

Higher/Degree Apprenticeships and the Diversification of Transitions in England

Bill Esmond

Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, University of Derby, Kedleston Road, Derby, UK DE22 1GB

Summary: The relationships between apprenticeship and higher education vary internationally: unlike countries whose apprenticeships and TVET offer tertiary vocational progression, post-school education in England is dominated by universities. Professional or technical additions to the higher education system have generally conformed to the norms of established universities. Apprenticeships at higher levels now contribute to moves to create a second tertiary pathway, with degree apprenticeships now offering both a work-based route and a qualification at bachelor level. Concerns about access and permeability between ‘technical’ and ‘academic’ routes provided the basis for a study of possibilities for ‘bridging’ between work-based and existing higher education provision. The four examples studied succeeded in their primary aim of supporting higher progression but were less effective in supporting permeability across these education pathways. A deeper recognition of the differences among students and their knowledge is suggested as a precondition of effective bridging between formal or implicit sectoral divides.

Keywords: higher apprenticeships, transitions, bridging, permeability

Introduction

The integration of apprenticeships with formal education at higher levels is seen as one of the key indicators of high-quality apprenticeships (OECD 2014). Several countries have developed special opportunities to study vocational fields at tertiary levels, sometimes generically described as Universities of Applied Sciences rather than as higher levels of apprenticeship (Teichler 2008). In these countries, questions of ‘permeability’ ask whether apprentices are able to progress to higher levels of study, although the relationship between apprenticeship and higher education appears to be experiencing changes (Hemkes 2018; Graf 2013).

By contrast, tertiary education in England has long been dominated by the higher education offered in universities. Moves to create apprenticeships at sub-bachelor levels have until now recruited weakly beyond a few specialist schemes. A significant turn in government policy under coalition and Conservative governments since 2010 has attempted to shift this balance. Apprenticeship ‘standards’ introduced following the Richard Review (2012) include more apprenticeships at higher levels. Degree apprenticeships now offer both a work-based route and a qualification at bachelor level. The Sainsbury Review (Independent Panel for Technical Education 2016), as

part of proposals to substantially reform the TVET system, also sought to encourage technical education at tertiary levels, including both levels 4/5 (sub-bachelor) courses and higher apprenticeships. These courses were distinguished from older, university-based degree courses, described as 'academic' higher education.

Reflecting the strength of demand for higher education in England, however, the Sainsbury Review also sought to counter anxieties that technical education should not be seen as a dead end: 'as a trap... when there are not enough bridges down the road to higher-level education programmes' (OECD 2014, p.3). The report proposed that students should be able to progress from across secondary 'technical' programmes onto 'academic' higher education at the same time. Correspondingly, the Review proposed that students of 'academic' secondary education should be able to access 'technical' forms of tertiary study. This represented a considerable challenge, going beyond the work of various initiatives that, during the last 40 years in England, have been developed to support higher education progression.

The study reported here was designed to examine what kind of curriculum and practices might be included within provision to support bridging between pathways at the same time. The research question was: What pathways to higher levels of study and work are emerging through higher and degree apprenticeships in England and what kind of opportunities will enable young people to negotiate them?

Methods and research design

Because the Sainsbury proposals had suggested that young people should be able to make transitions in both directions, the study was designed to provide two examples of transitions from work-based secondary to 'academic' higher education and vice versa. Thus two sites were selected which were expected to provide transitions from work-based studies into higher education: an apprenticeship extension 'bridging' course supporting progression onto professional degrees in nursing and midwifery; and a suite of 'Access to Higher Education' courses, which support candidates without 'A'-level entry qualifications to university progression. Correspondingly, two case studies were constructed around transition from general education to work-based studies at tertiary level. The selection of cases in this direction proved more challenging: at this stage work-based forms of higher education are still weakly developed in England. However, a promising case was an innovation module enabling Foundation degree (sub-bachelor) students to gain credit during work experience; whilst the second case examined firm-based (i.e. sub-bachelor) higher-level apprenticeships.

These four areas were studied using case study methods. Data was collected at both institutional and employment sites. Methods included local documentary analysis, and interviews of staff, students and employment representatives (i.e. training managers). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using schedules that covered the students' experiences on programme but also their earlier experiences and the wider issues encountered by educators and employers. The methods were approved by a university ethics committee; interviews were taped and systematically transcribed in full.

Data analysis was informed by a systematic literature review of the last ten years. Particular attention was paid to the concept of 'transition' and its different applications within the literature. In the literature which addresses transitions through vocational education and training into the labour market, transitions are generally conceptualised in terms of the movement into employment of various types, with some attention paid to questions of attaining stable forms of adulthood, for example

the contrast between 'work-based' and 'education-based transitions' (Ianelli and Raffe 2007). Higher education literature examines different propositions: they tend to focus more directly on how students become attuned to higher education practices. Gale and Parker (2014) have distinguished two strands of this literature, one (characterised as T₁) focused on acculturation to the institutional practices of the institution, the second, T₂, on acquisition of 'student' identity. Gale and Parker suggested a T₃, through which students could navigate change and risk and through which their differences might be accommodated within their institution. As will be seen, these different approaches provide important for the forms of bridging provision discussed here.

Results

Each of the case studies demonstrated the potential of such provision to support transitions to higher levels of study. They achieved this success by focusing strongly on the destinations for which they were preparing students. For their activities simultaneously to enhance transitions across pathways, however, would require further development.

Both of the courses designed to support young people from apprenticeships and vocational programmes onto university courses evidenced high levels of success. The 'bridging course' was designed as an optional extra for healthcare apprentices at upper-secondary level: a university leader of professional degrees reported that degree students who had completed that course achieved academic success as high as students with general education qualifications. Whilst 'Access' courses were designed to recruit candidates without the upper-secondary qualifications to demanded by universities, the courses studied reported high success rates and high numbers of students progressing to highly-regarded universities.

Correspondingly, the routes into high-level industrial employment also reported impressive successes. Although 'higher-level' apprenticeships below bachelor level recruited weakly before the development of degree apprenticeships, those on the firm-based schemes studied benefitted from the close integration of their programmes with the needs of their employers: these could include higher levels of expertise, for example in mathematics, than universities required for applied programmes at corresponding levels. The innovation module was taught at a further education college offering exceptionally high numbers of degree programmes and it was integrated into all programmes in the first year of work-oriented 'Foundation' degrees. It supported student transitions by developing systematic approaches to critical reflection on industry practice.

Of the types of transition discussed above, the focus was clearly on Gale and Parker's (2014) T₁. Access and bridging course students were taught about the expectations of academic study: as the Access course leader expressed it, 'You're not only teaching the student the knowledge, it's the execution of it under pressure.' Former Access students compared their performance to that of former A-level, whom a paramedic student described as 'a bit slacker... more chilled out.' The notion of acquiring student identities (Gale and Parker's T₂) had less resonance for these adults, who reported themselves as testing whether they could survive the rigours of combining study with family roles. Participants on the bridging course and even work-based trainers also performed the distinct identities of adults proving their ability to overcome 'academic' barriers. Students already employed on higher-level apprenticeships had already adopted the identities of employees. Those studying the innovation module described how it had enabled them to understand what their

employers expected in terms of innovation and, although they compared their own initiatives favourably to the approaches of other employees, they clearly regarded themselves as employees whose work was enhanced by their student activity. Both progressions to higher-level employment and those to degree study succeeded by focusing on the expectations of either university or work destinations.

However, this focus led to all types of provision emphasising the skills and knowledge valued by their target higher-level destinations. The kinds of knowledge that students already possessed were often disregarded. This was particularly evident on routes progressing to university. Access students and graduates interviewed already held qualifications at a level which would allow them to access university courses, if not the ones they wanted. Two former students held school-leaving qualifications sufficient for university study, and in one case a masters degree; current students already held vocational qualifications at upper-secondary level. By contrast, those on higher-level employment progressions were already committed to these routes. For higher apprentices on employer-led schemes, which were often highly selective, their academic achievements were valued according to their significance for employment, such as the extent to which they required advanced mathematics skills. Higher-level apprentices interviewed on the innovation module were not only completing foundation degrees as part of their apprenticeships: they had completed earlier apprenticeships at upper-secondary level with the same firm. None of these cases included the emphasis on difference suggested by Gale and Parker's T₃. Broader areas of earlier knowledge were not specifically explored and developed as part of their higher-level progressions.

It is less clear, therefore, how effectively these routes provided the basis for 'bridging' across routes. In some respects, the distinction between academic and vocational routes appeared instead to be perpetuated. For progression to degrees, attention is warranted to opportunities to build on their existing knowledge, along with guidance about 'student life' oriented to adults with employment backgrounds and additional commitments. For progression onto technical routes, an equally clear preparation is required about the distinctive nature of higher-level learning, including a critical orientation to workplace knowledge: exploration of how to identify and benefit from learning opportunities in the workplace, rather than simple emphasis on the expectations of employment would include links to academic concepts and wider industry (as opposed to firm-based) knowledge.

Literature

- Gale, T. and S. Parker. (2014): Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(5), 734-753.
- Graf, L. (2013). *The Hybridization of Vocational Training and Higher Education in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland*. Opladen: Budrich UniPress.
- Hemkes, B. (2018). Zwischen Studium und Beruf: Formate und Handlungskoordinationen im Kontext von Durchlässigkeit. [Between degree and career: permeability formats and coordinated actions in the education system.] *Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik-online* 34, at <https://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe/34/hemkes> .
- Iannelli, C. and D. Raffe. (2007): Vocational Upper-Secondary Education and the Transition from School. *European Sociological Review*, 23(1), 49-63.
- Independent Panel for Technical Education: (2016). Report of the Independent Panel for Technical Education, London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills/Department for Education.
- OECD. (2014). Background paper to G20-OECD-EC Conference on Quality Apprenticeships for Giving Youth a Better Start in the Labour Market. OECD Conference Centre, Paris, 9 April.
- Richard, D. (2012). *The Richard Review of Apprenticeships*. London: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).