



Apprenticeships in England: an overview of current issues

Apprenticeships
in England

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Abstract

Purpose – Apprenticeships in England are currently experiencing a revival. The purpose of this paper is to provide a general overview of apprenticeships in England, examine current government policy, and explore current issues around the further development of apprenticeships.

Design/methodology/approach – Desk research, including reviewing other research articles and labour market intelligence has been carried out to provide a general overview of the issues.

Findings – Apprenticeships have traditionally been regarded as the vocational route to stable employment. Although they have sometimes suffered from a poor reputation they are now becoming an increasingly popular option for both younger and older people. The knowledge economy is driving up the demand for higher level skills and concurrent with this is the notion that, in today's competitive labour market, experience is vital. Not only has this impacted on the popularity of apprenticeships but also upon more traditional "academic" routes such as higher education (HE). In addition it has raised questions about higher level skills and vocational education. The introduction of Higher Apprenticeships and work experience/real world interactions built into HE courses are establishing synergies between the two elements of the skills/education system; however, developing these synergies further is a critical issue for future consideration.

Originality/value – There is a proliferation of publications tracking the nature and value of apprenticeships. This paper traces apprenticeships and their evolution and examines how practices adopted can be applied to newer vocational options being integrated into HE. The paper considers apprenticeships and other vocational options, building on the author's own discussions with employers and recent graduates.

Keywords England, Apprenticeships, Higher education, Graduates, Work experience, Vocational, Higher apprenticeships

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

An apprenticeship is generally acknowledged as a system of training whereby an individual develops skills and knowledge whilst at the same time working for an employer. In other words, it is a means of continuing formal education via "on the job" training. In some countries apprentices are classed as trainees and in others they are given employed status. Nonetheless the word apprentice has similar connotations, namely, beginner, novice, someone who is learning a trade. In a paper to the Government in 2011 the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) proposed:

An apprenticeship is a competence based skill development programme designed and endorsed by employers for their employees, which combines independently accredited work based learning, off – the-job training and relevant experience in the job (Hoyle, 2012).

Early systems of apprenticeship in England developed in the middle ages around traditional guilds/crafts. Legally bound through indenture to a master craftsman for the purpose of learning a trade, young people (aged around 14) would be employed as

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an apprentice for between five and nine years (Pranculyte, 2011). From the mid-1500s apprenticeship became more regulated; the 1563 Statute of Artificers forbade anyone from practicing a trade or craft being without first having served a seven year apprenticeship with a master craftsman (Pranculyte, 2011). These regulations were loosened in the industrial revolution and by the mid-nineteenth-century apprenticeships had expanded from artisan trades to newer industries such as engineering and shipbuilding (National Apprenticeships Service (NAS), 2012a).

The apprenticeship system operating in England today has origins in both the original concept of apprenticeship and the training schemes used by the engineering sector for decades:

The mainstay of training in industry has been the apprenticeship system, and the main concern has been to avoid skills shortages in traditionally skilled occupations [...] The aims were to ensure an adequate supply of training at all levels, to improve the quality and quantity of training [...] (Haxby and Parkes, 1989).

In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s an apprenticeship was seen as an alternative for young people not wishing to follow the purely academic route of A levels; offering structured learning and training opportunities that led to increased personal transferable skills and knowledge. This growth and development reached its peak in the 1960s when around 240,000 young people were undertaking an apprenticeship (NAS, 2012a). However as apprenticeship frameworks tended to be based around traditional industries (such as engineering, construction and so on) participant numbers started to fall in the 1970s due to the decline in manufacturing, dropping to only 53,000 in 1990 (NAS, 2012a). In 1994, the Government introduced “modern apprenticeships” as a means of re-launching the idea of apprenticeships and this model, re-named “apprenticeships” provided a basis for the frameworks available today (Pranculyte, 2011). This new framework model and investment from government (including the establishment of the NAS in 2008) has facilitated major improvements to the apprenticeship system (NAS, 2012a).

Apprenticeships are currently experiencing a rise in popularity; the number of people starting an apprenticeship programme has steadily increased since 2006 (see Table I). In 2010/2011 there were 457,200 apprenticeship starts (an annual increase of 63.5 per cent) (Data Service, 2012). Traditionally associated with craft trades there are now over 100,000 employers in the UK offering >200 different apprenticeships, covering a variety of roles (NAS, 2012b). Alongside the more traditional apprenticeships such as engineering, construction and so on, apprenticeship frameworks are also available in business, administration, law, education, retail, IT and more.

In today’s economic climate improving the skills base of the UK is undeniably of vital importance. In 2004 Lord Leitch, chair of the National Employment Panel, was

	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011
Intermediate level apprenticeship	127,400	151,800	158,500	190,500	301,100
Advanced level apprenticeship	56,900	72,900	81,300	87,700	153,900
Higher apprenticeship	100	100	200	1,500	2,200
Total	184,400	224,800	239,900	279,700	457,200

Table I.
Apprenticeship
programmes starts
by level (2006/2007-
2010/2011)

Source: Data Service (2012)

commissioned by the UK Government to undertake a review of the UK's skills needs, to "identify the UK's optimal skills mix in order to maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice" (Leitch, 2006). The report, published in 2006, identified that the UK needed to dramatically increase skills at all levels in order to effectively compete in a global market. One target established in the review was that 40 per cent of the workforce should be qualified to Level 4 (qualifications equivalent to the first year of higher education (HE)) by 2020. Furthermore, "on the job" training was identified as a vital source of skills development and career progression, providing portability in the labour market (Leitch, 2006). These targets still have relevance today as the need for higher level skills and the increase of "knowledge workers" (typically those employed in the top three job categories – associate, professional and technical) (see Helyer and Lee, 2012 for a fuller discussion of knowledge workers) are continually emphasised. Within this context it is evident that the apprenticeship system is potentially a key component of the future UK skills system; it is important to consider how it can contribute to the evolving skills needs of a rapidly changing economy. What is more, given the emphasis on higher level skills, establishing correlation between apprenticeships and higher level provision/HE is vital.

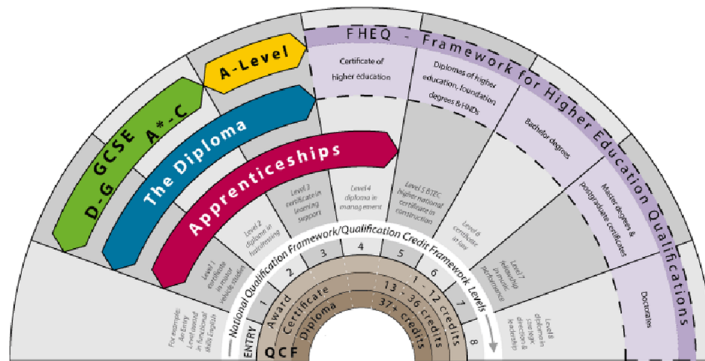
Apprenticeships in England

The apprenticeship system has been adapted by various governments over the years; in recent times Labour's policy aims focused more on entitlement, and therefore increasing the number of young people undertaking an apprenticeship, whereas the current coalition government are keen to generate higher level skills through apprenticeships (Steedman, 2011). In essence, however, apprenticeships remain unaltered; a system whereby an individual works in a company to gain job-specific skills and undertake formal qualifications to support these. At present Apprenticeship is a less dominant element of vocational education and training than it is in many European countries, in particular those where the dual system is in operation. For instance in Germany, which is held as an exemplar with regards to vocational education and training (VET), apprenticeship is still "[...] the route into work and further career development for nearly two-thirds of young people" (Steedman, 2010). In fact, unlike the UK where vocational training is often optional, in Germany "it is inconceivable in many industrial sectors and occupations that anyone would be employed without first having completed an apprenticeship" (Casey cited in Hasluck and Hogarth, 2010). In many occupations in Germany it is still the case that an individual is not allowed to practice until they have completed an appropriate period of apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship frameworks in England are designed in collaboration with employers/industry (often Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)) and, at Levels 2-4 (see Figure 1), are based around a framework which includes a competency qualification, a technical knowledge certificate and functional and key skills.

The design of these frameworks not only ensures that they are vocationally relevant but also supports the development of economically valuable skills in the future workforce. In today's labour market, characterised by a shrinking youth labour market, high unemployment and rapid economic change, the correlation between higher qualifications and better jobs has been established and often reiterated (Wolf, 2011; Milburn, 2009; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2009), implicit to this debate is the widely held belief that those with higher skills/abilities are those who have gone to university and gained a degree. However, it is often the case that

Figure 1.
National qualification
framework



a combination of skills, and methods of skills acquisition, is the most useable and desirable, “[...] employers value the skills learned in employment and the workplace, as well as those acquired in classrooms and [...] a substantial number of economically important and well-paid jobs [...] require skills acquired through demanding and vocationally specific study and training” (Wolf, 2011).

Negative perceptions

Apprenticeship can suffer not only from the historical widely held view of what an apprenticeship is/was but also from criticism aimed at how they function, who they are designed for/aimed at and what they achieve. It is widely presumed that apprenticeships are for the young and only available in manual occupations; in a recent interview with the *Financial Times* Jason Holt (managing director of Holts Jewellers who is currently undertaking a review of apprenticeships for the Government) stated that:

There is a misunderstanding; there is a quite outdated view that an apprentice is someone working on the shop floor or a trade like a plumber. The reality is you can be an apprentice in any sector and in any walk of life (*Financial Times*, 2012).

Although neither of the above perceptions are in fact true it is widely acknowledged that they have impacted on the take-up of apprenticeship places. However, perhaps more damaging are those criticisms about how apprenticeships work and what they achieve. Many young people, parents, teachers and employers have negative perceptions about apprenticeship. Varying sources (Wolf, 2011; Brophy *et al.*, 2009; UKCES, 2012) suggest that when the topic of apprenticeship is raised the negative perceptions come to the fore, in particular: “there are limited options” – “Apprenticeships are stereotypically biased towards males”; “they are poorly paid/a form of slave labour”; “they do not lead to well-paid jobs”; “they are merely a tool for government to massage youth unemployment figures” and “they are for students who are less academically capable or low achievers” – often employers assume that 16-17-year-olds looking for employment are:

[...] low-achieving or below average in terms of personal qualities such as application and perseverance. This perception is a direct result of the ever-greater proportion of the cohort who do not remain in full-time education: the more young people stay in the education, the more employers perceive the remainder as “low quality” (Wolf, 2011).

A recent television documentary (Panorama: The Great Apprentice Scandal, 2 December 2012) highlighted poor practice in apprenticeship schemes such as

companies using apprentices as cheap labour and providing poor quality training (examples included Morrison's supermarket where 40 per cent of staff were classed as apprentices). This adverse publicity will have done little to allay these views.

Value judgements persist, and there is an established belief that a degree has an intrinsic higher value than an apprenticeship; the middle class perception still prevails, that, "[...] choosing a path other than university is a mark of failure" (Bawden, 2011). Over the last decade various governments have encouraged increased university attendance (through a variety of widening participation initiatives) and within this timeframe "there has been a global surge in the number of young people going to university" (Coughlan, 2011). This "normalization" of HE has perpetuated the belief that a degree is more valuable than vocational training and even towards the end of the twentieth-century vocational training was still seen as inferior to academic education (Wright *et al.*, 2010).

Similarly completion and success rates have served to compound the attitudes outlined above and raise questions about the suitability of apprenticeship programmes; the number of people leaving an apprenticeship before completion was 23.6 per cent in 2010/2011 (*The Telegraph*, 2012) and as Table II shows much improvement is required in terms of framework achievements.

Slowly changing perceptions

Many of the negative assumptions detailed above are misplaced, in fact, apprenticeships cover a broad range of occupations, many CEOs started their careers as apprentices and many apprenticeships are already paid well above the minimum wage. Furthermore, as with everything, opinions can alter; it now seems that the value of vocational education and training, in particular apprenticeships is being more widely recognised. As well as government investment, numerous initiatives have transpired in recent times which could be viewed as apprenticeships by a different name, or certainly heavily influenced by the ethos of apprenticeship, for example, the school leaver programmes run by KPMG, PwC and others[1]:

Conceptually school leaver programmes sit somewhere between traditional apprenticeships and graduate schemes. These programmes are structured training and development schemes for young people who have drive, ambition and [...] potential (Collins, 2011).

In terms of attitude much is being done to improve the status of apprenticeships; government ministers, politicians, FE colleges, employers and other organisations are widely promoting the benefits of apprenticeships to encourage a similar prestige to academic learning. Other initiatives addressing the issue of awareness and encouraging engagement in apprenticeships are being introduced (an example of this can be found in Appendix).

	2006/2007 (%)	2007/2008 (%)	2008/2009 (%)	2009/2010 (%)	2010/2011 (%)
Intermediate level apprenticeship	60.2	64.4	70.4	73.4	75.3
Advanced level apprenticeship	56.4	62.8	72.1	74.8	76.6
Higher apprenticeship					84.6

Table II.
Apprenticeship
success rates

Current policy

The need for vocationally relevant training and experience means that apprenticeships are currently high on the political agenda. Subsequent to coming into power in 2010 the coalition government has presented apprenticeship as key to improving the skills base in the UK insisting that, “good quality apprenticeship schemes are the bedrock on which our business future is built” (Hayes, 2012). The National Skills Strategy, Skills for Sustainable Growth states that apprenticeships:

[...] bring together individuals, motivated and working hard to develop themselves; employers, investing in their own success but supporting a programme with wider social, environmental and economic value; and Government, providing public funding and building the prestige and reputation of the programme (DBIS, 2010, p. 7).

And therefore apprenticeships need to be placed at the heart of the skills system which is in development. The strategy sets out plans to increase the number of places available, improve the quality of programmes, increase employer demand, increase access and progression routes and establish the prestige of the apprenticeship brand. In 2011 John Hayes, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, stated that that the Government had to make progress in:

[...] increasing the wide range of apprenticeships and improving their quality. Their reach must become as wide as the scope of learners’ abilities and aspirations. Their quality must be such as to make the apprentice sought after by employers, envied by their peers and admired by us all (Hayes, 2011).

In order to achieve its aims the Government has, since 2010, invested significantly in apprenticeships including £250 m for adult apprenticeships in 2010, £180 m for extra apprenticeships places in 2011 and £25 m for higher apprenticeships (*The Guardian*, 2011). Maximising on this investment and ensuring that apprenticeships deliver the skills needed to facilitate economic growth is important. The latest policy development relating to the apprenticeship system is the Richard Review, a government-backed analysis of apprenticeships. Led by Doug Richard a successful entrepreneur and founder of the school for start-ups[2] the review will examine how apprenticeships meet the needs of the changing economy and how they can deliver high-quality training and the qualifications and skills that employers require (DBIS, 2012b).

In recent years there have been some evident improvements in terms of apprenticeships; the number of apprenticeship places available has significantly increased, as has the number of people starting an apprenticeship (see Table I). In fact it is now often reported that a number of apprenticeship programmes are heavily oversubscribed; in 2010 BT received almost 24,000 applications for 221 apprenticeship places. To place in context, in the same year Oxford University received 17,000 applicants for 3,000 undergraduate places (*The Guardian*, 2010). A recent survey commissioned by the NAS highlights the growing number of employers recognising the benefits of employing apprentices; 81 per cent of employers surveyed said that apprenticeships will play a bigger part in their recruitment policy in future and 75 per cent believed that despite the current economic situation apprentices were more important than ever to their businesses (NAS, 2012b) combination. What is more a number of world-renowned companies have recently announced an increase in apprenticeship places, these include Jaguar, BT and British Airways (who announced an additional 200 places in 2012). These employers realise the potential benefits of employing apprentices including: cost effectiveness, willingness to learn, flexibility and more. Perhaps most attractive however is the opportunity to “grow their own”; the

majority of an apprentice's learning takes place within the workplace and training is specifically focused on the needs of that business; apprentices are "[...] trained in the host employer's ways of doing things and are imbued with good working practices" (UKCES, 2012). This preference was echoed by a number of the employers involved in recent research in Tees Valley who stated that the opportunity to mould individuals was a distinct advantage when employing new (in particular younger) staff (Helyer and Lee, 2010). The impact of this is that the future development of the workforce is easier to manage and it offsets skills shortages within the business.

Apprenticeships and higher level skills

An issue frequently cited in relation to apprenticeships is the lack of progression to HE. Today managers, professional and associate professionals and technicians account for 43 per cent of the workforce, by 2017 this is expected to rise to around 47 per cent, equating to almost 2.2 million jobs (UKCES, 2010b). In this knowledge economy where higher level skills are of vital importance the perceived lack of progression to HE becomes even more pertinent. According to research undertaken by NAS 50 per cent of advanced apprentices were interested in continuing on to HE. Applying this figure to latest apprenticeship completion this suggests that around 70,000 apprentices are interested in HE (Hall *et al.*, 2010); paradoxically, actual progression is low. There have been numerous studies examining progression of apprentices to HE (Anderson and Hemsworth, 2005; HEFCE, 2009; Carter, 2010; Skills Commission, 2009; UKCES, 2010b) all of which indicate that progression from apprenticeship has remained low for some time. Most recently research undertaken by the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) highlighted that only around 4 per cent of advanced apprentices progressed to HE (Carter, 2010). This is in stark contrast to the 41 per cent of BTEC students and 90 per cent of A level students continuing to HE (Hall *et al.*, 2010). There are many reasons cited for poor progression including articulation and comparability of qualification frameworks and awareness of apprenticeships – “[...] the purpose of HEIs is to provide education and not ‘training’ the workforce” and, “Infrastructures and delivery [of HE is] geared to traditional, young, full-time first degree entrants with academic entry qualifications” are common misconceptions (UKCES, 2010b). However a lack of clear progression routes and insufficient flexible HE provision are argued to be most significant:

The lack of progression of apprentices into higher education is because of there is a lack of flexible, part-time discrete higher education pathways open to these learners who made a decision [...] to take up a work-based learning route rather than a full-time academic route (Hall *et al.*, 2010).

For many apprentices availability of work-based progression options is critical and with the increase in tuition fees (from September 2012) liable to deter some students from going to university it is essential that progression routes are further developed.

The National Skills Audit (DBIS, 2010) highlights the need for apprenticeships to provide a foundation for further learning at HE level; as part of the overhaul of apprenticeship the coalition government has provided considerable financial investment in the development of higher apprenticeships as a means of addressing progression issues. Such frameworks have the potential to open up access to the professions; higher apprenticeships are “[...] the missing link in the apprenticeship family, the component that provides for apprenticeships, parity of esteem with academic routes” (Hall *et al.*, 2010). Companies, such as those in the engineering sector,

have been delivering their own “higher apprentice” training programmes for years combining workplace training and academic learning (developing individuals from Level 2 technician level through to HNC and graduate/postgraduate level), often through day release or block release. However, specific higher apprenticeship frameworks have only recently been introduced. A number of higher apprenticeships (mainly in the engineering and IT sectors) have been available since 2009, but thus far higher apprenticeships are not widespread in the UK; in 2010/2011 there were 2,200 higher apprenticeship starts (Data Services 2012) in companies such as Airbus, BT and Rolls Royce and Vodafone. The current government has attempted to consolidate previous higher apprenticeships advances, introducing the launch of the £25 m higher apprenticeship fund and developing specific standards for higher apprenticeships:

In 2011 Higher Apprenticeships have come of age. In January 2011, the latest “Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England” was published and it included for the first time specifications for higher apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5 (Joslin, 2011).

In December 2011 19 partnerships were awarded funding to support 19,000 apprenticeship starts to degree level (NAS, 2012c) and higher apprenticeships are now available in: accounting; business and administration; contact centre operations; engineering technology; food and drink; it, software, web and telecoms professionals; providing financial advice; management; life sciences construction operations management and express logistics (all of which are Level 4, except the latter which is Level 5). In February 2012, at the start of National Apprenticeship week, the prime minister announced that a further £6 million (from the £25 m) would be made available to fund higher apprenticeship places up to degree level in 2012/2013 (DBIS, 2012a). The second round of bidding closed in March and applications are currently being assessed.

The concept of a higher apprenticeship combining vocational training and academic learning is not totally untried. Both France and Italy give examples of apprentices studying up to post-graduate level. In France apprentices work towards:

[...] the same nationally recognised qualifications as students on full-time vocational courses in vocational lycees. The whole range of recognised national qualifications from NVQ 2 equivalent up to post-graduate degree available in full-time school and university can therefore be accessed in apprenticeship (Steedman, 2010).

Similarly in Italy, higher apprenticeships combine work-based learning (WBL) with postgraduate study. Within the UK examples of higher level vocational training and academic learning exist; foundation degrees combine both academic learning at HE level alongside learning in the workplace. Designed in collaboration with employers, FE partners and universities, foundation degrees, “[...] have a strong vocational focus and address the key skills and knowledge required for real work [...]” (Pearson, 2010) and have grown in popularity as a means of undertaking more formal learning alongside work. Given the core elements of a foundation degree programme, parallels have often been drawn between them and the idea of a higher apprenticeship. In fact, BT, one of the first companies to set up a Foundation Degree, did so as part of its higher apprentices programme aimed at A level students (Pearson, 2010).

In line with the development of higher apprenticeships there has been much discussion about Foundation Degrees as potential progression routes for apprentices, either as a stand-alone option or as an integral part of the higher apprenticeship framework. “The best Foundation Degrees are those that are demand led and where they are part of a higher apprenticeship framework, this can be built in to provide

a core curriculum, practical skills, optional specialist units and delivery modes that are in demand by employers [...]” (Hall *et al.*, 2010). Moving on from the BT model, Foundation Degrees now form a key component of a number of higher apprenticeship frameworks; Semta’s higher apprenticeship framework is such an example, combining NVQ Level 4 and a Foundation Degree and also includes an option to top up to BEng (Hall *et al.*, 2010).

In the higher level skills debate government has continually argued that universities are central to the economic recovery of the UK (DBIS, 2009; Cable, 2010, 2011). There is clearly a bigger dialogue to be had around balancing HE and apprenticeships at the heart of the economy, a dialogue which is far wider than the parameters of this paper. However given that the National Skills Strategy (DBIS, 2010) outlines the need for SSCs to, “work closely with employers, further education colleges, other providers, universities and professional associations to ensure that there are clear ladders of progression so employers and apprentices can more easily understand and access higher level skills opportunities”, it is important to consider HE in some detail.

The HE offer

Traditionally HE and vocational education have been viewed as separate sides of the education system in the UK, and even now, “[...] English education policy [...] tries to enforce a bifurcated system in which either narrow, specifically occupational qualifications, or traditional academic qualifications are offered to 16 to 19 year olds” (Wolf, 2011). In this debate apprenticeship is seen as the vocational option and A levels, followed by an honours degree, as the conventional academic route to employment. However, the two differing approaches to learning are now much less diverse. In reality HE has, always had vocational elements, exemplified by its long-standing relationship with the professions; doctors, lawyers, teachers and similar have long been required to go to university to train and achieve the minimum of a degree to practice. Such advanced levels of study build skills which are professional, technical and transferable.

Like apprenticeships HE can also be misconstrued; the perception often is that A level students go to university to study a three-year honours programme. Contrary to this, HE has altered significantly over the years, to the extent that the number of students fitting the above description are in decline. To counter declining numbers of 18-year-olds, universities now offer a wide range of programmes at different levels to suit their diverse student body and furthermore they collaborate significantly with employers to maximise on the lucrative part-time numbers of employed students of all ages and backgrounds. Working with students and employers has sharpened HE’s response to, “[...] the development and/or delivery of learning opportunities relevant for the 21st century, prescient, bespoke, negotiated and often multi-disciplinary” (Helyer, 2010). HE is now more vocational than ever; the increasingly competitive graduate labour market has meant that more universities have come under pressure to visibly improve the employability skills of their students, “the importance of gaining work-experience at University has become a pre-requisite for finding employment on graduation. Job shadowing, internships and placements have become increasingly important” (Trought, 2012). These and other vocational activities such as real-life projects, links with businesses, business mentors, guest lecturers and so on are now more fully integrated into undergraduate and postgraduate provision in most universities.

As well as the integration of vocational activities in undergraduate and postgraduate courses WBL where learning undertaken both within a classroom and

workplace environment is becoming more widely utilised as a mode of delivery of HE. “HE level WBL study adds a further dimension to [a] very job-specific qualification and it includes the rounded qualities which the majority of employers state they are looking for, a mix of cognitive and no-cognitive skills and achievements which help [an individual] to become a fully developed person [...]” (Helyer, 2010). The benefits for an individual are clear, WBL formalises their workplace knowledge but also provides career development opportunities but WBL also has benefits for the company – enhancing the skills of its workforce, acting as a driver of change and improved capability; within this context perhaps it is right to consider WBL as a form of apprenticeship. With the onset of increased tuition fees WBL is likely to become a more desirable option to many individuals.

A further point to consider here is what is actually gained from HE. The benefits obtained from participating in HE are derived not only from what an individual learns (subject-specific knowledge) but also how they learn. “HE awards are widely recognisable carrying an impressive reputation and a high profile” (Helyer, 2010), they infer ability to assimilate knowledge, analyse and critically reflect and in fostering such skills arguably develop the whole person. Vince Cable (2010) stated that, “[...] learning how to learn, learning how to think; intellectual curiosity; the challenge and excitement of new ideas [...]” are the greatest endowments of universities.

Successful European schemes and vocationally relevant undergraduate and postgraduate provision like those outlined suggest that it is possible to positively monopolise on the synergy between vocational training and HE; clearly both sides of the skills system have a major part to play in bringing these elements together.

Conclusions

Apprenticeship as a means of “on the job” training dates back many centuries. From its earliest inceptions in the middle ages to present day it has proven to be a useful means of developing the skills required to effectively operate in the workforce. Whilst the number of individuals participating in apprenticeships in the UK is far fewer than countries such as Germany (two-thirds of young people), apprenticeship does represent an important part of the UK’s vocational training system.

Over the years various governments have sought to develop a strong apprenticeship system and maximise its benefits to the economy. The current government have continually emphasised the importance of apprenticeship and implemented measures facilitating some major changes. The investment and work undertaken has paid dividends; apprenticeship pathways available have increased, employer demand has improved and the number of apprenticeships starts has increased significantly (with some apprenticeships oversubscribed). However, perceptions of apprenticeship continue to be unrealistic and more effort needs to be devoted to enhancing their image. Many employers, providers and individuals have false notions of apprenticeship, particularly around types of pathways (manual trades), pay, academic ability of apprenticeships and status. In response to these issues the Government are particularly keen to establish the prestige of apprenticeship; in 2012 the prime minister claimed that, “by making apprenticeships a gold standard option for ambitious young people, we are sending a message that technical excellence is as highly valued as academic prowess” (DBIS, 2012a).

The critical issue for apprenticeships is the links with HE and higher level skills. It is widely acknowledged that if the UK is to succeed economically there will be a greater need for higher level skills. Traditionally apprenticeships have been seen as

providing a good supply of intermediate level skills, with academic study (through HE) providing the higher level skills needed by the labour market. However, “conventional academic study encompasses only part of what the labour market values and demands: vocational education can offer different content, different skills, different forms of teaching” (Wolf, 2011). Similarly, vocational training, at present, offers part of what the labour market needs and wants. In developing and putting in place the higher level skills necessary for future economic prosperity it is essential to develop and maximise links between vocational education (such as apprenticeships) and HE and align these with real world interactions.

As highlighted above HE is now much more vocational, furthermore significant progress is being made with regard to the introduction of higher apprenticeships and although still in the early stages, links are being established. The future population are more likely than ever to have multiple jobs across their careers; “In a rapidly changing employment market it is clear that the workforce of the future will need to be pre-emptive, adaptable and multi-faceted” (Helyer *et al.*, 2011). If individuals are to be successful within this context then they need to acquire skills gained from both vocational and academic learning. The necessity to develop hybrid models that adequately address the requirements of the twenty-first-century economy and workforce, whilst also accommodating the differing learning styles of individuals (whether this is predominantly vocational on the job training or learning in a more academic environment) is essential. Apprenticeships have proven to be successful in developing the skills of the workforce; according to NAS > 80 per cent of employers employing apprentices believe they make their workplace more productive (NAS, 2012b). In continuing in this role, which the Government are determined they will, the critical issue will be connecting with HE and capitalising on the skills, knowledge and progression that can be derived from higher level study.

Notes

1. [www.kpmgcareers.co.uk/SchoolLeaverProgrammes/SchoolLeavers'Programme_\(1730\)aspx?pg-1730](http://www.kpmgcareers.co.uk/SchoolLeaverProgrammes/SchoolLeavers'Programme_(1730)aspx?pg-1730); www.pwc.co.uk/careers/student/careers/schoolleaver/school_college_leaver.jhtml
2. www.schoolforstartups.co.uk/

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Appendix. Case study example

Case Study: Foundation for Jobs Darlington

Despite evidence that an increasing number of difficult to fill job opportunities will be available in fields such as engineering and manufacturing, the north-east has the highest proportion of unemployed under 25-year-olds in the UK (14.6 per cent) (figures from the Office of National Statistics for July 2010-June 2011). The problem of rising youth unemployment, at a time when some of the region’s major industries were also facing an impending skills gap, resulted in the creation of the Foundation for Jobs programme.

The programme was launched, by its patron the Bishop of Durham, in January 2012. Although a region-wide (north-east England) campaign it has a particular focus on Darlington, where around 1,000 young people were not in work or training at the end of 2011. The programme is a collaboration between north-east newspaper *The Northern Echo*, Darlington Borough Council and the Darlington Partnership (various public and private sector organisations):

An integral part of the campaign will be building greater links between businesses such as these, schools and colleges so that young people become inspired and realise opportunities through various career paths (Owen McAteer).

A key aim of the programme is to increase vocational opportunities for young people in Darlington by ensuring that they are appropriately advised about careers options and business/workplace skills and opportunities, “[...] making them aware of the opportunities available to them and highlighting sectors in the North East which offer the best chance of successful and enjoyable careers will be crucial”.

Following the launch of the programme the region’s businesses were asked to sign a pledge to do what they could to help, whether that was taking on apprentices, offering a work placement or becoming involved in inspiring youngsters. The Foundation for Jobs programme is now supported by a wide range of local employers including Cummins Engine plant (800 employees), Nifco (300 employees) and Darchem (650 employees). There are also companies from the retail and finance sectors and more including Handelsbanken, The Students Loans Company and Marchday signed up to Foundation for Jobs.

The programme focuses on four key areas of activity: apprenticeships; building business links with schools; internships and entrepreneurial skills. Implicit to each of these areas is the addressing of perceptions:

It is important that we get young people while they are still at school to consider all of the career paths available to them and particularly those industries where the work will be in the North-East, going forward (Owen McAteer).

A programme of collaborative events has been established in conjunction with schools and industry and includes site visits, industry champions and sector focused information days/events.

Apprenticeships:

Many of our region's business leaders started their careers as apprentices and it is hard to recall an instance where any I have interviewed have said they regretted taking on apprentices themselves once they were running their own firms. However this can be difficult especially for SMEs (Owen McAteer).

Aim – to increase the number of apprenticeships offered in Darlington in 2012/2013 by 100:

- introduce a system to support apprenticeship providers and companies wanting to recruit apprentices;
- develop a bite-size guide to apprenticeships and run industry visits to address perception issues; and
- use existing apprentices to deliver peer support sessions in schools.

Foundation for jobs is initially a two-year programme but it is hoped that it will lay the foundations for major cultural change around how young people interact with career options and business.

Details and quotations from Owen McAteer – Foundation for Jobs coordinator and business editor of *The Northern Echo*.

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Further information on the campaign can be found at: www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/campaigns/foundationforjobs/

About the author

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