insight to improve provision so that people and businesses can access the right training to connect people to jobs'

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/skills-England>)

- Since 2023-24 DA applications happen via the UCAS website: finding a vacancy and manage applications
- Funding of Level 7 apprenticeships are changed from 1 January 2026.
 - Government will fund L7 for under 21 y.o. and
 - For under 25 y.o. who are care leavers or with Education and Health Care Plan
 - Funding of Level 7 apprenticeships will not change if it already has started.

Latest policy developments

Statement made by



Sir Keir Starmer ➤
Prime Minister
Labour

Holborn and St Pancras  Commons

Statement

I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following Machinery of Government change.

I am today confirming that responsibility for apprenticeships, adult further education, skills, training and careers, and Skills England, will move from the Department for Education to the Department for Work and Pensions.

Responsibility for higher education, and further education, skills, training and careers for those aged 19 years and under will remain with the Department for Education.

Apprenticeships reforms

- Apprenticeship Levy to be replaced with Growth and Skills Levy in April 2026: offering flexibility and funding of 'apprenticeship units' in AI, digital, and engineering.
- Changes to funding announced in Autumn Budget, including fully-funded training for under-25s in SMEs and removing the 10% uplift for levy-payers.
- Assessment reformed so that apprentices are assessed on only a sample of knowledge and skills, while employers are responsible for testing behaviours.
- Plans to create 50,000 more apprenticeship places through funding for SMEs and a new brokerage pilot to connect young people with opportunities.



01.12.2025

Apprenticeships Work
campaign's response to the
Autumn Budget

High expectations of Degree Apprenticeships

- They should contribute to national economic growth and filling higher level skills shortages (DfE, 2020).
- They should address low levels of productivity and low investment in skills training (DfE, 2020).

Other expectations:

- DAs should contribute to a more diverse workforce
- They should support social mobility (widen participation to HE and higher-level roles)

Can DAs change the status of TVET/ apprenticeships?

Aims and Methodology

Research questions:

How are DAs perceived and experienced by stakeholders; employers, education and training providers, degree apprentices, and policymakers?

- *How have stakeholders experienced design and development of DA programmes? How did they ensure consistency and quality?*
- *How was delivery organised and experienced by employers, education and training providers, and degree apprentices? How did support structures and processes set up ensuring degree apprentices' needs are met?*
- ***What are the motivations amongst different stakeholders, for engaging with DAs? How are their experiences shaped by the barriers and opportunities they encounter?***
- *How does recruitment support or hinder diversity of DAs? What works well and what are the barriers to diversify new recruits or existing employees on DA programme?*

Methods:

- Semi-structured interviews with policy makers, universities, apprentices, employers and other relevant sector bodies.
- Thematic analysis using Nvivo
- Ethics

Interviewees	Total
Policy makers	9
Providers	34
Employer	18
Other Stakeholders	2
Apprentice	24
SME	12
Total	99

Who is participating in DAs?

Two distinct groups:

- Recent school/college leavers; new to the workplace
 - Limited DA opportunities for young people
 - Limited CEIAG at school (although signs of some improvement)
 - Often 'savvy' young people; those with social/cultural capital
- Existing employees/mature (more commonly)
 - Opportunities weren't available to them at the traditional entry point of university (i.e. financial constraints, having children at a young age)
 - Broadly considering university was 'not for them', e.g. learning difficulties or style of learning in traditional HE did not suit them.
 - Opportunity for broader socio-economic groups to participate

Apprentices' motivation for engaging with DAs

- Earning while training
- No tuition fees, obtaining a degree
- Stay local
- Keep their jobs
 - progress in their jobs
 - getting promotion after graduation
- Gaining the vital work experience employers value
- Want to work, not interested in 'student experience'
- Style of learning preference
- More likely to gain employment after graduation
- Re-engaging with education after family responsibilities diminish
- Re-engage with education at higher level as current job requires and gain a degree

Reasons for engaging with DAs - Apprentices

Career pathways and opportunities

'I knew that I wanted to be a biological scientist since I was about fifteen or something. So I think when you're sort of presented with the fact that when you're eighteen you can just go and do it rather than having to wait three years' (Apprentice 14)

Style of learning preferences

'I didn't particularly enjoy classroom learning, so I knew that university wouldn't be a suitable route for me' (Apprentice 09)

Finance

'I don't quite know why I'd go to university, incur all those fees, when there's this all-inclusive package that would give me every single thing, if not more' (Apprentice 10).

'I didn't have to take a pay cut. So obviously, I still kept my full-time wage because I have a young family, I have bills to pay' (Apprentice 15).

What motivates employers to engage with DAs?

- They can choose their own apprentice;
 - They train their apprentices and develop skills, knowledge and competences valuable for their trade;
 - They get to know the apprentice during the training;
 - The apprentice may be offered a job at the end of the training (this is an advantage for both sides);
 - The apprentice is ready work as soon as he/she becomes an employee and contributes to the economic advancement of the company.
 - Offer development opportunities for existing employees
-
- Increase diversity of workforce and support social mobility
 - It is an investment in the future workforce - Build their talent pipeline
 - Use the levy money

Motivations of Employers

- **DA's offer long-term sustainable employment**

I think the degree apprenticeships is the way forward, because you will offer opportunities for people that wouldn't be able to afford them first of all. You're showing that you're actually investing and that you're serious in terms of your long-term...That you've got a long-term vision in terms of, you know, upskilling local, you know, your staff for the long-term, and hopefully you'll reap the reward" (Employer (Large) 06)

- **Progression opportunities +**

I think progression's one element. I think getting time to really kind of understand your current role in its context, and therefore being sort of more useful to the team, the department, the whole (Employer Large 03)

- **Upskill existing staff, give them progression opportunities and retain them:**

'...raising the knowledge and the skills and the learning of employees' (Employer C02)

Motivations of Employers

- **‘Moulded’ with the skills set that the company requires**

‘You’ve grown your own talent and, you know, they work to your values, they know your environment, they know your beliefs, and they know your sort of plans for the future.’

(Employer D06)

‘The benefit we get from those range of people is the enthusiasm, the buy-in, the sheer energy that some of these people bring into the business’ (SME Employer 07).

- **May support employers’ diversity agenda – e.g. gender gap, social mobility**

‘They’ve got this huge gender gap to fill in their middle management and into their senior leadership team. So they’re really looking at ways of growing that pipeline.’ (Employer B06)

Motivations of Employers

- **Inclusion - Investment**

*So here is this person who is absolutely should be a nurse because she absolutely knows how to do wound care and you know, things that are really, really key [...] And then she emailed me about two months later because obviously we're advertising for the next step. And she said, though, do you honestly think I could do this? And it was one of those moments where you sort of go, Oh, my God, **that's absolutely why we have spent all this time, energy investing in because she'll be a nurse in nine months' time.. And she will stay with our trust forever.** (ETP Employer 03)*

- **More than just upskilling**

'taking a young person, moulding them and growing them for the future' (SME Employer 02)

Reasons for employers not engaging with DAs

- Administratively time-consuming and complex
- Not all SMEs pay the levy – no access to the *'pot of money'*
- Not understanding DAs :
'And I think the twenty per cent off-the-job training is kind of a bit of a mental hurdle for some of the line managers to get over because they think they're losing someone for twenty per cent' (Employer (Large) 16)
- School children are often unaware of certain professions (*orthotist*) hence recruiting from existing staff members.
- Negative connotation linked to 'apprenticeships'
- It can be costly, risky and complex to justify investment – especially for SMEs.
'because [SMEs] are so resource poor and everything is, you know, you're just at the knife-edge of being able to do your job in a business that needs, every person counts. You know, one person that isn't productive is life-threatening for the business' (SME Employer 01)

SMEs require targeted support

There's a disbalance between a small employer getting pushed out, large employer, you know, utilising their levy...The apprenticeship system has swung to a system dominated by large employers who want high-level skills, and they tend to be, they generally tend to be adults...And certainly at higher level we tend to find that the programmes are designed more around the needs of large employers. (Other)

preferred model is to have a big employer with a big cohort, where they can just do it all under one umbrella (SME Employer 03).

trying to pedal back from working with SMEs because it's so expensive, so hard to get hold of [...] We have a lot of SMEs on our books. If you ask me, "do I want any more?", the answer's "no" (ETP 09).

SMEs require targeted support

'How can we support them in their workforce development? Because there are some very severe issues that aren't going to go away. So it's been great to invite those small employers to be part of our, as a stakeholder in our programme. And they've been able to help develop a curriculum' (Provider B09).

'[breadth of experiences for apprentices, for example, across] large NHS partners, the small NHS partners like GP surgeries, with the local authorities and with an assortment of other partners like training provider organisations and social care partners, like nursing homes and small businesses' (Other stakeholder 01).

Motivation for engaging with DAs - Universities

- Often lead and pursued by a 'believer' in the model of apprenticeships
- Increasing the number of students (income from tuition fees)
- Recognising the business opportunity, not wanting to be left out
- Fit with/further develop already existing vocationally-related provision at the university

Challenges

- Resource intense programme especially early on
- Need experienced teaching staff (with industry links and experiences)
- Recruiting new/other staff members – working with industry link

Reasons for engaging with DAs - Universities

Fit with existing provisions

'We've always been a very predominantly vocationally focused university, so as a portfolio it makes perfect sense' (ETP 25).

Fulfil broader strategic aims

DAs enable ETPs to *'articulate [the] societal, social mobility, economical, impact of our provision, our relationship with employers, and what we do'* (ETP 06), including the *'greening agenda'* (ETP 11), and addressing *'skills shortages'* (ETP 21).

Challenges to engaging with DAs - Universities

Resource intense programme especially early on

DAs are *'heavily subsidised by the other, larger work of the university'* (ETP 11).

'lots of investment, lots of prime pumping of funding into the development of staff teams for development and delivery of DAs' (ETP 01).

Viability

'Why the heck are we doing this for £21,000 when it would be, you know, £28,000 and a lot cheaper to deliver, because you don't have skills coaches, we don't need to worry about Ofsted?' (ETP 21).

Funding model

'You're always kind of looking over your shoulder with apprenticeships to see whether, whether they're going to be running next year. Which is not great because you can't, universities can't build, or FE can't build for the future' (ETP 23).

Lack of Awareness, clear communication, targeted support

The level of knowledge and understanding about DAs is very variable and is not helped by the complexity of the system. There is a need of clear and coherent communication about DAs.

- Providing direct and tailored information advice and support to SMEs, who are crucial to the success of apprenticeships more generally.
- Information to both large employers and SMEs about the levy transfer process - often not known about or fully understood.
- IAG available to young people about DAs and the specifics of what the courses entail is often insufficient. They also need tailored support with the application process.

Experiences of stakeholders – clear communication

[I wasn't] really given the opportunity to go and explore [DAs], I was very much pushed down the "you'll apply to UCAS" route'. (Apprentice 23)

my workplace mentor hasn't fully understood, whether that's because of me explaining it or the university, about their particular role within the apprenticeship (Apprentice 04).

Clarity around what's required from assessments. Exactly what's needed in terms of placement. You need a good local coordinator in the department who understands the time constraints versus what they're going to need in terms of practical experience (Large Employer 02).

I didn't quite understand how it all like fitted together or like what it meant. [I didn't know about] day-to-day life of what your apprenticeship would look like (Apprentice 12).

Mike and Kate

School leavers recruited as an apprentice (STEM) in a large multinational pharmaceutical and biotechnology company

CEIAG in school/college

On the job support

Off the job support

Tripartite meetings

University experience

Assessment and feedback

Balancing work, study and life

Final reflections

- DAs provide a stable pathway to career progression and upward mobility within industries for apprentices and employers
- Many individuals opt for DAs due to their preference for practically oriented learning and non-academic settings and real-world application of knowledge
- Financial benefits for apprentices, employers
- Employer investment in the future workforce, secure long-term, sustainable employees while simultaneously addressing skill gaps within their industries.
- Administaring levy funds was a source of confusion and presented a substantial bureaucratic burden, particularly on SMEs.
- ETPs often reported DAs were not economically viable, and expensive compared to other forms of HE provision.
- DAs as tools to diversify workforces
- Challenges do exist



Thank you

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