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Edinburgh Napier UNIVERSITY | Centre for Higher Education Research

# Written Evidence: Graduate Apprenticeships

This evidence on Graduate Apprenticeships in Scotland is submitted to the Scottish Government Education and Gaelic Committee by Prof Sally Smith of Edinburgh Napier University. It draws upon a concise literature review requested by SG in December 2025.

**Summary**

Graduate Apprenticeships (GA) are a welcome and popular new route to a degree qualification. Overall, employer demand is high and demand for apprenticeship roles is very high. HEIs benefit from the opportunity for ongoing connections with industry and the public sector, as well as widening access possibilities.

Challenges include the intensity of the degree, combining work and study. Ensuring apprenticeship places continue to benefit diverse candidates is important in achieving SG goals.

There are under-used entry routes, such as advanced entry based on recognition of prior experience and learning. A closer alignment of Foundation and Modern Apprenticeships could facilitate these accelerated routes. An expansion of generalist Masters provision could also accelerate skills development linked to emerging occupations and sectors.

For some employers, especially SMEs and public sector organisations, it can be difficult to resource workplace mentors for apprentices.

While some employers and some providers would like to see rapid expansion of frameworks, it is important that GAs remain aligned with sectors/ occupations with high levels of demand for graduates, so the graduate role anticipated by GAs is a realistic expectation. Otherwise, apprenticeship wages could be used to suppress non-graduate roles.

The Framework model should be celebrated as a success in comparison with policies adopted elsewhere in the UK.

1. How are apprenticeships delivered to, and accessed by, young people?

**Delivery**

In terms of delivery, one point to note is that the approach whereby Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) develop apprenticeship programmes to satisfy published Frameworks offers significant advantages over the approaches and policies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These include:

- Apprentice mobility – if an apprentice is made redundant they are able to transfer to a new employer/ new apprenticeship provider;
- HEI sustainability – providers are able to recruit from a wide range of employers, rather than create bespoke programmes for a small number of large employers who might recruit a large cohort one year, then smaller numbers consequently;
- Less onerous monitoring of programme quality and individual apprentice progress than in other devolved nations, as this falls under QAA Scotland and standard HEI quality

monitoring requirements. Elsewhere in the UK, an influx of poor quality apprenticeship providers has led to excessive administrative burdens for all providers.

**Access to apprenticeships**

In Scotland, there is a growing awareness of GAs among parents, students and employers. As a result, there is more competition for apprenticeship places than university places (Lester & Bravenboer 2020), leaving employers in the recruitment driving seat. There is evidence that UK employers advertise apprenticeship roles that ask for UCAS points equivalent to standard university entrance requirements, together with meta skills including teamworking and good communication skills (Fabian et al. 2023). However, when recruiting students on traditional undergraduate courses, universities offer *contextual admissions*, which recognise that school qualifications achieved in areas of deprivation should be considered within their context (for example, that a Higher pass at C in an area of high deprivation could be considered equivalent to a Higher pass at A in a less disadvantaged postcode). Employers should be encouraged to consider contextual recruitment to ensure diversity.

The question posed by the Committee explicitly mentions young people, however there is evidence that apprentices who are 'upskilling' are more likely to achieve social mobility as a result of the GA (Smith et al., 2026). For example, an experienced existing employee who had not previously studied for a degree, who may be stuck in a lower paid role, is more likely to originate from a MD20/40 postcode than school leavers employed as apprentices who are more likely to be from less disadvantaged postcodes (due to employer recruitment preferences and parental awareness of the opportunity).

The strong demand for apprenticeships is unsurprising. Apprentices often compare their experiences favourably with the traditional student experience, for example, financially:

*"The financial opportunity was crucial: some apprentices noted that they could not have afforded to go to university otherwise; others were pleased to avoid student debt and the difficulties of juggling studying for a degree and working in an unrelated part-time job." (Smith et al. 2023b, p211).*

A recent study of both degree and graduate apprenticeships found they were creating new routes into higher education for young people, existing employees, mature learners and learners from diverse backgrounds (Nawaz et al., 2023). The danger is that if the focus is on young people, then those from diverse backgrounds may in future find themselves at a disadvantage.

The principle of flexible advanced entry, through wider recognition of relevant qualifications and previous experience, can reduce the length of time taken to achieve the degree and is important for both individuals and to reduce costs. In 21/22,17.5% of GA enrolments were advanced entrants compared with 11% in 2018/19; 16% in 2019/20 and 19.5% in 2020/21(SDS and SFC, 2022). A closer alignment of Foundation and Modern Apprenticeships with Graduate Apprenticeships might improve the numbers gaining advanced entry.

An expansion of Level 11 GA provision (Masters level) could serve to reduce the time taken for those with sub-degree qualifications plus work experience gain a qualification.

2. Do current apprenticeships meet skills demand, and how this might improve?

At present there is a very close link between GAs and sectors/ occupations with graduate vacancies. Smith et al. (2026) surveyed graduated GAs (on computing and engineering frameworks in 7 universities) into their first role beyond graduating: 'Where are they now?'. The headlines were that most apprentices had moved into graduate-level roles with their apprenticeship employer and had enjoyed a significant uplift in pay (on average over 100%).

The employer demand-led approach to framework identification facilitated these positive outcomes. Some frameworks, with reported employer demand for graduates, have not recruited the numbers anticipated (for example, GA Data Science) and in some geographical areas some frameworks have little employer demand or already have established HEIs providing the frameworks. As a result some HEIs are less involved in GAs.

It is widely considered to be more resource-intensive to run GA frameworks: academic staff need additional training; more flexibility is generally required with regard to assessment deadlines, while less flexibility is available for in-person learning and teaching, adding complexity to scheduling (Smith et al. 2022); additional employer engagement resources (including marketing and liaison) are required; classes are in general smaller making them less cost effective. When the funding model changed so that GA places were no longer additional, some of the smaller providers questioned the value of offering apprenticeships, especially where these were delivered separately from traditional on-campus students in small bespoke cohorts.

Speculatively launching a programme based on a framework is expensive for individual HEIs and when you combine this with the with additional cost of running GAs, the result is that some providers are discontinuing their GA programmes and some potential providers have not launched any GAs. Some seed funding for course development and approval, including to robustly test the local market, would be beneficial to HEIs.

In general, levels of employer demand must be robustly tested. If GA frameworks are published where there are few graduate vacancies the apprenticeship might not lead to a graduate role, and instead act to suppress wages in non-graduate roles. The GA is challenging, with sustained work and study demands, and the GA model works best where there is a good alignment between work and study, for example using live work projects as the basis of applied projects within the degree (Taylor-Smith et al. 2023). This means that GAs take on more responsibility as they progress through their degrees, as such not all graduate occupations are suitable to be offered as GAs.

3. Understanding the Scottish Government's aims for the reform of the apprenticeship system

The SG's aims for reform include a clearer delineation of skills development, in particular the new role for the SFC offers HEIs flexibility about balancing apprenticeship and traditional undergraduate student places. The former competitive bidding for places was more difficult to manage in terms of recruitment processes due to longer term uncertainty, however it did encourage HEIs to introduce GA programmes due to the additional fee income.

During the transition from SDS to SFC, some HEIs consider the introduction of new frameworks to have been opaque and slow. Now that the transition is almost complete this would appear to be a useful time to conduct some evaluation of existing frameworks (which may involve discontinuation) before rushing to meet every reported demand (from HEI or employer groups).

Recruitment and widening access via graduate apprenticeships are of particular interest in meeting the Scottish Government's widening access (COWA 2016) and equalities goals (e.g., gender balance: Scottish Government 2022). Progress here is slow, with published figures from SDS and SFC (2022) indicating a male dominance across frameworks of 68.0% to 32.0%, but also extremes such as Engineering: Instrumentation, Measurement and Control and Early Learning and Childcare having significant skews towards male and female participation respectively. However, graduate apprenticeships have potential to widen access, especially due to the focus on practical work and the opportunities for mature students, including women career returners. Taylor-Smith et al. (2019) found potential for women to enter computing through graduate apprenticeships; Smith et al. (2021) looked at social mobility and found this more pronounced for mature students. Smith et al.(2023a) explored the motivations of adult apprentices, finding they were more likely to be motivated by professional growth and benefitting the organisations they worked for. The mature participants noted that they would not have had an opportunity to study for a degree without the GA route.

4. The progression of plans to give the Scottish Funding Council new responsibilities for apprenticeships

The team involved in GAs at the SFC has established positive ways of working with HEIs, including regular meetings and updates.

It was clear at a joint workshop held on 22 September 2026 that SFC, SG and SDS had established a collaboration with a shared vision for working with the HE sector. This included listening to institutions which had not yet offered apprenticeships and those who had encountered challenges when establishing apprenticeships. Having removed the competitive bidding process, there would appear to be a more collegiate approach to GAs across the HE sector which should ultimately benefit both HEIs and those employers who had initially reported a confused skills landscape.

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