

Delivering apprenticeships at Russell Group universities

Summary

Russell Group universities work with more than 500 local and national employers to offer a mixture of advanced, higher and degree apprenticeships. These courses provide high quality technical and academic education ensuring students leave with the skills and experience valued by employers.

At present, 17 Russell Group universities offer apprenticeships in subjects such as digital technology, health, law, construction, manufacturing, and social sciences. They offer a range of apprenticeships with more than 2,100 students studying toward Level 6 and 7 qualifications, of which more than 60% are in STEM disciplines.

With only 10% of undergraduate entrants to degree apprenticeships studying at Russell Group universities, there is potential for growth of provision. However, there are four main barriers:

- a) **Administrative burden** – the scale and complexity of responding to regulatory requirements means universities often determine the cost-to-burden ratio to not be beneficial.
- b) **Lack of SME engagement** – although SMEs would benefit from degree apprentices, many do not have the resources to co-develop courses with universities.
- c) **Information and guidance** – improved information and guidance is needed to increase student awareness and knowledge of degree apprenticeships.
- d) **Financial sustainability** – investing more in degree apprenticeships is challenging within the context of growing deficits for teaching undergraduate degrees.

We want to work with Government to address these barriers, to enable more universities to grow their provision of degree apprenticeships.

Degree apprenticeships at Russell Group universities

- Russell Group universities offer apprenticeship programmes in conjunction with high-profile companies such as Jaguar Land Rover, PwC, Rolls Royce, BAE Systems, John Lewis, JP Morgan, the BBC and the Met Office.
- Figures from the Office of Students (OfS) show 92% of our undergraduate apprentices continue with their studies, compared to the baseline requirement of 70%.
- The **University of Exeter** is the largest Russell Group provider of apprenticeships with 1,000 starts in 2021/22. It aims to have 10% of its student population enrolled in apprenticeships by 2026.
- The **University of Sheffield's** Advanced Manufacturing Centre (AMRC) works with 300 local and global employers. Its courses focus on offering alternative pathways into higher education for those who might not have considered it or who might want to change career.
- Several Russell Group universities, including **Liverpool, York and Leeds**, deliver specialised health degree apprenticeships to fill regional and national skills gaps via

University of Birmingham • University of Bristol • University of Cambridge • Cardiff University • Durham University
 University of Edinburgh • University of Exeter • University of Glasgow • Imperial College London • King's College London
 University of Leeds • University of Liverpool • London School of Economics and Political Science
 University of Manchester • Newcastle University • University of Nottingham • University of Oxford
 Queen Mary University of London • Queen's University Belfast • University of Sheffield • University of Southampton
 University College London • University of Warwick • University of York

- partnerships with NHS trusts. This will help deliver on the ambitions for training in the NHS workforce plan.

Challenges to expanding the provision of apprenticeships

Regulatory burden

Degree Apprenticeships are regulated by the OfS and overseen by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), Ofsted and Designated Quality Body (formerly QAA). We recognise the need for effective regulation and accountability, but this must be proportionate. Large universities with only a small proportion of apprenticeships need to make substantial adaptations to meet the needs of these different regulators. Complex reporting exercises including onboarding, progress reviews, end-point assessments, and maintaining individual learner records create additional burden. Furthermore, frequent and often short notice changes to apprenticeship rules, which directly affect teaching and learning, mean greater administrative support is needed to ensure provision is compliant.

The scale, complexity, and cost of regulation is a barrier to scaling up provision. We recommend that ESFA and IfATE work with universities to streamline regulation and ensure providers are allowed sufficient time to implement any policy changes ahead of apprenticeship onboarding.

SME engagement

Russell Group universities have well-established partnerships with a vast array of employers, but more could be done to help SMEs recruit and retain apprentices. Many SMEs do not have the resources to employ apprentices due to high levels of administrative burden, lack of internal expertise and limitations on the use of levy funds, all of which make apprenticeships unaffordable to some smaller businesses.

Government should use Local Skills Improvement Plans to identify the challenges faced by SMEs when recruiting apprentices to encourage more take-up and help address local skill shortages.

Information, advice and guidance

We have welcomed UCAS's work highlighting the growth in demand for apprenticeships, but improvements to information, advice and guidance (IAG) about degree apprenticeship programmes are needed for both students and employers. IAG on apprenticeships should be made available to students from an early school age and for mature learners, the latter encouraging lifelong learning. Clear information on progression pathways to degree apprenticeships should be targeted at those studying apprenticeships at Levels 2 or 3 or enrolled on a Higher Technical Qualification. Improved IAG for employers is also important to highlight the benefits of hiring apprentices.

We would welcome further opportunities to work with DfE, the OfS, and UCAS to enhance the profile, prestige, and knowledge of the degree apprenticeships available at universities.

Financial sustainability

Degree apprenticeships are costly to run for both universities and employers, particularly for smaller student cohorts. Apprenticeships require investment, incurring set-up and ongoing costs. Partnerships with employers comes with an overhead and SMEs need additional support to deliver degree apprenticeships. This creates additional costs for universities who are already supplementing the cost of undergraduate education on average by £2,500 per student per year.

A more sustainable approach to funding higher education is needed – one that can offset the impact of inflation and one that is fair and affordable for students and taxpayers while safeguarding the pipeline of science, skills and innovation talent needed to help the UK economy grow and prosper. Without additional funding support, expanding apprenticeship provision will continue to be a challenge.