**Why the Arguments against Management Apprenticeships Don’t Hold Water**

Read many articles in the FE press or talk to FE sector leaders and you will soon get the impression that management apprenticeships are a very bad thing. There’s has been an ‘unstoppable’ growth in their use, they represent a misuse of the apprenticeship levy, a land grab by the middle class ‘haves’ and every £ spent on management apprenticeships is a £ less to spend on 16 – 19 apprenticeships.

Firstly their unstoppable growth. An easy one! May I endorse the excellent points made by Sir Gerry Berragan, chief executive of the IfATE in his FE News article of the 15 January in which he stated ‘*The 2,900 or so starts on the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship represent just 1.5% of all starts on standards. This doesn’t seem disproportionate.’* So, can we drop the claim of ‘unstoppable growth’?

Next, need. Look at any national, regional or sector analysis of skills gaps and shortages and management skills will feature as a key deficit. The Government’s Industrial Strategy identifies the UK’s poor management skills as a key reason for the UK’s productivity gap – ‘*Management skills could account for a quarter of the productivity gap between the UK and the US’.* In this context Ofsted’s chief inspector’s quoted concern that too much levy funding is being spent on higher levels seems at best ill-informed and ill-judged. Indeed, it’s staggering that a body such as Ofsted, with a quality role, can be so critical of apprenticeships that could well make the biggest impact on the UK economy and on productivity – a key purpose of the programme. During National Apprenticeship Week 2019, the National Audit Office recommended that DfE should measure the impact of apprenticeship on productivity and indicate the level of impact that it is aiming to achieve. Given this recommendation, may I suggest the role and approach of Ofsted in apprenticeship should be a first topic up for review?

There’s then the charge that Government shouldn’t be paying for ‘MBA apprenticeships’ and instead monies raised through the levy should be focused on apprenticeships for 16 – 19 year-olds. Here again we’ve had press headlines featuring Ofsted’s chief inspector with the caption *‘MBAs just don’t need funding’.* Let’s unpick the argument. Firstly the largest levy payers, the NHS, local authorities and police forces are certainly using and will increasingly use the Chartered Manager and Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeships to raise the skills levels and leadership capabilities of their managers. So monies raised through the levy in the public sector are and will be used to raise public sector skills and increase public sector productivity. Great? Well this argument doesn’t seem to be accepted by FE sector leaders or Ofsted, although I suspect it will be by the Department of Health, Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. So if the public sector was restricted in some way in its use of management apprenticeships where should the money ‘saved’ be used? An option would be to compel public sector organisations to use lower level Apprenticeships they don’t really need. This wouldn’t, of course, be in the interests of the public sector, or indeed the general public and would run counter to the purpose of the apprenticeship reforms – the employer is, after all, supposed to be in the driving seat as the customer and purchaser. Then there’s the demand to make more money raised from the levy available to non-levy paying employers, particularly for lower level apprenticeships. But can anyone explain why monies raised from the public sector, the NHS, police forces, local authorities etc. should be used to fund low level hairdressing, catering or business administration apprenticeships in small private businesses?

Let’s then look at the private sector’s use of management apprenticeships. The ESFA’s ‘botched’ procurement for apprenticeship provision for non-levy paying employers has meant universities have little, if any, funding to deliver management apprenticeships for SMEs. And for large and multi-national companies who are using management apprenticeships what do leaders of the FE and skills sector want? Is it to restrict choice and compel businesses to use level 2 Apprenticeships they don’t really need, which incidentally FE providers want to supply? So as car companies flee the UK, future business investment is on a knife edge and when businesses need the most competent managers possible to deal with the effects of Brexit – do FE colleagues really want to restrict the ability of business to use the apprenticeships they really need and instead flood the market with level 2 Apprenticeship provision?

Then there’s the social justice argument. Firstly, can I make the point that the engagement of top university business schools and the use of Apprenticeship by individuals from all backgrounds is a good thing. Unlike some I don’t want Apprenticeship to be the good choice for other peoples’ children, but instead to be an aspirational choice for all. Of course, it’s important that such opportunities are open to individuals from all backgrounds and we get the message across that a diverse workforce is a productive workforce. The HE regulator, the Office for Students, has already started excellent work here and HEIs will, rightly, be held to account on their performance in ensuring access for individuals from all backgrounds.

Finally we come to the apparent need to fund 16 – 19 Apprenticeships. Firstly, may I ask why Ofsted believes it is appropriate to argue that employers should focus on providing Apprenticeships to young people without a full level 2? Surely Ofsted should focus on ensuring a third of young people don’t leave compulsory education after 11 years without a full level 2. Isn’t it a little unfair for Ofsted to suggest employers pick up the bill and rectify a failure of the schools’ system? Of course young people without a level 2 need support, but apprenticeship probably isn’t the best answer anyway; rather this is where Traineeships and T levels could play an important role. So can I suggest we do what Skills Minister, the Rt Hon Anne Milton MP, has said and have ‘*a fully employer-led system’*. If this means employers spend less on level 2 Apprenticeships because they don’t need them to grow and sustain their business- so be it, there are alternative progression routes for individuals.

Let’s put the needs of employers first and training providers second and celebrate the success of the Apprenticeship reforms - specifically the use of management apprenticeships which will pay handsome dividends for the UK economy and society.

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