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**Social Mobility Commission: State of the Nation Report – Social Mobility and the Pandemic**

*A Failure to Understand Apprenticeship?*

Reading the Social Mobility Commission’s recent report (July 2021) on Social Mobility I can’t help think that the Commission has a rather dated understanding of what Apprenticeship is and a questionable understanding of Apprenticeship policy objectives. I’m also rather struck by the limited ambitions the Commission seems to have regarding Apprenticeship and its role in social mobility.

On the key point that Apprenticeship can be and should be a powerful tool for social mobility I would not disagree with the Commission. I would also concur that far more needs to be done to ensure Apprenticeship delivers on the social mobility agenda. In other areas I’m afraid there are some serious flaws in the Commission’s analysis. I would make the following observations:

**Apprenticeships is and should be a Programme for ALL and not a Programme Aimed Specifically at the Disadvantaged and those let down by the School System** – For the last Century, if not longer, England has suffered from an academic and vocational divide. Put simply Apprenticeship and technical education has not had parity of esteem with the academic pathway, A levels and full-time bachelors programmes. As often quoted Apprenticeship was the ‘good choice for other people’s children’. The fact that Apprenticeship, driven in large part by the development of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship, is becoming an aspirational choice for individuals of all backgrounds should be celebrated. Our challenge now is to ensure individuals in work and those about to enter the workforce can benefit from the expansive opportunity offered by Apprenticeships, particularly at the higher levels. Here I would agree substantial work is needed.

**A Commission Preference for Level 2 and 3 Apprenticeships?** – Reading the Commission’s analysis I am left with the impression that it has a strong preference for lower level Apprenticeships and questions the appropriateness of Degree Apprenticeship. The Commission notes:

*“The Pandemic has further exacerbated the pre-existing trend towards higher apprenticeships (with higher apprenticeships rising from 18% of starts from August to January 2018-19 to 32% in the same period in 2021-21).”*

The term exacerbate is at best regrettable and highly questionable. Does the Commission really believe a movement from employers using Apprenticeships for retail, customer service and business administration roles to higher level/Degree Apprenticeships for police constables, nurses/healthcare professionals, STEM occupations, even the managers and accountants the public and private sector needs is a bad thing? Lower skilled occupations, often where there has been significant numbers of Apprenticeships in the past, have tended to be the jobs most adversely impacted by the pandemic. To grow our economy for the benefit of all and to deliver the public sector services society wants there is a trend for a growth in higher skilled roles. Surely, the Commission should be arguing for more and not fewer Higher and Degree Apprenticeships and (as it does) challenging Government, employers, and training providers to ensure they support social mobility?

**Apprenticeship has a range of Policy Objectives** – No one should underplay the important role Apprenticeship could play in social mobility. It does, however, have other important objectives. Take the public sector. Degree Apprenticeship has a key role in recruiting and training new police constables and in future will be used extensively to train the new registered nurses and healthcare professionals our NHS needs. The Commission’s key recommendation that *“The levy should no longer be used as an alternative route for degree qualifications for more privileged staff”* sits uneasily with how the Apprenticeship Levy is being used to recruit new police constables, registered nurses and social workers to better reflect the communities, patients, and service users they serve.

Is the Social Mobility Commission telling Government, the NHS and Police Chief Constables that just because registered nursing and policing are degree occupations where Apprentices earn more than a school leaver following a customer service or hairdressing Apprenticeship that they shouldn’t be funded by the levy paid by the NHS and Police Forces? I would add police forces are noting the success in using the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship to recruit more women and individuals from BAME backgrounds. Does the Commission object to a 40-year-old healthcare assistant being supported by the levy to progress to become a nursing associate and thereafter a registered nurse through a Degree Apprenticeship?

Of course some would argue that the development and use of some higher level Apprenticeship, Management Apprenticeships for example, has been inappropriate. Apprenticeship was, however, reformed as an employer-led productivity programme and as the Government clearly outlined in its Industrial Strategy (and the subsequent Plan for Growth, *Build Back Better*) the deficit in management skills is a key factor explaining low UK productivity and the lack of skills ambition. It is worth adding that several NHS Trusts have made significant use of the Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeship that has raised performance and had a positive impact on the quality of patient care and in the recruitment of apprenticeships at lower levels. At the time of a national pandemic, is the Social Mobility Commission really arguing the NHS shouldn’t use its levy payments to train and develop new managers?

What is most disappointing in the report’s commentary is its failure to consider what many would argue is the greatest potential role of Apprenticeship in social mobility. That is providing a new work-based pathway to the professions and supporting diversity in recruitment for higher-level, better paid, occupations. This means dropping the view that Apprenticeship’s primary purpose is to support a young person who ‘isn’t academic’ into their first job and a preference for lower-level Apprenticeships. Here other programmes, Traineeships, for example are often far more appropriate.

We would encourage the Commission to reflect on the Government’s Apprenticeship vision and policy objectives. UVAC’s report *Realising the Potential of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship in* [*Supporting Social Mobility and the Levelling Up Agenda*](https://uvac.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UVAC-SocialMobility_PostCovid-29sep2020.pdf) should help in this regard. The use of Apprenticeship to open up new progression routes to the professions and higher skilled and paid roles is the real opportunity and challenge for social mobility – it’s a pity it wasn’t really considered by the Commission.

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