

How well have Degree Apprenticeships achieved the goals they were intended to accomplish in Greater London?

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INTRODUCTION

Background and policy context

Degree apprenticeships (apprenticeships at level 6 (bachelor's degree equivalent) and level 7 (master's degree equivalent) that have employers partner with universities to provide on-the-job training (80% of course time) paired with off-the-job training or study (20% of course time) providing a university accredited qualification upon completion) were introduced in England in 2015 as part of a series of apprenticeships reforms begun 2013-2015. They were introduced with the intent to create a high-quality, vocational, employer led route into higher education without the need to take on the debts typically associated with traditional university education and to help bridge the skills gap found in the British economy by providing direct job training rather than the more theoretical and academic education approach of universities (House of Commons Library, 2024).

Apprenticeships (including degree apprenticeships) have been promoted by the government as a central component to their skills strategy: to widen access to higher education, boost productivity and respond to skill shortages in key sectors (IfATE reports). One core way in which the government has worked to promote apprenticeships is by incentivising employers to launch their own degree apprenticeship programmes is by introducing the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017, which takes 0.5% of an employer's payroll if it is larger than £3 million and places it into a fund which they can access only to deliver apprenticeship programmes and if not used in 2 years it is taken by the HMRC as tax. The Greater London area of particular concern for these policy goals as the United Kingdom's central economic hub (responsible for ~22% of UK GDP) and the centre of its professional industries and high-skill jobs, resulting in high demand for professional-level apprenticeships but also a level of inequality to being able to access higher education (based on socio-economic background and area) both of which were areas of interest when proposing the degree apprenticeship programmes (Greater London Authority [GLA], n.d; House of Commons Library, 2024).

And adoption by students has been swift with demand for degree apprenticeship far exceeding supply and there being healthy interest and uptake by both public and private sector employers. With public perception of degree apprenticeships being quite positive and them being seen as equal to traditional university degrees in prestige.

Research question (Aims and Importance)

This research report investigates the question: 'How well have Degree Apprenticeships achieved the goals they were intended to achieve in the Greater London area?'.

A large body of research has been conducted to gain insight into the national picture of degree apprenticeships and it has been very successful in gauging public perception and effectiveness on a national level. However, national trends, in many cases, fail to give an accurate view into local trends which often deviate, this is particularly true for the Greater London area thus necessitating a report focusing specifically on the region. As the UK's centre of economic productivity and as a region with the strongest need for professionally qualified individuals it is

vital to know how effective degree apprenticeships have been and to be able to see any issues the programmes may be facing in Greater London. It is also important to take into account and compare effectiveness across different boroughs in Greater London (e.g. Most affluent vs. least) as it may not only shine a light on potential inequalities within Greater London but may also give further insight into the nation's picture.

Therefore, this report aims to discern how effective the degree apprenticeship program has seen in achieving the goals laid out during their introduction. These being:

1. Promoting and incentivising employer engagement and employer-led upskilling of the British workforce.
2. Providing a debt-free route into higher education as an alternative to traditional university education.
3. Having the degree apprenticeships be used as a means of promoting social mobility.
4. And helping to fill the skills gap in the British labour market.

[BASED ON IfATE Reports and the House of Commons Library, 2024]

How successful degree apprenticeships have been will be concluded in light of these goals and with a focus on the Greater London region which may result in deviations from national trends, comparison will also be made between different boroughs within Greater London (things that have not done in any previous report on national or regional trends or reports on degree apprenticeship effectiveness).

METHODOLOGY

Potential Methods

There were primarily two approaches that could have been taken when aiming to research the effectiveness of degree apprenticeships in Greater London.

One is interviewing degree apprentices and sending questionnaires to businesses offering degree apprenticeships to gather qualitative and quantitative data which could then be used to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of said degree apprenticeships.

The other method is the use of pre-existing dataset and previously published reports to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of degree apprenticeships.

This report has chosen to go with the latter as the first approach would be highly time consuming and would lack the year-on-year data set availability found in pre-existing datasets. The latter method is also more suitable as it allows for working with larger quantities of data thus allowing stronger conclusions to be drawn and the review of pre-published literature allows for a thematic review of what other research projects have taken into consideration and found to be points of success or failure.

This will allow this report to add to the already existing research by focusing on the Greater London regions and conducting a brief inter borough comparison of trends (both of which have previously not been done) and allowing for findings from the Greater London region to be drawn

in light of national trends and to be able to be better compared and contrasted against previous reports focusing other regions and the national picture.

However, certain datasets that would be useful cannot be accessed due to ethical concerns, specifically due to my accessing them being against the privacy agreement under which they were collected by the Edge Foundation, Department for Education and other institutions, therefore this report only makes use of publicly available preexisting datasets.

Research Design

This research report used a combination of methods to source data for its findings and draw its conclusion, these methods are tied primarily to the use of official datasets and previous reports published by other sources (a review of literature). The methods used can broadly be described as a quantitative analysis of official (DfE, GLA and NSS) datasets and a literature review focusing on finding recurring themes between different reports. This report makes use of: Descriptive statistics, using DfE and GLA datasets and their statistics about degree apprenticeship total starts, sector distribution, age and demographic; Comparative analysis, using the datasets to compare finding between boroughs in Greater London and between Greater London and national trends in the aims of attempting to identify any distinct patterns which may arise; Thematic analysis, looking for recurring themes, concerns and trends between the reports as part of a literature review and Policy Performance Review, evaluating findings to draw conclusion about success against a criteria of explicit policy goals.

Limitations Of Design

This research design, although the most applicable to the study, possesses limitations which will be mentioned here.

- The datasets being used suffer time lags with the possibility of trends changing during the data collection process and between collection cycles which may result in working with data that is already outdated, even if collected the same or previous year.
- The datasets being used can lack precision with them on occasion having limited regional breakdowns for smaller categories (e.g. Degree apprenticeships by borough). And in some cases lack distinction between degree apprenticeships (level 6 and 7 apprenticeships resulting in university accredited qualifications upon completion) and other higher apprenticeships (level 4+) and non-degree level 6 and 7 apprenticeships. Resulting in intrapolations having to be made based on available data in some cases.
- Some of the data cannot account for individual differences in quality between degree apprenticeships programmes, things like: degree apprenticeship type, employer involvement, sectoral differences (cultural/practical) or even the quality of supervisor with aggregated statistics in some cases perhaps masking differences by sector/employer.

However, these limitations are not severe enough to make finding unreliable and for our purposes are not of particular concern as impact can be minimised using aggregate statistics.

FINDINGS

Trends of higher/degree apprenticeships nationally and in London.

According to the DfE's Explore Education Statistics dataset, across England, higher apprenticeship 'Starts' have risen by ~35% from 2019/20 to 2024/25 however higher apprenticeship 'Start' have dropped by ~9% since 2022/23. This trend of higher apprenticeship 'Starts' increasing since 2019/20 is consistent across all age group categories (Under 19, 19-24 and 25+). Within the Greater London area specifically this trend also holds with higher apprenticeships 'Starts' having risen by ~39% (2019/20-2024/25) making it above the England average however 'Starts' in Greater London have also fallen since 2022/23 by ~9% as well making it inline with the England average, these trends also remain consistent across age categories similar to data for the entirety of England (Department for Education [DfE], 2025).

Although higher apprenticeships are not necessarily degree apprenticeships by filtering for only level 6 and 7 apprenticeships (which may not all be degree level) we can see that these trends hold for degree level apprenticeships as well from which we can further assume they also hold for full degree apprenticeships with an overall rise from the introduction of the qualification by a drop since 2022/23.

It can also be seen in the data that the Greater London area attracts a disproportionate share of higher apprenticeship ~15% of all of England's higher apprenticeships are found in the Greater London area with a good portion of that ~15% being degree apprenticeship, this is according to the reasoning that cities likely have more degree apprenticeship due to them being where large firms headquarter themselves.

It also reflects London's large high-skilled labour market and its need for high skill labour. The GLA's apprenticeship statistics and analysis show a higher demand for professional and technical apprenticeships across London sectors (GLA, n.d.). Degree and higher apprenticeships in London are concentrated in sectors such as 'professional services', 'finance', 'technology', 'construction and engineering' and 'healthcare' (DfE, 2025) which are the sectors that dominate London's employment base.

Employer engagement

There is strong evidence to suggest that employers are engaging very well with the degree apprenticeships with many large firms now offering their own degree apprenticeships in partnership with local universities with the course having strong input for the employers, particularly amongst large firms in the 'financial', 'professional services' and 'technology' sectors found in London (Office for Students [OfS], 2022; IfATE annual reports). Another sign of positive employer engagement is that employers often work with universities and the government to codesign the standards that are used to deliver the degree apprenticeships.

However, employer engagement appears to skew towards larger organisations and the public sector, meaning SME engagement remains limited. Several evaluation and think-tank analyses point to administrative burdens and limited HR capacity are a core reason as to why SMEs struggle to engage with the degree apprenticeships programme (and apprenticeship programmes in general) (IPPR;IfATE), this is a particular issue for the London area as SMEs

account for 98% of businesses and almost 50% of employment in London (City of London, 2023).

It is also important to note the trend of the number of lower level degree apprenticeships decreasing and higher level ones increasing (Level 4+), suggesting that employers are choosing to spend their apprenticeship levies on higher levels of apprenticeship training.

Access, widening participation and social mobility

In the year 2024/25 ~70% of higher apprenticeships 'Starts' in England by individuals 25 years old or older with only ~6% of 'Starts' being by those under 19. This remains consistent in the Greater London region as well with ~70% of higher apprenticeships 'Starts' and being by those 25 years or older with only ~6% of 'Starts' also being by those under 19. And over 50% of those doing level 6 degree apprenticeships are older than 30 and over 85% of those doing level 7 degree apprenticeships are older than 30 (Cullinane & Doherty, 2020), showing that most higher apprenticeships and as a result degree apprenticeships are being completed by older people.

Alongside showing that degree apprenticeships are more likely to be taken by older apprentices, the data also shows that they are more likely to be taken by those already employed by the employer offering the degree apprenticeship and participants are often more concentrated in higher-skilled, higher-paying sectors (DfE, 2023-24).

An OfS thematic review also noted that although degree apprenticeships have the potential to widen participation the evidence for them improving social mobility is limited as apprentices are often recruited from existing employee pools rather than from underrepresented groups and progression pathways for disadvantaged youth people are limited (OfS, 2022).

This limited effect on social mobility appears to be even more pronounced in London as degree apprenticeships have not uniformly reached the most deprived boroughs or young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Some initiatives (e.g. OfS funding competition activities) have attempted to improve the equality of opportunity in degree apprenticeships. Early-stage activities have focused on outreach and flexible entry routes (OfS, 2025). However, evaluations suggest these efforts are in early phases and need to be scaled up to be able to produce more measurable change.

Degree apprenticeships' effect on labour market skills gap.

Degree apprenticeships align reasonably well with London's prominent sectors, those being 'finance', 'professional services', 'digital and tech', 'engineering' and 'construction'. The supply of apprenticeship opportunities in these sectors address skill gaps at graduate level that London's employers cite as priorities (GLA analysis; IfATE).

There is also a limited impact on smaller scale skills needed in sub-regional areas and for SMEs. These skills shortages include specialized roles in health, social care and small business needs; degree apprenticeships are less prevalent in occupations that require level 3 and 4 skills or where employers may prefer other routes into the career. The IPPR and other analyses note

a kind of 'postcode lotter' effect where apprenticeship provisions and support vary by borough and sector.

DISCUSSION

Upskilling London's workforce

Degree apprenticeships have been partially successful in getting employers to buy into upskilling and upskilling London's workforce. Real progress has been made in strengthening and incentivising employer-led skills development, particularly where large employers have invested into co-designing programme templates and have created entire teams to manage their own degree apprenticeships. These degree apprenticeships being overwhelmingly in the 'financial', 'professional services' and 'technology' sectors is also good as a large portion of Londoners are employed in these fields and other related high skill industries. There has also been good public sector buy-in primarily from the health sector as many degree apprenticeships have become available for roles like nursing where practical work training and immediate extra employees are highly valuable and arguably can help save lives. This shows that degree apprenticeships have been very well received by employers who have made good use of them, they are likely also further incentivised to offer them due to the apprenticeship levy and primarily its use-it-or-lose-it nature pushing companies to want to maximise value from the money while they have it to upskill their current or new employees to a higher level thus the drop in lower level apprenticeships and an increase in higher level ones (including degree apprenticeships).

However, there are also a few issues present in London that limit the effectiveness of degree apprenticeships when it comes to upskilling its workforce.

Firstly, the number of degree apprenticeships is very limited (being only 6% of all apprenticeships (Cullinane & Doherty, 2020)). Due to degree apprenticeship's nature as a job role means that the number that can be offered is limited by the funds an organisation is willing to put towards offering them and the value of the apprenticeship levy that they can qualify to access. This is made worse by the fact that only large firms and public sector employers offer them with SMEs largely being unable to engage with offering the programmes. This results in few degree apprenticeships being available yearly (and number year to year may also vary as an employer may not take on apprentices every year) and so limits how many people can be upskilled. And due to employers preferring to give these limited degree apprenticeships to employees already working for them it limits how many new post secondary young people can have access to them, thus not helping to upskill people at the start of their career as much.

And secondly, degree apprenticeships are not available for every sector in London. This results in degree level upskilling not being available or being even harder to get for those who work in more niche or non central industries in London. It also means that people who want to pursue the practical education and qualification offered by degree apprenticeships can only be upskilled in a limited number of industries which may leave some sectors heavily under-skilled for the roles they require.

Accessibility and Social Mobility

As previously stated the number of degree apprenticeships is limited which reduces accessibility as less apprenticeships are available and of those available the majority are taken by older apprentices reducing the number of fresh secondary students that can access these opportunities, however, accessibility is also limited by other factors.

One of these is the entry requirements for degree apprenticeships. Degree apprenticeships have grade requirements varying from AAA to BBB but in reality these grade requirements are higher due to employers only wanting the best, due to them spending money to train the apprentice, therefore only top applicants even being considered for interviews and offers. This barrier is made even worse when considering that many people choosing degree apprenticeships are doing so due to them being incompatible with traditional book learning, making it so an apprentice's prospects are limited due to their past failures in an education system that they did not learn well in.

Primarily due to these previous two reasons the percentage of degree apprenticeship applicants that end up actually getting positions in <1% nationally and the picture seems to be not better in London.

Another is that degree apprenticeships also require an apprentice to be able to travel to and from the place of their degree apprenticeship. In London the majority of degree apprenticeships are concentrated in inner Greater London and Central London this makes it so that apprentices from Outer London boroughs would have to travel further to get to their apprenticeships (in some cases over 2 hours) which for some may be a limiting factor to taking part or to performing and learning as well as they could given lower travel times. This issue is accentuated by the fact that the Apprenticeship Levy cannot be used to supplement travel costs meaning the apprentice will have to shoulder the burden for their work related.

And lastly, schools do not provide the same support for degree apprenticeship applications that they do for regular university application, this leads to students who are interested in pursuing a degree apprenticeship perhaps: not applying to roles their interested in, not having as good chances of getting roles as compared to those who received support and not being able to find opportunities. That last point is particularly an issue as degree apprenticeship opportunities are made available by companies throughout the year with no coordination as compared to universities which have standardized times for intake making the process easier than degree apprenticeship application.

As for improving social mobility the impact of degree apprenticeships has been limited. People from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to succeed in getting degree apprenticeships than those from lower socio-economics backgrounds which may be due to receiving more support, being more aware of opportunities and actually achieving top grades needed to have a competitive application. This also means that the debt free nature of degree apprenticeships is also having a limited impact on improving social mobility as the people taking

the majority of degree apprenticeships are the people who would be least affected long-term by the student debt.

However this doesn't mean the degree apprenticeships have no impact on social mobility, they do. Degree apprenticeships have expanded access to higher education for people who otherwise may not have considered the option with a large portion of apprentices (30%+). This shows there has been a positive impact as it has given opportunities to those who otherwise wouldn't have been able to access them thus improving social mobility by giving work experience and university accredited qualifications on par with bachelor's and master's degrees while taking on no student debt and while being paid helping them build an early base of capital to further help them improve their economic standing.

Labour Market responsiveness and the Skills Gap

Degree apprenticeships have shown very good alignment with the needs of London's prominent sectors, this can be attributed to the employer directed nature of degree apprenticeships where apprentices are working in and being further trained for roles that the employer needs filled. Degree apprenticeships also make sure that apprentices are trained for changing markets and work need as the programme (for the part of the employer) is profit motivated, they are aiming to make the most of their apprentice and to retain them meaning they are willing to alter their training or give them further training based on current and projected market needs for their sectors. This also has a further positive effect for apprentices as it ensures their skills stay relevant and they remain employable even far after their formal degree apprenticeships are over.

However, this varies heavily from sector to sector. Within some sectors like technology and IT skills and knowledge quickly become obsolete as new technology is developed meaning that the need for these skills cannot really be preempted (e.g. AI's quick rise to use in people's work and personal lives).

Alongside the aforementioned sector to sector variation, London's labour market requires more than just degree apprentices for its key sectors. London has a deeply complex labour market and to meet its needs via degree apprenticeships it requires at least a moderate level of participation from employers from every organisation size and sector (public and private sectors and both large companies and SMEs). But this has not been the case, the vast majority of degree apprenticeships in London are offered by large firms and public sector employers (mostly in health and care), this leaves the labour demands of SMEs ignored. This is partially the case due to SMEs struggling to take part in degree apprenticeship programmes this is mostly due to the administrative burden of offering the programmes this is in direct comparison to larger and public sector employers who have the resources to create teams specifically to manage degree apprenticeships and apprentices, this serves to limit the number of degree apprenticeships available and also makes it so the ones available are concentrated in a handful of sectors, in large firms. This leaves portions of labour demand unanswered as, despite offering the least degree apprenticeships, SMEs employ the majority of people in the Greater London area and although there is cross-over between the need of SMEs and larger firms there are also

many distinctions (e.g. larger firms have a tendency to specialize their apprentices while SMEs may need people with more general skill sets within a given job role).

Degree apprenticeships are also doing quite well in addressing the wider skills gap in the London workforce. This is again due to them being employer led allowing them to address the most pressing skills gaps they are facing. Due to the majority of degree apprenticeships being in London's key sectors they have addressed the most pressing lack of skills. But although degree apprenticeships address the skills gap they have done little to actually help close it as there are so few degree apprenticeships for individuals to actually receive training in, and although other lower level apprenticeships may help fill skills gaps in less skilled areas, but the skills gap in more technical and high skill areas (most of London's labour market) require degree apprenticeship level learning to address.

Inter-borough comparison

Trends vary from borough to borough in Greater London, the following is key differences between the 4 most affluent and 5 least affluent boroughs in Greater London by median income and brief speculation as to the reason, as there hasn't been a local inquiry on the region before we cannot know definitively the causes (as well a borough level data on degree apprenticeships not being available, higher apprenticeship participation will be used as a means of gauging trends with some caveats included) however we can attempt to infer them from themes and trends found in other literature and datasets.

The more affluent boroughs had higher rates of higher apprenticeship 'Starts' and 'Completion' than those that were less so. Of the higher apprenticeships being completed in more affluent boroughs a larger portion of them are level 6 or 7 degree apprenticeships. Students in more affluent boroughs are also found to have better awareness of degree apprenticeships and be able to access better help when applying to them as compared to those from less affluent boroughs. This creates a form of postcode lottery where the place a person lives impacts which school they go to and thus how much support they can access.

Inner Greater London boroughs also have higher participation in degree apprenticeships as most large employers offering degree apprenticeships would be found in central London. This gives them easier access and an ease of transport that is not accessible to prospective apprentices from outer boroughs. This in some cases can put off people from wanting to complete degree apprenticeships as they may not wish to travel, in some cases as much as 2 hours) to and from their apprenticeship, the cost of which they would have to shoulder as the apprenticeship levy doesn't cover an apprentice's travel costs.

There is a clear divide in accessibility and apprenticeship intensity between boroughs, a difference that appears to be primarily driven by economic differences, with higher apprenticeships (including degree apprenticeships) 'Starts' and 'Completions' being correlated with median household income for a borough.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, degree apprenticeships have been partially successful in achieving the goals they were created to accomplish in London. They have done well in promoting and incentivising employer engagement and employer-led upskilling of the British workforce, providing a debt-free route into higher education as an alternative to traditional university education however have had a more limited impact in having the degree apprenticeships be used as a means of promoting social mobility and helping to fill the skills gap in the British labour market.

The programme's successes can be attributed to its nature as an employer first, profit driven (in the sense of labour value for money and getting value for investing in training a degree apprentice). This has allowed degree apprenticeship to be broadly in line with London's labour market needs and companies choosing to upskill their employees and offering degree apprenticeships as to capitalise their apprenticeship levy rather than losing it. However, part degree apprenticeships' failures can also be attributed to the reasons previously stated as there is reason to believe they are why some employers are still not willing to offer degree apprenticeships as they do not wish to spend money and time training an apprentice just for them to leave and go work for an employer, an apprentice who they then cannot easily replace due to the skills gap degree apprenticeships are trying to address on the first place creating a vicious cycle.

The limited effectiveness of degree apprenticeships can also be due to the fact that there are so few of them. Simply it is not possible for degree apprenticeships to have tangible benefits if there aren't enough available to meet demand. A way that the number of degree apprenticeships could be increased would be to build on current initiatives to attempt to increase participation by SMEs (like the apprenticeship funding competitions) and by simplifying the administrative burden placed on providers or even connecting them to a guide who will assist the SME through the entire process and remain available afterwards for further enquiry.

FURTHER RESEARCH AVENUES

When evaluating the effectiveness of degree apprenticeships through a review of datasets and already existing literature it has come to attention that there are a myriad of things that lack data or separate deeper inquiry into them.

Some of the most important ones which would provide highly useful information when attempting to gauge the effectiveness of degree apprenticeships and policy surrounding them would be:

- Conducting a longitudinal study following degree apprentices across their career, keeping track of their income, job roles, whether their job is in the sector they trained in and their ability to change jobs/sectors.
- A study on how well schools support students in their applications for degree apprenticeships and differences in support between schools in more and less affluent areas.

- Look into a means to create a more formalised vocational education pathway leading to degree apprenticeships (similar to the GCSE to A-level to Bachelor's degree pathway that exists currently).

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