

Apprenticeships - A Time to Celebrate - Never Mind the Numbers Look at the Quality

During National Apprenticeship Week we've had headlines highlighting the overall decline in Apprenticeship numbers, particularly at Intermediate level 2 and a number of leading articles questioning the success of the Apprenticeship reforms. Belonging to an organisation representing universities engaged in Apprenticeship I'd like to outline why we should, albeit with a note of caution, celebrate the success of the Apprenticeship reforms.

Bizarrely, none of the plethora of quality bodies involved in Apprenticeship (IfATE, Ofsted, OfS/QAA, Ofqual and a range of other organisations focused on external quality assurance) focuses specifically on what should be the central measure of the success of Apprenticeship. That is, the impact Apprenticeship provision is having on UK productivity by raising the occupational competence of the UK workforce. I'd like to offer a few observations.

It's far too early to draw firm conclusions, but one trend strongly indicates that Apprenticeship will have a far greater impact on productivity than the intermediary and provider led Apprenticeships of the past. Under the Apprenticeship reforms one of the most marked trends has been the decline in level 2 Apprenticeship provision from 329,000 starts in 11/12 to 161,000 starts in 17/18 as employers increasingly focus on the advanced (level 3) and higher level Apprenticeship provision their organisations need. The number and focus of Degree Apprenticeship standards that have been developed has been particularly significant. Under the Trailblazer process employers have developed Degree Apprenticeships for the key occupations needed in the public sector; registered nurse, police constable, social worker, in the private sector in engineering, science and construction occupations and in both the public and private sector in digital, in management and senior leadership roles. Indeed, I'd suggest there is a strong correlation between the Apprenticeships being developed and delivered and the skills gaps and shortages in the UK economy. Shouldn't we be delighted that employers have responded so positively to the Government's Industrial Strategy and focused on the development and use of management apprenticeships to help rectify the UK's oft quoted deficit in management and leadership skills? If in contrast employers don't want to use so many level 2 Apprenticeships, because they don't need them, what's the problem?

So from a skills and productivity perspective, the rationale of the Apprenticeship reforms, this trend should be celebrated: employers are using Apprenticeship in a way that will support the UK to develop as a high skill high wage economy. It's also worth noting the changing perception of Apprenticeship – under the old intermediary and provider led system it was seen as the 'good choice for other people's children'. As a result of the reforms we now have over 100 universities registered as Apprenticeship providers, including a large proportion of the Russell Group including the University of Cambridge. Apprenticeship is emerging as an aspirational programme. Some describe this as a middle class land grab, but don't we want Apprenticeships to be attractive to and used by individuals from all backgrounds?

Of course there are some level 2 craft and trade Apprenticeships of significant value, butcher, baker, joiner etc. – but can anybody really defend the provider and intermediary driven system of the past

where business administration and customer service dominated provision. There is of course a social mobility argument for level 2 Apprenticeships, but this I'd argue is overplayed. Firstly, shouldn't the focus of schools and Ofsted be to ensure individuals, after eleven years of compulsory education, achieve a full level 2. Where they haven't aren't better options available – Traineeships and T levels come to mind? As the Sutton Trust has pointed out the majority of level 2 Apprentices aged under 25 start their training below their existing level of educational attainment and are educationally “treading water”. From a social mobility and social justice perspective I'd suggest the key way in which Apprenticeship can play a role is opening up new work-based progression routes to technical, professional and managerial occupations. Nottinghamshire Police are an excellent example of how some employers are using Degree Apprenticeship to widen participation. Here, working with the University of Derby, Nottinghamshire Police have used the Degree Apprenticeship to ensure recruitment of officers better reflects the community they serve. The results for the first cohort are impressive:

21.8 % of applications were from the BAME community, this compares with 10% for previous recruitment campaigns and 4.63% within the force.

Subsequently 19% of the recruits on the cohort are from BAME communities compared with between 7 and 10% in previous cohorts.

50% of the cohort are female, compared with 30% in previous groups and 31.45% in force.

More than 50 % of the cohort are the first in their family to enter higher education.

I will conclude by suggesting that the relative decline in level 2 Apprenticeships and growth of Apprenticeships at higher levels can only be a good thing. Numbers are far less important than quality and any measure of quality should be linked to the primary objective of Apprenticeship – raising productivity. So shouldn't we celebrate the changing focus of Apprenticeship provision as an aspirational programme, focused on the skills needs of the UK economy which also supports social mobility?

Mandy Crawford-Lee

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