

THE PROVIDER INSIDER

INSIGHTS INTO FURTHER EDUCATION

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID WILLETT - OPEN UNIVERSITY

This edition of the WYLP Provider Insider brings you an interview with WYLP Managing Director Alex Miles and The Open University's Commercial Director, David Willett. In 2019, The Open University (OU) celebrates its 50-year anniversary, so I wanted to learn more about their higher and degree apprenticeships offering in England and David's thoughts on the future of the programmes.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON APPRENTICESHIPS?

The OU has a long heritage of designing and delivering training for people at work, so the introduction of apprenticeships was not a huge leap for our employer engagement or our external small to medium enterprise (SME) and corporate activity. Apprenticeships are a fundamental part of our B2B activity, and we currently deliver around £15million of apprenticeship levy training in England.

I spent 12 years running an Independent Training Provider and have a wealth of apprenticeship and learning and development (L&D) experience. Plus, completing an apprenticeship in engineering with the NHS, I have been able to bring knowledge and expert practice with me when I joined the University. I now head up the Business Development Unit.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE OU'S RESPONSE TO APPRENTICESHIPS INTERNALLY?

The OU apprenticeship strategy and commitment is led from top and it has a clear strategic priority across the business, across all four Nations of the UK, not just in England.

We have spent time investing in new curriculum design and new staff to support degree apprenticeship delivery to ensure we can offer a robust service to our external clients.

The OU currently has over 1,400 apprentices on programme – the vast majority of these are from our B2B relationships and is due to grow exponentially over the next 12 months.

The OU has a five-year plan to develop a hub of internal specialists all trained from apprenticeship standards that cover a wide range of business functions and to be rolled out across all OU teams.

We currently have some apprentices internally – mainly in Business Development and IT departments – but the strategy, led by HR, is now being put in place.

We spent quite a bit of time holding up a mirror and taking a look at how apprenticeships fit into the business and now that activity and plan has taken place, we are in a position to support.

The apprentices currently in the OU are making great strides and are extremely valued. We ensure all apprentices are rotated around most of the OU departments, so they get a real sense of the business and understanding in all functions, and this is having real workplace impacts and benefits to us already.

HOW HAVE APPRENTICESHIPS CHANGED OR DEVELOPED THE OU'S OFFER?

Apprenticeships have so far been a great success story for OU externally. Almost one in 12 of all Degree Apprentices in England are now delivered by the OU, and we have a 98% employer satisfaction rating according to the recent DfE/FE Choices Employer Satisfaction Survey. Our apprenticeships help address skills gaps in key areas including digital, management, social work and nursing. The OU is also launching a Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship later this year.

We are reviewing our portfolio offer over the next two years and we are all very excited about where apprenticeships will take the OU. We are well on the way to exceed all expected targets.

We can evidence real impact from apprenticeships that are leading our external clients to higher levels of productivity and workplace success – it just makes business sense.

We strongly believe there are a wide range of professional services roles in HE that degree apprenticeships will fit in and all establishments should have a rollout strategy internally for apprenticeship programmes.



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WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE LEVEL 2 / DEGREE LEVEL DEBATE THAT IS CURRENTLY TAKING PLACE ACROSS THE SECTOR?

Apprenticeships, especially those funded by the levy, should be employer-led. Therefore, it should be the employer's choice on the level and standard they require for their business and employees.

Our country is moving to a higher-skilled economy, so it is absolutely right that higher and degree apprenticeships are part of the offer, but we still need lower-level skilled roles and they have their place also. I don't think it should be an either-or debate, but to develop a system that supports both.

The levy was designed to give employers choice and therefore as training organisations we should be spending our time meeting the needs of employers and not debating funding.

Apprenticeships make good business sense, whatever the level.

DO YOU THINK THERE WILL BE ANY CHANGES TO THE LEVY ANNOUNCED SOON?

I sit on the CBI's Future of the Levy Working Group and the large employers who are on that are saying we need stability. So, the plea is to let it settle.

The UK Government as part of its review of the levy needs to work with employers to pinpoint what the levy is trying to do – raise productivity, widen access or fill specific skills gaps (or all three). I can see that the UK Government could tweak the levers, such as reducing threshold, increase allowance – but they should not do it yet.

There still seems to be a lack of clarity around funding for people outside of the sector and for employers. There is a lot of press about the issues with apprenticeship funding but not a huge amount of evidence to back it up.

WHAT CHANGES, IF ANY, DO YOU FEEL ARE NEEDED TO IMPROVE OR ENHANCE THE APPRENTICESHIP REFORMS?

There should be greater flexibility around developing standards and how they are designed.

With so many developments with new occupational roles over next 10-15 years that we cannot just keep developing standards to fill these – where are the transferable skills? We should develop a module approach using a few standards, so they can be designed by the employer and provider based on elements that work for the changing workforce, different workplaces and not set in stone and only reviewed every 3-5 years. The current standards design process is restricting to employers and the providers who work with them. The nature of work is changing all the time, so a modular approach would suit degree standards far better than the current design.

DO YOU BELIEVE APPRENTICESHIPS SUPPORT SOCIAL MOBILITY AND PRODUCTIVITY?

Apprenticeships 100% support social mobility, productivity and improving economic benefits

Formal traditional academia doesn't work for everyone and apprenticeships are absolutely one of the best chances of improving social mobility.

There is currently a kudos and parity issue between academia and apprenticeships, but this is changing and has been for the past five years. We see it with the businesses we work with and the huge uptake of apprenticeships by our levy clients. We are seeing a change in behaviours and employers taking apprenticeships more seriously as part of their recruitment and growth strategy.

Thank you, David and the team, at the OU for your involvement in this blog – I really enjoyed our discussion and hearing your thoughts on apprenticeships.

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