REFORMING APPRENTICESHIPS AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Research evidence from the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) sheds light on the longstanding weaknesses of vocational education and apprenticeships in Britain - and suggests how to remedy them.

A 2003 report on vocational education by Dr Hilary Steedman, who has nearly 30 years of research experience in this field, argues that it should be about progression, both to skilled employment and to further levels of education. If those aims can be achieved, vocational education has an important part to play in rebuilding the British economy.

Dr Steedman's 2011 report on apprenticeships argues that despite the substantial public resources committed to apprentice training over the years, far too few young people benefit and not enough high value skills have been developed. She concludes:

‘Policy-makers should develop a simpler model that prioritises high skills and directs public funds for apprenticeship to any employer who can give young people long-duration, high-quality training.’

‘It may not be realistic to aim for apprentice numbers on the scale of Germany. But with a clear strategy, some nudging and flexibility, we could realistically aim for the prize that has so far eluded us – higher skills and high youth participation.’

These are the key findings of the two reports:

FINDING OUR WAY: VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

There are strengths in the system, with around 30% of 16 year olds opting for full-time vocational programmes in school or college, quite apart from the numbers entering apprenticeships. And there is a large vocational presence in higher education, including the professions.

But vocational education has suffered a chequered history, being subject to many different initiatives over the years, each of which has had rather different purposes in mind. This overlay of initiatives, courses, qualifications and indeed philosophies has resulted in:

* a confusing plethora of qualifications, with no image in the minds of young people, parents and employers about what vocational education involves;

* high degrees of non-completion with switching between the many different courses and a dropping off of participation at 17;

* poor linkages both between the various types of vocational courses on offer, and between them and vocational offerings in higher education - a third of vocational students are on courses which could not lead to higher education, either directly or through further related course, even if someone excelled on it;

* poor linkages to the labour market, not helped by the fact that the industry bodies who are meant to set standards have been reorganised five times in the last thirty years, and twice in the last five years alone.

Other countries offer models of how to constitute programmes of full- time vocational education. These are common on the continent, even in countries which have a strong apprenticeship tradition. There is no single recipe, but the lessons are:

* trying to offer vocational courses both as pathways in their own right and as options which can be mixed with academic subjects is unlikely to succeed;

* linkages with both higher education and apprenticeship is both possible and desirable;
* vocational education can be a respectable option, and certainly is not seen abroad - as it sometimes is here - as an alternative to academic subjects for those who are struggling at school;

* the quest for "parity of esteem" between academic and vocational subjects is a wild goose chase - far from raising the reputation of vocational courses it is likely to distort them and make them pale imitations of academic studies, with little purpose of their own.

The right way forward is to develop substantial national vocational programmes, perhaps 15 to 30 in all, each culminating in an award at level 3, the first point at which vocational education has a demonstrable pay-off in the labour market. These programmes would:

* be designed through genuine working partnerships between industry, awarding bodies, higher education and vocational teachers;

* include a rich mixture of relevant physical and social science subjects to enable general education to be continued in a natural manner;

* give access to the large array of vocational subjects already present within higher education;

* through specialist options within them enable students to gain credits towards Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, or for Foundation Apprenticeships for young people who did not want, or who could not manage, a full level 3 programme;

* include an introductory stage for young people with weaker GCSEs who needed to build up their skills and mesh in with preparatory programmes for those under 16 who wanted to sample a number of vocational options before committing themselves.

These vocational programmes would build on the structures and courses that already exist, but - by gathering them together - make them much more coherent. They would reflect the best of successful practice abroad, where vocational studies are more esteemed than here and produce better results. And they would be consistent with emerging proposals for an "English baccalaureate", providing the specialised vocational variants that are envisaged under this system.

**APPRENTICESHIP POLICY IN ENGLAND: INCREASING SKILLS VERSUS BOOSTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S JOB PROSPECTS**

* There is consensus that increasing the number of apprenticeships is an important way of dealing with the country’s deficit in intermediate skills. In addition to raising skill levels, there has been a further aim of apprenticeship policy: to improve the job prospects of young people (which have been deteriorating since the mid-2000s).

* But although these two policy aims should be mutually reinforcing, they have often been in conflict.

* Successive governments have developed a dysfunctional funding and delivery model for apprenticeship. Government agencies and private providers have been used to design apprenticeship programmes and procure places, and a substantial proportion of government funding for apprenticeship training is swallowed up by the processes required to account for it.

* This model deters employers and stifles the growth of apprenticeships. Fewer than one in ten employers in England train apprentices compared with a quarter or more in countries where the apprenticeship system works well – for example, Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

* Despite the heavy bureaucratic burden associated with government funding, a nucleus of committed employers, offering high value-added apprenticeships, has grown up. Unfortunately, more young people apply for each of these apprentice places than for a place at an Oxbridge college.

* Compared with many other European countries, apprenticeships in England are relatively highly paid and, unsurprisingly, in generally low demand by employers.
* Apprenticeships are also of shorter duration than most continental European apprenticeships – one year rather than three – and they are more geared towards adults.

* The Labour government’s policies expanded apprenticeships to lower skill groups and enacted legislation to provide an entitlement to apprenticeship for all qualified young people who wanted one.

* Since it came to power in 2010, the coalition government has focused on expanding adult apprenticeships and dropping the entitlement to an apprenticeship offer to the young. This apprenticeship policy has created an unprecedented number of adult (over-25) apprenticeships.

* Adults’ share of apprenticeship places is now larger than that of the under-19s. This is likely to weaken the ability of apprenticeships to improve the failing youth labour market.

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This release refers to:


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