

A multilevel exploration of the first non-traditional honours degree apprenticeship in Ireland

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Overview

1. Background
2. Research Design
3. Results

Apprentice insights

Employer views

Analysis of graduate earnings

4. Conclusions & Policy Insights



1

Background



Context – Ireland developing modern apprenticeship

Apprenticeships have the potential to address several challenges:

Effectively fund Higher Education

Offer an affordable pathway to higher education

Provide skilled graduate workforce with sector-relevant skills

(HEA 2022)

1967-2013: Over 105,000 graduates across 30 traditional craft occupations (Oireachtas 2022).

2013: Action Plan to support ‘modern’ apprenticeships to reach 10,000 apprentices per year by 2025 (DFHERIS 2021).

December 2023: 27,470 apprentices across craft trades (23,140 , 84%) and consortia-led, non-traditional apprenticeships (4,330 , 16%) (NAO, 2024).



Context – Benefits of Degree Apprenticeship



“Degree apprenticeships carry the weight of expectations of **multiple stakeholders**. They are expected, for instance, to **meet economic needs** and those of employers; to **increase social mobility** and **diversity** in higher education; to bridge the gap between different levels of qualifications; to create a new **gateway to the professions**.”

Office for Students (2019)

Provide a **practice-based academic qualification** which develops professional competence (Bravenboer & Lester, 2016), while the blend of **work-based learning** and **academic theory** “facilitates strong employment outcomes for graduates from these programmes” (Cooper et al., 2010).

Serve to **widen participation** and **social inclusion** in higher education (Bradley, 2019). They attract a higher proportion of **mature learners** who may not otherwise have considered higher education (WECD, 2019; Engeli and Turner, 2019).

Case Study – Bachelor of Arts (BA Hons) Insurance Practice

First ‘modern’ degree apprenticeship in Ireland.

Addresses a **lack of younger employees** in the insurance sector
(worth 25% of Irish financial services sector)

Embedded **professional qualifications** that **informs curriculum design** to tailor the education experience.

Features:

3 Year honours bachelor degree

Level 8 NFQ, Level 6 EQF, First Cycle QF-FHEA, ISCED 665, 667

Four days employment, one day online student

Three semesters each year (ATU Sligo)

Reduced college fees (€600 p.a.)

€2,000 subsidy to employer (p.a)

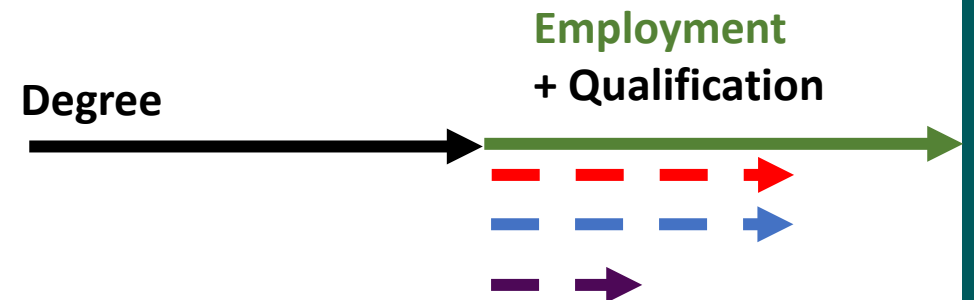
Professional qualification:

Accredited Product Advisor (APA)

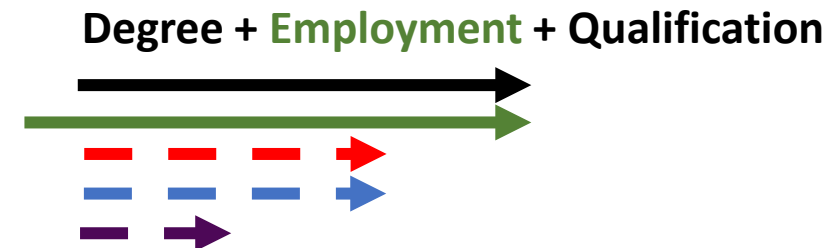
Certified Insurance Practitioner (*General stream*)

Qualified Financial Advisor (*Life stream*)

Was:



Now:



Research Objective

Address evidence gap on degree apprenticeship effectiveness through the study of perceptions of **Graduates**, **Employers** and current **Apprentices**.

Responses explore decisions to enroll, the apprenticeship experience, current employment, the value of the apprenticeship model and the qualifications earned.

Contribution

- Inform **policy development** for 'modern' apprenticeships.
- Identify **benefits**, **challenges** and **conditions** for apprenticeship success.
- Identify **best practices** in curricular development and employer engagement.



2

Research Design



Methodology – Mixed Methods Case Study

Method of data collection is an **anonymous online survey**.

Qualitative survey has been under utilised in research due to misplaced assumptions regarding the survey lacking depth compared to in-person interviews (Braun et al. 2021).

Views are coded (Bree et al. 2016) and analysed using **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke 2006). Comparative analysis of earnings performed with relevant national values.

Qualitative survey criteria

- Best fit for participant needs (sensitive topics)
- A population is geographically dispersed
- A population is hard to engage or access
- A wide range of perspectives is sought
- The topic suits a 'wide-angle' lens
- The focus of the study is quite specific

Source: (Braun et al. 2021)

Thematic analysis steps

1. Familiarising with the data
2. Generate initial codes from the data
3. Search for themes within the data
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Source: (Braun & Clarke 2006)

Sample Overview (Data collected November 2022)

Sample Profile – Insurance Practitioner Apprenticeship

	N	% Frequency
Graduate	39	33.33%
Employer (or relevant person involved with Apprenticeship)	36	30.77%
Apprentice	42	35.90%
Grand Total	117	100.00%

Sample Gender Profile

	Average Age	N	% Frequency
Current Apprentice	25.60	42	35.90%
Male		18	42.86%
Female		24	57.14%
Graduate	27.13	39	33.33%
Male		11	28.21%
Female		28	71.79%
Employer	N/A	36	30.77%
Grand Total	26.33	117	100.00%

3

Results

Student Experience

Employer Views

Graduate Earnings Analysis



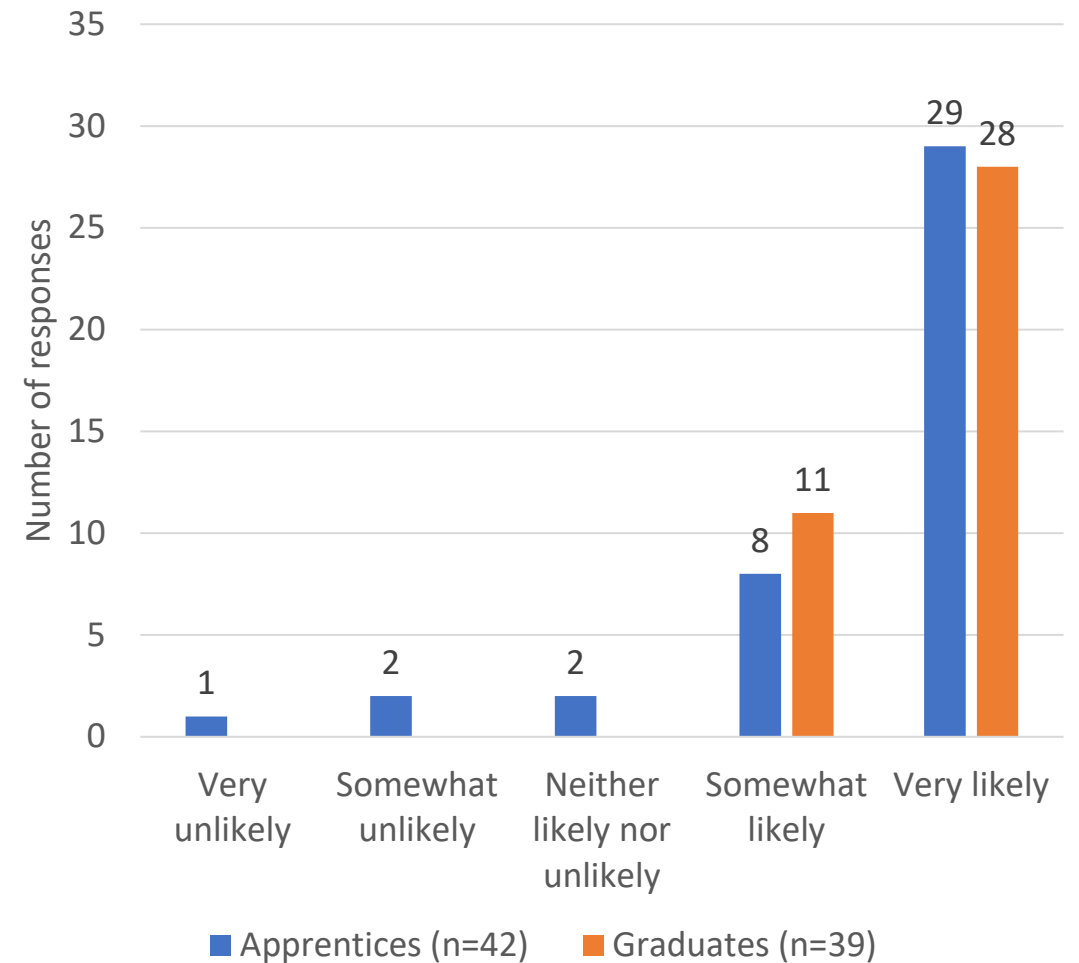
Student Experience (1/5)



Apprentice satisfaction with decision to enrol (n=42)



Recommendation of course (n=79)



Student Experience (2/5)

Enrolment Decision

Apprentices enrol due to a desire to **earn a qualification**, **career** ambitions and **financial concerns** ('Earn and Learn'). Many respondents identified earning a formal qualification as a key influence. Apprentices directly from secondary school and some who had previously worked were experiencing higher education for the first time.

"I had dropped out of college (my number one choice on CAO) and was unsure what to do. Going back to college would've been very expensive..."

Source: Apprentice

"[A] new career path which was much more appealing due to the college aspect of getting fully qualified whilst working full time."

Source: Apprentice



Student Experience (3/5)

Experience

The most positive aspect cited is the ability to **earn while gaining qualifications**. Respondents note how this model provided access to education they otherwise might not have. **Relevant course content, online delivery and alignment with work experience** were cited as positives.

“I have to say this course was so relevant to the working life which was great, other courses have a detachment from the real world, but this one was very well linked to what education we needed in the workplace.”

Source: Graduate

Employers do not always treat you like an apprentice. My wage reflects the fact that I am an apprentice but nothing else does. I have a lot of responsibilities and a lot of work to get done even though I only work a four day week and have to complete assignments and exams outside of those hours.

Source: Apprentice



Student Experience (4/5)

Employability

Employability improved through **industry experience**, **professional qualifications** and the **honours degree**. The opportunity to apply lecture material into practice in real time is viewed as an advantage. Several respondents felt that the apprenticeship proves their ability to successfully **balance work and education commitments**.

Having all of the CIP exams completed and [an honours] university degree is favourable for employers and the additional 3 years' experience makes apprentices stand out compared to post grad students who have not worked in the industry yet

Source: Apprentice

“Maybe work with the employers that are providing apprentices to have a bit more vision on what comes after the apprenticeship, where can they go, what roles can they take on. I myself left the insurance industry and used my degree to switch to banking because I couldn't see this vision anywhere in Ireland.”

Source: Graduate



“I have stood out in every role I have worked in and I put this down to the skills I have learned in the Level 8 part of the course”

“I think certain modules like big data, ecommerce and innovation enhanced my skills in the workplace, and although employers do not look for this degree, I think it makes me a better employee than others who did not undertake the program.”

“I have to say this course was so relevant to the working life ... this one was very well linked to what education we needed in the workplace.”

Employer Views (1/2)

Decision to join

- Company strategy to develop talent pipeline
- Future-proofing skills needs of the organisation

“the company will have the option to recruit the candidate full time when qualified and they will know the business and need very little training”.

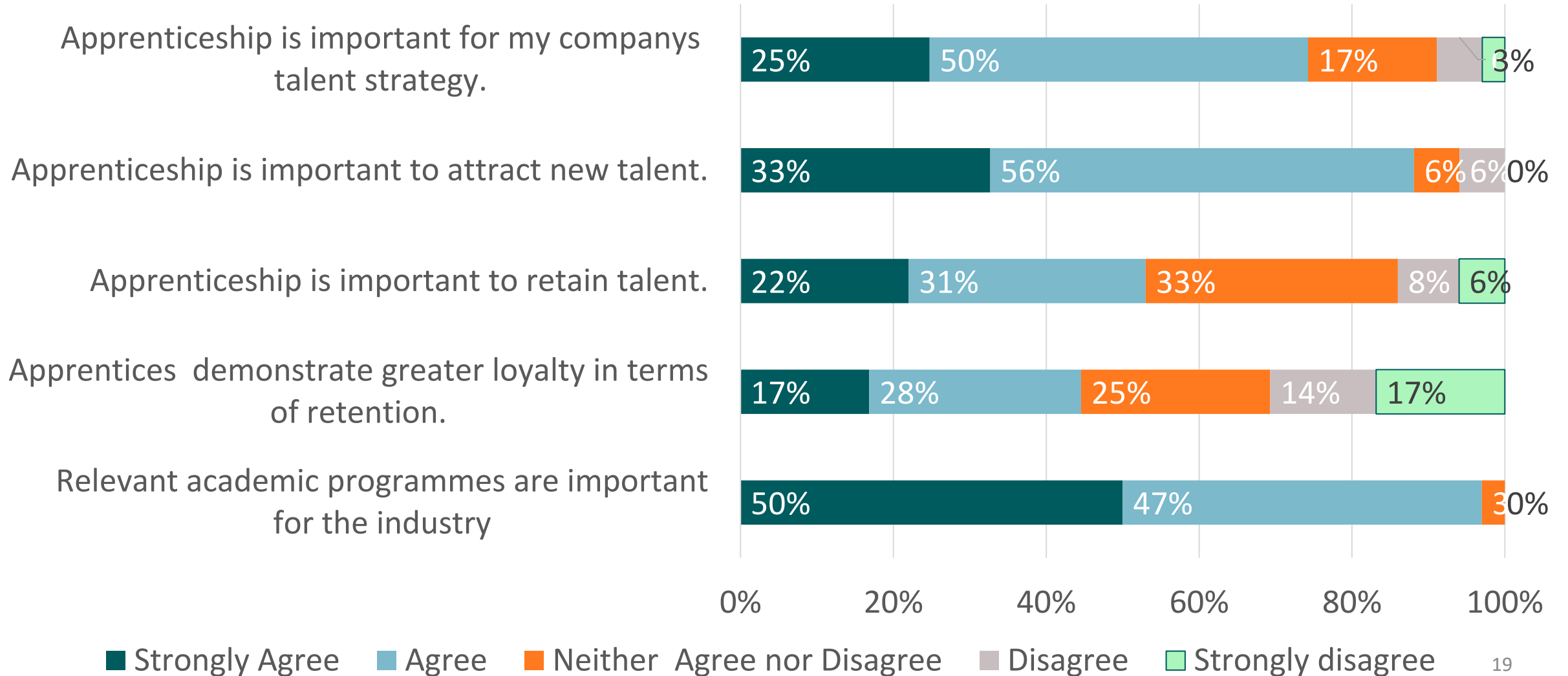
Positives

- Application of academic knowledge, real-time knowledge transfer
- Apprenticeship raises profile of Industry
- Partnership with professional body
- Cost efficiencies in reducing training & onboarding costs

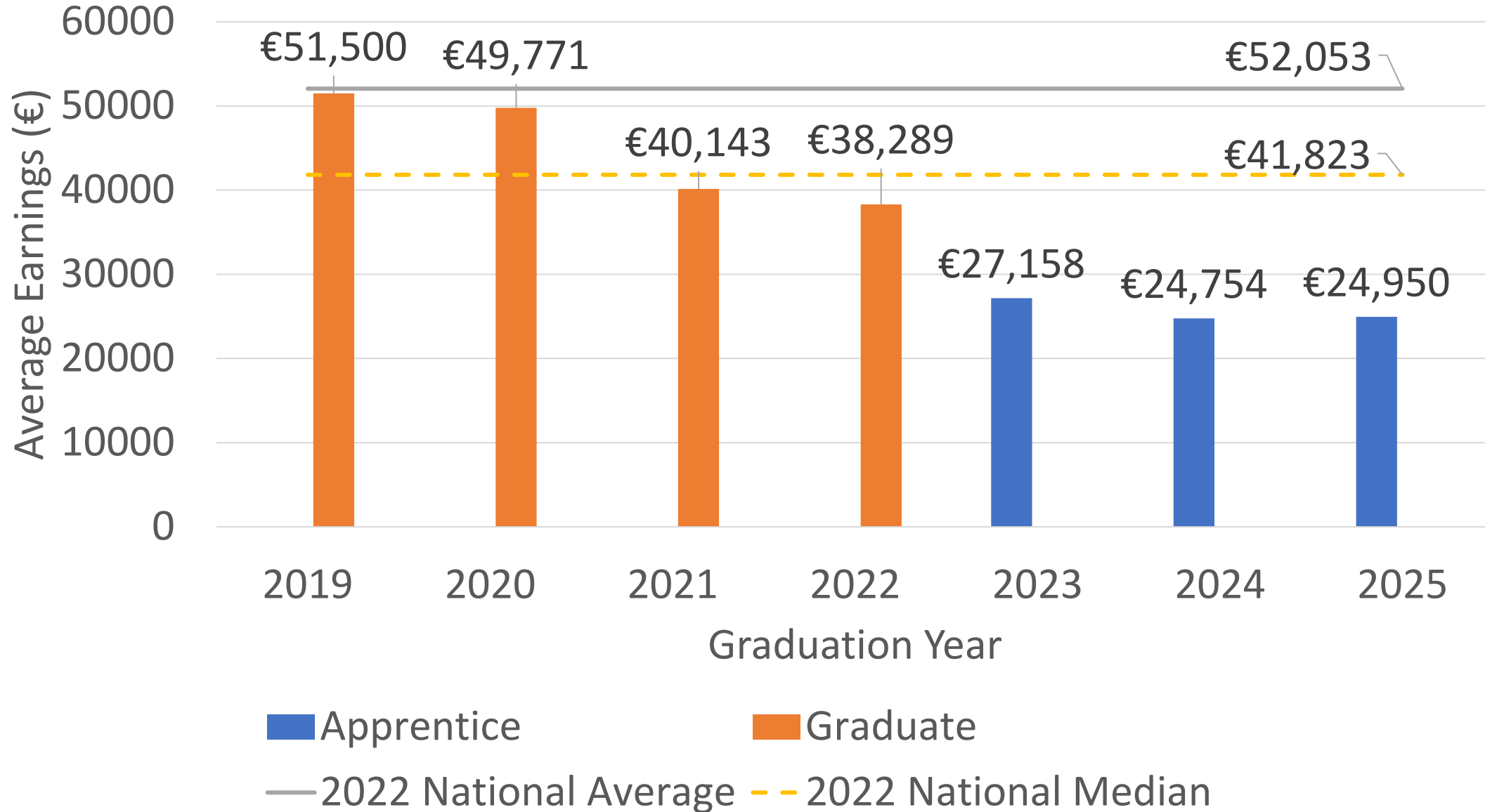


Employer Views (2/2)

Apprenticeship matters to employers. Less important for retention, mixed on loyalty.



Graduate earnings analysis (n=79) (1/2)



Graduate earnings analysis (by Field, Sector) (2/2)



Field of Study: Higher than Business, Law & Admin undergraduate average.

Field of study: Higher than Business, Law & Admin all graduate average.

Employment: Higher than Financial, insurance and real estate undergraduate average.

Average value	€
Insurance Practitioner Graduates (2021 cohort)	40,143
HEA Graduate survey average value	
All graduates	38,044
(i) Field of Study - Business, Law & Admin	
All graduates	37,066
All undergraduates	32,409
All postgraduates	42,571
(ii) Sector of Employment - Financial, insurance & real estate	
All undergraduates	31,560
All postgraduates	40,171

Source: Author calculation from self-reported data compared with nationally representative values from HEA (2022) Graduate Outcome Survey

4

Conclusions & Policy Insights



This research explores the effectiveness of Ireland's first non-traditional Degree Apprenticeship model from key stakeholder perspectives.

It is an important case study due to the critical role of apprenticeship in the modern economy and ambitious policy targets for non-traditional apprenticeship expansion.

Degree apprenticeship model offers significant benefit to all stakeholders – apprentices, graduates, employers and government. These findings are consistent with international evidence.

Highlights the value of the voice of apprentices and graduates to understand apprenticeship from the most important stakeholder.

Conclusions (2/4)

Main Findings

Apprenticeship is a valuable talent pipeline

- Provided there is support and buy-in from employers.

Qualifications matter.

- Employers value the benefit of the professional accreditations.
- Students and graduates value the Level 8 Honours Business Degree
→ A passport to future employment.

The 'Earn and Learn' model is successful

- Intangible benefits through employer knowledge transfer within-firms.
- Online delivery model supports flexible learning nationwide.

Graduate earnings compare well nationwide

- Graduate salaries above national averages.
- Graduate salaries above HEA 'Field of Study' and 'Sector of Employment' undergraduate averages for 2021.



Policy Implications (3/4)

The 'multiple benefits' of Degree Apprenticeship



Apprentice

- Cost-effective higher education
- Employment
- Value of honours degree
- Value of professional qualification
- Value of work-based learning
- Competitive salary as graduate

Employer

- Access to cost-effective skilled talent
- Ability to inform education design
- Access to an industry consortium
- Real-time knowledge transfers

Government

- Widens access to higher education (mature, lower socioeconomic status)
- Reduced skills mismatch through relevant upskilling
- Effective labour market activation policy

Private Benefit

Public Benefit

Policy Implications (4/4)

Success Factors

'Earn and Learn' model

Consortium plays an important role

Apprenticeship helpful in sectors where additional qualifications required (Academic + Professional)

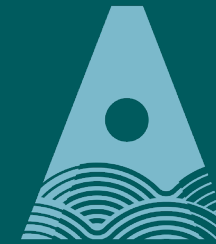
Ideal for a regulated sector

Collaboration between Industry and Education provider critical

In-person events for apprentices promote networking

General Business award provides graduates with upward mobility to change sectors





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Thank you for your time.

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