

Reading Your Future:

Analysing Newspaper Coverage of Apprenticeships and Undergraduate Degrees

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Approach

In an environment of graduate market oversaturation, increased tuition fees and a renewed government interest in vocational education, this research sought to explore media representation of undergraduate degrees and apprenticeships through analysis of UK national newspapers.

Research Questions:

- ♦ What are the key themes most frequently associated with Apprenticeships and Undergraduate Degrees?
- ♦ How do Apprenticeships and Undergraduate Degrees compare in terms of their presentation in coverage?

Method: Mixed method used; combining thematic analysis and quantitative content analysis.

Sample: 2016 "National Newspaper" articles sourced through Nexis with: "Degree" as headline and mention of "University" (anywhere in text) or "Apprenticeship" as headline.

Key findings

- ♦ Themes were diverse with a significant spread across articles.
- ♦ Employability¹ was presented as the main purpose for education.
- ♦ Work experience was seen as key to developing "skills for work", which saw apprenticeships presented in a favourable light.
- ♦ This, alongside considerable reference to tuition fees, often saw higher education presented as costing too much and providing too little.
- ♦ BUT degrees were still presented as symbolic of achievement and intelligence, and institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge remained prestigious. "Anti-degree" sentiment was instead directed at post-1992 universities.

¹Tomlinson, M. (2017). "Introduction: Graduate Employability in Context: Charting a Complex, Contested and Multi-Faceted Policy and Research Field", In Tomlinson, M. Holmes, L. (Eds) Graduate Employability in Context Theory, Research and Debate. London: Palgrave Macmillan p1-40

Sample: 2016 National Newspaper Articles

Degree (Count)	Apprenticeship (Count)	Both (Count)	Total
175	67	34	276

Overview of Key Themes in Coverage (all articles)

Key Theme	Features in
Earning and Employment Outcomes	34%
Skills for Work (Abilities/Competencies)	32%
Tuition Fees/University Costs	29%
Standard of Provision (Focused on Institutions)	13%
Degree as Symbolic (of Intellect/achievement)	12%
Satisfying/Fulfilling Work or Learning	11%
Government Funding for Apprenticeship	11%
Esteem of Apprenticeship Programmes	11%

Comparing Coverage: Apprenticeships & Undergraduate Degrees

Association with:	Apprenticeship (Apprenticeship/Both)		Undergraduate Degree (Degree/Both)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Developing skills for work	28	28%	6	3%
Boosting career prospects/chance getting job	34	34%	12	6%
High fees/debt	0	0%	71	34%
High earning	13	13%	15	7%
Achievement/ to be celebrated	5	5%	20	10%

"While a lot of my pals were racking up huge overdrafts and sweating over exams, I was earning money and starting a career... Young folk now have it tougher than ever... The smart ones might well decide that building up a crippling four-year debt pile isn't the best way to begin their adult lives... Here's a cold hard fact; some would be better off finding an Apprenticeship." The Sun

"(there is) no doubt that an Oxbridge Degree opens many gilded doors. But studying urban dance at Peckham University or media studies at the University of Scunthorpe is another story entirely." The Daily Telegraph

"For years higher education in this country has been a joke. First we had the polytechnics upgraded to universities with the result that what were previously vocational qualifications became Degrees. Then we had the gradual growth of Mickey Mouse courses so that students who could barely write proper English became graduates." The Express