

Degree apprenticeship case study

How aligning programme learning outcomes with KSBs has helped to establish B2B sales as a profession

This case study is authored by Professor Darryll Bravenboer, (BEd, MA, PhD, PFHEA), Director of Apprenticeships and Professor of Higher Education and Skills, Middlesex University.

The employer led Business to Business (B2B) Sales Professional degree apprenticeship trailblazer was constituted from the outset to recognise three universities (Middlesex, Portsmouth and Anglia Ruskin) as full members of the group. Each member university had a track record of delivering higher education in the area of professional sales and developing apprenticeship or work-based learning programmes. Professionalisation of the B2B sales occupation was also a clear aim for the development of the degree apprenticeship standard from an employer perspective. While providers of higher education typically emphasise knowledge and skills, the inclusion of behaviours for degree apprenticeships has provided the opportunity to embed expectations regarding how practitioners should act as professionals in their field.

Although chaired by an employer, the trailblazer group meetings were facilitated by the Association of Professional Sales¹ which had recently developed a professional standards framework for sales with ethical selling at its heart. This context meant that the professionalisation of sales practice intended through the development of the degree apprenticeship standard, would be founded on ethical practice. On this basis, the alignment between professional standards, knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) and degree outcomes was strongly endorsed by employers, the Association of Professional Sales and university members alike.

To achieve this alignment, the trailblazer group discussed how the KSBs should be categorised for the specific purposes of the B2B Sales Professional degree apprenticeship standard. For example, as all higher education programmes require that learners are able to evidence their understanding through the application of knowledge in relevant contexts, the 'knowledge' category became 'knowledge and understanding'. Expectations for degree learning outcomes concerning skills usually include cognitive skills (such as analysis) and practical skills (such as communication). The trailblazer group recognised that many, if not all of the skills required for professional sales competence included a combination of cognitive and practical skills and so retained the term 'skills' to encompass both. As indicated above, the shared understanding of how professional standards and ethical practice informed 'behaviour' outcomes, and this resulted in these being categorised as 'professional behaviours and values'.

As the trailblazer group was developing a level 6 integrated degree apprenticeship, it was agreed that the KSBs would be articulated so that they could be recognised by the higher

¹ now the Institute of Professional Sales

education sector as corresponding to degree (level 6) learning outcomes. As the university trailblazer group members were directly contributing to the development of the KSBs for the standard, they were able to help align them with learning outcome expectations for degrees. The university members of the group were able to draw on recognised higher education benchmarks, frameworks and descriptors when developing the KSBs to ensure appropriate alignment with the language used to describe undergraduate degree level outcomes. Specifically, the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications² and the SEEC Credit Level Descriptors³ were used as key reference points.

It was understood that degree apprentices would need to be able to demonstrate professional competence specifically in relation to the KSBs of the standard. The aim was to ensure that the achievement of the apprenticeship certificate, the award of the degree qualification and professional recognition would be co-terminus. Therefore, the KSBs, which embedded professional standards, were also thought of as the programme learning outcomes for degree programmes that providers would use to deliver the apprenticeship. This would avoid the need for universities to conduct a KSB 'mapping' exercise with separate degree programme learning outcomes, as the KSBs would be constituted as the degree learning outcomes. This also ensured that apprentices, employers and providers were all clear that it is specifically these KSB outcomes that determine professional competence and the award of the degree.

This approach has enabled universities to develop, validate and approve B2B Sales Professional degree apprenticeship programmes that use the apprenticeship standard KSBs as the programme learning outcomes. The design of degree programmes requires that module learning outcomes are aligned with - and cumulatively support - the achievement of programme learning outcomes. This is also the case for the development of degree apprenticeships. The integrated approach to developing the KSBs for the standard also helped to ensure that the outcomes for degree apprenticeship programme modules reflect and are aligned with the apprenticeship KSBs, and that the learning, teaching and assessment methods used also authentically reflect the requirements of B2B sales professional practice.

Reflective questions

1. What can be done at the apprenticeship standard development stage to ensure that the KSBs are articulated in a way that will be recognised by HEPs as degree learning outcomes?
2. How can we build professional behaviours and values into our degree learning outcomes?

² <https://seec.org.uk/resources/>

³ <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks>

3. How can our organisation's regulations more consistently recognise and accommodate degree learning outcomes formulated as KSBs, to avoid having to map the latter onto more traditionally constituted HE outcomes?