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A Pathway to Accelerated Degree Apprenticeships

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1. Context

The growth of degree apprenticeships since 2015 has led to a position where 101 universities offer them, with 109 Level 6 standards available (Laczik et al., 2024). Similarly, a focus on Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) with Office for Students (OfS) funding to support expansion at universities, and the establishment of two waves of Institutes of Technology (IoT), have led to an increase in learners taking HTQs and around 80 providers offering them (Cleaver, 2025). Most learners will have achieved the level they require for their current job role through an HTQ, but those who want to progress to a Level 6 qualification and achieve a degree can currently face limited choices. Partnerships between universities and colleges, including through IoTs, can provide a solution, notably in the form of accelerated degree apprenticeships.

An accelerated degree apprenticeship, typically at Level 6, could allow for the recognition of prior learning[1], and be shorter in time and content than a full degree apprenticeship. It allows for individuals to gain Level 6 skills through pathways involving technical qualifications and apprenticeships. Full degree apprenticeships generally last for 3-5 years, while accelerated degree apprenticeships could be complete within 18 months. An apprenticeship may be more attractive than a full-time 'top-up' qualification at a higher education provider for financial reasons, even after the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) is launched (DfE, 2025a). In some subject areas, notably policing, nursing and other health programmes, the financial impact of the levy on large public sector organisations has driven high apprenticeship numbers.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeships-recognition-of-prior-learning/apprenticeships-initial-assessment-to-recognise-prior-learning

2. Research

This research was supported by the Gatsby Foundation as part of its programme of work to strengthen higher technical education in England[2]. We conducted a desk review, starting with IoT webpages, and discovered a small number of accelerated degree apprenticeship programmes located in England. The programmes found were generally not explicitly part of IoT provision, although most were at providers that are part of IoT structures. This research aimed to better understand the enablers and barriers to developing accelerated degree apprenticeships and develop some key success factors for this kind of programme. The research involved the following methods:

- Exploratory research to uncover existing accelerated degree apprenticeships for individuals with existing Level 4 or 5 qualifications to achieve Level 6.
- Initial review of advertised accelerated degree apprenticeships to understand the offer, the content, and learner entry requirements.
- Interviews with programme leads from institutions offering them and interviews where possible with colleges and employers.
- A workshop with individuals associated with the IoT network to discuss the findings.

We conducted interviews with subject and apprenticeships programme leads in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) covering the following areas: Engineering, Nursing, Chartered Degree, Construction and Early Years Initial Teacher Training (ITT). In addition, we conducted a small group interview with a large employer.

[2] Improving Higher Technical Education in England| Gatsby Education

3. Key Findings

3.1. Demand for and Organisation of Accelerated Degree Apprenticeships

Accelerated degree apprenticeships reviewed for this research were all offered over a period of 1-2 years, with 18 months being most common. This was driven by both employers need to upskill their workforce quickly, and learners desire to gain qualifications in a timely manner whilst employed:

> *Employers want to get people from point A to point B quick. They need the skills enhancement to happen.* (Previous engineering programme lead)

> *To me, apprenticeships are the future... unless you've got the accelerated ones, there's so many people who won't do a 48-month programme.* (Chartered Manager programme lead)

Meeting employer need was a key theme, with providers typically offering online or block release models to large and national employers, while smaller programmes could be offered on a day release basis to a cluster of local employers. Employer demand, specifically workforce shortages in the public sector drove the size of cohorts, with some programmes running with up to 85 apprentices at peak times, particularly in nursing. Other accelerated degree apprenticeships that could run alongside traditional undergraduate programmes were able to run with only 8 apprentices in a cohort.

The age of apprentices diverged by programme and type of employer, with private sector engineering and management apprentices often being adults in their 20s, while public sector nursing apprentices being more likely to be in their 30s and 40s. The qualifications that apprentices had completed differed by industry, with HTQs (usually Higher National Diplomas from a local college) common in engineering, Level 5 apprenticeships (Nursing Associate) being common in nursing, and training providers in management accepting an assessment of experiential recognised prior learning for entry onto an accelerated programme.

Apprentices were usually already working at their employer, with the employer offering them the opportunity to take an accelerated degree apprenticeships either to fill an existing gap in the workforce (e.g. in nursing) or to retain a talented member of staff (e.g. engineering).

3.2. Enablers to designing and running Accelerated Degree Apprenticeships

Institutional knowledge and experience in offering apprenticeships, facilitated the development of accelerated degree apprenticeships by those with expertise in the subject area. In contrast, institutions with little to no experience of delivering apprenticeships found this to be a significant barrier. Leads noted:

> *We were able to piggyback on… institutional knowledge* (Nursing programme lead)

> *[In] next to no time the modules existed… you just shave off the first two years and that's it.* (Engineering programme lead)

Where **strong relationships already existed between the institution and employers**, the programme leads described being able to provide a level of flexibility to enable the accelerated degree apprenticeship to best meet employer needs:

> *To be able to sit down and actually have true frank conversations with [employers] about what's the experience been like in the past, if you could change anything at all, what would you do?... and to be able to have true conversations about the limitations on some of their desires.* (Chartered Manager programme lead)

> *It's kind of what [the employers] want, really, in all honesty, we just support them... And so, if they've got a bunch of [learners] that they want to take to the next level, then we'll work with them to do that.* (Apprenticeship programme lead)

Similarly, **strong relationships between colleges and HEIs** were a factor in being able to develop and maintain accelerated degree apprenticeships. Whether inside of an IoT or as another kind of long-standing relationship, understanding the content in college-delivered HTQs supports the development of accelerated degree apprenticeships by making the mapping process and recognition of prior learning (RPL) smoother.

> *With our college partners, we [understand] the HND in these colleges, so we know exactly what's in the course, and that's necessary for accreditation purposes.* (Engineering programme lead)

For some institutions, it has been possible to **combine apprentices with undergraduate learners**, either in full or after a specific bridging module delivered only to apprentices. This can make the management and finances of the programme more sustainable:

> *About 85-90% of the time we can manage it in such a way that the modules run alongside the three-year traditional degree.* (Nursing programme lead)

Where Accelerated Degree Apprenticeships were successfully running, benefiting from highly motivated apprentices and meeting employer need, the **learner outcomes and feedback** were said to be very positive. This helped to maintain the programme and employer support in the longer term:

> *Learner feedback always seems to be great as well. Again, the course team are so receptive to any individual group concerns and that's key to its success…Outcomes in terms of degree classifications and pass rates of first attempt for modules when you compare them to the traditional degree, [the apprentices] are outstripping the degree.* (Nursing programme lead)

> *Students who have been put through the apprenticeship are those that the company has already identified as the promising future leader* (Engineering programme lead)

Integrated degree apprenticeships, where the assessment of the degree can also be the assessment for the apprenticeship, allow for the HEI delivering the apprenticeship to be the end-point assessment organisation (EPAO) for the apprenticeship. This approach is favoured by HEIs, as it can reduce cost and administrative burden in contracting an independent EPAO. In the workshop, HEIs apprenticeship programme leads explained how the cost of independent EPAO disincentivised offering an accelerated degree apprenticeship. Thus, offering an integrated rather than a non-integrated accelerated degree apprenticeship was an enabler, and was part of the decision-making process:

> *I think we have the, the expertise and the knowledge… I think we are well positioned... there's also a potential to become an endpoint assessment centre.* (Potential Early Years programme lead)

3.3. Key Barriers specific to Accelerated Degree Apprenticeships

The **accelerated nature of the programmes** was thought to potentially pose a risk for learners, firstly in developing a sense of belonging to the HEI, but crucially for their development of skills and knowledge in time for the EPA:

> *You've got a very short period of time for an apprentice to assemble all the evidence they need… that's a really difficult part…* (Engineering programme lead)

Differences in learners' ability owing to having potentially varied previous experiences in learning and work, can mean that Recognition of Prior learning (RPL) can take a substantial amount of time and effort, and for some learners, additional support may be required. As above, this process is easier where learners come directly from an HTQ or a higher-level apprenticeship delivered by a local college or other provider where the HEI has an existing relationship and understanding. For those coming from a period out of learning or with other qualifications or experience, it can be much more difficult:

> *You've got to check the qualification very carefully to see if they're eligible, you've got to check the skills scan. Are they too qualified or under experienced to put them in? And then you've got to prove that you've done all that and prove to Ofsted that you're somehow factoring that into the teaching as well.* (Engineering programme lead)

> *Any recognition of prior learning experience, especially experiential learning, isn't just a 5-minute task… you've got to make sure they have that learning, you've got to test that… So, the time is the barrier more than anything when you get that many through...it's not easy.* (Apprenticeship programme lead)

This need to tailor learning for individuals coupled with the investment of time needed to conduct RPL assessment for learners, was seen to be problematic in terms of cost and resources for institutions. Similarly, an independent EPAO as required for a non-integrated degree apprenticeship had a high administrative burden and financial cost:

> *The sheer volume of administrative work… get an invoice, paid the invoice, work with finance, arrange a meeting.* (Engineering programme lead)

Due largely to a current scarcity of institutions offering accelerated degree apprenticeships, some programme leads felt there was an overall **lack of clarity or guidance on best practice** on developing accelerated programmes specifically:

> *The more people deliver these kinds of models, then there will be more best practise models and guidance to be used. And I think that's what will help other people be able to do that.* (Chartered Manager programme lead)

A **lack of data to support future planning** and the uncertainty associated with employer demand was also affecting the development and delivery of accelerated degree apprenticeships:

> *Universities… are too constrained in all sorts of horrible ways…. If there isn't a steady influx of students, then it simply makes the apprenticeship not feasible, not sustainable*. (Engineering programme lead)

> *That's why [my institution] has not been too keen on moving forward because we don't have any established data for how many would be interested in the region.* (Potential Early Years programme lead)

4. Key success factors

There is clearly potential for accelerated degree apprenticeships, as they are an example of the pathways and progression agenda set out in the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025). IoTs, as established partnerships between colleges, universities, and employers, are well-positioned to take this opportunity. One provider explained:

> *"We'll be looking for movement from that apprenticeship into that apprenticeship… when we first started, there was no thought process of that...certainly that is our direction of travel in the future. We're looking for pathways through our programmes."*
> (Apprenticeship programme lead)

To fully deliver on the potential of accelerated degree apprenticeships, there are some key success factors and related recommendations that can be drawn from this research.

Using **established relationships and practices to build capacity** is crucial. Most universities now offer apprenticeships, while universities and colleges have both individual existing relationships with employers and collective relationships as part of IoTs. Exploiting these experiences and relationships to develop sufficient numbers for a cohort of accelerated degree apprenticeships is the first step to making the programme sustainable and being able to market it. The size of that first cohort will look different for different providers and depend on whether apprentices can be part of undergraduate degree cohorts. Institution staff having honest conversations with employers about numbers of potential apprentices (current or future) is important.

Planning for progression with clear pathways through different qualifications and apprenticeships helps to better predict demand, particularly for accelerated degree apprenticeships. A leader at one provider told us they had planned a degree apprenticeship based on the demand from one, relatively large, employer, only for that employer to have a recruitment freeze and not be able to recruit any apprentices, meaning the apprenticeship did not run. Where possible, having two or more employers committed to an accelerated programme reduces risk. The relationship between colleges and universities, inside or outside of IoTs is important. For example, **sharing data on programmes and learner numbers** can help better plan potential pathways for individuals, providing a better understanding of potential demand at each stage in the pathway. Relatedly, understanding the content and delivery of likely existing qualifications through relationships with local colleges makes RPL much easier.

5. Recommendations

Looking to the future, **guidance and consistency around RPL and an accelerated degree apprenticeship offer** was an area where providers were keen to have more support. For some, RPL is an established part of their process, and so if needed, they may be willing to share practice. The Skills England occupational maps provide indicative pathways including HTQs to certain occupations. More formal recognition of pathways into higher level occupations through these occupational maps could allow for approved RPL from specific HTQs onto accelerated degree apprenticeships, making the process easier for providers and helping learners understand possible progression pathways. If this is an area for potential growth, sitting within the context of pathways and progression, then standard guidance from OfS and Skills England would be welcome.

Changes to apprenticeship assessment (DfE, 2025b), may make the differences in funding and EPA costs between integrated and non-integrated degree apprenticeships moot. However, we would suggest reviewing the differing funding requirements around apprenticeship assessment following the initial pilots and considering ways to avoid EPA being a barrier to developing accelerated degree apprenticeships.

More generally, promoting pathways and progression in the context of higher-level qualifications, both HTQs and higher-level apprenticeships, will likely be a key aspect of the roll-out from the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper. We would encourage partners to work together in promoting pathways that include HTQs and accelerated degree apprenticeships to young people, where they are appropriate and available.

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