



# Are we being serious about apprenticeship?

**Hilary Steedman looks at on-the-job education in six Continental countries to find a benchmark against which to judge British policy for vocational training and finds it seriously wanting.**

**“Beyond compulsory school age, we are determined to build a coherent and high-quality vocational education and training system that is the envy of the world.”** From *Opportunity and Skills in the Knowledge-Driven Economy*. A Final Statement on the Work of the National Skills Task Force from the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 2001

Last year, the government gave a commitment to build or (some would say) rebuild a vocational route to high-level skills and qualifications in Britain. This was a recognition that we do not have the coherent and transparent vocational route to intermediate and high level skills that, in other countries, has contributed to raising post-16 educational achievement.

Apprenticeship was identified as the chosen institution to form the backbone of this renewed drive to promote post-16 vocational education and training. More specifically, Modern Apprenticeship, established in 1994 by the then Conservative government, was to be the vehicle. It is, therefore, appropriate to spell out the standards that would need to be reached if vocational education in Britain is to become “the envy of the world”. A comparison with apprenticeship provision in other European countries where it is successfully established would provide a benchmark against which our Modern Apprenticeship (MA) could be assessed.

We have looked at six countries - three German-speaking (Austria, Germany and Switzerland) and France, Denmark and The Netherlands. The German-speaking countries have a strong “dual system” apprenticeship tradition. At least two thirds of all their young people embark on apprenticeship

training. France has a much more restricted apprenticeship tradition; between 10 and 15% enter apprenticeship, but numbers have grown rapidly in recent years, which makes it an interesting case for study. Denmark, with a long tradition of apprenticeship, has seen a rolling programme of change and reform for the past two decades. The proportion of young people entering apprenticeship has remained roughly constant: around a third of young Danes gain a vocational qualification through apprenticeship. The Netherlands completely restructured vocational education following legislation in 1996. The decline in apprenticeship numbers in the 1980s was reversed in the 1990s. Today around 30% of young people in The Netherlands enter an apprenticeship programme. In England and Wales the percentage of a young people starting apprenticeships is around 9% for Modern Apprenticeship and 11% for National Traineeships.

To establish our benchmark we examined a number of key aspects of apprenticeship provision in the six Continental countries. These were the framework and standards involved, including the length of training, the content of programmes, the methods of assessment and the final standards required. We then looked at the ways in which apprentice places were provided, how candidates found them, the educational background of apprentices, the incentives to enter and stay the course, completion and success rates and subsequent employment records. Finally, we looked at how the various national schemes are managed and financed. Using the findings as a benchmark, we are able to make a judgement about our own Modern Apprenticeship scheme.

The conclusions do not make comfortable reading. In Britain, in contrast to the other six countries, apprenticeship is not regulated by national legislation. Instead, regulations

and guidelines issued by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES formerly DfEE) are followed in a variety of ways in different sectors, leading to wide variations in provision from sector to sector and locality to locality. Financial flows in Britain are also more complex than our benchmark countries. Public funds flow from the budget of the DfES to the local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs). The money is then distributed to training providers, who contract with a variety of bodies for the provision of apprentice training and assessment required by DfES regulations. In the process, equity and transparency are largely lost, so that the funding devoted to off-the-job training of apprentices can vary from one local body to another and from one provider to another. This contrasts sharply with the greater standardisation of off-the-job training, funding and provision on the Continent achieved by direct transfers to public sector providers.

In other European countries these offers of apprenticeship places enable individual firms to signal immediate and anticipated skill needs to young people. Apprenticeship structures then enable firms to meet those skill needs by appropriate training in partnership with government. By offering places, employers provide good quality information to young people and their parents on future career possibilities. Young people are thereby encouraged to invest in further education and training in a way that helps to meet skill needs and improve the probability of future employment.

In Britain, the government practice of target-setting for apprentices in terms of numbers has led to the side-lining of employers in favour of "training providers" to whom most government funding is channelled on condition that they enable the government to meet its targets. Training providers then "place" young people with employers with little regard to local skill needs. The prime advantage of apprenticeship as a means of signalling skill need and satisfying demand for skills has thereby been almost entirely dissipated.

In every other European country, apprenticeship is a recognisable "brand". Although apprenticeship occupations differ in various ways, the national framework, underpinned by binding legislation on key features (duration, standards and assessment) provides a common identity which allows the "marketing" of apprenticeship to employers and young people. In Britain, apprenticeship has no legally defined identity. This gave rise to wide variations in the administration of government funding for MA by the Training and Enterprise Councils until their abolition two years ago.

Variability in duration, standards, achievements and funding are such that it is impossible to define apprenticeship in Britain except as "some combination of paid work and training". While other factors have contributed, this must be one of the main reasons for the chronic information failure that cripples attempts to promote apprenticeship in the UK – and which has led in the past to apprentices who did not know they were on apprenticeship schemes and widespread confusion among employers.

It is a condition of apprenticeship in the other European countries that young people in apprenticeship continue to be educated like their contemporaries within publicly provided upper secondary education. This requirement permits a simple and stable pattern of financial flows and ensures that vocational practice is underpinned by sound technical knowledge and general education and greatly facilitates further progression to higher-level vocational courses from apprenticeship.

In Britain, lobbying by employers' organisations in the early 1980s led to the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) that could be awarded on the basis of assessment on employers' premises alone. The same organisations pressed for the abandoning of any minimum fixed period for apprenticeship programmes and for NVQ to be the only qualification to be "aimed for" in government-sponsored youth training. Employer pressure has continued to ensure that apprentices in Britain have no entitlement to education during apprenticeship.

There is ample evidence that, in a small number of sectors with a tradition of apprenticeship training, schemes provided are of good quality and produce well-qualified young people. But these sectors only account for around 20% of young people on apprenticeship in Britain today. It is clear that the Modern Apprenticeship initiative has failed to spread good practice, as it exists in the traditional sectors, to sectors new to apprenticeship – such as Health and Social Care, Customer Service, Business Administration, Hotels & Catering, Hairdressing and Retailing – which together account for around half of all apprentice starts in Britain and for almost all female apprentices.

This failure only serves to underline the fatal weakness of a non-statutory framework for apprenticeship, compounded by a rush to fulfil government targets with little regard to quality or local skill requirements. But it should not be assumed that all is well in the "traditional" apprenticeship sectors where standards are high. Employers in these sectors are being damaged by the weaknesses of the scheme as a whole. Well-qualified recruits to apprenticeship are difficult to find, information about the excellent opportunities available to young people in their industries does not reach its target population and employers are unable to access government funding for apprenticeship in areas where total funds available have already been allocated elsewhere.

In all the other European countries, but not in Britain, employers' legitimate concern to minimise costs and maximise specific training is counter-balanced by other bodies, which are accorded a compensatory role in the governance of apprenticeship by the legislative framework. In the dual-system countries, trade union representatives perform the essential role of representing the interests of employees and of apprentices themselves at every level – local to national – of the apprenticeship structure. In France

and The Netherlands trade union influence is less important, but the role of protecting the interests of the apprentice and of other employees is undertaken by government and by educational interests.

Apprenticeship has been characterised as a public-private partnership. In the British “partnership” both trade unions and government have failed to provide sufficient compensatory counter-balance to the voice of employers in the design and day-to-day running of apprenticeship programmes. With only a very few honourable exceptions, mainly in the “traditional” sectors such as engineering and electrical contracting, trade unions have done nothing to protect the interests of young people entering apprenticeship. Unlike their German counterparts, they have not fought for the right to education and transferable training and, unlike their Danish counterparts, they have not upheld the importance of assessment based on objective evidence.

For successive governments, the work-based training route has been all but invisible. The result is that apprenticeship in Britain, judged as a programme, falls short of that provided elsewhere in Europe on every important measure of good practice.

The evidence on which this judgement is based is reported in my paper “Benchmarking Apprenticeship: UK and Continental Europe Compared” (September 2001). Let us look at an outline of the main points to emerge.

## In Britain, apprenticeship is not regulated by national legislation

Take duration for a start. In the German-speaking countries – Austria, Germany and Switzerland – the length of the apprenticeship training period for each occupation is fixed by legislation. The specified period can be shortened in the case of entrants who hold the *Hochschulreife (Abitur)* in Germany or the *Maturität* in Austria. In Switzerland, it is rare for entrants to apprenticeship to also hold a university entrance qualification. There is also provision in Austria for the training period to be shortened for those who already have substantial experience or qualifications in the occupational area concerned. However, the vast majority of those who enter “dual-system” apprenticeships in these three countries follow the apprenticeship training programme for three or more years. This reflects the fact that apprenticeship is understood to be a period of education as well as of training.

Denmark also has a long-established tradition of apprenticeship training based on “dual system” principles. With effect from 2001 it has reformed and revised apprenticeship education and training arrangements and requirements. Young people studying for a recognised vocational qualification will still alternate between periods of study in college and periods of work in a firm, but the new arrangements stress flexibility and individualisation of training programmes within a statutory framework. As a consequence, training periods are expressed in terms of minimum (1½) and maximum (4½) years duration. The typical duration is 3½ to 4 years. The basic (first part) of

**Table 1** Distribution of Apprenticeship Training Programmes by Duration of Programme, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland

	% of all programmes		
	2 years and <3 years	3 years and <4 years	4 years
Austria	10	88	2
Denmark		typical	
Germany	6	72	22
Switzerland	30	50	20

**Sources:**

**Switzerland:**

Statistik Schweiz 15. Bildung und Wissenschaft Die Berufslehre in der Schweiz [http://www.statistik.admin.ch.stat\\_ch/ber15/dlehrvertr\\_intro.htm](http://www.statistik.admin.ch.stat_ch/ber15/dlehrvertr_intro.htm) accessed 21/03/01

**Austria:**

<http://www.bmwa.gv.at/service/leservice/broschde/%FCbersicht2.htm> accessed 21/03/01

**Denmark:**

<http://www.uvm.dk/pub/2000/newstructure/6.htm> accessed on 22/03/01

**Germany:**

*Berufsbildungsbericht, 2000 2.2 Table 42*



the apprenticeship training cannot be completed in less than 10 weeks of college-based education and the college-based component of the main (second part) normally has a maximum limit of 60 weeks. (Table 1 gives the distribution of apprenticeship training programmes in the dual-system countries by duration.)

France and The Netherlands are fundamentally different from the "dual-system" countries with respect to duration. A significant reform in 1993 in France led to a fundamental change in the composition of the apprenticeship population. Previously, the law had only allowed apprentices to get the lowest level of vocational qualification. Higher level qualifications were only available through full-time education. As a result, apprenticeship recruitment was principally from those who had been unsuccessful in the school system. Since 1993 apprentices have been permitted to work for all nationally recognised vocational qualifications, extending to first degree level and even beyond.

The 1996 reform of vocational education in The Netherlands required vocational courses to be offered at four levels and be available through full-time (college) and part-time (apprenticeship) routes. The structure was designed to facilitate a switch from one route to the other without disruption of the study programme. Substantial amounts of work-based training are required for the full-time students and not only for apprentices. The clear formulation of levels of training also allows those on the apprenticeship

route to continue subsequently to a higher level of qualification, including vocational courses in Higher Education (either in apprenticeship or via the full-time route).

In both France and The Netherlands apprenticeship can lead to an occupational qualification at a number of different levels, ranging from the equivalent of the UK NVQ 2 (in The Netherlands a very small number go no further than an NVQ1 level) to the equivalent of UK NVQ 5 (France) or UK NVQ 4 (Netherlands). Those who move from one level to the next will spend a period of 2+2 or even 2+2+2 years in apprenticeship. (Table 2 gives the distribution of apprenticeship training programmes in France and The Netherlands by duration as determined by level studied.)

**In the UK a fixed training duration is no longer a condition of public funding of youth training. When Modern Apprenticeship (MA) was introduced in 1995, duration was left at the discretion of the employer. In 1998 only 10% of British employers surveyed by the DfEE expected apprenticeship in their companies to last less than 18 months. In three sectors, Child Care, Health and Social Care and Hotels and Catering, between 20 and 25% of all apprenticeships were expected to last for 18 months or less. However, a recent analysis by Fuller and Unwin shows that the gap between expectation and actual length of stay in apprenticeship is huge. In four of the ten largest apprenticeship sectors accounting for roughly a third of all apprenticeship starts, Health and**

**Table 2** The Distribution of Participants on Apprenticeship Training Programmes by Duration as Determined by Level, France (1996) and The Netherlands (1999/2000)

NVQ equivalent Level	2	3(a)	4	5
Duration (years): France	2	2	2	2
Duration (years): Netherlands	2-3	2-4	3-4	-
Distribution of Apprentices:				
France (%)	64	28	5	3
Distribution of Apprentices:				
Netherlands (%)*	55	45	-	-

\* In The Netherlands 45% are at Levels 3 and 4

**In other European countries apprentices continue to be educated like their contemporaries**



**Social Care, Retailing, Hotels and Catering and Customer Service, the average actual length of stay in apprenticeship was less than one year. In all sectors, average actual length of stay was considerably less than “expected” and none was longer than two years.**

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI), representing some 250,000 employers, is opposed to fixed training periods. This opposition must be understood in the context of employers’ opposition to “time-serving”, which characterised British apprenticeship in the first half of the twentieth century, and their determination to retain control over all aspects of learning in apprenticeship. In its response to the government’s 2000 consultation document on Modern Apprenticeship, the CBI wrote: “Employers are not educators and Modern Apprenticeships are part of the foundation learning system – not the education system.”

All the six continental European countries that we are using to establish benchmarks require apprenticeship training programmes to consist of three essential elements: general education, technical education, and occupational skills and competences. In the “dual-system” countries, standards of general and technical education are differentiated by occupation. It is accepted that some occupations will make more stringent demands in certain areas of general and technical education than others. In Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the regional Ministries of Education and in Denmark the national Ministry draw up standards in consultation with the industry body responsible for a given occupational area. There is no attempt to align standards of general or technical education in apprenticeship with a wider national standard.

In France and The Netherlands all apprenticeship programmes are required to offer general and technical education components. However, the balance may vary by occupation and by level. There is an attempt to align standards across occupational areas and within levels. Overall in all these six countries, between 70 and 80% of an apprentice’s training period is spent in the workplace, including time devoted to workplace training. The balance is roughly equally between general and more occupationally-focused technical education.

The distribution of the apprentice training period between workplace and school or college is thus weighted heavily towards time spent in the workplace. In all three “dual-system” countries and in The Netherlands, off-the-job education and training is ensured through compulsory attendance at publicly provided vocational colleges or institutions within the wider upper-secondary school system. In France, until recently, employers and Chambers of Commerce were the main providers of off-the-job education and training for apprentices. However, the curriculum to be followed and assessment procedures used are identical to those in full-time publicly provided vocational education.

A recent innovation in France is provision for apprentices to attend a publicly funded vocational *lycée* for their off-the-job education and training.

Modern Apprentices in the UK are currently only required to “work towards” an NVQ qualification at Level 3, although to receive a final certificate of completion they must obtain the relevant NVQ 3 certificate and demonstrate competence in Key Skills. The NVQ is a checklist of occupational competences, demonstrated and assessed in the workplace. Consequently, the UK apprenticeship has not, up to now, measured up to the requirements for separately taught and assessed technical and general education found in other European countries.

The government-appointed National Skills Task Force found the lack of a coherent body of underpinning knowledge, which characterised the NVQ template, seriously damaging to the development of Modern Apprenticeship. The Modern Apprenticeship Consultation Document put forward a proposal for a technical certificate to be an additional requirement alongside the NVQ qualification. This proposal could bring the balance of learning in the UK Modern Apprenticeship closer to the structure of that in continental Europe. However, there is still no recognition by the government that general education should continue during apprenticeship.

In our benchmark countries, the successful completion of apprenticeship is conditional on successful completion of *both elements* of the apprenticeship programme: off-the-job general and technical education and on-the-job acquisition of skills and competences. General and technical education is assessed by tests or examinations set and marked by outside bodies, or by the regional education authorities. Occupational skills and competences are almost invariably assessed by practical tests (with external assessors) and through oral examination (conducted by a panel of assessors). In addition, portfolio evidence is now also used as part of assessment of practical work.

In the UK, of the two elements of the Modern Apprenticeship that constitute the full qualification – NVQ 3 and Key Skills – only Key Skills may be assessed by examination. There is enormous variation in the way NVQ competences are assessed and the extent to which assessors have a financial stake in the outcome of the assessment. Most apprentices are assessed on their performance of tasks in the workplace. UK apprentices are not assessed by objective methods which promote confidence that consistent standards have been applied, regardless of sector, occupation or employer. While the employer of an apprentice may be indifferent to the reliability and transparency of the qualification awarded, lack of consistent, objective and reliable assessment lowers

### **the labour-market value of the qualification to the apprentice.**

In all our six countries, responsibility for finding a place as an apprentice rests with the young person. He or she must find a willing employer. This places a requirement on the young person to consider carefully the occupation/sector that he or she wishes to train for and the type of company where they would like to work. Since employers will be recruiting the apprentice with a view to trainability and productive work, a further requirement is that the aspiring apprentice should have acquired an appropriate foundation of skills and aptitudes. These two requirements, prior consideration of career options and adequate foundation for training and progress in a work environment, are met in various ways.

In the three German-speaking countries, the process starts in the last two years of compulsory school, when specific periods are set aside for careers teachers and visits are arranged to Centres run by the Careers Service. The Internet now provides additional high quality information on careers, the type of work involved, working conditions, skills and aptitudes required. In Germany, for example, the Chambers of Commerce (*Industrie und Handelskammern*) provide sites which list all apprenticeship places on offer locally for a range of recognised occupations. For obvious reasons, demand for apprenticeship places in the former East Germany has consistently outstripped supply and there has been government intervention to subsidise apprenticeship places. In the former West Germany, demand and supply have been kept in equilibrium despite rising cohort numbers by strong government pressure on employers. Overall, the number of apprenticeship places offered and accepted annually is still impressive – 630,000 in 1999 – equivalent to around two thirds of the 16-year-old cohort.

In Austria, where apprenticeship covers a narrower range of more traditional occupations than in Germany, there has been a marked fall in the number of places offered. In 1992 nearly half the age group (48.7%) entered apprenticeship; in 1996 just under two fifths (39.5%) did so. In the early 1990s the supply of places outstripped demand, while by the mid-1990s the ratio of demand for places from young people to supply by firms was over 2:1. Improved financial incentives to firms have resulted in more training places being offered and the decline in participation in Austria has now levelled out. A similar situation occurred in Switzerland, The Netherlands and France in the early 1990s and in all these countries steps were taken to improve incentives to firms to offer training places. This has now resulted in an increase in places offered.

Over the last decade it has proved more difficult in all the dual system countries to achieve the employer-apprentice match. There has been no formal raising of entrance requirements and, in all the German-speaking countries,

there are no formal pre-requisites for entry to apprenticeship. But employers having a clear idea of the qualities and potential needed for successful completion of apprenticeship and firms claim that it has been increasingly difficult to find young people with the qualities and attributes that they seek among those applying. A number of factors have contributed. There have been changes in economic activity and hence in the skill needs of firms and in the type of occupations offered. But the supply of young people coming forward has also been modified by the increased probability that a young person will stay on in full-time education after the end of compulsory education. It seems likely, then, that the average ability level of applicants for apprenticeship has declined to some extent. Combined with more exacting standards and a more competitive economic environment, this fall raises the cost to firms of providing apprenticeship and means that firms are more reluctant to recruit.

The German-speaking countries have addressed this problem from both the supply and the demand side. Young people who apply for apprenticeship without success have been encouraged to take pre-vocational or other full-time courses in post-compulsory colleges. These courses revise and consolidate basic skills and provide additional preparation for entry to the work environment. Around 10% of entrants to apprenticeship in Germany in 1998 had followed such courses. In Germany, the average age of apprentices has increased markedly, from 16.6 years in 1970 to 18.2 years in 1985 and 19.1 years in 1998. This suggests that those entering in 1998 were, on average, aged around 18.

Denmark has seen some decline in numbers entering apprenticeship. Nevertheless, just over a third of any age cohort currently enters apprenticeship training programmes. An innovation is that this final year can be spent partly in school and partly in vocational college. Thus, as in Germany, entrants to apprenticeship are likely to be aged at least 18. Those opting for the vocational route to qualifications also spend between 10 and 60 weeks (average 20 weeks) full-time in the equivalent of a College of Further Education on what is called the Basic Programme. In this programme, basic and vocational subjects are supplemented by educational and occupational guidance and counselling. The student can "sample" various vocational areas and decide on a suitable vocational route. Those with definite choices of occupation can "fast-track" through the basic programme. Before starting on the main part of the vocational programme (typical duration 3 to 3½ years), the student must find an employer willing to enter into an apprenticeship agreement. The vocational college plays an important part in this process through links with employers by means of the local Trade Committees (employer/employee organizations). If a student fails to find an apprenticeship place, the college may offer a "virtual place" and the student will cover the required occupational skills in the college. Currently around 6% of apprentices in

Denmark have places provided in this way by a college. The apprentice will alternate periods in the workplace and periods in college and be required to follow courses which amount (maximum) to 60 weeks of full-time study over the 3-3½ year training period.

The aspiring apprentice in France is less likely to have been prepared for the choice of an apprenticeship occupation while at school. The guidance process in French secondary schools (*collèges*) is normally restricted to outlining the routes that 16-year-olds can follow through the education system and the qualifications that can be obtained. This sharp division has its roots in the distinction made in French society between the public and private sectors. The education system is seen as a pillar of the public sector, while apprenticeship has traditionally been supported and provided by the private sector, most notably by French employers. French employers and those who work within the structures of apprenticeship complain in terms similar to those of their counterparts in the UK of the lack of status of apprenticeship and the perception that apprenticeship is only for the rejects of the school system. That was undoubtedly the situation for many years when the number of apprentices in France remained small (around 200,000 a year), mostly in artisan trades and occupations. However, since a number of changes were made to the laws governing apprenticeship – including allowing apprentices to obtain the whole range of educational qualifications up to and including Masters degrees – apprenticeship has

## **Apprenticeship has been characterised as a public-private partnership**

expanded dramatically. The young person seeking an apprenticeship may visit a local advisory centre for young people (PAIO), the local office of the national careers guidance organisation (ONISEP), the local Chamber of Commerce (representing local employers offering apprenticeships), or the local Centre for Apprenticeship Training (CFA). On the Internet, a rich range of well-presented information is available.

For example <http://www.apprentissage-paca.tm.fr/> is a site provided by the Regional government of the Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur Region. Regional governments now have much of the responsibility for promoting apprenticeship in France and the web site given above provides step-by-step information for employers and young people in the region. The official site <http://www.cidj.asso.fr> provides detailed descriptions of a wide range of recognised occupations, associated qualifications and ways of studying for them, including apprenticeship. The aspiring apprentice is encouraged to seek out an employer willing to take on an apprentice. The steps to be taken to enter apprenticeship are quite challenging and set out on the web page of eg <http://apprentissage-paca.tm.fr> without many concessions to youth and inexperience.

In The Netherlands, students look for apprenticeship places themselves, mostly with the support of colleges. Apprenticeship places must be accredited by the national sector bodies for vocational education and training. Information about apprenticeship places is available from the Internet ([www.edugate.nl](http://www.edugate.nl)) or from the sites of the national bodies ([www.colo.nl](http://www.colo.nl)). The national sector bodies have the task of ensuring that sufficient companies and organisations are in place so as to be able to provide the necessary number of training places. The national bodies also ensure that quality of on-the-job and off-the-job vocational practice complies with the quality standards set for each sector. In The Netherlands some 150,000 active training companies are recruited and registered as apprentice companies. In order to be legally enforceable, the apprenticeship contract must be signed by the student, the school, the apprentice company and the national sector body.

In Britain, there is no systematic provision for introducing students in schools and colleges to career opportunities offered by apprenticeship. Furthermore, there is no website available at national, regional or local level which provides comprehensive information on apprenticeship by occupation or sector, together with links to sites giving details of employers offering apprenticeships or to other ways of accessing provision.

While a small minority of apprentices in Britain enter apprenticeship by applying directly to an employer, for example in answer to an advertisement, most are channelled through local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) (formerly Training and Enterprise Councils) and are directed to a "training provider". In England alone,



there are some 1,330 training providers. Of these, just under 20% are employers. About 30% are private companies and a further 20% are Further Education Colleges. The remainder are Chambers of Commerce, Group Training Associations, local authorities and not-for-profit providers. Only around 5% of all apprentices are directly recruited and trained by employers. The remainder are the responsibility of the training provider, who contracts with the LSC to find an employer willing to take the young person. Frequently, most of the training and assessment is carried out by the provider rather than by the employer where the apprentice is based.

The process of employing an apprentice differs from country to country. In the three German-speaking countries, employers will either have had personal experience of being an apprentice and will almost certainly have a substantial number of employees who have obtained an apprenticeship certificate. Especially in Germany, such employers will not be confined to the smaller artisan-type firms. Apprenticeship, followed by full-time technical study, is a recognised route into management in Germany.

In France, although apprenticeship is largely provided by the private sector, it is nevertheless heavily regulated by French law. The procedure that a French employer must follow to take on an apprentice (set out with great clarity on the *apprentissage-paca* website) is not for the faint-hearted. However, French employers are used to detailed legal regulation of employment relations and it is possible that the requirements seem to them less daunting than they might to a British counterpart. As in Germany, the local Chamber of Commerce and the local *Centre de Formation des Apprentis* (CFA) help to put employers in touch with young people seeking an apprenticeship.

In The Netherlands, in order to train an apprentice, a company must be assessed and accredited by the appropriate national sector body. It must be sure that the apprentice will carry out appropriate tasks, that the company is providing a trainer/supervisor for the student and allowing the necessary time and facilities. If a student cannot personally find an apprenticeship place, the vocational college involved must do so.

In Britain, the complexities of the funding regime associated with apprenticeship are widely recognised as being too complex for most employers to manage. Training providers have filled the gap. However, they are in turn driven by funding incentives that derive from government targets for numbers of young people placed in government-supported training. Depending on the particular funding regime adopted by each TEC, funding may bias training towards low-cost provision, which does not necessarily correspond to local skill need. Once the government targets have been met (and funding committed), additional employers wishing to take on an apprentice have been refused adequate funding.

How do incentives to enter apprenticeship compare? The German system attracts young people by a combination of negative and positive incentives. Similar incentive structures pertain in the other German-speaking countries. There are no absolute barriers to the employment of unqualified school leavers in Germany, but firms are barred from employing people under 18 in the wide range of occupations for which an apprenticeship programme exists. Effectively, employment opportunities for under-18s are limited to unskilled occupations. As a result only about 1 or 2% of the cohort is in employment at age 16 or 17. Given the attractive range of occupational training open to young people, this means that the youth labour market is of limited attraction to school leavers. A second negative incentive is the length of university degree courses and their high dropout rate, which deter some of the more academic students from applying to university and cause them to choose apprenticeship instead.

Even more important is the recognition accorded to the apprenticeship qualification. Whatever the occupation, a completed apprenticeship confers a professional identity and consequent social status. Many collective agreements confine access to technician and *Meister* status to those who have completed the relevant apprenticeship. In the *Handwerk* (artisan) sector, the apprenticeship certificate is a necessary condition for independent practice and apprenticeship followed by a period of full-time professional education is a recognised route to management in many

**On the Continent, the Internet now provides additional high quality information on careers**



industries. But the social and career recognition of the apprentice depend on the passing of the final examinations.

The combination of these negative and positive incentives explains why nearly two thirds of young Germans enter apprenticeship. A substantial proportion of all those with school leaving qualifications equivalent to 5 GCSE Grades A-C (*Realschulabschluss*) choose apprenticeship in Germany, whereas in the UK most of their counterparts would normally aim for university entrance.

The negative incentives arising from the strict German labour market regulation relating to occupational qualification are not present in Denmark, France and The Netherlands to the same extent. University courses, while longer than in the UK, are not as long as in Germany. Furthermore, a more developed full-time route to vocational qualifications at Levels 3/4 exists in these countries (and, to a lesser extent in Austria), which restricts the range of occupations for which apprenticeship can prepare. In all these countries efforts have been made to improve the attractiveness of apprenticeship to more academically able students by improving links and bridges to the range of qualifications available from full-time education.

In France, state regulations have always prescribed that apprentices must study for nationally recognised vocational qualifications that are the same as those awarded in full-time education. While the proportion of those getting higher levels qualifications through apprenticeship remains relatively small, it has undoubtedly contributed to the recent strong growth in apprenticeship numbers and done much to raise its status.

In Denmark, apprenticeship programmes have been modularised and the "catalogue" of available courses aligned with those in adult education. Programmes have been individualised to make them more attractive and to reduce dropout. Thus students can now complete study programmes over variable time periods within set minima and maxima. Higher level vocational courses provided within the framework of higher education are specifically tailored for graduates from apprenticeship.

In The Netherlands, students on vocational courses study for the same vocational qualification, whether on apprenticeship or on full-time courses. Substantial amounts of work-based training are required for both full-time students and for apprentices. Switching between apprenticeship and the full-time route is, therefore, easier. The clear formulation of levels of training (see Table 2) also allows those on the apprenticeship route to continue subsequently to a higher level of qualification (either via apprenticeship or the full-time route). Perhaps for these reasons The Netherlands has a particularly high proportion of mature entrants to apprenticeship. In 1998 only 37% of apprentices were between 15 and 19 years old, 47 % were aged between 19 and 27, 12% between 28 and 40 and 4% were over 40.

**ar from being improved, in Britain the incentives to follow apprenticeship programmes have been reduced. One of the main attractions of apprenticeship to young people – the ability to “earn while you learn” – has been undermined by the progressive introduction of the Educational Maintenance Allowance for young people in full-time education. The initiative to establish a technical certificate as part of the apprenticeship qualification was floated without much thought for how it might promote progression to proposed new degree level qualifications (Foundation Degrees). At the same time, the pool of well-qualified (5 or more GCSEs Grades A-C) potential applicants for apprenticeship has been drained by the rapid expansion of places in higher education.**

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