

# Degree apprenticeships in England: current practices in design, delivery and quality management

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

Recent apprenticeship reforms have led to the emergence of a new form of apprenticeship in England: the degree apprenticeship. These sit at levels 6 and 7 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and the term ‘degree apprenticeship’ refers specifically to apprenticeships at these levels that include a full degree-level qualification, given that not all level 6 and level 7 apprenticeships include a degree. This research focuses specifically on degree apprenticeships.

Degree apprenticeships (DAs), as is the case for all apprenticeships, are built on occupational standards and associated end point assessment (EPA) plans. A minimum of 20% of the apprentice’s normal working hours must be dedicated to ‘off-the-job’ training which, in the case of DAs, is provided by higher education providers (HEPs) with degree awarding powers. They spend the remaining time in their job role, where the employer is responsible for any additional on-the-job training.

HEPs, as awarding bodies, are required to meet the Office for Students’ Conditions of Registration, including the B conditions on Quality and Standards (OfS 2018.01). In 2021 when this research was conducted, the B conditions included the expectation that programmes were ‘well-designed’ and would provide a ‘high-quality academic experience’ for all students. Further the core practices of the UK Quality Code (UKSCQA/QAA, 2018) were set out as indicative behaviours against conditions B1, B2, B4 and B5 of the then regulatory framework.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to these expectations, which relate to the degree element of a DA, a further quality assurance system, specific to apprenticeships, is set out in an Apprenticeship Accountability Statement. This specifies that the Department for Education (acting via the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)) has overall accountability for apprenticeships quality. This includes, for example, monitoring compliance with the apprenticeship funding rules, managing the apprenticeship provider market and intervening to address quality concerns where necessary. The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) holds responsibility for inspecting the quality of all levels of apprenticeship training and the ESFA uses Ofsted inspection judgements to inform any intervention activity.

Any HEP that is on the ESFA’s Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers, and receives funding for the provision of apprenticeships, is subject to this quality assurance system for apprenticeships provision and can be held accountable for the design, delivery and operation of these programmes in their entirety.

The Office for Students and Department for Education have commissioned Elizabeth Cleaver Consulting Limited to undertake qualitative research to explore current practice in the

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<sup>1</sup> In March 2022 the OfS published revised conditions for quality and standards and associated guidance which removed references to the UK Quality Code. In May 2022 new B conditions will come into effect which remove reference to ‘well designed’ courses.

design, delivery and ongoing quality management of DAs in higher education settings. The research project therefore addresses two research questions:

- What constitutes a ‘well-designed’ degree apprenticeship programme and a ‘high-quality’ apprentice learner experience, from a range of key stakeholders’ (HEP, apprentice learner and employer) perspectives?
- How are HEPs using and/or adapting their internal quality management processes to assure the initial and ongoing quality assurance of degree apprenticeship programmes?

To do this, the project has engaged with 13 HEPs ranging in size and mission. Interviews were conducted with 164 respondents drawn from three stakeholder groups: HEP staff, apprentice learners and employer partners.

### Motivations, Expectations and Experiences

HEPs have offered DA provision for a range of reasons. Some due to circumstance (i.e., areas of professional practice already within an HEPs portfolio adapting and expanding to reflect new DA occupational standards); others due to active expansion of their portfolio in line with their public sector ethos and commitments to regional ‘upskilling’ and access and participation agendas. DA programmes were often complementary extensions to existing portfolios of activity, enabling HEPs to capitalise on areas of academic expertise.

Apprentices described the ‘pull’ of the opportunity to learn while earning and described the ‘push’ of not wishing or being able to incur debt or to study full-time. Their awareness of and journeys into DAs were varied, with some supported to find and apply for DAs by their colleges and others (often from the school system) left to seek out opportunities for themselves.

Employers had a number of motivations for engaging with DAs. For many the primary motivation was to draw down their allocated levy funding. For some professional areas, there was little choice but to engage in DA opportunities as these had become the primary (funded) route to professional competency development. Some employers had purposefully woven DAs into their wider talent management and workforce development strategies. This meant identifying the right apprentice and apprenticeship programme that would add value to the business.

The benefits of engaging in DA provision were clear to all stakeholders. First and foremost, respondents noted the immediate and tangible value of work-experienced graduates (‘graduates +’), immediately able to apply the benefits of learning to their work-setting and their own career.

When describing the well-designed and high-quality DAs that produced these graduates, stakeholders noted the importance of cohesive and sequenced learning design where a DA programme, the apprenticeship standard and the workplace can knit together, underpinned by a seamless and supported onboarding and administrative process. DA programmes that were co-created by HEPs and their employer partners were seen as the gold standard by members of both groups.

All stakeholders recognised the benefits (and the difficulties) of ensuring that apprentices had time and support to learn in order that they could progress in their studies and

complete their DA programme. Where time to learn was difficult to achieve, due to workload or seasonal pressures, flexibility of delivery and assessment was vital.

Underpinning all these aspirations, and a pre-requisite for well-designed and coherent DA off-the-job and on-the-job learning experiences, was partnership working between HEPs and employers.

### Degree apprenticeships as partnership

Partnership-working was viewed by all stakeholders as fundamental to well-designed DA programmes and high-quality apprenticeship experiences. While an ideal of partnership based on co-creation was discussed by respondents, in reality partnership arrangements are diverse, reflecting the wide variety of employer and HEP settings, needs and cultures in which DAs operate, and the range of apprenticeship standards employed, and individual apprentice starting points in each of these settings.

To make sense of this diversity, the study has identified four broad types of partnership into which any individual DA programme-based partnership is likely to fall more or less at any point in time. Each type offers a number of challenges and opportunities for providers, employers and apprentices.

- a. **Study-release:** where an HEP ‘supplies’ off-the-job training in a non-bespoke day or block release model. The employer often sees itself as a ‘customer’ (with minimal responsibilities) and the HEP as the ‘supplier’. Apart from the possibility of ‘time off’ for the 20% off-the-job component, the apprentice is otherwise treated as a full-time employee and may have responsibility for seeking out and identifying opportunities for the sequencing and application of their own learning.
- b. **Complementary:** where there is a clear division of responsibility between the HEP and the employer. The former provides the formal training, whilst the latter supports the apprentice and ensures that they can apply their learning within the workplace. In this partnership setting, apprentices are often supernumerary members of the workforce, occupying a role/status that is distinct from other members of staff.
- c. **Collaborative:** where responsibilities for the training of apprentices are shared between the HEP and the employer. In both the on-the-job and off-the-job settings apprentices will ‘learn new things’, through formal learning events and opportunities to reflect on and apply their learning. In these circumstances both the employer and the HEP may provide learning opportunities that contribute towards credit for the degree award. This is particularly evident where off-the-job training is subcontracted back to an employer-provider.
- d. **Study-at-work:** where the study-release (Type A) relationship between the HEP and the employer is reversed with most if not all training subcontracted back to an employer-provider. The HEP receives the apprenticeship funding and is ultimately responsible for the delivery of the training. They validate this training for the purpose of awarding the degree. Apprentices are likely to be employees undertaking training that is fully integrated into their roles.

The common factor that underpins all these partnership types is the undisputable responsibility of HEPs for the oversight and quality and standards of their DA programmes:

the quality of the credit-bearing provision and standards of the associated academic award *and* the quality of the DA training provision leading to apprentices' readiness to undertake the occupational standard's EPA.

HEPs stated that to make sure DAs are appropriate and the right 'fit' it is important to oversee employer's on-the-job contributions. While all four models can lead to positive learner outcomes, types A and D may prove more difficult for HEP and employer stakeholders to effectively manage when compared with DAs that are built on complementary or collaborative partnerships (types B and C).

### Quality management and governance

Because of the credit-bearing 'degree' element of each DA programme, HEPs emphasised the importance of continuing to employ existing quality management processes and procedures wherever possible. However, at the different staging points of the quality management cycle, the distinctiveness of DA provision (relating to its employer-led nature, different funding compliance and reporting cycles and additional external quality assessment expectations) can lead to significant adaptations and augmentations of extant approaches.

The design, development and validation processes normally used by HEPs have been adapted to reflect and include the different needs of DA programmes. In particular, employers are engaged in this process in focused ways and validation panel membership is adapted to include DA specialists wherever possible. New sections to programme proposal forms and new sets of questions for validation panels have been introduced to ensure the process can adapt to the dual compliance needs of DAs: the regulatory and quality assurance expectations of the HEP and the occupational standard expectations of the DA.

The ongoing monitoring and enhancement of DA programmes has evolved to be quite different to mainstream activity in HEPs, driven by apprenticeship-specific requirements (such as those set by the ESFA to secure public apprenticeship funding) and the distinctive nature of Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework. However, it was noted that this stage of the cycle could not be changed wholesale, due to the need to undertake parallel scrutiny of the degree element of these programmes.

HEPs therefore operated and maintained a hybrid approach to quality management which could meet both sets of monitoring requirements. And while their aspiration was to draw these together as much as possible, the different starting points, purposes and data needs of each meant that this was not straightforward.

To ensure these hybrid processes worked efficiently and effectively HEPs have employed new expert staff teams to work in partnership with existing quality assurance and academic colleagues, and to support and develop others in these new areas of activity. These often include employer-facing roles to develop and manage the B2B (business to business) relationships with employer partners.

Where they have been able to make a successful business case, HEPs have additionally invested in new learner management systems to facilitate the three-way exchange of information required by DAs (between HEP, employer and apprentice) and to collect evidence with which to meet apprenticeship-specific external compliance and monitoring expectations.

These new teams and systems were seen to be essential for facilitating oversight of the off-the-job element and connecting it, through effective dialogue with employers, to the on-the-job training element of the DA, particularly where it was not possible or practical to develop more ideal forms of collaborative partnerships. This was managed through a range of mechanisms including initial discussions, due diligence processes, onboarding and ongoing monitoring and relationship management.

To ensure each HEPs governing body can receive and test assurances that this aspect of provision is effectively overseen, HEPs had also instituted a variety of changes to their reporting and governance structures and processes. This commonly involved creating additional committees and groups with a sole focus on DAs. Separating out the structures in this way – at all levels of decision-making – and was described as important for ensuring that the complexity of DA provision does not dominate existing committees or drive out other important business and is not placed under the scrutiny of non-specialists.

### Well-designed and high-quality: creating conditions for success

All stakeholder groups were clear that we should not forget the importance and transformative potential of higher education integrated with continuous learning in the workplace.

The research provides a glimpse into the current opportunities and considerable potential of DA provision to augment and enhance partnerships between higher education and employers, and to engage in the development of new forms of work-integrated delivery and assessment. These partnerships are recognised as the basis for significant benefits for employers, industrial and business sectors, regional economies and, perhaps most importantly, the apprentice graduate ('graduate +'). However, a number of ongoing challenges to the delivery of DA programmes and associated apprentice experiences may need to be addressed for these positive outcomes to be fully realised.

The advent of Ofsted inspections for all DA provision, coupled with ESFA compliance expectations and audits, OfS requirements, and any relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB) accreditation conditions, has led to a sense of bureaucratic burden. This complexity is seen by HEPs to be compounded by ongoing changes to the external policy and funding environments in which DA provision operates.

The employer-led nature of apprenticeships, including the leadership of the development of occupational standards and EPAs by employer trailblazer groups, can also lead to some practical delivery challenges. These are associated with differing understanding and expectations of what can and should be delivered as part of a degree programme and getting the right balance between meeting immediate workforce skills needs while supporting the development of apprentices' longer-term learning, personal and career development skills.

In this employer-led space, HEPs note that challenges remain about how best to ensure visibility of the on-the-job element of DA programmes through effective dialogue with employers, particularly where larger numbers of employer partners are involved with any one provider. As a relatively new area of HE provision, with little precedent about what 'good' looks like or what service levels expectations might be reasonable, HEPs discussed some of the difficulties they encountered when bringing together educational and workplace needs and opportunities.

While some HEPs have instigated and invested in organisational change, including new systems and teams, for others the relatively new nature of this provision and their continuing sense of market and financial uncertainty, has meant that gaining strategic traction and associated investment at the institutional level, has proved more difficult. Some HEPs in the sample continued to see this as a growing and important element of their provision, but at least two had actively stopped adding occupational standards to their portfolio until they were confident that the business model was viable and aligned to their strategic direction of travel.

With these challenges in mind, the report concludes with a consideration of how the conditions for well-designed DA programmes and high-quality apprentice experiences can be developed, supported and enhanced:

- The number of accountabilities and associated expectations for DAs were reported, by members of all stakeholder groups, as practically and culturally heavy to carry and manage. Furthermore, members of all stakeholder groups noted a sense of a complex bureaucratic burden was heightened by the different and changing external and internal environments in which DAs operate. Provision can therefore be affected, and perhaps unnecessarily driven, by wider operational systems and requirements. Refining and co-ordinating the touchpoints at which external reporting and monitoring take place would allow all parties greater opportunity to focus on enhancements to provision and the pursuit of positive outcomes for all stakeholders.
- Given the mixed-economy of apprenticeship provision, built on different occupational standards and partnership arrangements, it is important that those with responsibility for external monitoring and inspection recognise that ideals of cohesion and sequencing (and the holistic oversight of the on-the-job and off-the-job elements of provision that this requires) may be more difficult to realise in some circumstances than others. While this can present a number of challenges, the potential benefits that can emerge from a more diverse set of partnership arrangements should not be lost from sight. This is particularly important where DA provision has the potential to align with and contribute to a number of related policy agendas - e.g., access and participation of under-represented groups in HE, regional upskilling and levelling up.
- With DA provision still at a relatively early stage in its development in England, there is currently limited direct understanding of what 'good' looks like or what service-level expectations might be reasonable in degree apprenticeship partnership settings. In the absence of established benchmarks, it is important that any evidence-based understandings of *what works* are aligned with *what is practical*. This understanding could be facilitated through the development of a What Works Centre on higher technical education and skills, to complement the work of other centres which focus on local economic growth and access and participation in higher education.



# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Degree apprenticeships in England

Apprenticeships have a long history in England.<sup>2</sup> The most recent reforms have led to a new and emerging form of work-based higher education: the degree apprenticeship.<sup>3</sup> Degree apprenticeships (DAs) sit at levels 6 and 7 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (QAA, 2014), contain a degree level qualification, and are purposefully designed to connect industry and higher education in ways that can address the needs of society and the economy (HM Government, 2017a). The first four DA occupational standards were approved in 2014, and they are now becoming an established element of English higher education provision, with 30,500 DA starts reported in the 2019/20 academic year (Department for Education, 2020).

With the creation of DAs higher education providers and employers have moved into a new delivery space, different to the work-based or work-integrated learning models that had been on offer to-date (for example, PSRB accredited programmes, part-time day release courses, sandwich years, work-based placements and industry projects) with opportunities to develop new and augmented forms of partnership working.

Degree apprentices are employed in genuine jobs for the full duration of their programme. The training provided as part of the DA must therefore be purposefully designed to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) of the employee while in role. To ensure this, each DA is built on an occupational standard and associated EPA plan, designed by an employer trailblazer group. A minimum of 20% of the apprentice's normal working hours must be dedicated to 'off-the-job' training that is purposefully designed to develop occupational competence. The remaining portion of their learning takes place 'on-the-job' and is the responsibility of their employer. A further differentiator for this new apprenticeship model is the funding source. In April 2017 an Apprenticeship Levy (0.5% of large employers' annual pay bills) was introduced. Apprenticeship levy funding can only be used to pay for eligible costs directly related to the training and assessment, including EPA, of individual apprentices.

In England, a new body, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (the Institute) was created to work with employer trailblazer groups to oversee the development, approval and publication of each occupational standard and its associated EPA plan. The Institute additionally recommends to the Department for Education in England a funding band for each occupational standard which sets the maximum amount of funds an employer can use towards training and assessment for an apprentice studying for a particular DA.

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<sup>2</sup> Apprenticeships reform in the UK's devolved nations has followed different pathways. This report focuses solely on degree apprenticeship activity in England.

<sup>3</sup> Two influential reports set the stage for the changes in the form and funding of apprenticeships that took place in the latter part of the 2010s. The first – the Wolf Report – focused on the future of vocational education (Wolf, 2011) while the second – the Richard Review – reimagined contemporary apprenticeship provision (Richard, 2012).

## 1.2 The quality and compliance landscape

At first glance, assurance of academic quality and standards of DA provision in English higher education appears straight forward. This is reflected in the Universities UK *The Future of Degree Apprenticeships* report, which states:

*When a degree is a mandatory qualification in an apprenticeship, it means that all of the quality assurance mechanisms embedded in and operated by universities are applied to the development and delivery of the apprenticeship, as well as the oversight operated by the OfS. This provides reassurance to employers, apprentices, potential apprentices and their parents (UUK, 2019: 60).*

Here the assumption is that the quality of DAs is guaranteed by the internal quality assurance systems of English HEPs, and in accordance with their responsibilities as set out in the Office for Students' (OfS) Conditions of Registration (see OfS, 2018). These include:

*Condition B1: The provider must deliver well-designed courses that provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed (p. 87); and*

*Condition E2: The provider must have in place adequate and effective management and governance arrangements to... provide and fully deliver the higher education courses advertised [and] continue to comply with all conditions of its registration (p.112).*

This assumption was further confirmed in the OfS consultation on the future regulation of quality and standards in higher education:

*We propose that, as now, all of a provider's higher education courses will be subject to the same definitions of 'quality' and 'standards', and therefore be subject to regulation on that basis, irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them... our proposed approach to regulating quality and standards covers all types of provision, including higher technical education **and apprenticeships**. [emphasis added] (OfS, 2020a: Para. 34).*

There has been much debate in the higher education sector about what constitutes a well-designed course and a high-quality experience. This is consistent with the innovation and flexibility encouraged by the OfS' principles-based approach to regulation. Practice is informed and influenced by two further sets of expectations. First the sector-agreed UK Quality Code for Higher Education's processes, procedures and guidance which are designed to ensure judgements can be made about the academic quality and standards of the provision on offer (UKSCQA/QAA, 2018). Secondly, over the last five years the concepts of well-designed courses and high-quality experiences have been significantly influenced by the core metrics and judgements of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), based on assessments of each HEP's teaching quality, learning environment and associated student outcomes and awards (OfS, 2020b).

Evidence of how English HEPs manage their DAs and the overall quality of this provision has been limited to-date. This remains an outstanding issue due to the new and evolving external operating environment in which they sit and the various external bodies with different accountabilities to which they must report. The details of this new set of arrangements are captured in a dedicated document outlining each of the contributing

organisations'<sup>4</sup> accountabilities and how they relate to one another: the Apprenticeships Accountability Statement (Department for Education, 2021a).

In brief, under the terms of the Higher Education and Research Act (HM Government, 2017b) the OfS (taking advice from its designated quality body the Quality Assurance Agency) remains responsible for the quality and standards of the academic provision and awards offered by English HEPs. In the case of DAs, some of this provision also forms the key delivery mechanism for the off-the-job element of apprenticeship programmes. In these circumstances Ofsted, which holds responsibility for inspecting all levels of apprenticeship training provision, undertakes a quality assessment through this different lens. HEPs are therefore also required to monitor aspects of their DA provision against the expectations of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF; Ofsted, 2021) and host routine Ofsted monitoring and inspection visits. In undertaking this work, Ofsted is accountable to the Department for Education and the ESFA. Ofsted inspection outcomes are one form of evidence that can be used by the OfS in its quality assessment of an HEP's provision.<sup>5</sup>

Further, while Ofsted has the right to visit employers who are partnering with higher education HEPs to deliver employer-led DAs, its powers of inspection are normally limited to the 'main' HEP responsible for off-the-job training i.e., those organisations that directly receive ESFA or Apprenticeship Levy funding (Ofsted 2019: para. 37). These main providers have 'overall responsibility for the training and on-programme assessment conducted by themselves and their delivery subcontractors and have a contractual relationship on behalf of the employer for the EPA conducted by an end-point assessment organisation' (ESFA, 2021a: para 4).

In practice, this means that an HEP – as the main training provider – is accountable for the design and delivery of DAs, and as part of this, for undertaking a liaison role to ensure connections between the off-the-job and on-the-job elements of apprentices' development will lead to the KSBs of the DA occupational standard being met. Of particular interest here is how HEPs are acting to address an increasingly important issue for contemporary higher education: how best to manage the quality of learning activities that take place in employer settings (e.g., work placements, work-based learning, industrial experience and projects).

As providers on the ESFA's Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers (RoATP), HEPs are required to complete monthly Individualised Learner Records (ILR) which confirm that

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<sup>4</sup> The six organisations named in the Accountability Statement are the ESFA, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (the Institute), Ofsted, the OfS, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulation (Ofqual). Due to higher education providers having degree awarding powers, Ofqual does not have a role to play in DA provision.

<sup>5</sup> The OfS will take a risk-based approach and will take account of any action taken by another regulator to remedy an increased risk or breach of a condition before deciding whether to intervene in a particular case. Because Ofsted undertakes regular inspections of the quality of apprenticeships training, we would not normally include apprenticeship training within scope of our investigations, but there may be circumstances where it is appropriate to do so (for example, if a matter of potentially significant concern was identified in between Ofsted inspections). We intend to use Ofsted reports as a source of regulatory intelligence to judge whether there might be quality concerns about courses not subject to Ofsted inspection.

learners are still actively on-programme and prompt the release of funding for the provision. These monitoring requirements and the timing of their return are entirely separate and different from the registered student census returns submitted by HEPs to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Student records management in higher education, and the specialist systems that have been built to manage this information, thereby ensuring accurate data submission to HESA and other bodies such as the Student Loans Company, have been built to serve different timeframes and data requirements.

In addition, to comply with ESFA funding rules, HEPs must gather and hold further evidence which may be scrutinised to determine whether it uses funding appropriately; something that is not built into routine practice in higher education. This includes an initial training needs analysis, followed by ongoing evidence collection that the apprenticeship is progressing, that issues with progress have been identified and action taken, that at least 20% of an apprentice's normal working hours is being spent off-the-job, that opportunities for apprenticeship 'stretch' and engagement are discussed and planned and that feedback from apprentices and employers has been considered and acted on. All this evidence is gathered through apprenticeship records of time spent and activities undertaken and 'tripartite' employer-apprentice-HEP progress reviews which are significantly different in function and style to the one-to-one personal or academic tutoring offered as part of a conventional undergraduate or post-graduate degree.

### 1.3 Project focus

As indicated in the UUK quotation above, OfS-registered HEPs, as awarding bodies, have established and well-recognised policies and procedures for the assurance of the quality of their provision and academic standards of their awards. These must meet the requirements of the OfS regulatory framework (OfS, 2019) and are adapted and augmented to meet with the requirements of any relevant Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB; for example, the Nursing and Midwifery Council's Standards for Education). What is less understood is how HEPs are adapting or augmenting these extant and embedded processes – designed for a different form of educational offer and external monitoring system – to accommodate the new quality and compliance requirements of DA programmes.

To address these gaps in understanding, ahead of Ofsted taking responsibility for the inspection of apprenticeships as levels 6 and 7, the OfS and Department for Education commissioned Elizabeth Cleaver Consulting Limited to undertake qualitative research to explore current practice in the design, delivery and ongoing quality management of DAs. The project sought to address two research questions which align to conditions B1 and E2 of the OfS's regulatory framework:

- **RQ1** - What constitutes a 'well-designed' degree apprenticeship programme and a 'high-quality' apprentice learner experience, from a range of key stakeholders' (HEP, apprentice learner and employer) perspectives?
- **RQ2** - How are HEPs using and/or adapting their internal quality management processes to assure the initial and ongoing quality assurance of degree apprenticeship programmes?

## 1.4 Data collection and respondent profile

The project was designed to engage with DA stakeholders across a sample of English HEPs ranging in size and mission. Thirteen HEPs engaged with the project and all fieldwork was completed between February 2021 and May 2021. The following infographic (Figure 1.1) represents the diversity of the sample, recording the lowest and highest numbers in each of four categories: current apprentice numbers; employer partners; apprenticeship standards in use and PSRBs standards in use.

In total the project engaged with 164 individual respondents comprising 103 HEP staff, 36 apprentice learners and 25 employer representatives (see Figure 1.2). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an online meetings platform. The numbers participating in each interview ranged from one to seven, with the membership of each interview defined by each of the participating HEPs. Each interview took between 30 minutes and one hour 15 minutes to complete.

### PROVIDERS

In facts and figures

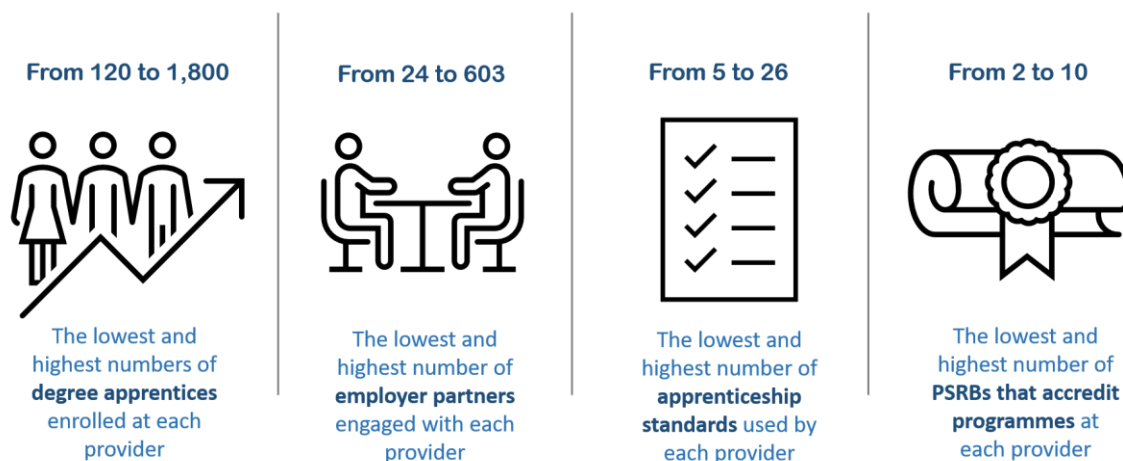


Figure 1.1: Project HEP institutions in facts and figures

Respondent group	Number of respondents
HEP senior leadership team	4
HEP quality assurance teams	31
HEP business development teams	37
HEP academic delivery teams	31
Apprentice learners – under-graduate	31
Apprentice learners – post-graduate	5
Employers - public sector	11
Employers - private sector	14

<b>Total</b>	164
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*Figure 1.2: Breakdown of respondent groups.*

HEP interviews engaged with a broad range of academic and professional services colleagues with expertise in the areas of DA design, delivery, quality assurance and business engagement activities.

The project’s employer sample included respondents from private sector businesses and industries including civil engineering, design engineering, production engineering, financial services, sales, events management, IT systems, rail operations, construction and automotive engineering. A number of large public sector services – police; fire and rescue; armed forces; local government and NHS trusts – were also represented. Some of the larger public and private sector employers (some with 300+ apprentices) were able to discuss their experiences of working with HEPs beyond those in the project sample.

Apprentice interviewees were engaged in a range of programmes, including those based on the following apprenticeship standards: Manufacturing engineer; Chartered manager; Project manager; Social worker; Registered nurse; Civil engineer; Senior leader and Digital and technology solutions professional. The sample included early career apprentices (i.e. those who had taken up their apprenticeships straight after school or college who were all undertaking level 6 DAs), and mid-career apprentices (i.e. those for whom their apprenticeship was an opportunity to upskill or undertake a career change).

Data from the interviews was analysed using an inductive thematic approach aligned to each of the project’s research questions. Themes that emerged from interview data are further explored and illustrated using quotations from respondents. All project respondents’ contributions have been fully anonymised in this report. Special permission was sought for the case study in Appendix 1 which includes the names of consortium member institutions.

Given the qualitative nature of the project, and wide-ranging and varied experiences of the respondents in the sample, the findings presented in this report do not represent the wider populations of employers, HEPs and apprentices in England. They nevertheless help to provide rich insight into the design, delivery, learner experience and ongoing quality management of DAs in higher education and employer settings.

## 2 MOTIVATIONS, EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Section 2 of the report begins with an exploration of HEPs', learners' and employers' motivations for engaging with degree apprenticeships. It continues by considering respondents' expectations and experiences of working and studying on DAs.

The findings presented highlight the value and importance that is placed on aspects of apprenticeship provision and the associated apprentice experience. In doing so, this section builds evidence with which to explore the project's first research question: *What constitutes a 'well-designed' degree apprenticeship programme and a 'high-quality' apprentice learner experience?*

### 2.1 Motivations for engagement

#### 2.1.1 HEPs

HEPs in the project sample noted a range of reasons for entering the DA market; some of which related to institutional aspiration and mission, and others to practical circumstances. While for some the portfolio was developing, and still involved low numbers of students, for others it was fast becoming an element of core business:

*Top line is we are looking for growth. DAs are now [a significant] income stream for the University and may soon overtake research. (HEP)*

In certain areas of provision, HEPs had had little option but to engage with DAs as their programmes had 'naturally' morphed into this form of programme and employers, offered the opportunity to draw down the apprenticeship levy, were seen as unlikely to fund places on other programmes if a funded DA option was available:

*Our [DAs] are translations of existing masters' degrees... we now have to use the levy as the programmes have morphed into apprenticeships. (HEP)*

However, this was also seen as a positive opportunity to review and enhance institutional approaches to part-time post-graduate degrees, many of which had fallen into decline over the last decade and was associated with rises in tuition fees and lower student numbers.

Some HEPs saw DAs as an opportunity to pursue their public sector service mission. These HEPs described their expansion into policing, nursing and allied health professions as a strategically aligned and natural extension to their existing applied degree portfolios. It was also noted that due to existing relationships with NHS Trusts and Health Education England, these programmes were often easier to design and build with employer partners.

HEPs also spoke about playing to their strengths more broadly, and seeing developments in areas of DAs (e.g. engineering) as extensions to existing and established portfolios of activity. Importantly, having strong academic expertise to underpin these developments was key to their success. Other developments were seen as valuable and complementary additions to existing industry/employer partnership activities and income streams such as pro bono student law and business clinics, work placements, research partnerships and knowledge exchange activities:

*It's not just about the apprentices, it's about all the other ways we can work with employers – KTPs [knowledge transfer partnerships], guest lectures, graduate employment. We may just have one apprentice, but [the employer] may interact with us in six different ways. (HEP)*



There was recognition that this engagement could, however, be more about reputation or maintaining existing relationships, than about building new income streams. One HEP describing one of their largest DAs as a ‘loss leader’:

*We have a long-standing reputation for [the subject] so we need to be involved... We are committed to social responsibility and working with local employers. Imagine if we said no to [employer X] because it doesn't make us money. (HEP)*

Apprenticeships were also seen as a key component of the growing technical education landscape (including T Levels and higher technical education), local ‘upskilling’ agendas, and moves to create greater pathways and partnerships between higher and further education (see Department for Education, 2021b).

*What we aspire to do is to join things up... to work with other HEPs in the city region and map out pathways from Level 2 all the way through to Level 7. (HEP)*

*[We've developed] ...greater synergy around the skills agenda across training HEPs in the county – T levels, placements, internships and apprenticeships – and have created progression pathways from Levels 2-7 across our consortium (HEP)*

One HEP further described how they had actively changed their admissions processes to ensure these pathways could develop and grow:

*The Level 3 Senior Healthcare Support Worker doesn't carry UCAS tariff, but our admissions process now accepts this for our Nursing Associate and Nursing Degree apprenticeships. (HEP)*

Given the commitments across the higher education sector to social justice, inclusivity and diversity, reinforced by the regulatory requirement for each HEP to have an approved access and participation plan (OfS, 2020c), it is unsurprising that a further motivation for entering the apprenticeships market was a commitment to supporting under-represented groups, including mature learners. Work with local employers to deliver closely applied education in employment, and activity to support these groups to access higher education was seen by HEPs to be in step with their ‘civic mission’. This resonates with the fact that nine of the 13 HEPs in the sample are actively pursuing this duty as ‘anchor institutions’ in their regions through Civic Agreements (see Civic University Network, n.d.).

### 2.1.2 Apprentices

Early career apprentices discussed the *pull* of the opportunity: learning while doing a real job, gaining experience and earning money. They also discussed the *push* they had felt from embarking on more traditional university experiences, having to motivate themselves ‘just to learn’ for another three years, alongside the disincentive of the associated student debt.

How these respondents had found out about their DA opportunities varied. Apprentices who described having already completed a lower-level apprenticeship at college or a BTEC, and those who attended vocationally focused institutions such as university technical colleges (UTCs), discussed how their institutions had actively advertised and promoted apprenticeships and had supported applications. In contrast, those who had attended more



traditionally focused sixth forms felt they had had little help from their institutions, even though they were clear they might not wish to follow a traditional university route.

Sometimes opportunities were not available. One early career apprentice discussed their journey from leaving school at 16, undertaking level 3 and level 4 apprenticeships, before asking their employer if they could carry on to a DA. Their employer was able to accommodate the request in principle, but the apprentice *'had to create a role'* for themselves to meet the eligibility requirements and expectations of the occupational standard.

The mid-career apprentices in the sample indicated a range of motivations for engaging in the programmes. Aligned to the access and participation motivations highlighted by HEPs in section 2.1.1, one reason offered was that the programme had provided the first realistic and affordable opportunity for them to gain a degree and/or associated promotions. Another was that it provided a paid-for opportunity to switch professions which would have been impossible to fund personally due to caring and financial commitments:

*'I was working in adult social care and looked to do social work training. But I already had a BA [in another subject], so there was no funding for another one.'* (Mid-career apprentice - Social worker).

### 2.1.3 Employers

A key motivating factor reported by employers was their wish to draw down money from the apprenticeship levy fund. Not doing so could mean they found themselves paying for staff development twice where appropriate occupational standards were available (i.e. paying the levy and then funding staff development opportunities separately). Indeed, one employer aired their disappointment that despite paying the levy they were unable to enrol a number of their new staff onto apprenticeships due to the fact they regularly recruited outside the EEA area:<sup>6</sup>

*Eligibility criteria [are an issue]... as a large levy payer we can't use the money as we have an international workforce. Brexit [means that this is likely to result in] further restrictions to anyone outside UK rather than outside the EEA. We're told we have to spend [the levy] but the rules affect our spending. [The staff] still need training but the levy can't pay for them.* (Large public sector employer)

That said, those that could draw down the levy were not all doing so simply for the financial benefits, and a number described how they purposefully positioned their apprenticeship provision within wider talent management and workforce development strategies and plans.

Some public sector employers were clear that they were expected to engage in the apprenticeship field (e.g. police forces and NHS trusts) as this was now the accepted route for early and mid-career development for certain staff groups. There was also an explicit

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<sup>6</sup> Annex A of the 2021 Apprenticeship funding rules for employers states: 'A non-EEA citizen is eligible for funding if they have permission from the UK government to live in the UK (not for educational purposes), and have been ordinarily resident in the UK for at least the previous three years before the start of the apprenticeship'. (ESFA, 2021b: E364)

recognition amongst some employers that early-career apprentices should not be seen as cheap labour there to do the 'grunt work'. This meant 'Identifying the right apprenticeship, that fits business needs and will add value.' (Large engineering employer)

HEP identities and reputations were also viewed as important. One consortium of public sector organisations had made the 'political decision' to work with their local HEP to keep the 'county pound' in the region. Some employers were continuing to work with HEPs with whom they had a good track record and established relationship. Others chose HEPs because of their public reputation and the ability for them to attract apprentices from a national pool:

*Some HEPs didn't align with how we wanted to be seen. The brand of the university is important. (Large financial services employer)*

*[The university brand] ...attracts good candidates for me to select for our business... the brightest talent wants a degree. (Large technology solutions employer)*

Further, the business itself needs to be motivated and apprenticeship-ready, to ensure that the investment can be maximized for all concerned. Employers discussed the benefits if this was done well. And while the sample only contained one smaller non-levy paying employer, its motivations for engaging an apprentice were not dissimilar:

*Yes, we are not levy paying, and as such we receive a financial incentive to take on an apprentice... As an addition, we have an [industry] accreditation... part of which requires us to demonstrate a level of training of industry professionals. An apprentice is supporting evidence of our commitment to do this... More importantly to us, we are passionate about the development of young engineers and want to do our part to support the engineering future of the country. (SME engineering employer)*

## 2.2 Expectations and experiences

### 2.2.1 Graduates +

Respondents pointed out the positive benefits for all stakeholders that result from well-designed programmes and high-quality DA experiences. HEPs were clear that the DA graduates not only had the attributes of a university graduate but were significantly ahead of other mainstream graduates:

*Week by week, month by month, [together] we create a great graduate with the best of both worlds. From day one after graduation, they can apply their learning. (HEP)*

*The core product is strong. Apprentices outperform our standard students academically. (HEP)*

*Compared with traditional students, third years are [mature] people with three years' experience in workplace as professionals. They become professional young engineers and the quality of their outputs compared to traditional students is huge. Of course [other graduates] will catch up, but degree apprentices are streets ahead. (HEP)*

Employers and apprentices also related the importance of the transformative potential of DA programmes, both for the workplace and for the individual. Both groups were clear that they expected changes associated with higher levels of learning. These included the development of critical thinking skills, and the ability to engage in complex problem-solving and decision-making activities as part of evidence-based professional practice:

*Two individuals have been in my team for four years. I've seen without a doubt a marked improvement in their general abilities – thinking laterally and their decision-making abilities. I attribute that to their learning. (Large public sector employer)*

*It gives you more confidence, shows you the theory behind processes, reassures you about techniques and decision making (Mid-career apprentice – Chartered Manager).*

In addition, HEPs identified how a successful DA graduate will have the ability to engage in self-leadership and self-development throughout their career, with strategic, critical and creative skills to lead rather than follow the field. These ways of thinking and practising are recognised as some of the transformational educational benefits and outcomes that higher levels of learning can offer its students, and are fundamental to the enhanced and unique learner offer in the DA space:

*[DAs are] about giving people the skills-set for handling future situations: 'the world is changing, but whatever situation we put you into, you will cope and thrive and make decisions which build on that learning and allow you to adapt.' Degree apprenticeships are about learning how to learn. (HEP)*

This transformational growth was already in train for a number of apprentices:

*It's unlocked a different part of my brain. (Early-career apprentice - Chartered Manager)*

*Apprenticeships really can change the way you work and think. (Mid-career apprentice - Chartered Manager)*

### 2.2.2 Cohesive design and sequenced learning

Stakeholder respondents were clear that to effect these transformational changes a well-designed and high-quality educational experience needed to be connected, cohesive and sequenced,<sup>7</sup> with programme curriculum and pedagogy, the apprenticeship standard and workplace learning and experiences knitting seamlessly together:

*[A DA has to be specifically designed] from the first moment you decide to do it - designed from bottom up ... in such a way you can still meet the requirements laid out in apprenticeship standard, and the academic and PSRB requirements. (HEP)*

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<sup>7</sup> Sequenced curriculum is referred to in the Educational Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2021) and describes the development of new knowledge and skills which build on prior learning and point towards defined end points.

*[HEPs need to] acknowledge that work comes first and work [and employers need to] acknowledge that university comes first. They go hand in hand. (Early career apprentice – Chartered Manager)*

The gold standard of apprenticeship curricular development and delivery was therefore seen to be one based on co-creation and collaboration where employers and HEPs collectively work up the best solutions to the delivery of the KSBs of the occupational standard through both the on-the-job and off-the-job learning elements of the programme.

Employers reported the ways in which they sought out this ideal, with some stating that they actively ‘chose’ their HEP partners because of their willingness to accommodate and support their work-place needs:

*It was important to find a HEP that would embed a rotational programme. It means they understand the company and how each department works [so that]... apprentices can embed what they are learning from university in each rotation. (Large engineering employer)*

For some employers this was best co-ordinated by the HEP who was seen to be expert in programme and academic delivery:

*I see the employer as best place to provide experience, but that needs to be monitored and guided by the university. Universities are experts in academia at a high standard – I don't get involved in that. (Large engineering employer)*

Employer engagement was sometimes (but not always) enabled by larger employers’ ability to agree an exclusive contract with HEPs and creating what is termed a ‘closed cohort’. These bespoke learning packages were seen to offer greater opportunities for cohesive and sequenced learning, designed directly to meet the needs of the employer organisation through the delivery of the apprenticeship standard (and more):

*[We worked together] and designed how the delivery takes place. It absolutely fits with the business which is perfect. We've built on an additional MSc qualification... The university have come in to see things we do and vice versa. We're involved in joint projects and research work ... providing post-graduate students. (Large engineering employer)*

*Our face-to-face is all done on site - in our own educational premises. That was always our aspiration from day one... On reflection it's very hard. It's based on building strong relationships. In some ways it would be easier to buy something off shelf. But for the long run an integrated product is far stronger. (Large police service employer)*

Resulting from a complex range of reported factors, including the culture of the organisation, the potential size of the cohort and the apprenticeship standard in question, employers and HEPs could be engaged in a range of closed (i.e. designed as a bespoke programme for one or a small number of employers) or open/mixed cohort programmes (i.e. open to any employer that meets the eligibility criteria) at any one time. HEPs were clear that where programmes had open/mixed cohorts it could be tricky to meet every employer and apprentice need through the off-the-job element of the DA programme. The most extreme example that the project encountered was an HEP that was working with over 300 employers one DA programme.

Ideally in such situations, experts at either end of the employer-HEP partnership can work with an intermediary who ensures that both parties remain on track. The importance of this intermediary role was demonstrated in health-related fields through the work of *practice educators* - described by one apprentice as an 'advocate' acting on their behalf, connecting the university and line managers. Where formal intermediaries were not in place, HEP-based apprenticeship tutors described taking on this role:

*It's a very complex beast - managing so many different stakeholder requirements. It boils down to that personal 1-2-1 understanding of each apprentice as an individual. Maintaining contact, understanding individual needs - triaging. All I think about is putting the learner at very centre of the conversation. (HEP)*

In the absence of active intermediaries, apprentices described how they worked with their workplace mentors to create connections between the off-the-job and on-the-job elements of their learning:

*My company's smaller scale. I'm the only apprentice; their first apprentice. They've moulded the apprenticeship to me. There are six experienced engineers in the office who are really willing to help. My workplace mentor, if I have work set, I show him and he will go through it with me and he will help me to think about what it means in practice. (Early-career apprentice – Product Design and Development Engineer)*

These contextual, cultural and logistical challenges notwithstanding, many employers and HEPs recognised the benefits gained from peer-learning in mixed employer and industry cohorts, and how this could contribute to high-quality learning experiences.

Finally, a number of HEPs noted the difficulties associated with non-integrated apprenticeships, where the EPA is separate from degree programme assessment. Apprentices studying on a non-integrated programmes were likely to achieve their academic award prior to its completion. In areas of professional competence, such as nursing, the achievement of the degree also indicates that they have met the expected professional standards and have gained the license to practice:

*We're waiting to fall into the cleft stick of NMC approval and Ofsted non-approval... Who trumps whom? A lot of health programmes are non-integrated and my fear is a student can pass the Nursing Associate foundation degree and not the EPA but can still register with NMC as nursing associate. Instantly employers say – why bother? (HEP)*

Importantly, it was noted that an integration of these varying assessment elements – academic, DA and PSRB - was the ideal end point for coherent design and sequenced learning on DA programmes.

### 2.2.3 Seamless onboarding and streamlined administration

When discussing high-quality apprenticeships, all stakeholder groups indicated the importance of a seamless 'onboarding' experience and as little bureaucracy as possible, as the programme progressed. They outlined the many layers of eligibility criteria and commitments that HEPs, employers and apprentices had to navigate for external registration and monitoring purposes. As such, all parties felt that an ideal programme

would be one where initial and ongoing registration and engagement was as straightforward as possible.

For HEPs, this ideal involved ensuring that all relevant parties and stakeholders could receive and provide the right information at the right time, and as efficiently as possible. However, this was recognised as a key challenge due to the nature and extent of funding compliance regulation:

*With tripartite reviews etc. and the [non-integrated] EPA and ESFA bureaucracy, it's costly. Until we have cracked it in terms of systems, that are automated then its going to be expensive [and challenging] to manage. (HEP)*

*We need to ask what is achievable? The reviews we have to do on a quarterly basis have huge resource requirements. With apprenticeships numbers growing, the paperwork, the bureaucracy and the checking is a huge ask. (HEP)*

Interestingly, a large financial services employer, when asked whether they would consider engaging in off-the-job delivery (as an employer-provider) noted that 'the bureaucracy of becoming a provider would put [our company] off'.

Apprentices also indicated that external compliance expectations were palpable to them, reflected in the significant amounts of paperwork and associated meetings they had to engage with to ensure audit requirements were met:

*[Focusing on] how much time we spend off-the-job... doesn't really focus on the impact of the time that you spent studying. It's better to focus on what you've achieved. (Mid-career apprentice - Senior Leader)*

To support these external compliance and monitoring requirements, HEPs were often in the process of building new specialist teams of experts and intermediaries to lead and support other colleagues to build the new DA portfolio, manage employer relationships and drive compliance and inspection-related activities (explored in greater detail in Section 4 of the report).

A number of issues were noted about the ongoing administration of DA programmes, often where these new teams were still forming or where HEPs had not been able to invest in a dedicated learner management system to facilitate communication and sharing between all three stakeholder groups. Relying on existing resources and systems, built to manage the needs of a two-way relationship between an HEP and their students, led to some employers having difficulty in finding out about their apprentices' progress in the off-the-job element of their programme:

*Our pay reviews are based on performance - on the job and academically. But it's easy for [the apprentices] not to come back about grades. Someone with a re-sit hadn't told anyone. We are paying for [their course] as an employer, so we need that insight. We could have supported the re-sit, but we found ourselves scrabbling too late (Large news and information services employer).*

However, despite these new requirements, HEPs noted that it was important that DAs remained connected to the mainstream elements of their provision and did not become a side-line or spin-off activity. In short, as part of their wider degree portfolio, high-quality and well-designed DAs must be subject to the same rigorous requirements of all academic programmes but adapted and augmented as required.



#### 2.2.4 Time, support and opportunities to learn

Time, support and opportunities to learn were highlighted by all stakeholders as central to a high-quality apprenticeship experience. Apprentices often expressed this in terms of having opportunities to ensure they receive their 20% off-the-job requirement, even if there were no timetabled sessions planned. Apprentices further spoke of the need for the off-the-job element of their programmes to be able to *'adjust for heavy workloads and seasonal pressures [in order to] give everyone their best chance'* (Mid-career apprentice - Chartered Manager).

While many felt confident that they had enough time, or could ask for more if necessary, others indicated they were time poor. One apprentice spoke of the fact that they were doing 11-hour shifts and 50 hours a week but were still only allocated 20% of a notional 37-hour week. Another discussed how their role was becoming more demanding as they progressed in their apprenticeship, and this reduced their capacity to engage with the off-the-job elements of the programme as it became more academically challenging. For others, the needs of their duty rotas (e.g. police and nurses) could mean that they found it logistically hard to fit learning in beyond formal scheduled learning events. One apprentice explained that their employer did not take online learning as seriously as off-site study-release and *'learning came second to front-line practitioner work'* (Mid-career apprentice – Registered Nurse: Mental Health).

HEPs and employers also recognised that the overall challenge of balancing workloads could undermine learning experiences, if not managed appropriately:

*Often when people are back in the workplace, they are cramming a full-time role into four days a week. Workload management [is a real issue] for apprentices. It contributes to apprentice stress. (HEP)*

*The university needs to understand that these people are employed - timetabling and schedules need to understand the pressures of the day job. This has significant wellbeing and health issues. [We have also had to explain to workplace] managers that these are apprentices - they have to complete DA requirements even though they are employees. But managers rely on them to do work ...and with Uni work as well... it can easily get out of control. (Large engineering employer)*

Support and opportunities to 'see the whole business' were viewed by apprentices as central to a high-quality learning experience. This was not only important for ensuring that they had enough experience to meet the requirements of the EPA, but also for growing their understanding of their role in their wider organisation and improving their industry or sector knowledge and career prospects. A number of larger organisations, often associated with early career workforce planning approaches, had instituted rotational opportunities for apprentices to engage with different aspects of the business. The benefits of this were clear to many apprentices. However, a number noted the challenge of having to broach the issue of time and relevant support with a new line manager at every point of change. One early career apprentice recounted how:

*Last year I ended up managing a team. It was tough. [I was having to do] a full-time role – five days – within four days. There's a lot of pressure to make a great impression in work. I don't want to underperform. I want to do well and*

*find it hard to say no; particularly if a project [I'm being asked to do] may be beneficial to the future (Early career apprentice - Chartered Manager).*

Some apprentices, often those who were more established in role with existing work-commitments, spoke about the challenges of aligning their work to the off-the-job training and KSBs of the apprenticeship. Indeed at least two apprentices spoke about moving roles during their DA registration period to ensure that they could meet the programme's requirements. In one case, this role change had been left to the apprentice to manage:

*I've just changed jobs – the job I was doing at the start, it was clear early on that wasn't going to be able to meet the KSBs. Even though they acknowledged that, I still had to apply for a job and go through interview process. [They kept telling me I could get a new job] 'when one comes up'. But it's difficult applying for a full-time job and then having to say, 'by the way I'm not here on a Wednesday'. (Mid-career apprentice - Social Worker)*

Other logistical issues raised included a clash between the specified off-the-job day of learning and work-place based learning opportunities – with both taking place on Fridays.

With these constraints and complexities in mind, one apprentice explicitly noted the need to be a 'self-starter' and seek out opportunities when they were not immediately to hand. Apprentices additionally spoke about the importance of buy-in from senior colleagues who could ensure that their learning was actively supported by experienced and established work colleagues and managers, not just by their HEP tutors. This view was mirrored by employer respondents who were explicit in recognising the importance of support for learners to achieve in off-the-job and on-the-job settings:

*Our responsibility is to train them as an apprentice - teaching them the ways of business, but also to teach the more company-specific side of engineering. ... how learning integrates into work life and how we could use the lesson that they've learnt and develop products. (SME engineering employer)*

When the partnership and connections between employers and HEPs worked well and learning was designed and experienced in a cohesive and integrated way, apprentices were clear that they felt supported and that this motivated them and enabled them to learn and to complete their studies:

*My employer is very supportive of the degree; we often speak about module results and how Uni is going in our 1-1 meetings. To start us off ... my employer enrolled the apprentices on a great data analysis project which significantly helped us to get a head start. (Early-career apprentice - Digital Technical Solutions Professional)*

Apprentices additionally spoke of the importance of the support offered to them by their HEP tutors particularly when their work and learning responsibilities hit moments of challenge. One early career apprentice spoke of the need in such circumstances for 'a bit of compromise from all three parties'; something that was certainly reflected in many HEP interviews:

*It's high stakes - in terms of reputation and for students. If a student trips up academically, I worry about the impact it has on their employment. They are*



*under extra pressure, so we have a different duty of care for those students.  
(HEP)*

#### 2.2.5 Partnership working

Respondents identified partnership working as the lynchpin for DA success. Finding the right partner, and identifying appropriate ways to work together, was seen as essential for the development of high-quality learning experiences and well-designed DA programmes. In short, the success of many of the other expectations and experiences discussed so far – cohesive and sequenced learning and time and support to learn resulting in the development of skilled and work-experienced graduates – could be contingent on this.

Strong partnership working required knowledge of what each partner could offer, and an understanding of each party's responsibilities and roles:

*At its heart [a high-quality DA is] about application of theory to practice and practice to theory. They are degree apprenticeships not [just] apprenticeships. So how are those level 6 and 7 capacities developed - the value added of working with the University? There is also something about coherence and engagement across the partnership. That the university knows what is going on in the employer and vice versa and they are not working on two parallel tracks. (HEP)*

*It's important [that our apprentices] get and see those skills that we can't provide [in the workplace]. They won't need it [necessarily in their role] but it is important that we don't look blindly at what we need but what they need to become an engineer. (Large engineering employer)*

*[It's important employers don't just offer opportunities for] grunt work... there's a lot in industry that isn't touched on in a degree. It's the employer's responsibly to cover those parts. (SME engineering employer)*

As part of these partnership working arrangements, respondents discussed the importance of ensuring that the needs and drivers for each apprenticeship are fully understood, beyond those who make and agree the initial arrangements, and can filter down into all operational aspects of the partnership:

*The three-way commitment statement is often signed by someone who has to spend the levy ...Tying up the loose ends so people can't drift away from the intention is the hard bit (HEP)*

*[Its important] company-wide that everyone appreciates what an apprentice is there to do. You can start to become a middleman between Uni and work... they should talk about things directly, but you become the messenger between the two of them. (Early career apprentice – Civil Engineer).*

A number of employers noted this potential disconnect and discussed the extensive work they had undertaken in-house to ensure cultural buy-in and support. This involved whole-organisation briefings, developing clear objectives for operational managers and undertaking relationship-building activities for apprentice mentors. One HR early careers talent specialist from a large engineering firm explored this with us:

*[We use our] Town Halls - where the general manager gets everyone together. Ahead of [starting apprenticeships] I did a Town Hall and introduced ...where*

*apprentices would fit in business and what our rotation plan would look like. At the next Town Hall, our apprentices introduced themselves. At the start of each rotational placement [I work with line managers to] set objectives.*

HEPs also noted the need for cultural change in their own institutional settings, in order that DAs could be appropriately supported. This involved moving from a culture and endeavour built on bipartite staff-student partnerships to one which is not only tripartite, but is 'employer-led':

*In apprenticeships there are three of us in the relationship. [we need to understand it's] more complex. The student is not always the lead client. (HEP)*

*This is more like knowledge exchange activities and a mature B2B [business to business] relationship, rather than a student relationship, which is more individual. (HEP)*

This was not to say that HEPs are unused to working in a competitive market environment aligned to value for money and stakeholder requirements, but that the nature and operation of this emerging market, and its associated stakeholders and relationships, are fundamentally different and may require different approaches. HEPs had worked to adapt in a number of ways including creating DA academic forums where staff could meet to share good practice and solve problems together, providing dedicated staff and curriculum development support for those new to DAs, and using external expertise to support the design and enhancement of work-based learning frameworks and associated DA programmes. HEPs noted this external expertise was more important where challenges existed to finding appropriately experienced staff who could bridge the cultures of academia and industry – for example in the construction sector.

Employers and HEPs explored how partnerships that work well are not static but grow and develop together. This growth was built on open and honest conversations, a respect for difference and a commitment to creating shared solutions to any problems or conflicts that arise in the process of delivery:

*Where there are hiccups along the way, our relationship is important. An honest frank conversation. New apprenticeships in social work are still a bit in development. There is often a lack of clarity about what is ok [in the profession]. Open communication between partners can deal with most scenarios and can help with managing anxiety. (Large social work employer)*

However, partnerships cannot be one-sided, and a number of HEPs noted the challenges that could ensue from DAs 'employer-led' status, particularly in the absence of precedent, good practice examples or expectations in this developing field of practice. Some of the practical difficulties thus far had emerged from circumstances where early trailblazer groups had been led by employers:

*When we were first involved, HEPs weren't allowed to be part of the trailblazer process. We ended up with standards that no-one can deliver as they don't fit with the HE model. Things have improved. Now we can be represented. (HEP)*

*[In the early days] we spent a lot of time trying to engage with employers and Trailblazers. It's difficult to establish we were on the same playing field – it felt like we were selling [our services to them]. (HEP)*

Some HEPs also struggled with parity in the relationship during procurement and contractual negotiations:

*Contracts with the NHS require us to provide a 24-hour turnaround response. But it doesn't work both ways. In the procurement process - they have the upper hand. If we prove too difficult, they may be gone... and certain agreements or partnerships are too unique to fully embed... [when this happens] it doesn't feel tripartite. (HEP)*

This was certainly reflected in discussions with employer representatives who noted the expectation that HEPs would meet their organisation's contractual requirements:

*We place a lot of store in contractually detailed statements of work - the modules we want delivered, when we want them delivered, expected start dates, planned completion dates. Then tracking - how people are working - in progression tracker meetings and quarterly business review meetings with operational leaders and HEPs. (Large automotive engineering employer)*

*During the procurement process and invitation to tender, we insisted on our own terms and conditions for the contract. (Large local government employer)*

Respondents also noted that challenges could emerge in partnerships where organisational cultures did not readily align. For example, employers spoke of temporal misalignment, noting differences in understanding of what 'advance notice' means, their need for apprentices to begin their programme at times different to conventional educational start points, and for the off-the-job training to flex when business needs prevailed. Where this cultural misalignment existed, HEPs noted that they could find themselves taking on higher levels of responsibility in the partnership, to support the employer and apprentice by 'joining the apprenticeship dots up'. This was seen as important to ensure the best learner experience as possible:

*It helps with our learners – the more support we can develop [for apprentices] in the workplace, the better it is for our apprentices. So much is outside our control - 80% - if we can influence this by supporting our employers that is great (HEP).*

The varying types of commitment and resourcing available from employer partners had led to a number of HEPs taking, or planning to take, a 'managed growth' approach, with pre-screening processes to ensure that new employer partners understand the commitments that DAs entail. These comprised undertaking risk assessments, arranging regular partnership meetings and the provision of 'apprenticeship essentials' resources, handbooks and information events for potential employers. One HEP representative described the new apprenticeships marketplace as feeling 'more like [a dating app] than monogamy'. As such they were clear they had to be mindful about who they were prepared to partner with and why. This reality sometimes played out in HEPs engaging more actively with existing partners, where they felt that they could make a straightforward 'judgement call' about reciprocal commitment. The need for careful partner selection was also mirrored in several

employer organisations who discussed the importance placed on selecting and procuring training providers in line with organisational need:

*We encourage HEPs to visit and look around and 'open the cupboards' so that they feel involved and engaged. Our relationship with the University is good. We fix problems and develop the programme together. (Large rail operator employer)*

*The best training providers take time to understand our business and our structure. We look for a clear and well-organised structure to the programme and look for commercially astute partners. (Large financial services employer)*

### 2.3 Summary

Section 2 has explored stakeholders' motivations for engaging with DAs, and their varying aspirations for and expectations of the experience. This has offered an opportunity to explore – from each stakeholder perspective – the key elements associated with well-designed DAs and high-quality learning experiences.

Stakeholders were positive about and committed to the exciting and unique opportunities that this new form of provision can bring: a transformative educational and training experience for apprentices, alongside significant organisational benefits for employer organisations and HEPs.

Success in this area was seen to rest upon a series of interconnecting building blocks: the ability to build a cohesive programme and sequenced on-the-job and off-the-job learner opportunities, enabled by seamless onboarding and streamlined administration, and time, support and opportunities for apprentices to learn.

Respondents could see a range of benefits beyond the immediate and tangible value of work-experienced graduates. When DAs work well, the unique and transformational benefits associated with degree-level learning were clear to see. HEPs noted significant benefits in engaging more closely with employers and in exploring opportunities to develop their expertise in work-based and work-integrated learning. Further, employers could see direct gains for their workplaces, their employees and the future of their professions.

What has emerged from this discussion – transcending the detail of individual apprenticeship standards, levels of study, employer or HEP types or numbers of learners on programme – is the importance of successful partnerships and partnership working. More particularly, respondents highlighted the opportunities for interface and integration that strong partnerships engender and support, impacting on all angles of the work and learning of each stakeholder.

However, partnership arrangements are not uniform and reflect different employer and HEP settings and cultures, and the variety of apprenticeship standards. Each apprenticeship programme may therefore need to straddle multiple partnership types, and each employer may find themselves navigating different partnerships with one or more HEPs. The design of each programme, and the reality of each apprentice's learning experience, is fundamentally connected to this. Section 3 moves on to examine in greater detail some of the different forms of partnership that can exist between employers and HEPs, and any concomitant implications for the development of well-designed apprenticeship programmes and a high-quality learner experience.

### 3 DEGREE APPRENTICESHIPS AS PARTNERSHIP

The project interviews identified multiple types of employer-HEP partnership that may be active at any given time within any one HEP or employer (or in some cases within just one DA programme) setting. This section draws on this understanding to build a typology of the forms of partnership arrangement that may exist between employers and HEPs. The typology identifies four types of employer-HEP partnership, based on how responsibilities are divided between the two stakeholders and the associated status of the apprentice. Each of the partnership types is explored through a short vignette. This discusses some of the potential opportunities and challenges associated with each, which could have either a positive or negative effect on developing well-designed apprenticeship programmes and high-quality learner experiences.

As with any typology, the reality of each case assessed against its categories will necessarily be richer and more complex than the classification categories can fully illustrate. This notwithstanding, the typology is presented as a framework that can be used by HEPs and employers to reflect on, manage and oversee their current and future DA portfolios:

- in the operational sphere, to support and develop understanding of current and future partnership arrangements and to inform discussions and decision-making about how best to manage these activities; and
- in the strategic sphere, to support the development of organisational strategies and associated action plans for future DA developments.

#### 3.1 Apprenticeship partnerships typology

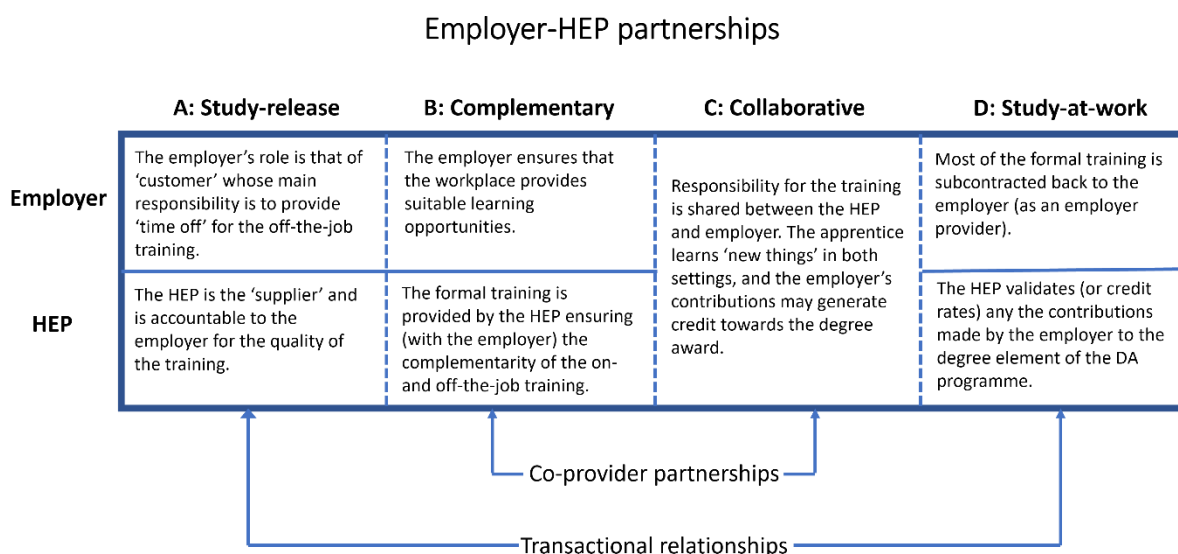


Figure 3.1: Employer-HEP partnerships

The typology comprises four types of employer-HEP partnership, each of which is explored briefly in Figure 3.1 and in greater detail in the partnership vignettes. Importantly, any individual DA programme-based partnership is likely to fall more or less into one classification category at any point in time. However, as indicated by the dotted lines in Figure 3.1, the boundaries between categories are not solid and some of the experiences outlined in one category may also reflect the experiences of stakeholders in another.

Type A and Type D (**study-release** and **study-at-work**) partnerships imply a more *transactional* customer-oriented relationship based on the provision of a service: i.e. in Type A the provider supplies the training, in Type D the provider supplies the academic award. These are arguably not partnerships in the truest sense of the word and may be less accommodating of some of the elements of partnership working that underpin the DA expectations outlined in Section 2.

Type B and Type C (**complementary** and **collaborative**) imply partnerships based on co-provision, in which each contributes equally but differently depending on which type, to apprentices' learning opportunities and experiences. In contrast to Types A and D, Types B and C are seen by respondents as more likely to provide the connected activity and shared understandings that together underpin and support well-designed DA programmes and high-quality apprentice learner experiences. For HEPs, this connectivity was seen to be important for their oversight of the on-the-job element of the programme, over which they may have little direct visibility or control, but which nevertheless contributes to the overall quality of the programme of study.

It is also important to note that partnerships are not static entities and may develop over time; built on changing needs and growing understandings of how best to work together. Respondents indicated that programmes might start off on the Type C partnership pathway, through co-design with employer partners, but as new employers join or existing employers leave programmes or engage in different ways (perhaps due to staffing changes), the delivery of the off-the-job training 'product' could become separated from the on-the-job elements of the programme in some partnership arrangements. Further, any new employers arriving once the design phase of a DA has completed, might start as a study-release partner, but could work to join up and collaborate or co-provide the programme in time.

As the typology moves from Type A to Type D, the overall leadership of and responsibility for the partnership's success moves from the HEP towards the employer. Each type can also be more or less associated with a particular form of apprenticeship cohort: mixed multi-employer or closed employer-based. Figure 3.2 therefore plots the four DA partnership types on these two axes – from employer-led partnerships to HEP-led partnerships and from closed employer-based cohorts to open mixed-employer cohorts. Each partnership type and its position on these axes presents a mixed set of experiences, challenges and opportunities that the vignettes below begin to explore.

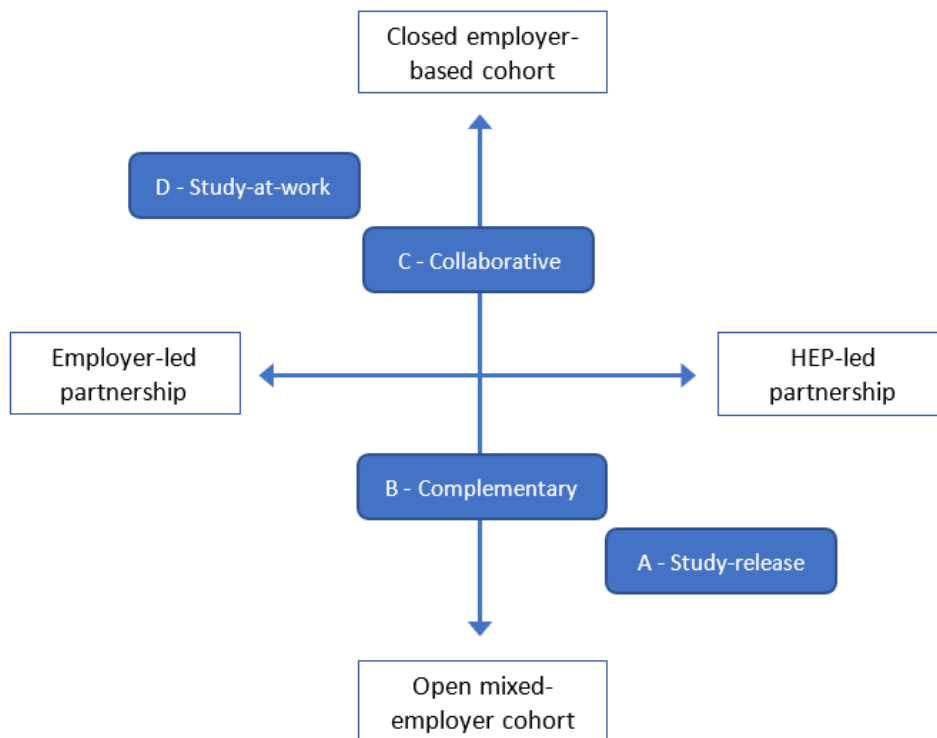


Figure 3.2: DA partnerships and their association with leadership and cohort types

### 3.2 Typology vignettes

The following vignettes draw together key insights gathered from the project’s stakeholder interviews. Each short description explores stakeholder roles and experiences and a number of perceived strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Due to the varying and variable factors underpinning and influencing each partnership, the detail included in each vignette remains illustrative and should not be taken to directly reflect the reality of every employer-HEP partnership that aligns to a given category. As stated earlier, the boundaries between categories are not solid and some of the experiences outlined in one partnership type may also reflect the experiences of stakeholders in another.

When considering the typology, HEPs and employers will need to judge where, on balance, their partnership fits. In reflecting on this ‘fit’, they should be able to consider whether the current position of their partnership and associated provision feels appropriate for all stakeholders’ needs and their organisational strategic goals and, if not, how it could or should develop to align more appropriately.

#### PARTNERSHIP TYPE A: STUDY-RELEASE

Study-release partnerships may be found where a range of employers from a diverse set of sectors, and of varying sizes, have contracted to send employees to join a mixed-cohort DA programme.



Due to the mixed group of employers involved, employer contact with the academic programme team may be time-bound and/or mediated through the apprentice or an intermediary. In these circumstances both HEP and employers have direct contact with the apprentice, but in separate spheres of activity i.e. off-the-job and on-the-job. Beyond the initial contractual agreements at the beginning of the partnerships, tripartite reviews can form the primary way in which all parties come together and gather soft and hard intelligence. However, if the individual who attends the tripartite meetings on behalf of the HEP is not part of the DA delivery team, then these meetings may be one step removed from the off-the-job training experience and rely on detailed reports and records from the apprentice and the delivery team. Meeting records often rely on retrospective reports and reflections which may lead to employers hearing too late about any issues that have arisen or assessment results. In these circumstances, access to learner management systems is seen to be key to ensuring that employers and intermediaries can engage with and understand the academic off-the-job expectations of the programme and their apprentices' progress against these, and use this understanding to provide relevant and timely on-the-job experiences.

Apprentices in these partnerships may need to be 'self-starters' who can seek out relevant opportunities and take responsibility for balancing work and study. In some employer settings, apprentices may also need to find their own time to study outside a formally scheduled teaching timetable, as their primary identity may be that of employee and work-goals may not alter to reflect the occupational standard. This can be particularly problematic where the workplace and/or colleagues are stretched or when seasonal deadlines approach.

*Potential benefits:*

- Opportunities for apprentices to mix and learn with peers from other workplace settings.
- Opportunities for HEPs to engage with a range of smaller and larger employers who may not be able to provide a full cohort of apprentices.
- Opportunities for employers to engage individual or small numbers of their workforce with opportunities that align to individual and/or wider workforce development plans.

*Potential challenges:*

- Workplace cultures may not fully understand and support the needs of apprentices and/or provide sufficient and appropriate opportunities to meet the KSBs of the occupational standard.
- The relationships necessary for strong partnership working may be more difficult to build due to the range and/or number of employers and HEPs engaged in delivering a given apprenticeship standard.
- Employers may find they have insufficient detail of the DA programme and learner progress to support them in the workplace, particularly where learner management systems are not in place.



## PARTNERSHIP TYPE B: COMPLEMENTARY

Complementary partnerships form where each party is committed to ensuring a sequenced and cohesive on-the-job and off-the-job learner experience but cannot enter a more collaborative arrangement. This may result from the size of the organisation (SME), the (smaller) number of employees registered from a given employer, or the culture or views of an employer partner. In these circumstances a sequenced package of work-related learning and activities is developed so that apprentices can experience complementary on-the-job and off-the-job learning opportunities which enable them to acquire and demonstrate the KSBs of the relevant occupational standard.

In complementary partnership arrangements there is a division of responsibility. The HEP takes responsibility for designing and leading the DA programme and provides the formal off-the-job element, whilst the employer supports the apprentice and ensures that they can learn through application and practice within the workplace. Depending on the size of the organisation and the cohort, the on-the-job experiences may be provided in two different ways: through rotational opportunities that match the learning on the course and provide experience of related and relevant aspects of the workplace in different organisational settings; or by tailoring the work of an individual apprentice to ensure that each course element can be met from their primary employment base. Line managers and/or workforce development leads are often key to the success of this approach in employer settings, ensuring that apprentices have appropriate work-based opportunities and time to complete their learning. Access to learner management systems remains important in this category, but where dedicated workforce development roles are also in place, these individuals may also regularly connect with HEP representatives to gain further insight and intelligence about each apprentice and to provide feedback on workplace progress.

Apprentices in this category of partnership are more likely to be supernumerary members of the workforce, occupying a role that is distinct from that of other staff members. Their status as a learner will form a major part of their identity at work. As such they are more likely to be early career apprentices due to the challenges that mid-career staff may experience when trying to step out of their substantive duties to mirror and complement the off-the-job element of the programme.

### *Potential benefits:*

- Opportunities for apprentices to mix with and learn with peers from other workplace settings and to gain a wide range of experiences in their organisational settings, through bespoke and/or rotational work-plans.
- Opportunities for HEPs to engage with a range of employers who may not be able to provide a full cohort of apprentices.
- Opportunities for employers to engage individual or small numbers of their workforce in DA programmes that align to individual and/or wider workforce development plans and, due to their greater engagement with the programme, to meet with HEP representatives (and perhaps other employers) out of which other collaborative activities may grow.

### *Potential challenges:*

- The wider workplace may not be well informed about the needs of apprentices and the apprentice, which may impact upon their status and experience as a learner.
- Workplace opportunities may not reflect, in an appropriately sequenced manner, the off-the-job elements of the programme and the associated learning needs of the apprentice.
- Workplace programmes designed around rotational learning opportunities may struggle to communicate and ensure the needs of the apprentices at each rotational stopping-off point.

#### PARTNERSHIP TYPE C: COLLABORATIVE

Collaborative partnerships are recognised by many as the gold standard. In these partnerships, collaboration may start at the very inception of the programme with employers becoming involved in the design and development of the curriculum and its sequencing. This is likely to occur where a large employer has enough apprentices to form a whole or significant part of an apprenticeship cohort, and/or when strong relationships and partnerships already exist between HEPs and employers, built for example through activities such as research, knowledge transfer or other educational activities governed by PSRBs. While existing relationships are important, this does not negate the importance of strong procurement and risk assessment processes. These may lead to a period of contractual commitment from the employer, which in turn can engender confidence from the HEP, leading them to invest in the DA programme and partnership.

Collaborative partnership arrangements are often based on co-provision, where responsibilities for the training of apprentices are appropriately shared between the HEP and the employer. In both on-the-job and off-the-job settings, apprentices will 'learn new things', through a combination of formal learning events and opportunities to reflect on and apply their learning. These learning events are designed to ensure a sequenced curriculum. In these circumstances the employer may provide learning opportunities that contribute towards credit for the degree award. This is particularly evident where elements of the off-the-job training are sub-contracted to an employer-provider as part of the validated DA award. This form of apprenticeship partnership relies on strong and shared leadership and an agreed direction of travel in both HEP and employer organisations. This can be manifested in several ways, including where staff commit their time to attend regular apprenticeship steering and management group meetings to ensure the provision remains on track and that all parties agree and are up-to-date.

Apprentices in this category of partnership may be supernumerary or in established roles. The design of the programme may allow mid-career apprentices with existing substantive duties to engage in learning opportunities as it either mirrors and complements their existing work activities, or their employer arranges for them to step outside of these activities using a secondment-type approach. A case-study example of this form of partnership in practice is provided in Appendix 1.

*Potential benefits:*

- Opportunities for apprentices to learn as part of a specifically designed programme together with peers who are similarly placed and can support one another in their learning.
- Opportunities for less complex relationship management activities as HEPs can engage closely with one/a smaller group of employers, out of which new partnership opportunities may grow.
- Opportunities for employers to take cohorts of new and existing members of their workforce forward as part of workforce development plans. As part of this activity, line managers and other employees will engage in activities aligned to the apprenticeship programme, thereby ensuring wider awareness of apprenticeships and their role in the organisation.

*Potential challenges:*

- Finding and committing appropriate and ongoing resources (including leadership and operational resource) to the apprenticeship programme. If this is not formally sub-contracted activity (to an employer-provider) then no DA funding can be drawn down for this purpose.
- Contracts, often determined by the employer, may restrict the design of the DA programme and the ability for the HEP to enhance their activities over the period of delivery. If original employer partners leave, the bespoke programme may not be appropriate to market to other employer partners.
- Apprentices may not be able to learn with and from others outside their organisations thereby reducing opportunities for cross-organisational learning.

**PARTNERSHIP TYPE D: STUDY-AT-WORK**

In study-at-work partnerships, employers-providers (as sub-contractors of the HEP) take on most if not all responsibility for the education and training of the DA. In addition to validating the programme (with all the subsequent quality assurance responsibilities that that entails), the HEP remains accountable for the provision to the ESFA and Ofsted, and for managing and overseeing the sub-contractual arrangement. This is most likely to occur where large employer organisations have a strong culture of workforce development and a dedicated team embedded in their organisational structures, with enough apprentices to warrant the resource commitment this entails. Employers in this group will be on the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers in their own right, but to deliver any credit-bearing elements of the DA, will require a partnership with a validating HEP.

Apprentices in this category are likely to have the primary identity of employee in their organisational settings, contracted to undertake DA training that is fully integrated into and an expected part of their organisational roles. Apprentices may be unaware that they are on an apprenticeship programme as their status is little different from those around them in similar roles and is an embedded part of the organisational structure and culture.

*Potential benefits:*

- Opportunities for apprentices to learn as part of a specifically designed programme alongside peers who are similarly placed and can support one another in their learning.
- Opportunities for employers to take new and existing members of their workforce forward as a fully integrated element of their workforce development plans.
- Opportunities for HEPs to extend their partnerships into new employer settings, with the potential for other spin-off activities.

*Potential challenges:*

- As a funded 'sub-contractor' employer-providers will need to be able to commit appropriate and ongoing resources (including leadership and operational resource) to the programme of activities to ensure that sequencing between on-the-job and off-the-job training is coherent and seamless.
- Apprentices are unlikely to be able to learn alongside others outside their organisations, thereby reducing opportunities for cross-organisational learning.
- Apprentices' opportunities for engagement (individual and collective) in the organisation and governance of their programmes of study will need to be managed within the employer setting and overseen by the validating HEP.
- The validating HEP remains the 'main provider' and retains responsibility for the overall quality of the DA. Existing HEP collaborative partnership processes are unlikely to provide the insight necessary to perform this role and may need to adapt to provide DA-specific quality oversight.

### 3.3 Summary

The common factor that underpins the varying partnership models described in Section 3 is the particular and undeniable responsibility of HEPs for the oversight and quality and standards of DA programmes. HEPs are not only responsible for the quality of the credit-bearing provision and standards of DA academic awards, but also accountable for the overall quality of the associated apprenticeship training. To do this effectively, HEPs need oversight of the effectiveness and appropriateness of both off-the-job and on-the-job contributions. This is key to HEPs 'joining the apprenticeship dots up' to ensure that apprentices receive all the necessary training and development to successfully complete their apprenticeship and pass the EPA.

In considering these four partnership types, a contradiction that began to surface in Section 2 becomes clearer: the range of DA partnership types and associated variations in HEPs ability to oversee all the aspects of this provision. This may prove particularly significant where DA programmes are built on study-release (Type A) or study-at-work (Type D) partnerships, due to the more transactional nature of the relationships on which they rest.

As stated at the beginning of this section, the reality of each case assessed against the typology categories will necessarily be richer and more complex than can be explored here. This notwithstanding, given the large variation in partnership types, and our growing understanding that partnership working is fundamental to the success of any apprenticeship

provision, the typology is offered as a framework with which HEPs and employers can make sense of, manage and oversee their DA portfolios:

- in the operational sphere, to support and develop understanding of current and future partnership arrangements and to inform discussions and decision-making about how best to manage these activities; and
- in the strategic sphere, to support the development of organisational strategies and associated action plans for DA developments going forward.

Having explored and established the complexities of DA provision and partnerships, both here and in Section 2, the report now turns its focus to the second research question. It considers how HEPs are using and adapting their internal quality management processes to assure the initial and ongoing quality of this different and, for many, non-mainstream provision.

## 4 QUALITY MANAGEMENT & GOVERNANCE

This section explores DA provision using the lens of UK higher education's established approach to the design and quality management of degree programmes: the quality management cycle. The discussion highlights the different needs of DA programmes and any associated adaptations or changes to processes and procedures at each cycle stage. The section moves on to outline the organisational management resources, structures and systems HEPs have developed and adapted to support some of these differences and the governance structures and processes in place to oversee this new form of provision. It closes with a discussion of apprentice and employer engagement in HEP quality management and governance processes.

### 4.1 The quality management cycle

Because of the credit-bearing 'degree' element of each DA programme, HEPs emphasised the importance of employing existing quality management processes and procedures wherever possible. These processes have been carefully designed and are internally monitored and regulated by each HEP in their capacity as an independent degree awarding body. As such they are governed by each HEP's regulations and codes of practice and are overseen and managed by specialist regulatory and quality assurance teams in partnership with academic delivery teams. In turn, these processes and procedures provide the assurance that any credit-bearing provision of the HEP institution meets the sector-recognised standards (see paragraph 342 of the regulatory framework) and which reflect the expectations of the OfS regulatory framework which sets out the parts of UK Framework for Higher Education Qualifications that apply in England.

However, as the staging points of the quality cycle were explored in the interviews, it became clear that the distinctiveness of DA provision – relating to its employer-led nature, external compliance expectations, reporting cycles and external quality assessment methods – has led to significant adaptations and augmentations of these extant approaches.

#### 4.1.1 From development consent to validation

Most HEPs, as a matter of course, now operate an institutional development consent or strategic approval process<sup>8</sup> to ensure that there is a market for any proposed programmes and that they align with strategic priorities and goals. However, the research indicates that this form of institutional oversight was still in development for DAs in a number of HEPs. While some spoke about an emerging or establishing 'managed growth' approach, others recognised that existing institutional planning processes, based on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data and associated market insights, were unhelpful for this kind of provision. Those engaged in DA provision therefore often relied on new business development and engagement colleagues, who could provide intelligence on potential demand, industry readiness and relevant occupational standards.

During the process of DA development, HEPs identified the need for focused activity with academic colleagues to help them to understand the differences between DA and other

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<sup>8</sup> Internal evidence-based decision-making processes that lead to agreement for new programmes to be added to the HEP academic portfolio.

provision. These differences included: alignment to the occupational standard, the importance of employer relationships and input, expectations around safeguarding and British values, an adapted process for recognising prior learning and the need to design for flexibility in off-the-job provision to accommodate different workplace settings and demands. One HEP had used dedicated project resource to fund an educational development colleague to work directly with DA academic teams, and another HEP discussed their hope to employ instructional designers to support the writing of DA programme materials.

It was acknowledged that, in first few years of DA development, some programmes had been designed as part-time 'day-release' versions of existing provision, with apprenticeship elements bolted on. This had resulted from a lack of understanding of this new type of provision and the contrasting culture and approaches it encompassed. However, HEPs noted that this early approach had proved less likely to be employer-focused and were keen to ensure that academic colleagues now worked directly with employers to enhance existing and develop future DA programmes.

Thus, while a number of academic teams already had industrial liaison panels in place to inform their broader portfolio development and management, DAs were recognised as needing significantly more and direct engagement with prospective employers – particularly during the design and validation phases. That said, HEPs acknowledged this was not an end in itself and ongoing partnership should be encouraged wherever possible as part of the monitoring and enhancement of this provision.

The importance of building on existing processes was explicitly mentioned by a senior leader at one HEP, who described how they had made the initial 'mistake' of treating DAs differently to other provision, leading to an overly bureaucratic process. This led to them subsequently adopting the approach taken by other respondent HEPs, who had augmented existing programme development and validation processes to make them fit for purpose. This was reported to involve adding new DA annexes or questions to forms and meeting agendas to capture the relevant detail:

*Our biggest mistake was creating a separate overcomplicated course approval document for DAs. People collapsed under the weight of it. We subsequently added a short section [to the normal form and process] which talks about specifics. (HEP)*

HEPs discussed how programme validation events<sup>9</sup> had also been adapted to meet the needs of DAs. They observed the importance of finding external independent panel

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<sup>9</sup> Expert validation panels are convened by HEPs to make judgements about the quality of proposed provision and the standard of the subsequent award. Panels comprise internal and external expert members who peer-review submitted paperwork and lead a focused discussion on each programme submitted for approval to ensure it meets the expectations of the subject area, the level of study and any other specified institutional requirements often associated with strategic goals (e.g., inclusive curriculum and/or opportunities for developing an enterprising mindset). At the event, the proposing programme team is often invited to present



members with a good understanding of this type of provision. However, due to the relatively new nature of DAs in the sector, finding such experts was noted as challenging, and actively engaging in national networks was deemed important for seeking out suitable candidates. Employer representatives were also routinely invited to validation events, to provide evidence of engagement in the design of the programme, and/or a stakeholder opinion on its usefulness and market attractiveness. However, while these events are part of the normal cycle of activity in degree awarding HEPs, the interviews highlighted how their importance may not be fully understood by participating employers:

*I underestimated the seriousness of [the validation event]. I genuinely thought it was just another meeting. It was a shock to see such a full room and tension in the room. A deeper understanding of what this is all about... and induction sheet would be beneficial... [explaining you are] 'the defendant', and the jury here are not sure, so you need to convince them. (Large local government employer)*

As members of a validation panel may not all be expert in DA provision, HEPs noted the importance of a set of supplementary questions for panels to draw on, which could be used to assure a programme's dual compliance with the regulatory and quality assurance expectations of the HEP and the occupational standard expectations of the DA.

*Some things wouldn't be different from other course approval: we'd cover academic progression, a variety of assessment methods, learning outcomes that are clearly framed... In terms of the DA specifically we focus on clear strategies for supporting students [who are working], good integration with employers, employer input into programme design and meeting all the other regulatory and compliance requirements. (HEP)*

A small number of HEPs described a more nuanced approach, where separate panels were convened for DA and other related provision:

*We have a dedicated [validation] panel for work-based learning. It was already in existence, but it's now used for all apprenticeships. This allows us to think about the different nuances of apprenticeships (HEP).*

HEPs additionally described the role of overarching institutional work-based learning (WBL) frameworks, which informed programme development and validation panel understandings. Such frameworks identify what work-based learning means at an HEP and set out clear expectations of structure, pedagogy and common focus or content for any WBL programme:

*Our work-based learning framework is our mechanism for the approval of DAs. It forms the basis of understanding at the panels. Panels are interested to hear how the DA developed in liaison with employers and the intent of the*

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to the panel, followed by a discussion led by the panel members based on lines of enquiry arising from the proposal paperwork. Following the event, the panel can make recommendations and/or set conditions that need to be met before the programme goes to market.



*delivery in meeting local needs. Right from outset we expect employer involvement and co-design. (HEP)*

#### 4.1.2 Monitoring and enhancement

While it was clear that HEPs had developed and were using augmented versions of extant design, development and validation processes, the middle phase of the quality cycle – the ongoing monitoring and enhancement of programmes of study – had evolved to be quite different. This was due to the distinct focus of externally driven ESFA monitoring and audit and Ofsted inspection processes:

*QIPs [quality improvement plans] sit outside normal annual monitoring processes... they inform the SAR [self-assessment report]<sup>10</sup> we are working on for Ofsted. And because they're done annually, in the next round of QIPs we'll pick up actions identified to check they have been completed. The format and questions asked are quite different to annual monitoring. (HEP)*

*The Uni wasn't too sure how it was supposed to approach [annual monitoring] for apprenticeships. We initially used the educational partnerships process but there were some requirements for partnerships ... that weren't relevant to DAs. In the end it was a matter of filling it out with the detail required for Ofsted rather than the needs of the usual process. (HEP)*

An important element of this change included the recognition of HEPs' role in ensuring that the apprentice receives all the training required to meet the KSBs of the relevant occupational standard in order that they are prepared to complete the EPA. This was reported to require knowledge and understanding of the on-the-job activity of employer partners; something that would normally sit outside an HEP's sphere of visibility and control and could therefore be difficult to negotiate:

*[All] accountability sits with us, not only for the 20% off-the-job, but we need to control the 80% on-the-job. Are [employers] doing the right thing?... At times – it makes me feel we are 'checking up' on the employer. It's not always applicable – going into [global financial services firm] and telling them their workplace isn't correct. It isn't our place. (HEP)*

However, it was noted that HEP's internal monitoring processes could not be changed wholesale, due to parallel and ongoing scrutiny of the degree element of these programmes under the regulatory oversight of the OfS. To reflect this, HEPs discussed how they retained and adapted elements of existing processes. For example, one HEP spoke about the expectation that DA programme external examiners<sup>11</sup> would visit employer settings to understand the context of the 80% on-the-job element of the apprenticeship. Another discussed the need for their web-based continuous improvement tool (designed to support

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<sup>10</sup> Ofsted requests that providers they inspect send them a copy of their self-assessment report or equivalent if they have got one. But we do not expect that they have one and this is entirely voluntary.

<sup>11</sup> External examiners form a national network of independent evaluators of students' learning and their standards of achievement who additionally provide impartial and independent advice to programme delivery and management teams. Details of the role of the external examiner can be found in the QAA advice and guidance document: External Expertise (QAA, 2018)

programme teams in their monitoring and enhancement activities) to remain in use, but for additional data and evidence to be sourced and used in the monitoring of these programmes.

Respondents therefore indicated that they operated and maintained a hybrid approach which allowed them to meet the range of internal and external monitoring and inspection criteria and requirements associated with DAs. And while their aspiration was to draw these together as much as possible, the different starting points, purposes and data needs of each meant that this was not straightforward. How HEPs managed and resourced this hybrid activity is discussed in greater detail in Section 4.2.

#### 4.1.3 A note on periodic review

Due to the relatively new nature of DA provision, none of the participating institutions' programmes had reached the point of periodic review<sup>12</sup> – the final stage of the quality management cycle. This, like annual monitoring, was seen to be something that would require significant change to ensure processes reflect the additional quality assurance requirements that are specific to apprenticeships.

*Periodic review? We haven't got that far. We would want to involve representatives of industry or professions to check we are still meeting stakeholder expectations and requirements. And would want to add in a meeting with the employers of apprentices we have, to get feedback. We'll need to adapt processes. (HEP)*

## 4.2 Organisational management

With this hybrid monitoring and enhancement process in mind, a number of HEPs discussed the employment of expert staff such as business development managers and Ofsted compliance managers. These new staff members worked in partnership with existing quality assurance and academic colleagues to support these new areas of activity and their associated requirements.

### 4.2.1 DA management structures

A range of new (permanent and temporary) structures have developed and continue to develop in HEPs to support DA provision. These include employer-facing roles to develop and manage the B2B (business to business) relationships with employer partners. Some HEPs operated a 'hub and spokes' model where a small central specialist team worked to guide a distributed management structure involving academic and quality assurance colleagues. Others had a more centralised process with colleagues based in the specialist team undertaking most of the activity in this area. Some HEPs described their centrally managed approach as temporary; something that would remain in place in its current form until DAs had become more embedded in the culture of the organisation. One HEP

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<sup>12</sup> Periodic review forms a major review of an academic programme or cluster of programmes every 5 years. In some HEPs it is referred to as quinquennial review. The process provides an opportunity to review a programme holistically, drawing on the peer-review expertise of periodic review panel members. At some institutions, periodic review also acts as the point of programme re-validation. Where possible, HEPs also try to align periodic reviews with PSRB accreditation timelines to ensure that the two processes can be as complementary and supportive as possible.

described the fact that the management of DAs had started off as centrally run, had been too swiftly distributed and a central team had had to be rebuilt to help regroup and reconnect programmes and practices. It is therefore important to note that the structures described here reflect a particular snapshot in time; it was clear that they are still developing and may change as provision matures and grows.

These different management structures were noted to have been influenced by a diverse range of background factors including: the drive and vision of a Director/Head of Apprenticeships or equivalent; the ability to secure early apprenticeship development funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE); the pre-existence of work-based learning teams and structures and pro-active academic teams who had driven the growth of provision from their own subject areas as part of their local growth plans.

Staff with further education and apprenticeships backgrounds had been employed by some HEPs to support their transition into this line of work; others had used consultants in areas where they did not have expertise. This was particularly the case where HEPs noted they had struggled to get permanent investment in the area due to perceived uncertainties about the future of the provision, and its funding bands and the likely proportion of future income that would flow from DAs. In such cases HEPs also described how they relied on temporary project staff or colleagues on secondment, with the plan to bid for a bigger team resource once income had been established.

#### 4.2.2 Learner management systems

To manage the compliance and monitoring requirements associated with delivering apprenticeship provision, including the monthly reporting requirements of the ILR, HEPs spoke of the need to extend and augment their existing student information records management systems (SIRMS) and virtual learning environments (VLEs) which had been built to support and manage their existing credit-bearing portfolio and the bipartite relationship between HEPs and their students:

*[Through our existing systems] we can monitor and track academic progression, but we can't track professional progress at an occupational level rather than as an academic one. (HEP)*

To do this, those that had been able to make a successful business case had purchased one of several targeted apprenticeship learner management systems. These systems not only provide records for monitoring and compliance purposes but can be used to ensure that all stakeholders in the tripartite relationship can gain access to learning records. Importantly, apprentices, HEPs and employers all had visibility of the apprenticeship programme through these systems. Respondents also acknowledged the role these systems could play in planning apprenticeship income through monitoring learners and learner status, in a way that existing SIRMS could not.

Those who did not have these bespoke systems spoke of the additional manual processes and workarounds needed to ensure compliance. They also spoke of the challenges of providing access to systems designed to support bipartite HEP-student relationships to a third party (employers). Again, in such circumstances workarounds were developed including, in one HEP, the creation of an employer-focused programme VLE page. This could be resource heavy; particularly where it had proved difficult to bid successfully for investment to support DA provision.

Irrespective of whether HEPs had new systems in place or not, the entry of the right evidence and information into the system was key to successful compliance and monitoring. This required staff and apprentices knowing how best to input data and information efficiently and effectively:

*[Our new system] is administratively very heavy - the bureaucratic tracking mechanisms do require a lot of time. It does work for us but still requires the data entry to be done. (HEP)*

*[Our new system] is a key resource but only works if it's engaged with. I have to do audits twice year. If we left people to do it, it wouldn't happen (HEP).*

### 4.3 On-the-job training

*Regardless of whatever happens, the main training HEPs are the ones that are accountable ...But where does accountability sit on employers? It's their tax, their reinvestment, but we have to identify any malpractice. And telling off an employer has major repercussions. The chances are they are also doing a KTP or offering placements. We're walking on eggshells [as any wrong move] could put a stop to a relationship as whole. The market's competitive. Employers rate training HEPs through their digital accounts. Employer surveys and learner surveys through Ofsted. Where do we get the chance to rate them? (HEP)*

This quotation neatly captures two important issues raised by HEPs which relate to their role in ensuring that the apprentice receives all the training required to meet the KSBs of the DA standard and successfully complete the EPA. First is the challenge of *knowing* whether on-the-job, employer-led training provision is appropriately supporting apprentices. The second issue is the difficulty of *acting* on this knowledge when the contribution is not satisfactory. This was viewed as particularly challenging when HEPs are working in partnerships based on more transactional relationships and are viewed as the supplier of DA training for the employer client or customer. How, then, were HEPs gaining oversight of this element of apprenticeship provision and 'joining the apprenticeship dots up'?

Some HEPs discussed their early thinking that they would use their experience in validating and managing collaborative educational provision and partnerships.<sup>13</sup> However, it was found that DAs were so 'poles apart in some of the checks and balances needed' that combining these activities was neither practical nor possible. Given this and reflecting the number of employer partners associated with some DA programmes and HEPs<sup>14</sup>, the B2B (business to business) nature of these relationships, and some of the potential imbalances

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<sup>13</sup> In HEPs, specialist quality assurance teams oversee collaborative provision activity. This includes the credit-rating the provision of partners without degree-awarding powers and undertaking due diligence in four key areas: financial health, legal compliance, academic quality and strategic alignment. These teams undertake further detailed investigations and checks for trans-national educational partnerships (TNE) and any UK partners without an established record or reputation in the UK. They also work in partnership with organisations such as academy trusts, local education authorities and NHS trusts on programmes that incorporate large practice-based elements to ensure that any PSRB competency requirements embedded in their awards are met.

<sup>14</sup> One HEP in the sample was working with a total of 603 employer partners.

of power and responsibility that were found to result from more transactional DA partnership arrangements, a large part of this activity fell to the new business-facing DA teams outlined in Section 4.2.1. DA team respondents noted their roles in setting out, clarifying and reiterating expectations and responsibilities at different stages of partnership development and management with each employer partner.

#### 4.3.1 Initial discussions and contractual due diligence

DA team members spoke about the need to manage employer expectations and understandings at the very earliest stages of a potential partnership, prior to contracts being agreed and signed:

*They come in with a wish list of everything they would like to see encompassed in an apprenticeship - we have got much better [at dealing with] that in an appropriate and manageable way. (HEP)*

Responsibility for undertaking due diligence activities – to identify each employer partner’s commitment, capacity and capability to meet the on-the-job training and support requirements of an apprenticeship – also largely fell to this team. To this end, some teams had introduced new employer risk-assessment processes which considered the proposed relationship against a range of risk factors. Examples which were shared included: ethical considerations (business fields that the HEP may not wish to engage with), the prior DA experience of the employer, the extent of each employer’s role and function in the delivery of the DA, whether they are a levy payer or an SME, readiness to deliver on-the-job training, any existing relationships with the HEP; employers’ apprenticeship support systems and services; and an overall assessment of the likelihood of reputational enhancement or damage.

However, interview discussions revealed the difficulties HEPs had in assessing, overseeing and managing due diligence; particularly where employers insisted on using their own contractual documents and directed the procurement process on their terms. Indeed, several HEPs indicated that in the absence of a strong and established process, they could end up relying on known reputation and assumptions of trustworthiness:

*[This is an] area that isn't terribly evolved in the sense that most of the intelligence [about risk] is soft and not process driven. We've a high degree of confidence in many of our public sector partners. (HEP)*

Where there was overlap with PSRB accreditation activity, other forms of due diligence were also required, and the practicalities of this could also prove challenging:

*When we work with the NMC [Nursing and Midwifery Council] they will want to look into [due diligence] before they approve. But it's not consistent. When working with NHS Trusts we can [check this] with 5 large employer partners. But it's difficult when we're dealing with 20-30 employer partners on a standard. (HEP)*

#### 4.3.2 Onboarding and monitoring

DA team members discussed their use of apprenticeship nomination forms to reinforce the importance and nature of employers’ roles and commitments for the success of the DA programme. However, they noted the challenges that could ensue if when, after initial discussions had taken place, operational responsibilities were handed over to less knowledgeable and/or committed employer partner staff members.

Further information about the on-the-job experiences of apprentices was gathered through what was described as ‘soft intelligence’ from routine monitoring activity, quality assurance processes and conversations between apprentices and academic teams during teaching sessions. HEPs also noted the vital role that regular tripartite review meetings played in picking up this soft intelligence, allowing them to deal with issues or concerns in as timely a manner as possible. This point was also noted by apprentices who recognised the role that well managed tripartite meetings could play in keeping everyone on track:

*The tripartite meeting adds a lot of value for me. Getting hold of [my line manager] to come to meetings is difficult. They're ex-military, so not great on feedback. It forces them to reflect and it's good to hear feedback. The academic tutor [who attends] is good about touching on all angles. It's [also] a real opportunity [for me] to feedback. (Mid-career apprentice – Senior Leader)*

*Whenever I'm lacking in something, I ask if I can do something... We don't talk about [university things] in review meetings. We talk more about how work is going rather than how Uni is going. It's more like a routine checkup. (Early-career apprentice – Digital and Technology Solutions)*

HEPs additionally invited employers to sit on boards and attend meetings (such as programme monitoring and development groups) and to play an active part in each programme through activities such as delivering guest lectures. And while this was not consistently managed or practical with every employer partner, where it did occur it had the dual role of providing insight into employer's contributions and offering employers opportunities for wider engagement; something to which the report returns in Section 4.5.

#### 4.4 The governance of degree apprenticeships

Given the distinct nature of DA provision, with associated adaptations to quality assurance processes, it is important to consider the ways in which each HEP ensures their governing body<sup>15</sup> is kept abreast of this area of work, i.e. how they are enabled to receive and test assurances that this aspect of provision is effectively overseen.

HEPs noted a variety of changes to their reporting and governance systems to accommodate the requirements of their apprenticeship portfolio and build it into the decision-making committee structure. By doing this HEPs ensured that apprenticeship provision became part of the evidence-base from which they prepare their annual assurance reports on quality and standards for their governing bodies.

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<sup>15</sup> An HEP's governing body (e.g. Council or Board of Governors) has overall responsibility for the quality and standards of its DA provision. In England, it is explicitly required under the OfS's Public Interest Governance Principles to receive and test 'assurance that academic governance is adequate and effective through explicit protocols with the senate/academic board (or equivalent)' (OfS, 2018: 145), which in practice covers the Conditions B 1-5 on Quality and Standards (OfS, 2018: 87-95). The Committee of University Chairs (the representative body for Chairs of Council/ Board of Governors of UK HE HEPs) explores this further, stating 'Governing bodies will also wish to receive assurance that specific academic risks (such as those involving partnerships and collaboration, recruitment and retention, data provision, quality assurance and research integrity) are being effectively managed' (CUC, 2020: para 2.5).



Commonly, this involved the creation of additional committees and groups with a sole focus on apprenticeships, which reported into existing committee structures:

*We've created an Apprenticeships Sub-Committee of the Quality Assurance Committee. It's been in place for just under 18 months and is the monitoring committee for apprenticeships... It reports to Quality Assurance Committee and then up into the governance process. (HEP)*

*We've established a DA Operations Steering Group which reports to Academic Standards and Audit Committee and to Student Experience Committee and then on to Board of Governors. (HEP)*

Recognising the time it takes to build expertise and knowledge in this distinct area of practice, HEPs stated that separating out the structures in this way – at all levels of decision-making – ensured that the complexity of DA provision did not dominate existing committees, drive out other important business or end up under the scrutiny of non-specialists:

*At the school operational level, we have a separate dedicated set of meetings for DA provision which feed into wider governance. Our existing committee structures don't cover this, and there are too many people not involved in DAs in those meetings... the expertise of our central Apprenticeship Hub is critical here as academics don't have the compliance knowledge. (HEP)*

*We have sub-boards of study that focus on DAs and can specialise in Ofsted, IFATE and ESFA requirements and report into normal boards. We need that specialism as boards of study can't have that detailed oversight. (HEP)*

This separate scrutiny also extended to institutional examination, progression and award board<sup>16</sup> meetings:

*Apprenticeship progression boards - meet 3 times a year - beyond assessment boards that just look at academic module progression... Dedicated departmental apprenticeship external examiners attend these too. All key staff involved attend as well as work-based learning coaches.... Each learner is RAG rated. Individual progress about how learners are getting off-the-job training and meeting KSBs. We also identify where there are issues to escalate through governance. It's the mechanism we use to approve learners to go through the gateway. A really thorough monitoring of learner progress. (HEP)*

The importance of getting scrutiny right, at the right level, was recognised as important across the project sample. Indeed, where separate reporting and governance structures were not in evidence, the potential risk this created was noted:

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<sup>16</sup> Detailed in each HEP's regulatory framework, variously named examination, award and progression boards oversee the standard of students' performance, award credit and confirm the progression of taught students from one stage and/or level of study to another or the conferment of an overall academic or interim award.



*The issue at the moment is that we have a small provision [compared to our overall student numbers] and a lack of [specialist] oversight and governance structures... it makes me nervous. (HEP)*

But like the other processes and structures that had grown-up around DA provision, HEPs were clear that current governance structures reflected a snapshot in time and would be open to enhancement and change as their provision matured. Indeed, in one HEP, the difficulties of aligning existing processes, systems and culture with DAs had now been fully acknowledged, and a strategic change project was underway:

*Current provision was built on the existing infrastructure of the university, without quite realising the extent of the differences in apprenticeship delivery and regulation - funding and quality - and the style of that regulation. We're now having to rework the way we think about apprenticeship to ensure compliance ... we're having to do fairly significant things to get to where we want to be. [We've just started a] major project ... taking apart our current operating model and reworking it, focusing on management and governance requirements. ... Bringing it all together in one space and all the right people have enough to know and have the right conversations. We've a reasonable distance to travel in very short time. (HEP)*

## 4.5 Apprentice and employer engagement

### 4.5.1 Apprentice engagement

Student engagement sits at the heart of UK higher education and is a core and established element of high-quality provision in England.<sup>17</sup> The importance of this engagement is outlined in the OfS regulatory framework's Annex B which outlines the public interest governance principles for registered HEPs, including:

*III. Student engagement: The governing body ensures that all students have opportunities to engage with the governance of the HEP, and that this allows for a range of perspectives to have influence (OfS, 2018: 145).*

In many HEP settings these quality and governance expectations have been analysed and articulated in terms of *student journeys* with consideration given to touchpoints and opportunities along the way for student feedback, student voice/agency and student partnership in or co-creation of their learning opportunities. Students' union representatives are also normally invited to attend the highest academic decision-making

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<sup>17</sup> The UK Quality Code states: *Core practice: The HEP actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.* In practice, this means that effective, meaningful and inclusive student engagement requires continuous effort to ensure the development of new and innovative approaches. Students can engage individually in their learning and in quality processes, which might involve working in partnership with individual staff, or groups of staff and other students. However, individual student feedback is not a substitute for formal structures of collective student representation. Collective student engagement involves students considering, deliberating and developing informed views, independent from the HEP, which are representative of the wider student body. Collective engagement will happen primarily through the student representative structures such as course/class/faculty representatives, and where they exist through the students' representative body (such as the students' union, association or guild) (UKSCQA/QAA 2018: 3).

committees of an HEP to ensure they have opportunities to engage in institutional decision making.

When asked how they engaged their DA learners in these various opportunities, HEPs stated that the normal formal opportunities for student representation and voice applied, including multiple touch points for feedback:

*[Apprentices can be members of] Programme Committees as with other programmes – they're voted in. We have an Apprenticeship Forum (sounding board) to capture the wider cohort voice... Progress review meetings help to influence change on programme. You're actively encouraged as an apprentice to feed in through these meetings. (HEP)*

However, it was noted that apprentices may not have the same time capacity to engage with these representation structures (which can expect hours of commitment over a given academic year) and were clear that this was an area of activity that needed further work.

*[They have opportunities to become] Student Staff Committee reps, but ... apprentices have full-time jobs and can't just give up 60 hours of time each year. So how can this be modified for apprentices? (HEP).*

While the project did interview some apprentice programme representatives, and a selection of apprentice respondents were aware they had programme 'reps' to turn to, this was not evident across the board.

That said, apprentices did identify several other engagement and feedback mechanisms and opportunities with both HEPs and employers, reflecting their dual on-the-job and off-the-job learning settings. These included taking issues straight to the programme leader, having a meeting with their academic or work-based learning tutor, discussing issues with their line manager or work-based apprenticeship mentor, attending work-based apprenticeship forums to share experiences, and being engaged in employment assessment centres to help select new apprenticeship recruits.

#### 4.5.2 Employer engagement

Recognising that unlike traditional higher education provision '*...there are three of us in the relationship and the student's not always the lead client*', HEPs and employers noted the importance of employer engagement opportunities, but were clear that they were still in the early days of defining and establishing this new approach:

*While we care about apprentices our primary client is the employer in an apprenticeship – different to normal students. We've made all student engagement and voice mechanisms open [to apprentices] but employer voice needs to be represented in decision-making forums. This didn't come naturally to us like listening to students. (HEP)*

Respondents noted that employers were invited to, and welcomed at, scheduled apprenticeship programme management meetings. Where closer partnerships had been established with large employers (often those sitting in Type C category of the project typology) HEPs described a high level of focused investment in employer engagement based on the employer's needs:

*With [one large employer] we've done a year's worth of workshop development work and invested in getting to know one another. The*

*programmes is being geared very much around what the employer wants [and its design is] an iterative process through consultation events. (HEP)*

#### 4.4 Summary

Section 4 has explored how far HEPs are using and/or adapting their internal quality management processes to assure the initial and ongoing quality of DA programmes. The analysis indicates that, due to the additional quality assurance and funding compliance requirements of DA provision, existing processes and procedures are not always fit for purpose and have had to be adapted and augmented. As such, this section of the report identifies two distinct but connected areas of activity which form a hybrid approach to the quality management of DAs:

- *Augmented activity*: built on established quality management processes and procedures led by existing teams of academic staff in association with expert quality assurance professional colleagues, who hold responsibility for the quality assurance of academic programmes of study at the HEP.
- *Bespoke activity*: using new quality management and funding compliance processes, procedures and systems, led by new staff members with focused responsibility for apprenticeship provision and employer partnerships.

The discussion has shown that these are influenced by two important and contrasting process contexts and drivers, which together influence the practice of quality management of DAs:

- *HEP-led* quality procedures and processes designed to meet the regulatory conditions of the OfS (OfS, 2018);
- *Externally driven* procedures and processes, aligned to compliance expectations of the ESFA and quality inspections of Ofsted, leading to new and augmented DA quality management procedures and processes.

These adapted hybrid modes of quality management have led to the development of new organisational and governance structures, roles and responsibilities which together manage and oversee DA provision in the context of new compliance and inspection requirements.

## 5 WELL-DESIGNED AND HIGH-QUALITY: CREATING CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

It is important to begin this final section with a reminder of the sense of optimism and opportunity that interview respondents shared, and the wealth of existing and planned resource and commitment made by HEPs, employers and apprentices to ensure the success of DA provision. All stakeholder groups were clear that we should not forget the importance and transformative potential of higher education integrated with learning in workplace. The research has provided a glimpse into the current opportunities and considerable potential of DA provision to augment and enhance partnerships between higher education and employers, and to engage in the development of new forms of work-integrated delivery and assessment. These partnerships are recognised as the basis for significant benefits for employers, industrial and business sectors, regional economies and, perhaps most importantly, the apprenticeship graduate.

However, respondents also identified a number of ongoing challenges to the delivery of DA programmes and associated apprentice experiences, which may need to be addressed if these positive outcomes are to be fully realised. The OfS has previously made a distinction between two contexts in which higher education programmes (and by extension DAs) operate: ‘the context a HEP creates for itself through the choices it makes about its mission and operating model, and the context created outside a HEP’s control in the wider operating environment’ (OfS, 2020a: 51). However, the undeniable interconnectivity and interdependence of these two contexts has emerged from this project: activity in one will undoubtedly interact with, and at times depend on, activity within the other. The report concludes by asking: *how can we ensure we are creating the right conditions for well-designed DA programmes and high-quality apprentice experiences to enhance and grow?*

Given the rich nature of the information collected from project respondents, there is not space to detail every possible enhancement. Through reading the report in full, those involved with and interested in DA provision will be able to draw up their own list of conclusions, as they reflect on their partnerships and connected practice and experiences. The conclusions are not therefore comprehensive, but are offered as a stimulus for discussion, debate and, ideally, action.

### 5.1 The mixed economy of apprenticeships

Section 1 noted that well-designed programmes, and associated high-quality experiences, were those which comprised three inter-related elements:

- cohesive and sequenced on-the-job and off-the-job provision;
- seamless and unbureaucratic administration; and
- time, support and opportunities for apprentices to take full advantage of their educational experience aligned to the requirements and expectations of the relevant apprenticeship standard and EPA, the workplace, and the degree programme.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the nature of these three elements, success was seen to hinge on strong partnerships and positive partnership-working. In Sections 2 and 3, an ideal form of partnership was identified, based on ‘collaboration’. This type of partnership was viewed by respondents as having the greatest potential for realising the benefits of apprenticeships for all stakeholders.

While such partnerships certainly existed (with benefits noted for all involved, see Appendix 1), and aspirations towards this ‘ideal’ remain important, the research indicates that they may be difficult to realise in some circumstance and settings. As such, some apprentices in the project sample were working and studying within other forms of partnership setting, each with its own different but related benefits and challenges. These other forms of partnership (perhaps more suited to SMEs<sup>18</sup> and other employers which wish to send a small number of apprentices to study on a DA programme or are unable to commit the resources to high levels of partnership working) are nevertheless vital if we are to ensure that a range of apprentices and employers can engage in DA provision. They may also prove critical to the success of three other related policy agendas – regional skills, levelling up and access and participation of under-represented groups in higher education – and the role each plays in building diverse and skilled regional workforces.

## 5.2 Ongoing challenges

### 5.2.1 Complex accountabilities and expectations

As shown in this report, the realities of working and studying in DA provision cannot be separated from the wider circumstances in which each programme is built and the contexts in which it operates.

Respondents from all three of the project’s stakeholder groups discussed elements of the complex reality of this provision, associated with its dual external accountability frameworks, overseen by separate agencies with different priorities and expectations. This complexity was seen to be compounded by ongoing changes to the external environment in which DA provision operated (e.g. changes to TEF and its contributory metrics, changes to the National Student Survey, the advent of Ofsted inspections for DAs at levels 6 and 7, requirements to re-register as a training provider on the ESFA’s Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers and ongoing reviews of occupational standards and funding bands). HEPs noted the difficulty of keeping their employer partners abreast of the fast and changing nature of this operating context, and apprentices spoke about the significant amounts of paperwork they were required to complete which took away time from their learning experience.

The employer-led nature of occupational standards and their EPAs was also seen to lead to some very practical delivery challenges. These included differing understanding and expectations of what can and should be delivered as part of a degree programme and getting the right balance between immediate employer needs and the needs of an apprentice as they develop their lifelong learning and career skills. These differences can play out in the arena of the three-way relationship of the DA programme, where stakeholders outlined a wide and variable range of on-the-job and off-the-job programme delivery mechanisms and associated apprentices learning experiences.

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<sup>18</sup> The Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth white paper highlights the importance of boosting opportunities for smaller employers to engage in apprenticeships: ‘In 2018/19, starts in SMEs were down 43% compared to pre-reform while starts among large employers were up 7%’ (Department for Education 2021b: 21).

In this complex working space where HEPs viewed a negative review from Ofsted or sanctions imposed by the ESFA as something that could lose them business and/or reputation, DA provision was reported to have developed a reputation of being 'high-stakes'. To manage this, several HEPs had employed Ofsted and ESFA specialists from FE, one of whom noted the very real differences between the language of compliance and inspection on which FE provision is based, and the culture of peer-review and enhancement in HE. This left the question hanging: 'how FE do we want to become?'

### 5.2.2 Spheres of visibility and control

As noted in this report, in DA provision the training provider is responsible for ensuring that the apprentice receives all the relevant training to achieve a successful outcome against the relevant occupational standard, and to successfully complete the EPA. This means that while not formally accountable for the on-the-job element of the programme, oversight of its appropriateness and quality is arguably necessary given employer commitment is vital for ensuring that apprentices can achieve occupational competence and meet the expected standards of their degree award. HEPs reported that their responsibility for the overall quality and success of each DA programme was challenging to meet in partnerships where they had limited visibility or oversight of this significant contributory element and its associated learning experiences.

The quality and standards of mainstream provision in HEPs is overseen and managed through well understood and embedded internal quality assurance processes, supported by specialist teams. However, with the oversight of the on-the-job element perceived by HEPs to be a key element of the quality assurance of DA provision, existing quality management processes are not fully fit-for-purpose. As explored in this report, HEPs have responded by employing a range of mechanisms to oversee the employer learning space; but noted that in some circumstances visibility may be limited. This can be affected by the type of partnership on which a DA is built, the culture of the employer organisation, the management structures and systems in place in the HEP institution, as well as the 'employer-led' nature of the provision.

As such, challenges about how best to undertake due diligence and ongoing quality assurance with large numbers of employers were noted by HEP respondents. This was seen as particularly problematic in more transactional 'partnerships' where employers viewed themselves as 'purchasers' of apprenticeship places from an HEP 'supplier'.

### 5.2.3 Organisational management and readiness

*You can buy into an idea - work based learning and widening participation - but organisational readiness for realising that strategy can be easily underestimated. (HEP)*

Given the noted differences in DA provision when compared with other academic programmes, a number of HEPs have instigated and invested in significant organisational change, including adaptations to and augmentations of extant quality assurance and governance processes. To facilitate this, new hybrid approaches to quality management are in development, undertaken by members of existing quality assurance teams and new apprenticeship teams which work together to oversee the dual compliance and quality assurance requirements of DA provision. A number of HEPs have also invested in new systems to support these teams, processes and wider stakeholder engagement. These



systems were noted as important for partnership working and communication in this complex field of practice.

HEP respondents reported that they received conflicting financial messaging about this provision. When compared with other higher education provision, some HEP respondents reported apprenticeship funding bands can be seen as low and cited the additional overheads associated with managing the dual expectations of DA external compliance and monitoring. In contrast with recent and ongoing DA funding band reviews there was the impression that these current income expectations may not be secure; although it should be noted that in practice, funding bands have decreased, increased, and remained the same on review. This perceived uncertainty was reported by some HEPs to have adversely affected internal bids for investment in apprenticeships which, in turn, was seen to impact on organisational readiness.

#### 5.2.4 Planning and risk

The complexity and fast-changing nature of the external environment, and the very real differences between DAs and other mainstream HE provision, had left many HEPs in the sample considering the costs and the benefits of this provision.

For HEPs the ‘employer-led’ nature of the DA market has associated financial risk: that employers might seek out new HE ‘suppliers’ if they felt their purchase was not up to standard. This is not to say that HEPs are unused to working in a competitive market aligned to value for money and stakeholder requirements. However, for HEPs the DA marketplace is significantly different to that of their mainstream provision where students are the key stakeholders and parties protected by consumer law. The relatively new nature of DAs led to HEPs noting that there is little precedent about what ‘good’ looks like or what service level expectations might be reasonable; with practice-knowledge largely emanating from the complementary but distinct environment of further education, or from lower and/or non-degree forms of provision. In the absence of established benchmarks, HEPs reported that the market can appear weighted towards employer needs and requirements which has the potential to impact on the educational experience that they offer. This educational experience is something that is not only valued by the HEPs in the sample but is something on which they are assessed and monitored through a number of external mechanisms including, but not limited to, consumer law, TEF, the National Student Survey, ongoing OfS monitoring and Ofsted inspections.

In this context, HEPs report that they have begun to develop new processes for assessing employer partnership risk. Some had engaged dedicated legal support, and others described how they had developed or were planning to develop separate bipartite employer agreements or memoranda of understanding, and associated complaints and escalation policies. HEPs are certainly not hostages to fortune, and some sample members had already taken action to terminate unsuitable employer partnerships. However, how far these developing approaches to due diligence can translate into action when large numbers of employer partners are involved, remains to be seen.

With these challenges noted, the majority of HEPs in the sample described recent action to regroup and recalibrate after having to deal with some of the challenges created by earlier, arguably more opportunistic, approaches:

*[We perceived risk differently] before we worried about the risk of missing out on standards – the first mover advantage. Now we recognise different risks*



*and we're thinking strategically about which partners we want to work with to ensure quality. (HEP)*

Thus, although some were clear this was an important and developing area of their portfolio, the need for 'managed growth' was also recognised. At least two HEPs in the project sample had actively stopped adding occupational standards to their portfolio until they were confident that the business model was viable and aligned to their strategic direction of travel.

### 5.3 Creating conditions for success

It could be argued that some of the challenges related here add up to what Rittel & Webber (1973), identify as a 'wicked' problem. That is, they 'involve multiple interacting systems, are replete with social and institutional uncertainties, and for which only imperfect knowledge about their nature and solutions exist' (Mertens, 2014: 3). Such wicked problems often require multifactorial solutions which in turn necessitate nuanced understandings of stakeholders, contexts and circumstances.

With this in mind, the report returns to the question posed at the beginning of this section: how can we ensure we are creating the right conditions for well-designed DA programmes and high-quality apprentice experiences to enhance and grow?

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'Wicked problems often crop up when organizations have to face constant change or unprecedented challenges' (Camillus, 2008).

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The research indicates that the number of accountabilities and associated expectations in the DA landscape (when compared with mainstream higher education provision) can be practically and culturally heavy for stakeholders to carry and manage. This sense of bureaucratic burden, noted by members of all stakeholder groups, appears to be heightened by perceptions and experiences of the complex and changing external and internal environments in which DAs operate. While stakeholders have certainly risen to the challenge of this complexity, the support that HEP and employer partners can offer each other and their apprentices can be affected, and perhaps unnecessarily driven, by these wider operational systems and requirements.

Refining and co-ordinating the touchpoints at which external reporting and monitoring take place would allow all parties greater opportunity to focus on enhancements to provision and the pursuit of positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

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'[A wicked] problem involves many stakeholders with different values and priorities' (Camillus, 2008).

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The reality of each DA and the employer-HEP partnership on which it rests, results from a complex set of interlinking factors, including the expectations of its occupational standard, the associated degree award, any associated PSRB accreditation requirements, and the organisational contexts (values, priorities and expectations) of the partner organisations

engaged in its delivery. DAs are therefore not, and cannot be, uniform in their creation and operation. While all stakeholders can envisage ideals of partnership and outcome, operational realities may prove very different. Importantly, while different types of partnership can pose a number of potential challenges to the successful design and operation of DAs, each also has associated potential benefits which should not be lost from sight. Acknowledgment of these benefits, as well as challenges, is particularly important where DA provision has the potential to align with and contribute to a number of related policy agendas, e.g. opportunities for under-represented groups in HE, regional upskilling and levelling up.

Given this *mixed-economy* of apprenticeship partnerships and provision, it is important that any internal and external assessment, monitoring and inspection activities recognise that ideals of cohesion and sequencing (and the holistic oversight of on-the-job and off-the-job provision that this requires), may be more difficult to realise in some circumstances than others. What ‘good’ looks like may look different from this idea in different partnership settings, but may nevertheless offer broader organisational, educational and socio-economic benefits beyond the apprenticeship programme per se.

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‘There is nothing to indicate the right answer to the problem’ (Camillus, 2008).

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DA provision is still at a relatively early stage in its development in England. Available practice-knowledge largely emanates from the complementary but distinctive environment and culture of further education, or from lower level and/or non-degree forms of provision. As such, there is currently limited direct understanding of what ‘good’ looks like or what service level expectations might be reasonable in degree apprenticeship partnership settings. In the absence of established benchmarks, it is important that any evidence-based understandings of *what works* are aligned with *what is practical*.

This understanding could be facilitated through the development of a What Works Centre on higher technical education and skills, to complement the work of other centres which focus on local economic growth and access and participation in higher education (Cabinet Office, 2019).

These various developments could work together to build the conditions for stakeholders to focus their energies and attention on the very real benefits that lie at the heart of this form of provision, and to integrate it as a core element of their strategic planning activities. Drawing on the words of one of the project’s apprentice respondents, as we work together to build the right conditions for success, we may need ‘*a bit of compromise from all ... parties*’.

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## APPENDIX 1: CASE STUDY

### A complex collaborative partnership in practice

The Police Education Consortium, led by Middlesex University, is perhaps the most complex partnership encountered during the project, and provides a useful illustration of a number of the key points made in Sections 3 and 4 of the report. In this partnership, Middlesex University, Canterbury Christ Church University, the University of Portsmouth and the University of Cumbria have joined together to co-create programmes with three police forces. All members of the Consortium are described as ‘equal partners’ and a senior leader from one HEP told us: ‘the model of partnership is the best example I’ve seen in my career’.

Based on the expectations of the accrediting PSRB (the College of Policing) that Police Constable DAs and Degree Holder Entry Programmes will be co-designed and developed, this consortium illustrates a partnership which firmly sits in the collaborative category (Type C) of the project’s partnership typology.

Provider representatives have worked to build a strong relationship with their policing partners, based on a shared vision of *transformational education*. As well as working in partnership, the providers also subcontract elements of the provision to the forces’ learning and development (L & D) teams. Members of these L & D teams are clear that the apprenticeship programme must go beyond the KSBs to create a good ‘student’ experience – something that they themselves had enjoyed. The DA is acknowledged to be part of a wider piece of cultural change work in policing: creating foundational principles of learning that can carry on throughout a police officer’s career and equip them to deal with the complexities of modern policing.

To do this, the Consortium delivery team have actively designed a bespoke programme together, with writing and delivery undertaken jointly between police and Consortium university staff. All face-to-face delivery happens on the police’s own educational premises, augmented by ‘flying faculty’, where academic staff travel to the police training sites to co-deliver as required. In response to the pandemic, all delivery moved online and some aspects of this have been recognised as further enhancing the provision and will be retained. To ensure sub-contracting can work well, the university Consortium members have undertaken work with police colleagues to develop their understanding of degree-level qualifications. This exchange of expertise is not all one way, and police colleagues’ expertise in how to teach about sensitive subjects – such as domestic abuse – is proving invaluable.

To meet the combined requirements of the DA occupational standard, the College of Policing and partner institutions quality and governance processes, the Consortium has a complex set of contracts (each including up to nine to ten annexes covering delivery responsibilities and individual and shared KPIs) and has established a comprehensive independent governance structure, to which all partners are mutually accountable. At the highest level, a strategic board meets once a month, with discussions focused holistically across the DA provision and Consortium activities. This is complemented by a programme management board which meets to discuss management issues and operational progress. Finally, an operational group meets regularly to ensure that the DA is progressing as planned.

A proposal about how quality would be managed across the four institutions was agreed at the programme validation event, which involved simultaneous approval by each Consortium

university with College of Policing representation. A quality sub-group now coordinates the four providers activities in this area such as how changes to programmes and modules will take effect through the four institutional quality processes and committees. This is done through the creation of an alignment document, with any differences that need addressing discussed at the quality group.

Because of the large number of apprentices engaged in the DA programmes (contracts specify that the programmes will deliver c. 4000 student officers over the next three years), each cohort has a separate student officer representative, who is invited twice a year to a Consortium student voice meeting. Drawing on practice in the police forces, each cohort is also asked once a year to undertake a learning 'debrief'. This apprentice feedback, in addition to a range of other information about the programmes, is stored on the Consortium's learner management system – Aptem. The need to manage information more effectively has been raised up the agenda by a series of external Ofsted and internal provider quality reviews, which have highlighted the importance of understanding where each apprentice is in their learning journey at any given moment in time. The Consortium recognise that while they have plentiful data, it can be held in a variety of places and accessed using a number of nuanced lenses. The priority is to make sure that every line manager knows how their apprentices are getting on and can answer the question: 'are they on track?'