



APPRENTICESHIPS OPENING DOORS

The blending of vocational learning and academic education is commonplace within biomedical scientist education, and so the recent emergence of the degree apprenticeship agenda offers exciting opportunities, write **Ian Davies** and **Katie Berger**.

Initially launched by the government in 2015, degree apprenticeships are underpinned by a fixed “apprenticeship standard” – a set of knowledge, skills and behaviours written by a trailblazer group of employer representatives.

For practitioners across the healthcare science professions, the level 6

Healthcare Science Practitioner Standard provides the broad, high-level expectations on values and behaviours that employers and the public would expect from anyone working within a clinical diagnostic environment, from cardiac physiologists to biomedical scientists. Importantly though, whilst integrating the apprenticeship standards allows access to Government

levy funding, the standards alone do not confer eligibility to apply for HCPC registration, and so for biomedical scientists, programmes must also provide accessibility to this route through IBMS accreditation and/or HCPC approval.

Integration

At Staffordshire University, the advantages of integrating the apprenticeship standards within our part-time degree structure were an obvious response to an employer need for vocationally-focussed opportunities for staff development. Although part-time study has always been a possibility, finance and delivery patterns often presented hurdles to keen and able staff working within pathology support roles. By developing a blended learning approach, utilising online learning platforms, study days and – as the students develop – incorporating more and more work-based learning, we have been able to develop a programme that is sustainable financially and operationally, to support staff progression.

An important aspect of degree apprenticeships is their role in widening

participation in higher education. They can open up career progression to new or current employees who may be reliant upon earning an income whilst they study. As Professor Ieuan Ellis, Pro Vice Chancellor at Staffordshire University, comments: “The ability to earn while you learn opens up degree education to those who otherwise may face financial barriers, for example those with carer responsibilities or returning to education. The value of this in raising aspiration and providing opportunities to develop social mobility is transformational – from an employer perspective, this can contribute greatly to local staff recruitment and retention.”

Balance

Although apprenticeships offer a great opportunity, they are not an easy option. Students need to work through the academic content of their degree while maintaining performance within their job roles, balancing the expectations to achieve both academically and vocationally. For employers too, there are factors to consider, including an Education and Skills Funding Agency

requirement for 20% of apprentices’ working hours dedicated to “off the job” training. The payback, however, is great, developing a talent pipeline of resilient and vocationally focussed biomedical scientists. Dr Chris Chase, Training Manager at Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, strongly supports the development of apprenticeship opportunities. He says: “Apprenticeships are now an integral part of our workforce development, providing a means of developing a skilled, motivated and qualified workforce. At Hull we have apprentices across all areas, biomedical science, IT, and administration and clerical all contributing to the continuity of our vital service.” Karen Kendal, Deputy Cytology Manager at The Royal Wolverhampton Hospitals NHS Trust, who is currently supporting three staff through the degree apprenticeships, adds: “The apprenticeship levy has allowed growth within pathology, giving support staff the opportunity to develop skills and qualifications which current training budgets could not support. Staff have fed back that they feel valued and are motivated to pursue a career in pathology. We are now in a position to ‘grow our own’ staff at a time when recruitment to posts is increasingly difficult.”

Potential

The ability to develop potential is key for students as well. Ian Blanshard, a Medical Laboratory Assistant in the Microbiology Department of Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, was one of the first apprenticeship intake at Staffordshire University. Now in the second year of his degree, Ian reflects on the opportunity to further his education and advance his career whilst not being in a position to leave work and enter into education full time. “It allows me to learn in an environment with knowledgeable staff, and gain the experience I require from within a working laboratory, providing me with the necessary skills to gain a degree level education as well as

KEY FACTS

- ✓ Since 2017, employers with a payroll over £3m must pay 0.5% of their pay budget to Government as their apprenticeship levy.
- ✓ Funding for apprenticeships at all levels can be drawn from the levy paid by your trust.
- ✓ Employees receive 20% of their time “off the bench” to undertake learning and education.

completing my IBMS portfolio”. Similarly, Donna Simms, an Associate Practitioner in the Cellular Pathology Department at University Hospitals of North Midlands NHS Trust, says having worked within the laboratory for 10 years in the same role, the scheme has proved invaluable for her future progression “enabling staff who have the appropriate professional characteristics and technical skills but lack the correct qualifications, to progress”.

As with any learning and teaching, one size does not fit all, and learners on different educational pathways all bring different skills and experiences to their employment. The apprenticeship programme recognises this, and provides an additional pathway towards biomedical scientist education and registration. Employers recognise the need for a mixed economy of pathways and graduates, from full-time applied biomedical science degrees, to degrees with approved supplementary education and degrees achieved through apprenticeships routes. This blend of pathways and experiences will all contribute to an agile and skilful future biomedical science workforce. 

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