APPRENTICESHIPS AND PROGRESSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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1. Introduction

As a Lifelong Learning Network, Linking London was set up to improve and create opportunities for vocational learners, who want to progress into and through Higher Education (HE). One of the most challenging areas of this work is Apprenticeships. Whilst there are common issues that affect the opportunities of many vocational learners, such as a lack of effective advice and guidance and a lack of flexibility in HE for example, these appear to be accentuated in relation to Apprenticeships. In some ways this is easy to understand. Other vocational qualifications, although not without their issues in relation to HE progression, at least have some applicability to HE. Level 3 BTEC learners study primarily in FE colleges, where they will often be exposed to at least the possibility of progression. 14-19 diploma learners, studying in schools or colleges, are on a qualification that is designed, or at least was intended to be designed, as preparation for progression to HE. Although not strictly a vocational qualification, another alternative route to HE for mature learners, the Access to HE diploma, is again designed to provide a smooth progression to HE. However, Apprenticeships are a bit different. Apprentices are in full time employment. They are learning skills, primarily in the workplace. Their employers have a big stake in what they are doing, as they pay them a wage and pay for some of the training. It is often said that non-A Level learners lack the necessary ‘study skills’ or ‘reflective learning skills’ to progress to HE. It is well documented that these learners do not have access to clear and transparent entry criteria information. Information, Advice & Guidance (IAG) is often difficult to provide for these learners. Universities often do not fully understand the qualify-cations. It is hardly surprising therefore that these issues are accentuated in relation to Apprenticeships.

This paper will outline the current state of progression to HE from Level 3 Advanced Apprenticeships, as we know it, and look at some of the reasons for this. It will then give an overview of what Linking London is doing in an attempt to address some of these barriers on a local level. Finally it will give a view on the national picture and what clear progression opportunities for all Advanced Apprentices might look like.

2. What is the current state of play?

Whilst it is true, as is sometimes stated, that some Advanced Apprentices might not want to progress to HE, it is nonetheless Linking London’s position that they should have equal opportunity to progress to appropriate HE, should they wish, or at the very least access to the kind of clear and transparent information about their options that is enjoyed by every A Level learner. Some may disagree with this, but then the question has to be asked, why, when we have a skills deficit, can apprentices not progress to HE if they are willing and able? At present, the evidence suggests that this is simply not happening.

In London, as is also the case nationally, numbers of Level 2 and Level 3 Apprentices has been rising year on year. The chart below illustrates the growth.

![Apprenticeship Starts in London 2005-2009 by Year](chart)

This means that since 2005 there have been over 50,000 starts at Level 2 and over 23,000 starts at Level 3. At the time of writing there have been, since 2005, 8,100 completions at Level 3 (this number is likely to be much higher as the current data is up to 2009).

So the question is, what do all these 8,100 individuals do next? Who, if anyone, has had a conversation with them about their options? The quick answer is nobody knows.

They are certainly not doing Level 4 Higher Apprenticeships in any significant numbers. Again, at the time of writing there are 75 learners on the one Level 4 Higher Apprenticeships offered in London, which are in IT and Accountancy. The other 3 Higher Apprenticeship frameworks, in Engineering, Contact Centre Management and Purchasing and Supply, are not currently offered in London. So what about the remaining 8,025? We don’t know. Discussions
with our HE partners would suggest that they are not progressing to their institutions in large numbers. Few in admissions can recall a phone call or an email from an Apprentice asking about their options.

Nationally, we know from research carried out by Mark Gittoes for HEFCE that the progression rate from Advanced Apprenticeship to HE is around 4%. That’s compared to 90% for A levels and 41% for BTECs. We have no evidence in London to suggest that this percentage is any higher. So if we assume that 4% of those 8,025 learners managed to negotiate their way in to HE that leaves 7,704.

3. What’s wrong with having low progression?

So what is wrong with a low progression rate? Why does this matter? Maybe, as is often suggested, the employers don’t see the relevance of up-skilling these employees. They wouldn’t pay for it, for fear of the employee leaving. Maybe, the apprentices themselves are happy getting to level 3. They don’t want to access higher level learning. But the problem is we don’t know. What little research has been done on the potential Apprenticeship market for HEIs suggests that they are in fact very interested in progressing to HE. In England, the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) recently quoted their research findings that 50 per cent of apprentices who completed an Advanced Apprenticeship showed an interest in pursuing a degree-level equivalent course. We don’t know much more than that. If we assume this figure to be broadly correct, then this means that in London, there are over 4,000 individuals, who have matriculated at Level 3, who want to access HE, but are not doing so.

The question for the education sector and for government is why are these learners not progressing, and what can be done about it?

4. The difficulties faced by Advanced Apprentices who may want to progress to HE:

4.1. Lack of Entry Criteria Information

Linking London recently conducted a survey of Entry Criteria information. Apprenticeships, unsurprisingly were least well served with information. In nearly all cases (69%) there was no information, and in 19% of cases the information was impartial or out of date. In the few cases where there was information, the applicant was asked to contact the admissions office. A browse of various HEI websites found no mention of Apprenticeships.

UCAS’s own research into vocational progression has revealed that whilst 93 per cent of HEIs gave information about entry requirements for applicants with A Levels, only 55 per cent gave information for those with BTEC National Diplomas and 24 per cent with the OCR National Extended Diploma. Apprenticeships and NVQs are hardly ever mentioned.

The simple message for Apprentices is that HE is not for you.

4.2. A lack of flexibility in delivery

Despite the growing importance and expertise in Work-Based and Distance Learning provision this is still not the core activity for most HEIs and there has been no attempt to market this offer to Advanced Apprentices and their employers. As a result the more traditional delivery model of attendance and large qualifications might be off-putting to potential students who have, up till now, learnt primarily in the work place.

4.3. Information, Advice & Guidance (IAG)

Linking London has so far not found any detailed IAG that informs Advanced Apprentices of actual progression opportunities to specific HEI programmes, rather than just generic information about the HE sector as a whole.

So in summary, there aren’t really that many options for these learners, and information is not readily available on what little options there are, so they don’t inquire to HEIs. And as a possible consequence HEIs don’t develop more opportunities for them, or specifically market the opportunities they already have. It’s a vicious circle.

Which brings us to the next question: What can be done about this?

Some may venture that progression to HE for Apprentices is not a high priority area. The argument being, that since there is no demonstrable demand, why should HEIs put themselves out for what is an untested market? That is a strong argument. At the moment, and certainly for the next year or two, before the implementation of increased fees, there will be huge demand for full-time provision from learners on qualifications well known to the HE sector, such as A levels. However, depending on what happens with the Browne recommendations, it may be that some HEIs will look to different markets. And certainly Advanced Apprenticeship numbers will continue to increase. It has also been noted in the UVAC report ‘Progression from Vocational and Applied Learning to Higher Education across the UK: A comparative study by the University Vocational Awards Council’ that a failure to give these
learners access to higher skills has economic implications: “The development and effective deployment of higher level skills is essential to the UK’s recovery from recession and to sustaining our international competitiveness. Given that over three-quarters of the 2020 workforce is already of working age, it is crucial we support the current stock of individuals in work to gain higher level skills.” The report also notes the implications for social mobility: ‘In recent years the expansion of higher education has disproportionately benefited those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Vocational qualifications and programmes, in contrast, are followed disproportionately by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Better support for individuals on vocational pathways who have the aspiration and ability to achieve higher level skills should have a positive impact on social mobility.’

The government recognises these issues, saying in the recent ‘Skills for Sustainable Growth’ strategy document that ‘to widen access, there will be clear progression routes into Level 3 Apprenticeships and routes from Level 3 Apprenticeships to higher level skills, including Level 4 Apprenticeships or Higher Education.’ There is no indication as to how this will happen, however, and how the many barriers that are placed in the way of Level 3 Apprentices will be removed.

5. How will Higher Apprenticeships help?
In theory, one of the most obvious routes for Level 3 Apprentices is onto a Level 4 Higher Apprenticeship. However, at the time of writing there are only five Higher Apprenticeship frameworks on offer (as described above) and although there are more in development it is not clear how quickly they can be developed. The frameworks have to be developed by the relevant Sector Skills Councils. It can take some time for these frameworks to be developed as they have to be in accordance with National Occupational Standards, comply with the SASE requirements and have the support of employers. Generally it would take a year to two years. Of the five frameworks in development there were 1,475 starts in 2009 and 160 in 2008. 84% of those starts were on the Accountancy Higher Apprenticeship. There are over 180 frameworks at Level 3. Even if we had many more Higher Apprenticeship frameworks there would still not be progression opportunities for all Advanced Apprentices.

6. The importance of work-based learning and flexible HE provision
Another possibility which could work alongside the development of more Higher Apprenticeships is the promotion of Work-Based Learning to these individuals. Some universities now have work-based learning frame-
works which can be applied to an individual’s place of work and a project they are undertaking in the workplace. Offering this approach to Advanced Apprentices and their employees could provide the flexibility and applicability required, especially where there is no relevant Higher Apprenticeship to progress to.

7. What is Linking London doing?
Linking London is currently working with willing members of the network to try and improve progression on a local level.

We have funded 3 projects aimed at progressing Advanced Apprentices onto HE provision. The projects are being delivered by:

- Middlesex University
- Birkbeck, University of London
- College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London.

The projects started in September 2010 and are due to complete by April 2011. The ultimate aim for all three projects is to try and find a progression pathway for Advanced Apprentices and to ensure that some of these learners progress to HE.

7.1. Engagement with Higher Apprenticeship Developments:
Linking London is also part of a bid, lead by SEMTA and with involvement from LSBU, to the National Higher Education STEM programme. The aim of the project is to develop, pilot and demonstrate that an alternative higher apprenticeship model for SME employers is feasible and to help develop pathways for engineering technicians and incorporated engineers. The bid was submitted on 29th October, 2010 and was successful. In 2011 Linking London will be approaching HEIs in the network to discuss possible involvement.

Linking London is also in discussion with a number of SSCs around Higher Apprenticeship delivery and development.

7.2. Information, Advice and Guidance:
Linking London has also produced a ‘Routes to HE’ guide for admissions staff, giving details of the Apprenticeship scheme, how to make a meaningful offer to Advanced Apprentices and where to go for further information.

8. What next?
Important as this work is, however, it is just scratching the surface. How will all the Advanced Apprentices that are willing and able to access HE be able to do so? Making this happen will require a firm commitment from government
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and from the education sector. For example, Linking London supports the recommendation from UVAC that ‘From 2011, level 3 vocational qualifications and apprenticeships offered to young people should only be eligible for public funding if they outline clear progression routes and opportunities for progression to higher education.’ The challenge would be to make this progression realistic, not just a vague statement. Linking London would also welcome the UVAC recommendation that Government should ‘invite universities to make an apprenticeship admissions pledge – where an appropriate course is available they will guarantee interviews to Advanced Apprenticeship framework completers.’ Perhaps this will require more than an invitation.

Whether this kind of commitment will materialise, given that there are many other priorities, we will have to wait and see. If it does then there is the potential to ensure that all willing and able Advanced Apprentices have a genuine possibility of accessing HE. If it doesn’t then there is the very real danger that for the vast majority Apprenticeships will be a route to level 3 but not beyond.

9. More information:
http://www.uvac.ac.uk/downloads/0401_publications/UKCES%20Progression%20Review%20Final%20PDF.pdf