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Apprenticeships deserve the same treatment as universities – so let's get Ucas involved

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Tucked quietly on the northern banks of the river Neckar in southern Germany, the University of Heidelberg cuts a familiar figure to the Anglo-Saxon eye. With its medieval spires and august alumni its students would feel quite at home in the quadrangles of Oxford or Cambridge.

Head a few miles upriver, however, and a more alien scene can be found. In a smart industrial park amongst the neat, unassuming streets of Mannheim the US machinery giant John Deere is offering 60 apprenticeships in its engineering department. It receives more than 50 applications for each place. For those hoping to study medicine back at Heidelberg (the university's most competitive course), the competition is less than half as fierce.

The ability of apprenticeships to go toe-to-toe with Germany's oldest and most prestigious academic institutions is a striking example of the country's successful approach to technical education.

In Britain, thanks to unprecedented government funding, more than 2 million new apprenticeships were created during the last Parliament, with the number of people starting an apprentice tripling.

Yet, despite this, the participation of school leavers has barely changed. Although we typically think of apprentices as young people, 16-19 year olds account for just 5 per cent of the increase in new apprentices. Clearly there is a problem.

Partially the issue is status. Few parents would advise their children to turn down a university place in favour of an apprenticeship. But logistics also play a part. Schools and employers are not well equipped to connect directly and efficiently with each other to match students and apprenticeships.

The good news is that the solution is staring us in the face. Head to any school in January and you will witness similar scenes: university hopefuls being coached, cajoled and nagged into drafting their "Personal Statements" for the Ucas (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) applications that will decide their future.

For many the memory is a nostalgic one. But for those without university ambitions the recollection is too often one of sitting forgotten at the back of a classroom while teachers were forced to focus on the university-bound.

If we're serious about spreading opportunity to everybody, we need Ucas for apprenticeships.

By making Ucas the home of apprenticeships as well as universities we can bolster the confidence of teachers, students and parents, amongst whom the Ucas brand carries considerable status.

At the same time, the promise of direct, easy access to young talent would incentivise more employers – particularly smaller businesses who lack the HR infrastructure to efficiently recruit – to create apprenticeships. This would help close the gap between the UK and other leading nations where SMEs are almost twice as likely to take on an apprentice.

Some, of course, will continue to argue that the excellence of Britain's universities make focusing on apprenticeships unnecessary. After all, four English universities rank within the world's top ten. However, while top institutions do continue to provide good value for money, an increasing number of degrees do not.

In fact, for many graduates, a quality apprenticeship is fast becoming a much better investment in their future. Those completing an engineering apprenticeship at BAE Systems, for instance, can look forward to a starting salary of £34,000, almost double the £18,741 average earned by an English Literature graduate.

Putting apprenticeships on the same platform as universities would provide the competitive pressure necessary to force weaker universities and degrees to up their game.

As our economy changes, policy makers across the world must grapple with the same indispensable question: how can we ensure that globalisation benefits the 99 per cent and not just the 1 per cent? As Theresa May said in her first speech as Prime Minister, the challenge before us is “to make Britain a country that works for everyone”.

The problem is far too complex for silver bullets, but in the coming years it's crucial that the government takes tangible action to create a Britain where every young person has the opportunity of a decent future. Ucas for apprenticeships is a practical step towards achieving that goal and we shouldn't hesitate to take it.