

Higher education

is facing significant challenges, and it will have to adapt if it is to meet them and continue to support economic growth, argues **Dr Sally-Ann Burnett, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of BPP University.**



Almost all the recent debate over higher education has focused on student funding. Important though this is, it has tended to obscure more deep-seated and just as significant challenges, which if left unaddressed could harm the country's economic prospects and those of the higher education sector.

The first is demographics. After a few years of decline, the number of 18 to 20 year olds in the UK is forecast to rise from a low of 2.3 million to 2.6 million over the next decade, half of whom could be expected to want some form of tertiary education. In the past few years, universities have compensated for the shortfall in homegrown numbers by attracting high-paying students from overseas. It's unlikely they will want to lose that source of revenue even as UK numbers rise.

Yet they will be under enormous pressure to cater to domestic demand, particularly if Brexit complicates the immigration and skills picture for employers. Adding extra physical capacity is expensive, so course delivery will have to become much more flexible and inventive if demand is to be satisfied. That brings us to the second challenge: technology. Higher education providers will have to get much better at effectively incorporating technology in course delivery. BPP University is a good example of an early adopter of technological solutions.

Many of our courses use live webinars, recorded lectures and online learning materials. They allow for accurate monitoring and assessment and provide greater flexibility for lecturers and students alike. Increasing numbers of courses will have to be similarly enhanced if higher education is to keep pace with the demands of the economy. Finally, and most importantly, tertiary learning will have to become more work-based, not least through degree and higher-level apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships offer employers huge advantages – they can offset costs against the levy, they can tailor learning to their business needs, and they can make it easier to recruit a diverse and committed workforce.

The benefits for students are just as great, and we are very confident that a BPP apprentice, for example, studying for a degree in technology or financial services will know what is expected of them in the workplace. They will receive a practical and relevant education, and they will be earning while they learn without accumulating any student debt.

I appreciate that there may be some reluctance in higher education to embrace this shift. Yet in many professions – banking, law and accountancy, for instance – work-based learning was historically the norm. Companies will always recruit graduates directly, but the balance in some could easily shift to a 50:50 split between them and apprentices. Higher education institutions that don't prepare for that shift will not only fail to cater to the demands of employers, they also risk shortchanging themselves and the broader economy.