

Apprenticeships: not much to celebrate?

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Though beefed up by David Cameron in 2014, with a promise that three million more would be available by 2020, apprenticeships have continued to tread water. Despite the increase at Higher Level, the total number of apprenticeship starts has fallen recently. In 2017/18 there were 375,000, down from 495,000 the year before and 509,000 the year previously.

Make no mistake there are some very good apprenticeships and a significant number of young people have benefited from not following the conventional higher education route into employment. In particular it's the expansion of Higher-Level apprenticeships (some of which involve university attendance) that has attracted attention of late. Last year saw over 30,000 new starts on Level 5 and 6 (graduate level) schemes, which include standards for teachers and legal professionals. Higher-Level starts now make up over 1 in 8 of the total but only a minority of these are started by young workers, under 19 year-olds making up less than 10 per cent.

New standards, developed by employers, now operate for over 400 routes with apprentices guaranteed, at least in theory, much better opportunities for off-the-job training. The number of starts on the new standards, phased in from 2014, increased by over 60,000 between 2016/17 and 2017/18, representing 25 per cent of the total. As is the case elsewhere in Europe, an employer 'levy' now provides most of the finance.

It's true that the proportion of young people starting schemes has grown. 28 per cent are started by under 19 year-olds, with another 30 per cent by those between 19 and 24 (government has clamped down on a process whereby some employers re-registered existing employees as 'apprentices' to gain funding), but a situation where nearly half the starts are by over-25s means that apprenticeships are still not providing a proper alternative pathway to university for young people (over 400,000 school-leavers apply for HE annually).

There is also concern about the level at which apprenticeships have been offered - Cameron promised they would develop 'high skills' and commissioned entrepreneur Doug Richards to

improve them. Yet nearly half of apprenticeship starts are intermediate standard (GCSE equivalent, a level that most young people have already reached) while Advanced Level apprenticeships have not expanded in the way that was hoped. The number of 16 year-olds enrolling is a fraction of those that start A-level courses.

Finally, 30 per cent of apprenticeship starts are in the business sector and 25 per cent in health and social care - which helps to explain why there are as many female apprentices as male. Apprenticeships have been considered a key part of the Government's 'industrial strategy' designed to rebalance the economy, yet only 15 per cent of starts are in Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies.

What's gone wrong?

Recent falls in numbers have coincided with the introduction of a compulsory levy on large employers, but it's difficult to see how this could be a cause - the opposite might be assumed? Schools and colleges have also been criticised for not promoting apprenticeships to their students - but schools can't be expected to compensate for cuts in careers advice, and in many parts of the country employers are either not offering apprenticeships or are reluctant to employ school-leavers. Low levels of pay are also cited, but they are higher than in some other countries.

Comparisons can be made with successful European systems like Germany. But there, apprenticeships are part of a broader 'social partnership' that still exists between employers, local and national state institutions and trade unions, through which apprenticeship requirements are planned collectively and where completing an apprenticeship guarantees progression to employment - this isn't guaranteed on many British programmes. In contrast UK apprenticeships largely run on a 'free market' basis, where, rather than being required, or at least expected, to, employers have to be persuaded to opt in.

Most significantly, the apprenticeship problem is really a jobs problem. Apprenticeships were previously associated with manufacturing. The employment structure of the post-war period, the heyday of apprenticeships, was very different from the one that exists now - where the need for generic, rather than specific, technical skills is now emphasised and workers may expect to have to move in and out of different types of employment during their lives.

But the 'deindustrialisation' of Britain has not, for many people at least, given way to employment in a highly skilled service sector or a 'knowledge economy'. The UK has also been particularly susceptible to the disappearance of 'middle-jobs', particularly many technician-level jobs that apprenticeships have been associated with.

Lastly, the huge expansion of universities has resulted in a surplus of graduates, many occupying jobs that were once filled by non-graduates or by training up junior staff. Why take on an apprentice if you can recruit an oven-ready graduate? The problem with apprenticeships is that employers don't need as many of them as government and policy wonks like to think.

Is there an alternative?

With apprenticeships already struggling to maintain their momentum, the Cameron government, based on recommendations in the Sainsbury Review, published proposals for new T (Technical) Levels. Unlike apprenticeships most of these would be college-based and would represent a 'middle' path between academic studies and work-based training from age 16. Yet T-Levels, the first of which are due to start next year, have not been met with any real enthusiasm from employers and, based on what has been made available so far, do not seem to be very different from the vocational qualifications they are designed to replace and which struggled to gain any real parity with academic A-levels. Labour's 2017 election manifesto backed T-Levels (and improved apprenticeships) as a way of increasing skill levels and opportunities. At best, the jury is out.

Considering the changes to technology and employment outlined above, a more satisfactory way forward would be to argue for a good general education for everybody. This doesn't mean that technical and vocational options would not be available, but that young people wouldn't be pushed onto narrow pathways made up of one or the other. Key to this would be the reform of academic education, an area largely unchallenged by reformers.

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.