



Towards Expansive Apprenticeships

A Commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme

Alison Fuller and Lorna Unwin



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Apprenticeship is a means of learning for work which has been used successfully since the Middle Ages. The term has entered the language to describe the process of learning new and valuable skills from a seasoned professional. Today the UK has almost 250,000 apprentices, and they are learning everything from social care to plumbing.

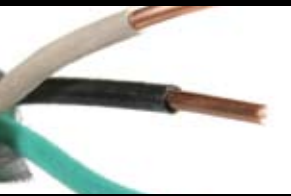
In this Commentary from the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, we examine the vital role of apprenticeship in creating a high-quality workforce for the UK. In an era of mass participation in higher education, apprenticeship has lost none of its importance. Governments of different parties have recognised its significance and established formal frameworks within which apprenticeships can take place.

Alison Fuller and Lorna Unwin's analysis shows, however, that instead of focusing on grand policy, attention needs to be paid to the delivery of apprenticeship on the ground. Apprentices can find their experience ranges from the expansive to the restrictive. A restrictive apprenticeship is intended to produce profitable workers fast. It does not allow them time to study deeply, see the business from all angles, or reflect on what they are learning. An expansive apprenticeship, by contrast, does all this, and helps produce employees who can contribute to many areas of business success throughout a worthwhile career. One of the firms at which this research was carried out has former apprentices in director-level positions, and emerges as a champion of the apprenticeship at its most expansive.

As well as developing the high-level skills that the UK will need in growing amounts, apprenticeship can be a route to university or other forms of education. It is certain to retain a valuable role in the era of lifelong learning. But as the argument here shows, it will flourish best if standards are raised and policies are fully thought through.

This Commentary is one of a series based on the work of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme. It is intended to help thinking about apprenticeship by employers and in government and education. Other TLRP Commentaries cover topical areas ranging from personalised learning to the link between neuroscience and education. We welcome your comments on this and our other Commentaries, via our web site www.esrc.ac.uk.

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This Commentary has been written by Alison Fuller and Lorna Unwin on behalf of TLRP (June 2008).

For further TLRP material on apprenticeship, see:
<http://www.tlrp.org/themes/workplace/apprenticeship.html>

For related material on workplace learning, visit:
<http://www.tlrp.org/themes/themes/workplaceov.html>
<http://www.tlrp.org/themes/themes/sectorov.html>
<http://www.tlrp.org/proj/index.html>



Introduction

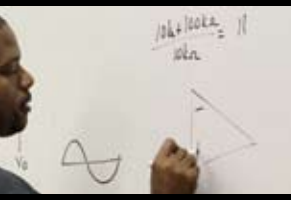
Many countries in the world are seeking to expand or at least sustain some form of apprenticeship as part of their education and training systems. This affirms the belief held by many policymakers, employers and individuals that this form of vocational preparation has continued value. In the United Kingdom, apprenticeship has been an instrument of the state's vocational education and training policy since 1993, when a Conservative government decided to revitalise apprenticeships. Since then, successive governments have promoted apprenticeship as a key pathway for young people and as a vehicle for improving adult skills, and apprenticeship has enjoyed all-party support.¹

Since medieval times, the term "apprenticeship" has been used to describe the journey a person takes from novice to expert in a specific occupational field. The concept transcends occupational boundaries and hierarchies, and is used by surgeons as well as carpenters, chefs, actors and musicians. Apprenticeship is also the name for a set of formalised, state-regulated arrangements for vocational education and training. In many European countries, these arrangements are organised through social partnerships between the State, employers, trades unions, and education and training providers. The UK has had a much more ambivalent attitude to apprenticeship than its continental neighbours, but now there appears to be a stronger commitment to creating the conditions in which apprenticeships, and vocational education and training more generally, might flourish.

This commentary is a contribution to the public debate on apprenticeships and on the government's plans for the continued improvement of apprenticeship provision. It calls for apprenticeship as a model of learning to be placed at the heart of debates about vocational education and training for young people and adults. This requires a step change if policy decisions are to focus on the quality of the learning experience rather than viewing apprenticeship as yet another 'scheme' intended to meet government targets for increased numbers in post-compulsory education or training, or for the number of qualifications issued. In recent years, apprenticeship's core identity as a model of learning has been replaced by that of a policy instrument. In that sense, apprenticeship is currently government-owned and directed. This change has to be reversed.



¹ See DIUS/DCSF (2008) for the latest government review.



Expansive and restrictive apprenticeships

Apprenticeship is a form of learning that allows people, organizations, and society more broadly to achieve their individual and collective goals. To examine ways of improving the quality of apprenticeships in the UK, we used apprentices' learning experiences as a lens through which to address aspects of apprenticeship which affect the character and quality of the learning it delivers.

In our TLRP research project, we drew on our case studies of apprentices' experiences in a range of settings to develop what we refer to as the 'expansive-restrictive continuum' (see Fuller and Unwin 2003, 2004, 2006). It forms part of a new conceptual framework designed to make sense of the barriers and opportunities to learning being experienced by apprentices in a range of settings. It can also be used to evaluate how far apprenticeship programmes are managing to maintain a balance between meeting the goals of employers, apprentices, and government. The framework is useful to employers, as it allows them to think through how offering a good quality apprenticeship can contribute to their wider workforce and business development strategies. It is also useful to education and training providers to help them explore different ways to improve the learning opportunities available to apprentices both on and off-the-job.

We use the term expansive deliberately and in two ways. Particularly in juxtaposition with the term restrictive, it helps capture and illuminate the empirical reality of our case studies. In addition, it helps us to understand the interaction between institutional context, workplace learning environment and individual learning. Differentiating between approaches taken to apprenticeship might provide a window on the wider culture of learning in an organisation.

Evidence from three companies at which we carried out research illustrates the contrasting learning environments being created for apprentices, and the opportunities for, and barriers to, learning which result.

The companies to which we refer are all associated with the steel and metals sector in England. Company A manufactures bathroom showers and has about 700 employees. It has had an extremely well-established apprenticeship programme dating back over 50 years, which has been used to develop successive generations of skilled and qualified engineers and technicians. Many of the company's former apprentices have progressed to senior management positions. The company currently offers apprenticeships in engineering, steel production and processing, and accountancy.

Company B is a small family-run company with around 40 employees, providing specialised steel polishing services to other businesses. The vast majority of its employees work on the shopfloor as semi-skilled machine operators. The work is managed by the production manager and two company directors. Recently, the company turned to apprenticeships (in steel processing) for the first time, as a response to difficulties it was having in recruiting adults with relevant experience.

Company C is a steel stock holder with some 80 employees. It is part of a large Swedish corporation but operates as a stand-alone business that buys and sells stainless steel. The workforce is organised into three areas, sales, administration and finance, and the warehouse. It offers apprenticeships in business administration.

The figure overleaf lists the features that characterise expansive or restrictive apprenticeships. It is intended to help identify pedagogical features which influence the quality of apprentice learning.



Approaches to Apprenticeship:
the expansive/restrictive continuum

EXPANSIVE

Dual status as learner and employee: Explicit institutional recognition and support for apprentice's status as learner

Participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the workplace

Primary community of practice has shared 'participative memory': cultural inheritance of apprenticeship

Broad: access to learning fostered by cross-company experiences built in to programme

Access to range of qualifications including knowledge-based vocational qualification

Planned time off the job including for college attendance and for reflection

Gradual transition to full participation

Apprenticeship aim: rounded expert who is full participant

Post-apprenticeship vision: progression for career

Apprenticeship is used as a vehicle for aligning the goals of developing the individual and organisational capability

Apprenticeship design fosters opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing

Apprentices have full access to their workplace's curriculum, values and goals

RESTRICTIVE

Status as employee dominates: Ambivalent institutional recognition and support for apprentice's status as learner

Restricted participation in multiple communities of practice

Primary community of practice has little or no 'participative memory': no or little tradition of apprenticeship

Narrow: access to learning restricted in terms of tasks, knowledge and location

Access to competence-based qualification only

Virtually all on job: limited opportunities for reflection

Fast – transition as quick as possible

Apprenticeship aim: partial expert but full participant

Post-apprenticeship vision: static for job

Apprenticeship is used to tailor individual capability to organisational need

Apprenticeship design limits opportunity to extend identity: little boundary crossing experienced

Apprentices have limited and restricted access to the range of skills and knowledge of their workplace





The idea of expansive learning has been developed by Engeström (2001: 139), who uses it to achieve substantial changes at the organisational level. As he says: “The object of expansive learning activity is the entire activity system in which the learners are engaged. Expansive learning activity produces culturally new patterns of activity. Expansive learning at work produces new forms of work activity.”

Our emphasis differs somewhat from his, and focuses on people and learning, in other words on workforce development. We aim to identify those features of the environment or work situation which make the workplace as a whole offer or deny opportunities for learning. This allows us to provide a conceptual and analytical tool for evaluating the quality of learning environments and for analysing an organisation’s approach to apprenticeship, and indeed to workforce development more generally.

We do not assume, however, that an organisation whose approach we identify as restrictive will automatically reform along expansive lines. There may be a host of strategic and practical reasons for organisations to resist making such changes, and doing so may sometimes be the right decision. Nor will creating more expansive learning environments automatically produce new forms of work activity. However, evidence from our empirical research suggests that an expansive approach to apprenticeship increases the quantity and range of opportunities for participation and therefore for apprentice learning. It also suggests that an expansive approach is more likely than a restrictive one to promote synergies between personal and organisational development.

In our research, Company A provides apprenticeships which contain many expansive features, whereas Company B’s apprenticeship illustrates a much more restrictive learning model. On the other hand, Company C exhibited a mix of features and comes between Companies A and B on the continuum.

In Company A, apprenticeship lasts for four years. It involves engagement in a wide variety of departments within the firm, attendance at college to pursue vocational qualifications, and the opportunity to take part in residential, outward-bound style activities. The apprentices have explicit status and recognition as learners, hence they gradually develop their capacity to contribute as productive workers. In fact this company consolidates this principle by classifying the apprentices as supernumerary for the first part of the apprenticeship. The apprentices gain access to multiple communities of practice inside, outside and near the firm, and to the rich opportunities for learning that this system makes available.

In contrast, company B’s apprentices are primarily involved in one community of practice, which centres on the operation of steel-polishing machines. Apprentices learn on the job, by engaging in the practices of the shop floor with more experienced employees. They become fully productive in around six months. The apprentices do not have the opportunity to study for knowledge-based vocational qualifications, which could provide the underpinning theories and concepts of their wider occupational field and would facilitate their subsequent progression to higher-level study.





In the contemporary economic and social context, the use of apprenticeship to attain a restricted skill base may be viewed as limiting the apprentice's opportunities for personal development, and for educational and vocational progression. Within the power structures of the conventional employment relationship, apprentices will have little influence over such choices and therefore over the scope of their learning opportunities. Whether the apprentice has a restrictive or an expansive experience depends, at least in part, on whether workplaces have mapped the range of tasks and skills that apprentices should develop, and have designed a structured curriculum to generate opportunities to learn broadly as well as deeply. In companies that have not done this mapping, learning is haphazard and is likely to be driven by organisational and commercial expediency. Here the status and legitimacy of the apprentice, and their experience of learning, is likely to be weak.

Although some employers will have valid reasons for taking a restrictive approach to apprenticeship, we argue overall that an apprenticeship characterised by expansive attributes will create a stronger and richer learning environment than one with restrictive features. All employees can benefit from and contribute to this expansive environment. The expansive quality of apprenticeship in Company A is a product of a learning environment in which employees at all levels share their skills and knowledge, and have access to learning opportunities within and beyond the workplace, and itself reinforces this approach.

Writing from a situated learning perspective, Lave and Wenger (1991) have downplayed formal educational institutions as important contributors to the development of occupational knowledge and skills. In their case studies of naval quartermasters and butchers, they see the off-the-job educational components as adding little or even having a detrimental effect. In some of the cases we have been investigating, work-based learning includes off-the-job provision leading to qualifications. We would argue that the opportunity to study away from the workplace and gain knowledge-based qualifications provides an expansive dimension to workforce development. It gives employees the opportunity to extend their membership to other communities of practice and to cross boundaries between communities of practice. It also provides for employees to stand back from, and reflect on, workplace practice and provides the chance to pursue knowledge-based courses and qualifications.

These advantages of the expansive approach recall the contrasting forms of participation available to apprentices in companies A and B. Company A's apprentices have access to a range of qualifications, including knowledge-based awards pursued at college. This gives the participant access to theoretical and conceptual knowledge and understanding that is unlikely to be made available solely through experience on-the-job. It also offers the option of gaining general vocational and educational credentials which qualify recipients to enter higher-level education and can support career progression.

The examples of Carl, John and Sarah show how the progress of apprentices in our case studies was affected by the extent to which their companies offered a more expansive or restrictive approach to workforce development.





Carl

Carl left school at 16 and joined Company B on a Level Two steel and metal industries' apprenticeship. Company B provided a relatively straightforward exemplar of the features we have attributed to a restrictive learning approach. One of the main explanations for this is that the company viewed apprenticeship as a vehicle to address recruitment difficulties. The company's principal aim was to create narrow 'experts' in the role of machine operators who could contribute effectively to the smooth execution of production. Carl quickly learned how to operate steel polishing machines on-the-job from more experienced employees and became a competent machine operator in just a few months. Although still officially an apprentice, Carl was then asked to train another new recruit. The sole opportunity he had to participate in communities of practice beyond the workplace was through attendance at two half-day courses on 'steel industry awareness'. These took place at the premises of the private training provider who was responsible for helping Carl to attain the mandatory qualification requirements of the Apprenticeship. Given the speed of his trajectory to full participation and the limited scope and goal of his training, Carl's apprenticeship identity was relatively weak and short-lived. Two years on, Carl had still not attained the qualifications necessary for completion of his apprenticeship but remained a Company B employee.

Carl's experience of apprenticeship can be located at the restrictive end of the continuum, As the following example illustrates, a more mixed learning environment has been created for John at company C.





John

John is an apprentice in Company C (the steel stockholder), which, like many employers offering apprenticeships, falls somewhere between the restrictive and expansive ends of the continuum. John was advised by his external training provider to follow an apprenticeship in Business Administration as this provided a general framework for gaining competence in administrative activities through learning on the job. For several months, John was indeed able to gain experience in the administrative aspects of the business. However, his training and development were very loosely planned, with no off-the-job provision, and he had little opportunity to make formal progress towards the qualifications specified in his apprenticeship programme. During a period in the quality assurance department, John was pleased to be offered a permanent job there. John believed that he would have the chance to become fully skilled and integrated into this area of the company's practice. The downside was that he would not be able to move around other departments and would have less access to learning in other communities of practice. At this point, John stopped seeing himself as an apprentice on the grounds that he now had "a proper job" and, because of this, a new status and identity. Within a few weeks of his appointment, however, John was moved to another part of the company, where he was required to process routine paperwork generated by the warehouse and transport function of the business. While the change gave him access to a new community of practice and its learning opportunities, the fact that his newly established expectations had been dashed made it much more difficult for him to interpret the move positively and left him confused about his status in the company and the prospects of completing his apprenticeship.

In John's case there are possibilities for career and personal development. A wide range of activities are available within the company, and potentially its parent company. He has had the opportunity to work in different parts of the business, although his ambiguous status in the company has impinged on the legitimacy of his participation in the communities of practice in which he has worked. As an individual, John has the advantage of having attained A-levels with grades high enough to enter university, and well developed information technology skills. He told us that if his opportunities continue to be limited at the company, he would look elsewhere for a job or apply to higher education. John has the background, ability and self-esteem to envision himself in new situations and embracing new identities, social and cultural capital which the apprentices at the restrictive company B did not seem to have.



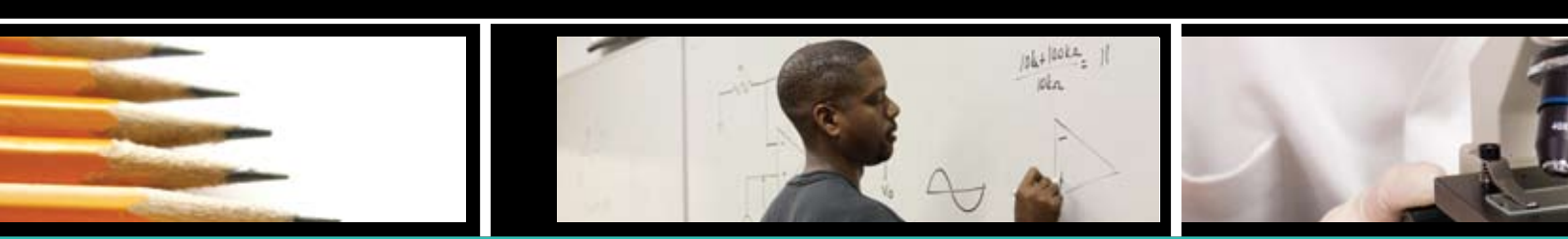


Sarah

Sarah has recently completed an apprenticeship in Accountancy with company A. She is highly focused, goal-oriented and lively. She decided during her secondary education that she wanted to become a professional management accountant. She took and passed appropriate A levels, including Mathematics, and researched the quickest route to achieving her goal. This showed that if she took up an apprenticeship leading to the Accountancy Technician Certificate she would be qualified to pursue a route to professional status. Consequently, she 'self-selected' into the company as it offered her the opportunity to complete the apprenticeship as quickly as she was able, and provided financial support and time off to attain her professional qualifications via part-time study. At the time of writing, Sarah is well on her way to achieving professional status and at a younger age than would have been possible if she had first taken an accountancy degree. Sarah is very happy with the working and learning environment she is experiencing at the company but she is very clear that if the opportunities she expected had failed to materialise she would have sought an alternative route to meeting her goals. Sarah is a young woman with clearly defined career and personal goals. So far, she is achieving these through the company's workforce development strategy, of which the apprenticeship is an integral component.

Carl, John and Sarah illustrate the very different ways in which young people experience apprenticeship in the contemporary workplace. Their pathways through apprenticeship and beyond are closely entwined with the strategies, behaviours, and fortunes of the companies for whom they work, as well as the sectors in which they are training. Apprentices monitor the extent to which their companies are providing them with the opportunities they desire in order to meet their personal goals, but have access to different social and educational resources with which to respond.

The current government's welcome endorsement of apprenticeship allows for publicly-funded provision whose style ranges widely along the expansive-restrictive continuum. This means that there can be issues of equity in the quality of provision on offer to participants, and who is gaining access to the more expansive apprenticeships.



Apprenticeship as a model of learning

The concept of apprenticeship has come to form an important part of learning theory. It has relevance regardless of setting, age range or topic. Guile and Young (1991: 112) argue that apprenticeship “offers a way of conceptualizing learning that does not separate it from the production of knowledge or tie it to particular contexts. It can therefore be the basis of a more general theory of learning that might link learning at work and learning in classrooms, rather than see them only as distinct contexts with distinct outcomes”. Hargreaves (2004) has argued that the model’s emphasis on mentoring and coaching could help schools rethink the teacher-student relationship.

But others argue that apprenticeship is a model that belongs in the past and that it has been overly romanticised. Grubb and Lazerson (2007) list its weaknesses:

- It can easily become routine production rather than learning through production
- It may not facilitate well-rounded learning about work
- It is suitable to more stable conditions of skill and employment, and often deteriorates under changing conditions
- It is not a good setting for teaching abstract and theoretical material
- Apprenticeships often replicate the gender divisions of the workplace, the class biases of family selection, and the discriminatory patterns of employers

We agree with the first two charges as they capture the problems inherent in our restrictive workplaces, but we don’t agree with the others. The third ignores changes in the nature of apprenticeship, whilst the fourth seems to concentrate on apprenticeship in the productive workplace, thus missing the broader concept of apprenticeship as a dual mode of learning. The fifth charge could easily be laid at the door of education in general.

Apprenticeships which are located entirely in the workplace are problematic for both pedagogical and social reasons. Whilst the workplace and everyday workplace activity are important places for meaningful learning, apprentices and other employees also need access to more formal instruction, and spaces for reflection, to transcend their workplace concerns. Restricting apprentices entirely to the workplace was as risky for apprentices at the time of the medieval craft guilds as it is now. Like all models of learning, apprenticeship is socially situated and can be exploitative or even cruel, as well as enlightened. Throughout history, apprenticeship in the UK has played a role in the exploitation of some young workers (see Lane 1996).

This means that the relationship between apprentice and employer has not always embodied the caring and nurturing virtues that are important to self-sustaining communities. Recalling his apprenticeship in a factory, making parts for a well-known car manufacturer in the 1960s, this engineer vividly portrays the apprentice-employer relationship:

“You never spoke to the manager. He was a god, an absolute god, there were so many layers between him and you anyway that there would be no necessity for you ever to speak to him...They (the chargehands) weren’t afraid to rule with a rod of iron in terms of language and so on, you’d get all sorts of earwiggling that was the way it was, but it was a regime driven by fear in those days, very much us and them.”

In this era, learning to be an engineer involved becoming aware of the social hierarchies, behavioural codes and rules that underpinned everyday life in the factory, and which reflected the way work was organised at that time. Whilst the culture of workplaces and the nature of the relationship between young people and adults have evolved, the broad conception of learning as becoming part of an occupational community remains at the heart of the apprenticeship model.





Apprenticeship as an instrument of government policy

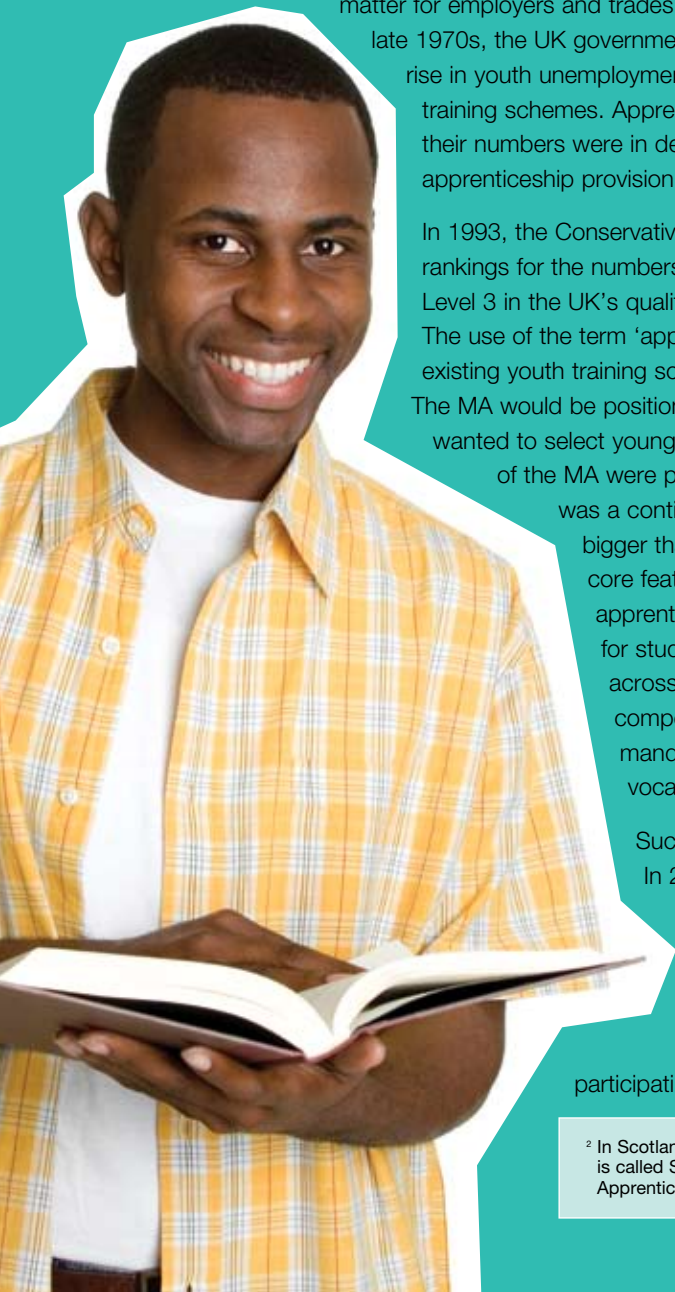
To understand why the UK is still struggling to improve its publicly-funded apprenticeship system, we need to remind ourselves how this position has arisen. The history of apprenticeship in the UK from medieval times provides a fascinating lens through which to view the relationship between employers, young people and the State, and the separation of vocational education from general education.

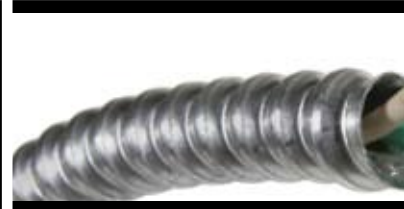
In many other European countries, apprenticeship has been visible in government policy since the late 19th century, and has formed part of plans for regulating labour markets and creating compulsory education systems in which vocational education would play a key role. Apprenticeship was seen as much more than a vehicle for skills training. Just like full-time education students, apprentices would follow a programme that would prepare them for active and responsible citizenship. Apprenticeship would play an important role in the development of the nation state. In the UK, however, apprenticeship was regarded as essentially a private matter for employers and trades unions, and as part of the structure of industrial relations. In the late 1970s, the UK government intervened in the youth labour market, in response to the rapid rise in youth unemployment resulting from the global oil crisis, by creating a series of youth training schemes. Apprenticeships were still being funded by employers at this time, but their numbers were in decline, and the new schemes incorporated much of the remaining apprenticeship provision.

In 1993, the Conservative government responded to concerns about the UK's international rankings for the numbers of people qualified to intermediate or technician level (expressed as Level 3 in the UK's qualification framework) by launching the Modern Apprenticeship (MA). The use of the term 'apprenticeship' signalled a desire to set the new programme apart from existing youth training schemes, which had struggled to shake off an image of low quality. The MA would be positioned as a Level 3 programme, and would involve employers who wanted to select young people who had achieved well at school. Although early evaluations of the MA were positive, the variability in quality of the programme across sectors was a continued cause for concern. Differences between programmes were bigger than in other European countries. There, legislation ensured that core features, such as standardised lengths of time for participation as an apprentice, the presence of qualified trainers in the workplace, and time for study of general and vocational education off-the-job, were guaranteed across sectors. A further problematic feature was the decision to have the competence-based National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) as the main mandatory outcome of the apprenticeship, instead of also including a vocational qualification that required studying off the job.

Successive governments in England continued to tinker with the MA.² In 2001, the Labour government broke with the original aim of the MA by splitting it into two, to produce the Foundation Modern Apprenticeship (FMA) at level 2 and the Advanced Modern Apprenticeship (AMA) at level 3. The FMA was effectively a rebadged version of existing youth training schemes and, at a stroke, enabled the government to claim that the numbers participating in apprenticeship had increased substantially on its watch.

² In Scotland, the MA has always remained as a Level 3 programme, whilst the Level 2 programme is called SkillSeekers (see CPC, 2006). In Wales and Northern Ireland, the term Modern Apprenticeship is still used, but covers both the Level 2 and Level 3 programmes.





At this time, operational responsibility for apprenticeships was given to the newly established Learning and Skills Council (LSC). In order to tackle persistent concerns about the quality of apprenticeships and low completion rates in several sectors in England, the LSC introduced two reforms. A more rigorous system for appointing training providers led to poorly performing providers having their contracts terminated. In addition, an extra qualification, known as a technical certificate, was added to all apprenticeship frameworks. This was a significant step as it recognised that, on their own, the competence-based NVQs failed to provide a sufficient platform for apprentices to progress beyond their immediate workplace, or to higher levels of study, including entry to university. The requirement for apprenticeship frameworks to include a technical certificate and for apprentices to be guaranteed any off-the-job training was removed in 2006. The fact that government can reverse such a fundamental principle is a prime example of how governments can interfere at their whim in publicly-funded education and training. We discuss this in more detail below.

Since 2004, the brand name 'Apprenticeships' has been used in England to cover all government-funded youth training schemes, apart from 'E2E' (entry to employment), a vocational preparation programme for 16-18 year olds. The brand covers:

- Young Apprenticeships for 14-15 year olds
- Apprenticeship (the level 2 programme previously called FMA)
- Advanced Apprenticeship (the level 3 programme previously called AMA)
- Programme-led Apprenticeship (PLA)

As the tables below indicate, in England there are currently around 243,000 people aged 16 and over in publicly funded Apprenticeships. Around 60 per cent of apprentices successfully complete the programme, but completion rates vary from sector to sector. Completions have been rising over the last three years due to concerted effort by the national LSC and increased attention by local LSCs to the performance of training providers. Apprenticeship's close connection to the labour market, and the diversity of both sectors and the participant population, mean that completion is a more complex challenge than it is in full-time education.

Table One: 16-18 year olds, 'average in learning' 2006-07 (12 months) by gender and Apprenticeship level

	Female	Male	Total
Advanced Apprenticeship L3	10217	42800	53017
Apprenticeship L2	40541	56690	97231
Total	50758	99490	150248

Table Two: aged 19+, 'average in learning' 2006-07 (12 months) by gender and Apprenticeship level

	Female	Male	Total
Advanced Apprenticeship L3	20585	25558	46143
Apprenticeship L2	22138	25315	47453
Total	42723	50873	93596

Source: Learning and Skills Council, <http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk/partners/frameworks/apprenticeshipsdata/reports20062007/>



Two important points about apprenticeship participation emerge from these statistics. Most participants in the programme are male, with the male – female imbalance being starkest in the Advanced Apprenticeship. And most participants are in the younger, 16-18 age group, and most of them are in the lower level programme. The vast majority of the apprentices in the older age group are aged 19-25.

Despite apprenticeships currently being available in over 100 sectors, over three-quarters of apprentices are found in just 12. Nonetheless, the diversity of occupations and jobs covered in these sectors is indicative of the wide range of workplace settings in which young people on apprenticeships find themselves. One key difference between the sectors is in the proportion of participants following L2 and L3 programmes. In the electrotechnical area, the vast majority are following the Advanced Apprenticeship, whereas in retail, hairdressing and construction over eight out of ten are following the L2 programme. The twelve most populated apprenticeship sectors are as follows, in descending order:

- Construction
- Hairdressing
- Business Administration
- Customer Care
- Hospitality
- Childcare and Early Years
- Engineering
- Vehicle Maintenance
- Retail
- Health and Social Care
- Electrotechnical
- Plumbing



Programme-led Apprenticeship (PLA)

The PLA is a highly significant adaptation of the concept of apprenticeship and was first suggested in a report on English apprenticeship in 2001 from the LSC and the then Department for Education and Skills. The idea was to use a full-time vocational education course as the first phase of an apprenticeship, followed by a full-time period with an employer in order to complete on-the-job training and achieve the competence required for the mandatory National Vocational Qualification. The report's authors suggested that this route would be attractive to employers who were reluctant to release apprentices from the workplace to spend time training off the job. In 2007, the LSC reaffirmed this thinking by describing the PLA as:

“A flexible route through which young people can acquire the underpinning knowledge, understanding and skills that will be required for successful completion of the full apprenticeship framework. By gaining the same skills as will be required when the apprentice moves into the employed phase, apprentices will be better prepared to meet the expectations of employers, will complete their framework more quickly and will become productive earlier in their employed phase.” (LSC, 2007:5)

The PLA positions apprenticeship as a front-loaded, full-time, provider-based programme topped up with a short period of work experience. The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) has used it to encourage more small and medium sized companies to take advantage of the large numbers of students on full-time construction courses in colleges who need a period of work experience to become sufficiently proficient to work



in the industry. In this model of apprenticeship, the employer becomes a marginal player waiting for potential employees to appear, employees who they are led to believe are very close to being work-ready.

The social identity of this so-called apprentice is ambiguous. The individual begins as a full-time student and only become registered in the official statistics as an apprentice, once an employer has agreed to take recruit them. Unlike apprentices who have employed status and are paid a wage, young people on a PLA can apply for support through the means-tested Education Maintenance Allowance. PLA is also now used as the term for what were previously called 'non-employed status' apprentices. This refers to young people who are with an employer but don't have an employment contract

In the latest review of apprenticeship in England, published in 2008, the government has proposed tightening the rules governing the PLA, by stipulating that there should be "frequent contact with an employer in the relevant sector within six months of starting a course," and that training providers will be assessed on their apprentices' progression from PLA to an employed-status apprenticeship (DIUS/DCFS, 2008:23). In the Netherlands and Denmark, a form of PLA exists in which young people alternate their time between studying in a vocational school and working with an employer. This 'school-based' apprenticeship has proved popular with both employers and young people. The key difference with the PLA, however, is that the school-based approach is structured round the concept of 'alternance', whereas in the PLA, work experience comes at the end of a period of full-time education. 'Contact' with an employer in the Danish and Dutch models means that time spent in the workplace is an integrated part of the overall programme, and not just a chance for young people to meet employers who might eventually offer them a placement so they can complete their apprenticeship.

The introduction of the provider-led PLA means that two versions of apprenticeship are now being implemented in England. The PLA coexists with employer-led apprenticeships in which the apprentice has employed status. The employer-led, employed-status apprenticeship follows the historical positioning of apprentices as employees. In contrast, the provider-led PLA is located in what we refer to as the 'education paradigm'. Both variants have weaknesses that need to be addressed in order for apprenticeship as a model of learning to respond to the dynamic economic and social challenges facing the UK. We argue that these weaknesses often produce a restricted form of apprenticeship, whereas, we need a much more expansive approach in order to unlock the potential of both individuals and workplaces.

These forms of apprenticeship belong within the same qualification-led straightjacket that has determined the design of publicly funded work-based programmes since 1986, when the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) made the achievement of an NVQ and what were then called 'core skills' (now called 'key' or 'functional' skills) the mandatory outcomes for successful completion. Funding for providers would be based on the delivery and attainment of these qualifications. Despite all the attempted reforms over the succeeding years, this stress on qualifications has remained as the one immovable constant. The current Apprenticeship Blueprint, issued by government, states that every apprentice must attain a relevant NVQ and a set of functional skills at a level deemed appropriate by each occupational sector. The attainment of specific and controversial qualification outcomes takes precedence over everything else, minimising the much more important process elements of an apprenticeship programme. In addition, NVQs and 'key' (or 'functional') skills are contested by employers and by educationalists despite government's rhetorical claim that they are 'employer-led'.



Qualifications are important in any programme of learning if they provide both a testament to expertise and a passport to progression. In theory, restricting the mandatory specification to these limited qualification outcomes provides 'space' for providers to offer additional courses and awards which are valued within their sector. But tying funding arrangements to the attainment of starts and completions targets militates against this approach. In practice the government-led model lacks flexibility, forcing the existing partners to work as best they can within a funding and qualification-based framework that denies scope for the innovation which a dynamic, fast moving economic landscape requires.

The ownership, status and specification of the Apprenticeship Blueprint are central to the debate about how to improve quality. The Blueprint lays down the standards against which sectoral frameworks are approved and indicators of attainment are derived. The lack of involvement by the parties responsible for organising and delivering apprenticeship in decisions about the Blueprint is evidence that the programme is government-owned. In our view this has prevented the creation of a model which has vocational learning at its heart, as well as the measurement of outcomes. The 2008 Apprenticeship Review goes some way to extending the scope of the Blueprint, including the important requirement for mentoring and some off-the-job learning. But it emerged from government without the involvement of providers, employers and awarding bodies, which are steeped in apprenticeship pedagogy, delivery, assessment and accreditation.





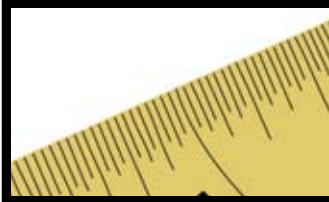
The purpose of apprenticeship and the role of the State

Apprenticeship is an internationally understood, long-standing, and robust model of learning and skill formation. A key difference between the UK³ and many other European countries, which have much larger numbers of young people in apprenticeships, is that there has been no statutory underpinning to apprenticeship in the UK. In Germany, the national Vocational Training Act and the Landesschulgesetze (Education Acts at regional state or Lander level) set out the legal responsibilities of government, employers, and other partners, such as chambers of industry and commerce, education institutions and trades unions, with regard to all aspects of apprenticeships. This social partnership approach means that problems and ideas are discussed between the key stakeholders to enable apprenticeship to evolve over time. The apparent success of the recent modernization and expansion of apprenticeship in Ireland has been attributed to a social partnership approach (see O'Connor, 2006). Perhaps surprisingly, given its generally laissez-faire approach to labour markets, apprenticeship in the United States is underpinned by the 1937 National Apprenticeship Act, which provides a federal legislative framework specifying apprentices' contractual status and standards of provision, including their minimum number of training hours and their wages. Successful completion by someone who has participated in the 'Registered Apprenticeship Programme' leads to a license to practice in the relevant occupation or trade (see <http://www.doleta.gov> and follow links to Office of Apprenticeship Training and Labor Services).

In contrast UK governments can and do make whatever changes they wish, and whenever they wish, to what they choose to define as apprenticeships. They are not obliged to consult others with an interest in the changes they make. Ryan and Unwin (2001) refer to this as 'leaflet law' whereby changes are announced in the form of press releases and ministerial statements. Unlike in some other countries, there has been no statement of purpose setting out the nation's reasons for continuing to support apprenticeships. The lack of a clear purpose for apprenticeship in England has allowed it to become a 'wrapper' or 'brand' embracing a range of formal and informal learning experiences, opportunities and attainments, reflecting the diverse nature of around 80 occupational sectors. Apprenticeship is not a 'course' or a 'qualification' but merely a label. Some apprenticeships are highly prized, very selective, and lead to well-paid careers with professional pathways and qualification hierarchies. For example, the Advanced Apprenticeship in the engineering sector has entrance qualifications at least as demanding as A levels, in the shape of GCSE grade C or above in English, Maths and Science, as well as extensive interviews, and cognitive and practical aptitude tests. At the other end of the spectrum are apprenticeships that demand little if anything in the way of entry requirements, offer no opportunity for off-the-job education and training, and limit the apprentice to a restrictive diet of on-the-job experience. These apprenticeships might last for less than a year and provide no real foundation for progression beyond level 2.

We have argued that apprenticeship occupies an ambiguous position across what we term the education and employment paradigms. The employment paradigm sees apprenticeship primarily as a vehicle for employers to meet their skill needs. This means that government must accept wide variation in the quality of the learning experience across sectors, despite the mandatory minimum requirements specified in the Blueprint. There is also the danger that some employers, for understandable reasons, will focus too narrowly on immediate skill needs and fail to capitalise on the potential of an apprenticeship programme to deliver longer-term benefits for their organisation, their sector, and the apprentices. Here the apprentice's key identity is that of 'worker' rather than a hybrid identity of worker and learner.

³ Devolved government in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland may result in different approaches emerging from this shared tradition.



In the education paradigm, the ‘apprenticeship’ concept is reduced to a form of work experience that complements a largely classroom-based programme, as in the case of PLAs. The problem here is that the work-based element is too short, and possibly too tokenistic, to enable the apprentice to become part of an occupational community of practice. Theories and concepts learnt in the classroom are too divorced from the workplace and the identity of ‘student’ overtakes that of ‘apprentice.’

The best apprenticeships in the UK mirror the dual approach found in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. They sit at the intersection between the UK employer-based and education-based paradigms, inhabiting what we refer to as the ‘vocational education paradigm’. Here apprenticeship is regarded as a model of learning underpinned by pedagogical and curricular principles and by close dialogue between the key parties in decision-making, whose role are specified formally. This dual-mode form of apprenticeship is to be celebrated because:

- it is a mode of learning which has appealed to people over the centuries, as it combines theoretical and applied approaches;
- it is a highly effective model of learning to meet the challenges of contemporary society, combining disciplinary knowledge, interpersonal skills, employment competence, and maturation;
- it lays the foundation for personal development and career trajectories by providing the breadth and depth that allows individuals to believe they can progress and by providing the platform for individuals to demonstrate their capabilities.

We are not arguing that the UK should simply import the dual systems found in other countries, which depend on deeply-rooted cultural and political value structures for their success. Equally, we are not suggesting that those systems are perfect. Steedman’s (2005) analysis of the relationship between employer commitment and the integration of apprenticeship into full-time educational structures indicates that countries where employer commitment is high (e.g. Germany and Switzerland) have low vertical integration between apprenticeship and further and higher education⁴. Although former apprentices have high currency in the specific occupational labour market in which they have trained, and have a licence to practice, they have only a limited platform for either vertical transition to higher level study or horizontal transition to other fields of study or training. There is scope for the UK to build on the well-recognised career, educational and qualification pathways that exist in sectors such as engineering and which are based on continuing part-time participation to achieve graduate and later Chartered or Professional Status. There is much to be learnt from the positive and negative features of apprenticeship in the UK and elsewhere.



⁴ There have been recent attempts in these two countries to improve integration, but this has been largely driven by employer demand for apprentices to gain more skills before they enter the workplace so that they make faster progress to becoming productive workers (see Pilz, 2007)



Recommendations for policy and practice

Very bold targets have been set for the expansion of apprenticeship places in England (DIUS/DCSF, 2008). They will be expanded to 400,000 by 2010/11, including an additional 30,000 places for adults aged over 25. Creating and sustaining apprenticeship programmes that meet the needs of individuals, employers and the state demands considerable energy, expertise and innovative thinking. A number of steps could be taken to help the social partners as they seek to make improvements in this very tough area of public policy. First of all, we propose that apprenticeship must be located within a new Vocational Education Paradigm. This would ensure that all forms of apprenticeship, regardless of sector, contain integrated on and off-the-job curricula and pedagogies. Such a shift has major implications for government, providers, sector bodies and employers. They would have to agree to a shared concept of what counts as a quality apprenticeship for organisations, individuals and society. This in turn would provide greater legitimacy for the investment of funds from the public purse. Apprenticeship policy can no longer be government-owned or directed, but must be derived instead from a partnership approach in which the expertise of government, employers and providers is combined.⁵

What should government be doing?

- The State has a duty to involve the social partners in a genuine alliance to produce a statement of purpose, as exists in some other countries, for apprenticeship. This would provide the statutory underpinning needed to formalise apprenticeship in the education and training system. This will include the development of an Apprenticeship Blueprint that specifies both learning processes and outcomes.
 - The State has a duty to invest in the country's vocational education infrastructure, and to build the capacity of vocational educators and trainers to ensure that expansive apprenticeship is delivered.
 - The proposed creation of a government-led national Apprenticeship Service (see DIUS/DCFS 2008) should be reconfigured as The Apprenticeship Partnership and be led by a joint board of the social partners. The Apprenticeship Partnership should develop a research and evaluation strategy to create an evidence base from which to revise the Apprenticeship Blueprint, and policies and practice for apprenticeship, over time.
 - Vocational qualifications offered within apprenticeships must provide a proper platform for progression from Level 2 to Level 3, and from Level 3 to Level 4.
 - The government should resolve the place of Apprenticeships in the UCAS system for university admissions, and promote closer integration with vocational higher education including the new Foundation Degrees.
 - The government should ensure that the curriculum for those training to become professional Information, Advice and Guidance practitioners includes knowledge and understanding of apprenticeship.



⁵ We have not included trade unions in the list of social partners as they currently have very little involvement in the design or delivery of apprenticeships. In some other countries, they play a much more active role.



What should Sector Skills Councils be doing?

- Whilst in receipt of public funds, they should have a statutory duty to ensure that apprenticeship is promoted in a continuous and consistent manner in line with the Blueprint and with concepts of good practice agreed by the Partners, including diversity and equity.
- They have a responsibility to educate employers to understand how apprenticeships can contribute to organisational and sectoral development.
- They should focus on making creative use of apprenticeship to facilitate developments in the use of skills and knowledge, and on new ways of organising work that will contribute to sectoral performance.

What should providers and employers be doing?

- They are the guardians of apprenticeship as a model of vocational learning, and should ensure that the quality of the learning process and the environment in which it can take place is at the heart of any apprenticeship programme.
- They should monitor and evaluate the way in which they support and structure apprenticeship in line with the Blueprint, again including attention to diversity and equity.
- They should have a duty of care which expresses their commitment to ensuring that their apprentices maintain a dual identity of worker and learner, and commit themselves to a model of apprenticeship that has pedagogic, social and economic value.

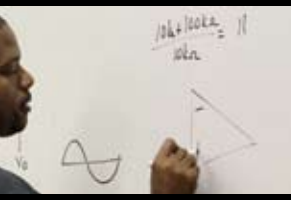
What should schools, colleges and careers services be doing?

- They should explain the benefits of the apprenticeship model of learning, as well as its capacity to provide a platform for career and educational progression.
- They should ensure that the individuals providing advice and guidance have up-to-date knowledge about apprenticeship, and encourage young people and adults to consider training in occupations beyond their gender and race stereotypes.



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