



Sheffield Solutions

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BEYOND THE NUMBERS Incentivising and implementing better apprenticeships

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Summary

- Through the apprenticeship levy that came into effect on 6 April 2017, the government plans to raise £3 billion a year by 2021-22. This is the highest investment in real terms ever made for apprenticeships.
- Poor implementation could undermine the key benefits of this investment, in particular the quality of training, the school support and levels of pay, all of which remain a key challenge to providing better apprenticeships.
- This policy briefing helps address this concern by offering practical ways to overcome residual negative stereotypes about apprenticeships and to ensure that young people get into high-quality training schemes leading to good employment opportunities and skills that meet employer needs.



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PROVIDING BETTER APPRENTICESHIPS: HELPING MAXIMISE GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT

The UK government has set a target of three million new apprenticeships by 2020, and it is intended that these will be given the same recognition as degrees.¹

It is encouraging to see that the government recognises the value of apprenticeships and has developed mechanisms to increase the number available as outlined in *Building our Industrial Strategy: Green Paper*. A key challenge, therefore, is to overcome the residual negative stereotypes about apprenticeships by ensuring that young people get into high quality training schemes leading to good employment opportunities. This policy briefing, based on new research findings, recommends how this can happen by ensuring appropriate mechanisms are in place.

ADVANTAGES OF APPRENTICESHIPS

Through our research, we uncovered a number of benefits to well-structured and well-implemented apprenticeships programmes, for both apprentices and employers.

SECOND CHANCE OF EDUCATION

Apprenticeships were widely regarded as a 'second chance' of education for those who had not done well in school, or had a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. The research found that employers have had positive experiences with young people who did not achieve high grades during their education but have gone on to successful careers through the education, training and support provided through apprenticeships:

"We've had people who, for whatever reason, were disenfranchised by the school system, thought they had nowhere to go, no possible career prospects, and now they're halfway up the career ladder... we have got evidence to show that we've changed people's lives." (employer working with apprentices in the Health Service)

BOOSTING THE CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Pamela, a young woman who had completed school with very low grades, explained how the apprenticeship was a chance for her to turn her life around:

"I went to school, I attended every day, every lesson but I just didn't sit down and do the work... I didn't have the attention span... I remember I left my coursework to the last minute and then when it came to GCSEs ... I went to the exams but I came out with like Ds, Es, Fs." (Pamela)

After going through the apprenticeships scheme, and completing both a Level 2 and then a Level 3² apprenticeship in Health and Social Care, she got a full time job within the NHS.

SKILLS & EMPLOYABILITY

Employers valued apprenticeships as a way of "fast-tracking" young people into technical careers to address the skills gap.

Among training providers working directly on apprenticeship programmes there was also a good deal of positivity about the potential of this training pathway to provide young people with skills and qualifications. A tutor, who delivered training in a Further Education (FE) college, stated:

"This route has been valuable to a lot of students in terms of their professional developments, giving them the skills and the recognised qualifications to get into the workforce."

1. <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN03052>

2. Level 2 qualifications are equivalent to GCSEs at grade A*-C, while Level 3 is equivalent to AS and A-Levels.



THE PERSISTING CHALLENGES FOR APPRENTICESHIPS

Despite these positive outcomes, our research also found challenges for apprenticeships.

LOW PAY

One of the government's key selling points for apprenticeships is the slogan 'earn while you learn'. Ironically apprenticeships may not be a viable option for poorer families as the payment for apprentices is currently well below the National Minimum Wage and considerably below the London Living Wage. Low pay was an issue repeatedly raised by our respondents, where evidence shows that there are cases of employers using apprenticeships as 'cheap labour'.

For young people in our study, undertaking an apprenticeship was only viable if they lived at home with their parents. Phoenix, who was doing a hospital-based apprenticeship, shared a flat with his brother:

"I've had to move in with my brother because the wages that I'm earning here wouldn't have paid the rent of where I was living and I haven't got as much expendable resources, you know."

Elsewhere in our study we encountered young people who were put off apprenticeships because of low pay. Greg, whose family were on benefits, stated "the amount you earn on apprenticeship because it's below minimum wage, isn't it? It's just like for me, we struggle with money".

Without improvements in pay for apprentices, there will be large groups of students who are unable to access apprenticeships, as the salary will not cover their living costs. Coupled with reductions in other benefits for young people, this undermines some of the aims of the apprenticeships programme.

SCEPTICISM IN SCHOOLS

Among young people there was a shared view that schools were more interested in promoting traditional academic routes to university. Several participants observed that the drive towards universities sometimes was more in the interest of schools than students.

Several young people stated that they got little or no information about apprenticeships from their careers advisors in school. Some academic high achievers were actively deterred by their schools and indeed their parents from doing an apprenticeship. One young woman we interviewed was told by her school that she was 'too bright' to do an apprenticeship. Clearly more needs to be done to promote apprenticeships as a route into skilled occupations among 'bright' young people.

Apprenticeships are a great opportunity to provide second chance education for those with low academic achievement, as discussed earlier. However, this image of 'second chance' may be a contributing factor in deterring high achieving students from wanting to pursue apprenticeships, narrowing the pool of students who take up these opportunities.

Without proper advice and support at school, many young people found their own way on to apprenticeships of variable quality, as we discuss below.

Similarly, among our stakeholder interviews, we found a tension between government policies to develop alternative learning arenas such as apprenticeships, and the overall perception that formal academic qualifications are still widely regarded in society as the gold standard that all young people should aspire to achieve:

"I think in this country we never had a very high profile for vocational education and we haven't got a strong tradition of seeing it as a very positive route for young people." (Youth Service Council Officer)

There seems to be a genuine push to equip young people with in-demand skills through reform of the apprenticeship programme and other vocational offers. However, the pressure on schools to raise attainment at GCSE and A-Level appears to reinforce the privileging of academic qualifications. According to some participants, the country needs a cultural shift to value vocational qualifications, apprenticeships among them:

"Young people don't know about it sufficiently and parents and teachers don't know about it sufficiently. ... So I think, the offer is broadening, it's just it's not yet known and is not credible enough really." (Senior Officer, London Councils)

Our research suggests that this culture shift could be achieved, in part, through a more formal, single portal, application process to enable applicants, their parents and schools, to identify high quality apprenticeship schemes with reputable providers.

THE QUALITY OF TRAINING

The stakeholders we interviewed were especially critical of the short, one year, Level 2 schemes. A senior manager at an FE college remarked: "I would get rid of all this 12-month nonsense because I don't know how much you can learn in 12 months". He was also concerned about the level of partnership between the training providers and the employers. There were calls for closer working and cooperation between the different parties that together provide apprenticeships. He argued that training should be based in FE colleges instead of the low quality online training which was the case for many apprentices.

THE EXPERIENCES OF HOLLY

Amongst the young people, we met Holly, who had changed her apprenticeship programme because she was not happy with the level of training provided.

After a few months in her first apprenticeship she began to think that 'something was wrong.... I wasn't getting training'. She was effectively working full time without the required training element: "my employer wasn't meeting the contract rules appropriately". After much discussion with the employer and many promises of training which were not met, she decided to leave. When we re-interviewed Holly six months later she had started a new Level 2 apprenticeship in Business Administration and was receiving online training.

CONCLUSION

The UK government is pumping billions of pounds into apprenticeship programmes. However, there are tensions between the main aims for apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are promoted as addressing the skills gap and training the next generation with in-demand skills. They are also presented as second chance education/ training for those with poor academic achievement. Most young apprentices do Level 2 qualifications which reinforce the negative stereotype among students, their parents and schools, that apprenticeships are low quality. In order for government investment in apprenticeships to realise its potential, it is necessary for mechanisms to be put in place to ensure a central application process to high quality schemes delivered by reputable providers and leading to skilled employment opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need for a culture shift in the UK so that apprenticeships achieve a change of image and are valued as high quality training amongst a wide range of students. To achieve this, the following action is needed among key stakeholders:

SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

- Rethinking school league tables: Schools need to be incentivised to promote apprenticeships which means changing school league tables so that success is not judged simply on A-Level results and progression rates to university
- Extra training and resources for career advice in schools: The vital role of career advisors needs to be recognised and effectively resourced so that careers advisors in schools are trained to provide correct advice to young people about the range of pathways including apprenticeships
- Coordinated, single portal application process for apprenticeships: The creation of a single portal application process, like UCAS, so that young people, their parents and schools are confident in accessing high quality apprenticeships delivered by reputable providers.

PROVIDERS

In order to improve the quality of training provision:

- Monitoring of apprenticeship accreditation needs to improve to ensure that training is meeting the required standards to address the skills gap
- The minimum length of a course should be no less than 12 months and probably closer to 18 months
- Training needs to improve and serious consideration should be given to bringing training back into colleges and moved away from private training providers who mainly offer online provision. This would also ensure that young apprentices have access to additional support services, such as welfare, safeguarding and career advice, and may help to improve progression from Level 2 to Level 3.

EMPLOYERS

- Coordination between employers and trainers needs to be improved so that skills training and work-place experience are more compatible
- Employers need to provide a proper living wage for all apprentices so that these training opportunities are viable for a broader range of young people
- Employers need to be incentivised to encourage more progression from Level 2 on to Level 3 and Level 4 qualifications to ensure on-going skills development.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

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About the research:

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In addition to the authors of this paper, the UK team also included Dr Alessio D'Angelo and Neil Kaye. Interviews were conducted with local and national stakeholders in education, training and youth services, staff members – including tutors, trainers and employers drawn from diverse sectors including childcare, health and social care, IT, business administration, sport and the medical field. The voice of young apprentices was collected through two focus groups and a number of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which included apprentices, a number of whom were interviewed twice over an eight month period.

Sheffield Solutions is an ambitious initiative of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Sheffield, which supports events, activities and outputs aimed at connecting social science perspectives to policy makers, practitioners and other external audiences in order to tackle pressing global issues. For further information contact Gareth Young at sheffieldsolutions@sheffield.ac.uk.