

# The Role of Universities in Facilitating Higher Apprenticeships

Inside Government: The Future of Higher Apprenticeships 2014: Investing in Skills, Delivering Growth  
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## Speech – full text

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you today, about our experiences in the development of Higher Level Apprenticeships at UWE Bristol. Meeting the increasing demand for higher level skills in our economy and throughout our society is a very important agenda to our university – and, I would imagine, the universities that are represented here today. It is also, of course, an important political issue – ensuring we have the skills required to generate jobs, boost the UK's global competitiveness and realize our potential on the global stage.

You have already engaged with some excellent speakers and discussions this morning on the development and future of higher apprenticeships – in terms of the challenges and the opportunities. I don't want to go over these issues again, but I do want to spend a few moments talking about our motivations, as a university, to be involved, and to be driving forward innovations, on this important agenda - as part of this case study session.

As a University that is highly engaged with employers, we are very aware of the changing shape of the future workforce, and the increasing demand for high-level skills, with 80% of new jobs requiring skills at this level. We recognize the important role we have in meeting this demand.

As Chair of the CBI South West, and Chair of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce, I am also very familiar with messages from business leaders, predicting an increasing need for higher level skills over the next 3-5 years – with demand particularly strong in engineering, manufacturing and construction.

The need for access to high quality apprenticeships and other 'learn while you earn schemes', that meet the needs of both businesses and employees, is well recognized by the CBI, Chambers and increasingly the political parties. Higher Apprenticeships are certainly one of the ways we can work to meet the demand for high-level skills, albeit with a number of barriers to overcome, not least in terms of the investment needed from industry and challenges in terms of scalability.

So why did we, at UWE Bristol, become involved?

At UWE Bristol, working with employers, to support economic growth, raise aspirations and increase access to opportunities is already core to what we do.

We have an extensive range of connections and networks in our region and beyond, particularly with SMEs - who are absolutely at the heart of growth in the UK. For example, we have been leading regional innovation networks, to better connect academic and SME expertise across a range of areas important to growth in the Bristol City and South West Region – in Biosciences, Microelectronics, Green Technologies and the Creative Industries. We recently won government funding to set up one of four 'University Enterprise Zones', which will provide a business 'hatchery', incubation and grow on space for businesses specialising in robotics, biosciences, biomedicine and other high tech areas, working with the LEP and the University of Bristol.

We already work with employers, and our own careers consultants, on the design of our academic programmes and opportunities, and have a number of programmes that are co-run with industry professionals – for example with the BBC in film making and broadcast production.



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Last year we launched a new BA Business (Team Entrepreneurship), which is based on a really innovative learning model. Students work in a high-tech hub, rather than a classroom. They have coaching sessions and workshops, rather than compulsory lectures. And it is running a real business that drives the students' learning, as they set-up and run their own team company that will earn money finding, and completing, real projects for real organisations. This has really engaged a group of highly talented students; some of whom would not have chosen to go to University based on the standard format of more traditional degrees.

We also have a very well established Work-Based Learning framework –which is of course key to Higher Level Apprenticeships. We offer a range of professional and short courses through Work-Based Learning in areas such as health, as well as our Integrated Professional Development (IPD) programme, where we work with organisations to identify the learning needs of their employees and shape bespoke programmes of work-based learning to support their business ambitions.

We also have very well established and long-running partnerships with FE colleges in the region, and were a significant partner in setting up of the first University Technical College in the South West – the Bristol Technology and Engineering Academy – with City of Bristol College and supported by Rolls-Royce, Airbus and GKN Aerospace.

All of this means we were well placed to get engaged with HLAs, and it also means we were clear about how this involvement would feed back into our broader strategy as a University - which of course is absolutely critical to success.

This background is also important to mention, as when we consider the role of universities in facilitating HLAs, and as policy makers determine how we best drive this agenda forward, we have to take a holistic approach - with a clear focus on the overall objectives we are trying to achieve - a highly skilled workforce, who are ready and able to drive forward growth and innovation in our economy, with opportunities that are accessible and appeal to the talent we have throughout society.

It is only by taking a holistic approach, focused on the overall objectives, that we can ensure the 'bridges and ladders', that have proven to be so successful in countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong, are realised here in the UK. We cannot look at the development of initiatives based on two separate pathways – academic, or vocational and professional. That approach isn't going to help our young people. We need blended approaches, not closed pathways, as we consider the best ways to meet the demand for higher-skills.

In terms of our current HLA provision at UWE Bristol, when the £25 million Higher Apprenticeship Fund scheme was launched in 2011 we were of course keen to take part, based on our strengths and our approach. We got together with the City of Bristol College, and were part of their successful bid for £1.1m. UWE Bristol took the lead on the development of provision in Aerospace and Healthcare Science.

The reason the bid was successful was because we were able to offer significant expertise in this form of learning and the subject areas, a history of working in partnership across HE, FE and with employers, and the clear mapping of the proposals to the needs of the region.

The UK boasts the world's second largest aerospace sector, with many of these companies based in Bristol and the West of England. The South West's aerospace supply chain provides 41,000 full-time jobs and generates an annual turnover of £5.5 billion. And it is set to grow even further.

One of the biggest challenges to this growth is the supply of higher-level skills.

As part of the HLA project we worked with SEMTA, the Engineering sector skills council, to develop a new HLA pathway in Aerospace. The Aerospace HLA has since been fully embraced by large employers including Airbus and Rolls Royce and upon completion of the three year programme, apprentices gain a BEng (Hons) in Aerospace Engineering and are entitled to register professionally as an Incorporated Engineer (IEng). Competition for places is very high and students typically have set their sights on progressing to Chartered Engineer, which they are well placed to do upon completion of the HLA.

At UWE Bristol we already have a well established provision in Aerospace, working with employers, so developing the HLA was a natural step.

In terms of Healthcare Science, the NHS is one of the biggest employers in the Bristol region. We already offer a BSc in Healthcare Science and were exploring with the NHS the development of an entry route below this level. Through the Higher Apprenticeship Funding, we worked with Cogent, the Sector Skills Council for the Science Industries, to develop a pathway in support of the NHS Modernising Scientific Careers programme.

The Healthcare Science HLA started in October 2013 and provides an excellent route, particularly for those already employed in Healthcare Science, to engage with the NHS Practitioner Training Programme with the award of an FdSc Healthcare Science after two years and an optional progression route to year three of the UWE BSc (Hons) Healthcare Science.

Designing learning to satisfy employers' requirements, to develop both professional 'knowledge' and 'competency', and enable students in full time employment to gain a university degree within the same timescale as full time students, and within the tightly regulated Specifications of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE), was a big challenge! But, both pathways are now successfully up and running.

Developing good Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) is an essential component of both of these learning packages. These are very intensive programmes, so the learning and support provided online throughout the scheme is absolutely critical.

Therefore, a substantial part of the project budget was used to develop innovative new provision for formative assessment, and 'synchronous' learning sessions via Blackboard collaborate - to help build a cohort identity. A useful by-product is that this TEL can be used to support other undergraduate programmes that we offer, and we can utilize the innovative practices for further staff development across the University.

One challenge we continue to face with the Aerospace provision, is engaging SMEs with the programme. There are two main elements to this:

- The first, convincing companies that they want to take someone on, probably straight from school, and invest time and money in them, when they could take on a graduate - this is where tax breaks and government incentives are absolutely critical. A recent study undertaken by Business West, shows that employers rate graduates as 4 times more likely to be prepared for work than school leavers, and 2 and a half times more likely to be prepared than college leavers – so we know there is a significant ask on employers.
- The second element is convincing young people to consider this option. Rolls Royce, Airbus, PWC, and others, have put a large amount of marketing behind their offer – challenging and changing opinions about the apprenticeship route. They can afford to do this and their brand makes it work. These schemes are in high demand. However, people don't think of SMEs in the same way – they don't have the same prestige. They are also seen as more niche with fewer opportunities and career pathways available. At UWE Bristol we have been looking at different ways in which we might be able to break down this resistance, for example, through a consortium of SMEs taking on a number of apprenticeships. The Local Enterprise Partnerships and Chambers could certainly have a key role here, providing the coordination that is required, and possibly channelling future funding to support this.

Breaking down the barriers and increasing the scale of HLAs, rests to a degree on funding, but also on better communications – with employers, schools advisers, parents and students - communications that situate HLAs in the bigger picture of learning opportunities, pathways and options.

SMEs are where the growth is in our economy and where the high level skills are needed. We know we are faced with a skills gap, particularly in STEM areas, with many technical staff reaching retirement in the near future. Industry needs to step up to meet this demand. A drive from industry would provide a strong message to the public and individuals, about the value of higher-level skills, inspiring individuals to attain and be ambitious, and helping them to understand that you get good jobs and progress through education.

We do a lot on this at UWE Bristol, working with employers to inspire young people, before they reach 14+ when often it is too late. Our work with the Bloodhound SSC project – to build the world's fastest car - is a great example of this and has captured the imagination of people of all ages. We need to work together to make education, and what can be achieved through education, truly accessible and inspiring.

Earlier in the year the Times Higher Education ran a headline, 'Universities risk missing out on higher apprenticeships', with HLAs being a potential means 'by which high-level skills are delivered to the workforce without any involvement by universities'.

Our belief and experience at UWE Bristol is that, as a University, we do have an essential role in the development and delivery of HLAs. It is important for young people that their qualifications are nationally and internationally recognized – the qualification is not an end point in itself but must open doors. Being associated with the global reputation of a trusted university is a real asset here.

Universities also have a clear role in working with LEPs and intermediaries to ensure that the learning is transferable, beyond immediate employer needs; tackling the tensions that sometimes exist, between transferable skills and learning, and those specific to the particular employer.

It is important that we get this right.

In Bristol, we have the second lowest participation rate in higher education in the country. Yet, our graduates from UWE Bristol achieve some of the highest rates of employment in the country. The value of higher education and higher level skills is clear. But provision needs to be more accessible and inspire more young people. Making pathways accessible and attractive, blending approaches to learning and work, is critical if we are to address this social unjust - regionally for us, and nationally.

There is of course the question of whether the title is right. Does an apprenticeship create an aspirational image of progression, to individuals throughout our population? Does it help industry attract and develop the talented people they need? Is it very 21st Century?

There is also, of course, the developing Labour policy around University Technical Degrees.

The lack of prestige and the current 'disorganisation' associated with the vocational offer, across a variety of countries – not just the UK – was a point picked up in the recent McKinsey report "Education to Employment". A recent article in the Economist has also pointed out this is leading to a 'burst of innovation' in vocational education. Whatever the titles we use and initiatives we progress, we need to keep it simple, accessible and aspirational. And we need to we shape things in a holistic way, making sure that we don't close down pathways, but open up opportunities. Maximising the talent we have in our society is absolutely critical for our economy, social cohesion, families and for the individual – we need to make sure we get this right for our young people – and for industry.