

Why aren't there more accelerated degree apprenticeships?

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Accelerated degree apprenticeships

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Accelerated degree apprenticeships are Level 6-degree apprenticeships completed more quickly, usually 18 months or 2 years, because the apprentice already has a Level 5 qualification or apprenticeship, or equivalent work-based experience. Like Level 6 top-up years that lead to a degree, they are generally delivered by universities or other providers with degree awarding powers. Unlike a Level 6 top-up year, the cost of the degree qualification is borne by the apprentice's employer or the government. Given policy developments around apprenticeship units and changes to assessment, the rise in Higher Technical Qualifications at Levels 4 and 5, and a push for a joined-up skills system in the Post-16 White Paper, you might expect these to be a growth area.

During 2025, we investigated the potential for accelerated degree apprenticeships to grow, particularly within an Institute of Technology structure whereby employers, colleges and one or more universities have an established relationship. This work was funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation as part of its programme of work to strengthen higher technical education in England. We spoke to a range of providers, mostly universities, and one large employer, and presented findings to the Institute of Technology Network, which itself is supported by Gatsby.

We found that there are some clearly established accelerated degree apprenticeships. For example, individuals who have completed a Nursing Associate apprenticeship or Foundation Degree were likely candidates for the Registered Nurse accelerated degree apprenticeship, as the shortened time requirement allowed the NHS to more quickly meet workforce shortages. Another established route was an accelerated option for the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship, where individuals typically had experiential learning they could evidence at Levels 4 and 5, that could be recognised by apprenticeship training providers (including universities).

There was also evidence of more local arrangements, for example, where a college offering Level 4 and 5 programmes in engineering reached out to the local university to meet the needs of a large employer keen to find a way to offer a degree apprenticeship, whilst retaining the existing Level 4 and 5 programmes (HNC and HND). This kind of arrangement was helping the employer and other, smaller local employers to retain talented staff, by offering them the opportunity to obtain a degree, while developing higher skills necessary in the workforce for the businesses.

There were significant challenges to developing the programmes however, and these inevitably contributed to the small numbers we were able to identify. Some of these challenges hold for universities offering apprenticeships more generally, around logistics and the different requirements of delivering apprenticeships compared to traditional undergraduate programmes. However, the recognition of prior learning was a

key challenge specific to accelerated degree apprenticeship programmes. This is necessary in all programmes, but easiest where qualifications or apprenticeships at Level 4 or 5 map directly onto the requirements of the apprenticeship. Problems arise even for these situations though, as different training providers deliver these qualifications or apprenticeships in different ways, using for example different kinds of software or terminology depending on the sector. For programmes where recognition of prior learning was almost entirely focused on experiential learning through work, the requirements of assessing each potential apprentice were high, especially when they came from a range of different companies. One university talked us through their process, which involved written evidence, interviews and assessments with the potential apprentice, and a corroborating interview with the current and/or previous line manager to confirm the evidence. While any apprentice must be assessed to ensure they are on an appropriate programme, the recognition of prior learning for an accelerated programme was an especially time-consuming process, and of course, essential. The investment of time was a noted barrier for some providers in offering accelerated degree apprenticeships.

The key to making the programmes work, was existing relationships with both training providers for Level 4 and 5 programmes, usually local colleges, and with employers. Understanding what individuals were going to present with in terms of qualification, and the curriculum at the local college, made the recognition of prior learning much easier. The colleges were able to tell learners about the opportunity of the accelerated degree apprenticeship, helping to increase demand, including where potential apprentices were able to present the idea to their employer, as well as where employers were keen to offer this to their staff.

In apprenticeships in general, being confident about the likely future cohort from employers is crucial. One university told us about a full degree apprenticeship where they had the curriculum designed and internal approval, before going back to the employer who had initially committed to a sustainable cohort, only to be told there was a recruitment freeze, and they were no longer able to offer the apprenticeship. For accelerated programmes, having at least a handful of interested employers, often with apprentices who have the same previous qualifications from local colleges, was an ideal situation, and gave a much greater degree of security for providers. Where there was potential for significant variation in cohort sizes, one university, that were already running a similar undergraduate programme, combined the cohorts for the majority of the programme, with only limited additional delivery to the smaller accelerated degree apprenticeship cohort.

In funding terms, the accelerated degree apprenticeships were generally a helpful way for institutions to diversify their income, but there were challenges around the cost of end point assessment (EPA), particularly in non-integrated degree apprenticeships

where the university was not the end point assessment organisation. Where the EPA cost could be 20% of a whole degree apprenticeship, and entirely borne in the accelerated programme, it would be a significant portion of the funding available for the apprenticeship. Changes to apprenticeship assessment in 2025¹ may solve this issue but are being introduced in phases, and will be guided by the occupational standard, any safety requirements, and employer need.

So, despite a clear opportunity to provide pathways to degrees for individuals with Level 4 and 5 qualifications, the barriers of not having strong existing relationships with colleges and employers, the potential burden of recognition of prior learning, and in some cases, the disproportionate cost of assessment, mean that accelerated degree apprenticeships are currently rare. But, with a renewed focus on a joined-up skills system in the recent Post-16 White Paper, including references to universities building on specialist areas, might universities start to introduce these programmes in areas where they already have strengths?

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-funding-rules-2025-to-2026/changes-to-apprenticeship-assessment-2025-to-2026>