

in brief...

The state of apprenticeships

Numbers and completion rates of apprenticeships in England are at an all-time high. Yet according to a report by **Hilary Steedman**, the country's apprenticeship provision still lags behind those elsewhere in the world.

There are no headlines in the quality press. But this year, as every year, thousands of young people will not get the apprenticeship place they desperately seek. The demand for apprenticeship is outstripping places everywhere in the world. But in England, the situation is worse than in many other countries with a significantly lower proportion of apprentices in the labour force: just 11 for every 1,000 employees compared with 39 in Australia, 40 in Germany and 43 in Switzerland.

Young people know that, like a degree, apprenticeship pays in better employment prospects and higher lifetime earnings. Why then do at least a quarter of all businesses abroad offer apprenticeships but fewer than one in ten in England? And why in Germany do almost all very large firms (those with over 500 employees) take on apprentices but under a third in England?

Some of the answers can be found in our report comparing apprenticeship in eight countries – Australia, Austria, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland. One reason for more apprenticeships abroad is that generous subsidies are available to employers who expand the number of places available. Employers in England receive no subsidies and pay higher wages to their apprentices than their counterparts abroad.

Training is also shorter in England and with less time off-the-job. Lower wages and longer apprenticeships allow employers abroad to provide more training and cover more of their training costs. In addition, employers in England face greater handicaps than their counterparts abroad:

- England still comes out badly in international comparisons of basic skills (mathematics), far outstripped by Australia and Switzerland.
- Unlike in other countries, there is no route through apprenticeship to higher education.
- Careers education in schools is woefully inadequate despite excellent models available elsewhere. Schools are often hostile to work-based learning and provide little or no assistance.
- Occupational standards are too inflexible and standard setting is too remote from employers' needs.

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These problems and the shortfall in places persist in part because of differences in the management of apprenticeships in England. In Austria, France, Germany and Switzerland, employers are in charge of standards and, unlike most English employers, recruit and train their own apprentices. Employer organisations also take responsibility for much of the necessary infrastructure of support.

In England, the Apprenticeship Ambassadors Network has worked hard to make the business case for apprenticeship, but 'ownership' by employers remains elusive. Employers here need to claim back from government the responsibilities and trust that would enable them to provide the apprenticeships that we need.

This article summarises *The State of Apprenticeship in 2010 – International Comparisons: Australia, Austria, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland* by Hilary Steedman, jointly published by CEP and the Apprenticeship Ambassadors Network. The report is available for download here: <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/special/cepsp22.pdf>

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