Chapter 3

The Creative Disruption of Degree Apprenticeships in the UK

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of an apprenticeship levy for employers with a payroll above £3m in 2017 has transformed the landscape for higher-level skills in the UK. While there is some evidence of the economic benefits of higher education, it seems to be largely operating to reproduce economic position rather than as an agent of social mobility. At the same time, UK employers have made it clear that graduates do not possess the range of skills that they require and yet have a poor record of investing in the development of their employees. In this problematized context, degree apprenticeships can operate to creatively disrupt our understanding of the relationship between higher education and work. Assumptions about the presumed differences between academic and professional standards, knowledge and competence, on-and-off-the-job learning are all challenged by the introduction of degree apprenticeships. Can universities overcome these challenges to rethink the role of higher education as the worlds of work and learning align?

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the context, policy, development and potential for what is widely anticipated to become the most prominent form of work-based learning (WBL) in the UK, namely apprenticeships. Until now WBL in various forms has been delivered in many UK universities, including my own and this has largely taken two forms. Initially most WBL programmes were designed to meet the needs of those with significant professional experience, studying part time but more recently, to enable younger employed people to undertake ‘work-integrated’ degrees aligned with work roles. The anticipated growth in degree apprenticeships is intended to meet the needs of both younger people seeking access to professional roles and existing employees who are seeking professional recognition and career progression.

Through the examination of some of the tensions between ‘traditional’ higher education provision and the advent of the specific requirements of apprenticeships I identify how the development of ‘degree apprenticeships’ have served to challenge conceptions about the relationship between work and learning. It is of course the case that universities have for many years been providing work-based and employer sponsored degrees. The provision of employer sponsored degrees also challenges the traditional conception of higher education and the relationship between work and learning. Indeed there are those who contend that:

While there is much that is good about Modern (including Higher and Degree) Apprenticeships, they are clearly not a silver bullet for the UK’s skills and productivity issues. (Phoenix, 2016, p4)

It is also the case, as Phoenix (2016) argues, that there exists a lack of a level playing field between employer sponsored degrees and degree apprenticeships, as a consequence of the introduction of an ‘Apprenticeship Levy’ in the UK. However, I want to propose that the advent of degree apprenticeships, in particular, has the potential to transform our cultural understanding of the role universities, professional associations and employers and place learning at the center of our working lives.

The policy relationship between higher education, work, employment and skills in the UK has fluctuated considerably and the tension between students being ‘at the heart of the system’ (BIS, 2011a) and employers driving the apprenticeship agenda is palpable. The provision of UK higher education, based upon delivering traditional undergraduate programmes, is significantly challenged by the demographic downturn in the UK population of young (18-21 year old) people since around 2009, which is not projected to start to rise again until after 2020 (UUK, 2008). The projected decline between 2010/11 and 2020/21 is 13.2% (Bekhradnia, 2006). While this decline has to a degree been mitigated by non-UK students, the inclusion of students
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