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A growing pool of talent

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A growing pool of talent

Degree apprenticeships are becoming increasingly popular as a vocational alternative to higher education qualifications

Joseph Rizzuto, Indira Chauhan and Janet Rowson

Recent government policy has prioritised degree apprenticeships to address the construction industry's skills shortage while at the same time helping to boost UK economic growth.

Degree apprenticeships represent a vocational route into higher education with the same prestige as other conventional degree study routes. They were originally developed in 2015 by a partnership between employers, professional bodies and universities known as the trailblazer group. Degree apprenticeships provide the opportunity to gain a full bachelor's degree alongside the knowledge, skills and behaviours necessary for doing the job. Courses combine full-time paid work with part-time university study, so learners gain practical, on-the-job training while studying and do not have to pay tuition fees.

Apprenticeships can open up avenues by attracting new recruits, particularly if they form part of an employment offer or are used as an incentive to retain skilled employees. Individuals who might not have considered going to university to get a degree can learn and work at the same time, and existing staff looking to upskill can also advance their careers.

The chartered surveying degree apprenticeship programmes are designed in partnership with employers, and course content developed with reference to RICS requirements. They encourage employees to develop the knowledge and experience needed to fill high-level skills gaps by tailoring their learning to the needs of the building surveying profession. Apprenticeships are therefore an attractive provision for employer and employee alike.

The apprenticeships are paid for by a levy introduced in 2017, which obliges employers with an annual wage bill of more than £3m to contribute towards training. Those whose salary costs fall below the £3m threshold, and don't thus qualify to pay the levy, receive a significant contribution towards apprenticeship funding from the government as co-investment employers (bit.ly/govapplevy).

Degree apprenticeships can represent good value for money with this support, which comes via the Education and Skills Funding Agency, and a small contribution from building surveyor practices themselves. As of April last year, revisions to these funding arrangements mean that the government has increased its level

of co-investment from 90 per cent to 95 per cent for smaller organisations that are not liable to pay the levy.

Participating in degree apprenticeships ensures that employees have the skills they require to adapt to changes in the profession. Meanwhile, an employer investing in the continuous professional development of its workforce can demonstrate its commitment, boost its reputation and improve productivity (bit.ly/appemprbens).

As part of the co-investment arrangement, practices must support and monitor employees' progress through five-year study period for degree apprenticeships. The time management and administrative costs associated with employing apprentices have deterred some employers from investing in these study programmes, however. A dedicated academic – the support link tutor – has to visit each apprentice at their place of work every eight to ten weeks so they and the employer mentor can review progress and set targets for the next couple of months. The frequency of these visits can be a strain on resources for both the training provider and the employer.

Constructive competencies

Degree apprenticeships are gaining momentum as the benefits are seen to outweigh these potential obstacles, though. University and employer have to work closely together to ensure the knowledge gained on the degree is successfully applied at work, but this enables appropriate development of skills, behaviour and practices to achieve the professional competencies of the apprenticeship.

The School of Computing and Engineering at the University of West London (UWL) has been successfully running degree apprenticeships in computing since January 2017 and civil and environmental engineering since 2018–19. It is now preparing for the launch of a new chartered surveyor degree apprenticeship, available to both local and regional surveying practices. This provision will sit alongside its RICS-accredited BSc (Hons) building surveying degree programme from September 2020. The new course will work to the nationally recognised Level 6 Building Surveyors pathway of the chartered surveyor degree apprenticeship standard, providing practices with the opportunity to develop their employees' talent (bit.ly/IfACSdeg).

The course delivery and assessment will include a combination of work-based learning, practical applications and classroom teaching. Embedded in the curriculum of all UWL built environment courses are practical learning aspects of this kind including construction site visits. An active construction site can engage students as active learners, and has been shown to have a long-lasting impact on how they learn (isurv.com/knownbysite).

Thriving apprenticeship systems can give employees a head start, and reshape higher education and employer interaction to futureproof the construction workforce.

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