

TO EARN AND TO LEARN

Almost a decade on from the inception of the degree apprenticeship scheme, **Alex Bell** asks businesses, universities and apprentices why they continue to commit to the programme

It was the former skills minister Robert Halfon who said: "Degree apprenticeships are my two favourite words in the English language."

Commenting in the 2024 *Degree Apprenticeship: Voices from the Frontline* report, he went on to add: "Whether you want to be a solicitor, space engineer or doctor, we have introduced a new route to climb the ladder of opportunity to a successful and fulfilling career, and all without student finance to repay."

With a new government now bedding in, the future of degree apprenticeships isn't yet clear. Across Yorkshire however, businesses, universities, colleges and apprentices continue to commit to what is also known as the jobs with training scheme.

Adam Greenwood is associate director, degree apprenticeships at Leeds Beckett University, which has around 1,000 apprentices on the programme at the moment.

He says: "We onboarded our first apprentices in 2017, the portfolio has evolved and the employers we work with have continued to grow."

"Degree apprenticeships are an incredible opportunity for not just young people, but for those already in the workforce to get the professional qualifications and skills they need to develop their careers. It's also enabled us to be quite creative and innovative in how we might deliver to a professional audience."

Greenwood also alludes to challenges within the apprenticeship system.

"There are challenges around the complexity and regulation we have in the apprenticeship system," he says.

"Alongside that, we're not seeing that the level of funding is increasing each year, with inflation causing some challenges in terms of the amount of funding we have available to deliver good-quality programmes."

Daniel Lally is group director of business, enterprise, skills and employability at Sheffield Hallam University, which has 3,000 live learners and more than 700 employer partnerships.

He says: "We delivered our first apprenticeship in 2015, building on a long heritage

Former apprentice
Jak Lomas and
Leeds City Council's
Hannah Wood



"By offering them a job at the end of it, we know we're going to have a guaranteed workforce."

Lindsay Sparks
Royal Derby Hospital

of employer-facing work based learning provision. Apprenticeships help narrow skills gaps and boost social mobility. They attract learners of all ages from disadvantaged and non-traditional backgrounds, and areas with low participation in higher education.

"Apprenticeships can bring new talent into the workplace. They allow individuals to learn as they earn, supporting people into employment as well as helping those in low-skilled employment, providing opportunities to upskill and reskill."

Discussing learnings since the 2015 introduction of the scheme, Lally says: "Apprenticeships are for all ages and should be available at a range of levels."

"For the economy, through upskilling and reskilling, but more broadly for adult learners, this is a sign lifelong learning is becoming a priority."

The 53-year-old therapeutic radiography apprentice

Sheffield Hallam second-year apprentice Joanne Gill works full-time at the Royal Derby Hospital and studies therapeutic radiography.

The 53-year-old spends one day per week studying online with lecturers and at times has a one, two or three-week studying block.

"I've got a son who's at university, so we're always in competition as to who can get the best marks," she says.

Her mentor and practice educator at the Royal Derby Hospital, Lindsay Sparks, says the scheme is bringing major benefits to the department. The reason why we went down the apprentice route is because we're an at-risk profession," says Sparks. "There aren't enough radiographers in the country. Because the apprentices' academic breaks don't go on too long it means they are not out of clinical care for months at a time like undergraduates who do the traditional student route."

Gill was the first apprentice in the department and is guaranteed a job at the end of her three years of study.

"By having the apprentices and being able to offer them a job at the end of it, we know we're going to have a guaranteed workforce," says Sparks. "It's getting bigger too and this year we had 114 applications for two places."



Creative digital design degree apprentice John Slater



Therapeutic radiography apprentice Joanne Gill (left) and mentor Lindsay Sparks at the Royal Derby Hospital

Gill, who initially graduated with a business degree in her 20s, adds: "What's great is that we don't have to worry about the financial side. It's given me the opportunity to do something that I probably wouldn't have been able to do. The fact it is open to people no matter what their age gives you so many more opportunities and shows that it's definitely never too late to start training."

Blending public with private

Leeds-based Alscient has been delivering Salesforce and AWS solutions for 14 years and chief executive Lee Duffy is on the brink of taking on apprentices from Leeds Beckett University.

"This is the first time we've dipped our toe into degree apprenticeships," says Duffy. "We have always tried to focus our recruitment in Leeds where possible."

"We currently have two part-time members of staff who we are hoping will join us on the scheme as it's something they are interested in. We're seeing it as a good way to work with people that we're familiar with

and then see how we'd perhaps grow that going forward."

Alscient's head of people David Owen adds: "It feels like a natural progression for us because we take on local graduates anyway. In the IT sector, it's very much continual professional learning. You have to update yourselves in certification and new technologies. Young people find that natural."

"We're really looking forward to the apprenticeship scheme. It also sends a good message to our wider workforce about investing in the future and showing that we are here for the long term."

Hannah Wood is principal engineer in city development at Leeds City Council.

She says: "We've been using the apprenticeship scheme since the civil engineering one started in September 2018 and currently have 15 students who are doing the apprenticeship at different stages. It's really good value, a great set-up to upskill internally and it's tried and tested and still going really well."

Now promoted to senior civil engineer, Jak Lomas, 24, says: "I started my apprenticeship

in 2018 when I was in sixth form, and have just finished it."

"I think you end up a lot more rounded than if you did three years at university and then two years of work experience."

"The experience you get from working and learning at the same time is really good. You're getting paid while you're doing it and have no debt which is a big plus."

Never too late to learn (more)

Aged 48, John Slater jumped at the opportunity to become an apprentice.

Armed with 15 years' experience as a graphic designer at Rotherham NHS Foundation Trust, he's now back in the lecture theatre.

One year into the three-year creative digital design degree apprenticeship at Sheffield Hallam, Slater is enthused.

"When I saw an opportunity that Sheffield Hallam were doing this apprenticeship scheme, I asked my managers whether they would support me doing it," he says.

"There was some hesitation as it wasn't a niche area they had supported before. But they felt I deserved the opportunity and decided to support me."

"It's changed things on both sides of the fence and enabled me to kind of cut through some of the clutter when doing my own research into new ways of working."

"I'm also learning from lecturers who are far more experienced than myself in numerous disciplines. At work, because of the nature of how the assignments are put together, it encourages me to look deeper within the organisation I work in."

Slater, who began his career as an engineer in his early 20s, says: "When I first started as a graphic designer, it was about producing posters and leaflets but it has evolved over time to incorporate multimedia. I'm doing a lot of video work and dipping my toes into animation."

"The NHS is really pushing on the digital side of things now and integrating with AI [artificial intelligence] to help improve services. The apprenticeship course encourages you to go down these avenues."

"I'm in a class full of people in their late teens and early 20s. They have a very different experience because they're obviously new in their career path."

"The most difficult part of it as a mature student is finding extra time to try and do the apprenticeship side of it as well. But so far, one year in, it feels worth it."