

Government-funded apprenticeships are generally of good quality. Establishing universally recognised definitions and funding procedures should be a priority

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Graham Hoyle discusses the current state of the apprenticeship 'brand', arguing that – contrary to current media perceptions – there is no quality crisis, although a greater focus is needed on definitions and costs.



The Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) select committee has been open about how its recently launched inquiry into apprenticeships was largely prompted by substantial concerns aired by the media about the government-funded programme.

The members of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) and I had no problem with the establishment of the inquiry. It is important for accountability reasons that the investment is perceived as delivering value for money when we are talking about £1.4 billion of taxpayers' funding. I also saw my own appearance before the select committee as an opportunity to offer a different picture on apprenticeships than some of the MPs might have been receiving over recent months.

Since the inquiry was launched largely in response to concerns about the quality of training provision under the programme, it is important to address these. The concerns are mainly focused on the development of 'short-course' apprenticeships, mostly in the retail and IT sectors, and the safeguarding of quality when colleges and other providers choose to sub-contract their apprenticeship provision to work based learning providers.

If you believed all that you read in the press, you might be under the impression that the apprenticeship programme has been plagued by an epidemic of short-course apprenticeships over the past 18 months that are wrecking the apprenticeship 'brand'. But the facts are these: there are approximately 1,000 colleges and training providers in the government-funded skills market who are currently helping employers to train somewhere in the region of 750,000 apprentices. The recent quality review of apprenticeships, undertaken by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS), found that of these 1,000 providers, only 10 primary contractors and 3 subcontractors were identified as having provision that has raised 'significant and unresolved concerns'.

The NAS chief executive told MPs that in his estimate, less than 5% of the total apprenticeship cohort in England had been subject to poor provision. This small percentage is still too high and in the interest of those individual trainees, the quality of their training needs to be rectified immediately. But it cannot be reasonably argued on the basis of this data that we are witnessing an epidemic of bad provision in the skills sector.

Nevertheless, AELP was content to support the government's decision in January to introduce a 1-year minimum course rule for apprentices aged 16 to 18 to recognise better the experience needed 'on the job'. However, we have told ministers that we would have serious difficulties with any blanket move to extend the rule to all ages where work-based experience might already be substantial in many cases.

Sub-contracting is an issue which requires action. The AELP position is that the lead contractors are not only responsible for the quality of their own apprenticeship provision but they should also be accountable for the provision of their sub-contractors. As recently [published data from the SFA](#)

[shows](#), there are some large sub-contractors (although the data covers all adult skills provision and not just adult apprenticeships) and we welcome the new SFA pilot which may encourage those that wish it to become directly contracted with the agency so that the lines of accountability are more clearly drawn.

Universally recognised definition of an apprenticeship are needed

The BIS select committee has received representations about the large growth in adult apprenticeships over the last 18 months at a time when the number of 16 to 24 year olds out of work has touched one million. Firstly, it is important to recognise that when apprenticeships were relaunched in 1994 as 'modern apprenticeships', they were not designed to be exclusively a form of job creation for young people, but as an employer-owned programme principally aimed at improving the skills of the British workforce.

Another key point is that [official figures published in January](#) show that apprenticeship provision for young people is not suffering at the expense of the growth in adult apprenticeships.

We recognise that the so-called not in employment, education or training (NEET) issue might lead to the government steering more funding towards apprenticeships for young people as a priority, as opposed to allowing the funding to respond solely to employer demand as part of the [Lord Leitch recommended demand-led approach](#) to the publicly-funded skills market. But AELP remains convinced that all-age provision in the apprenticeship programme should continue as we made implicit in [our own definition of an apprenticeship](#), namely:

“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.”

The recent public debate on apprenticeships has often been blurred by commentators having different perceptions on what an apprenticeship actually is and we believe that the select committee's final report could play a valuable role in recommending a clear definition – hopefully one that is in line with our own!

Who pays for an apprenticeship?

One of the major themes explored during my appearance before the select committee, which was again understandable in the current fiscal climate, was how meeting the cost of an apprenticeship should be split between the employer, the state and the individual trainee. The present system is complicated and it is arguably about to become more complex with the introduction of the FE loan system for learners which will apply to apprentices over the age of 24 wanting to achieve Level 3 and above.

The 1994 relaunch of apprenticeships saw significant government contributions to delivery costs for the first time, with the government as part funder understandably exercising some control over aspects of design and delivery. However, a major unintentional mistake at this stage was to allow the inaccurate myth to develop that apprenticeships were a government funded programme to which employers made a (modest) contribution; a complete reversal of reality.

AELP is now working on new proposals on how an apprenticeship should be paid for and we will be interested to see the select committee's own recommendations on this important issue.

Official data for 2010-11 shows that 76.4% of apprentices in England successfully complete their programmes, which is a success rate that compares very well with the best in Europe. Therefore, in the current debate we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I am confident

that the BIS select committee won't fall into that trap when producing its report.

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