

Degree Apprenticeships:

The whys and the wherefores in diagnostic radiography

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Background

The Integrated Degree Apprenticeship (IDA) standard for Diagnostic radiography was published in 2019 and some Higher Education institutes are either delivering, or preparing for delivery, of this programme. The standard was developed by a trailblazer group consisting of industry partners i.e. 16 employers and 4 higher education institutes, in consultation with other stakeholders including the HCPC. The involvement of employers has been key to the development of all apprenticeships as the focus is on workplace learning and workplace readiness.

The Rationale for Apprenticeships

The Leitch Review of Skills ¹ projected a sharp decline in low-skilled jobs in the United Kingdom (UK) up to 2020 and the increasing importance of high-tech jobs. It called for a demand-led skills system that meets the needs of, and engages, individuals and employers rather than being centrally planned. In the foreword to the post 16 skills review Nick Boles MP; Minister of State for Skills argued that the economic case for further reform of the skills system is compelling. Bringing training for young people and adults in line with the needs of business and industry will drive up productivity, in which the UK has lagged behind ² In response to these stark warnings, the 2015 Conservative election manifesto committed to developing three million new apprenticeships by 2020 ³.

Brief history of Radiography Education

Historically the original role of the radiographer was to assist the radiologist in creating images that could help diagnose the patient's illness or disease. Knowledge of the professional development of radiography was dominated by evidence provided by other disciplines of radiology, physics and scientists ^{4,5}. Since state registration of radiographers in 1960, Radiographers were trained through 'an apprenticeship style education pathway' in the early part of the twentieth century where students spent time learning their craft from an expert ⁶. Degrees were approved for state registration and radiography became a graduate profession in 1993 and the move to Higher Education based provision was a significant paradigm shift in the culture of radiography education ⁷. There was then an expectation that degree level radiography students would do much more than implement protocols associated with the standard range of radiographic examinations and graduates should be able to apply critical thinking and reflective practice to their work ⁸.

The Diagnostic Radiography Integrated Degree Apprenticeship (IDA)

Apprenticeships are defined through the Education and Skills Funding Agency as 'a job with an accompanying skills development programme designed by employers in the sector'; paid jobs incorporating on and off the job training, with the testing and application of theoretical knowledge and methods directly to the practical world of work. It is this interaction between work and education that defines an apprenticeship ⁹.

The apprenticeship standard comprises a range of knowledge, skills and behaviours that an apprentice must evidence that they have achieved before they undertake an independently assessed End Point Assessment (EPA). It is this inclusion of the EPA that makes the radiography standard an integrated one; it is stipulated that 20 credits are allocated to the EPA, and so the degree level award, necessary for HCPC registration, is inclusive of the EPA.

The Development of Healthcare Apprenticeships

The degree apprenticeship route into radiography has been established as an alternative pathway into the profession ¹⁰. It has been identified that the introduction of student paid fees to undertake the radiography degree in 2017 may have had an adverse effect on student application numbers, in particular affecting widening participation students ¹¹. Apprenticeships can widen participation as entry is often through non-standard routes where relevant work experience and endorsement from the employer is given considerable weight. The need to relocate to the University locale is also removed, meaning those who are not mobile due to commitments can consider undertaking the course. Another favourable aspect of the IDA is that the student is effectively a paid 'employee'

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