

Trailblazers: Stakeholder motivations for developing degree apprenticeships for the radiography profession

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BACKGROUND

Degree apprenticeships are a relatively new concept in health care; unlike traditional students, the apprentices are paid employees receiving both 'on the job' training and academic education without the need for a student loan. Interest in degree apprenticeships within the Allied Health Professions has gained momentum since the introduction of the Government Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 and the changes in funding streams for health care training.

Apprenticeships require a far greater employer commitment, both in terms of training capacity and salary costs, resulting in variable employer engagement. This has raised concerns around the viability of the associated programmes [1] as well as professional acceptance of the apprentice route to registration.

Degree apprenticeship training is aligned to a nationally approved occupational standard developed by employer-led Trailblazer groups. Very little previous research had been undertaken to explore the design and implementation of health care apprenticeships; the few studies undertaken highlight employer engagement in programme design as challenging. The success of degree apprenticeships depends upon managing stakeholder expectations effectively.

This research begins this process by exploring the expectations, motivations and perceptions of those most closely engaged with the three radiography related (Diagnostic Radiography, Therapeutic Radiography and Sonography) trailblazer groups. It was hoped that this would identify any issues prior to the next phase of radiography related apprenticeship development and implementation.

METHODS

Following ethical approval, 18 semi structured interviews were conducted with the Chairs, Employers, and Higher Education Institute and Professional Body representatives of the three radiography related trailblazer groups. Interviews followed a defined interview schedule and were audio-recorded and later transcribed in full. Thematic analysis allowed any similarities or differences both within and across the trailblazer groups to be identified.

RESULTS

Four main themes were identified which included the benefits and challenges associated with apprenticeships, professionalism and professionalisation. In this context, professionalism is defined as behaviours associated with being a professional. Professionalisation is defined as the essential elements required for an occupational group to become a profession.

Professionalism

Professional Protectionism

- Being in control
- Resistance to change
- Managing change
- Professional acceptance

Professional Pride

- Making a difference
- Leading the way
- Influencing change
- Being part of a team

Professionalisation

- Well defined skills set underpinned by knowledge [2] subject to regulatory and professional controls [3].
- Having a code of practice, professional and regulatory bodies [2, 4, 5].
- Being educated rather than trained [2, 5, 6].
- Being autonomous, accountable and freedom to act

Benefits of apprenticeships

Employed

- Paid employment, no student loans
- More clinical time
- Upskilling existing staff
- Having a career pathway

Training

- Better transferable and clinical skills
- Widening participation
- More employer say on training

Retention and recruitment

- 'Growing your own'
- Increased staff loyalty and retention
- Upskilling existing staff

Challenges of apprenticeships

Apprentice versus traditional students

- Potential conflict between the two different student groups
- Placement capacity
- Less academic, less autonomous, less transferable skills and development opportunities.

Training

- Onus on employers and clinical mentor capacity
- Longevity of the programmes
- Recruiting apprentices with the right attributes

Funding and discrepancies

- Cost and funding for apprentices pay, travel and accommodation
- Cost of developing training and clinical mentors
- Discrepancies in apprentice pay and banding

Conclusion

The experience of being part of a national trailblazer group for the three radiography related professions was seen by participants as a positive one. Participants were mostly positive about the proposal to introduce degree apprenticeship routes, with the exception of some in the sonography group who had a degree of scepticism. This tended to relate to concerns over 'dumbing down' of the role and the current lack of professional regulation for sonographers in the UK.

Degree apprenticeships are a new concept for the Allied Health Professions and it was clear from this research that additional work was required to address the concerns raised prior to the implementation of radiography-related degree apprenticeship training routes.

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