

POLICY WATCH

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The Skills Commission call for greater access and progression for apprenticeships

One of the Clauses in the [current](#) Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill that has provoked some discussion, let alone an Opposition amendment, is Clause 35. This is the Clause that requires all state secondary schools in England to include information on apprenticeships as part of their careers programmes but, and it's the but that's caused the problem, only when it is *'in the best interests of the pupil to do so.'* To many people this smacks of a cop out. If you want to enhance the stature of apprenticeships, you don't restrict information to just certain groups of almost self-selecting pupils; down that road go sheep and goats.

There are, however, two problems to be overcome first if the stature of apprenticeships is to be improved. One is to raise levels of awareness and understanding about apprenticeships amongst the people giving advice and guidance on them. And the other is to improve entry and progression routes in and out of apprenticeships overall. This [latest Report](#) on apprenticeships, commissioned by the Edge Foundation and launched by the Skills Commission last week sets out to tackle just these two problems. The shelf may be groaning with Reports on apprenticeships but there are gaps and these are two of the most pertinent.

Let's take the problem about levels of awareness about apprenticeships by teachers and careers advisors first. This problem was highlighted in a [survey](#) commissioned by Edge last year; it found that three of the qualifications about which teachers knew least were Apprenticeships, Young Apprenticeships and Adult Apprenticeships in that order. This is not of course teachers' fault, very few of them have had any exposure to apprenticeships and the system in which they operate is geared up primarily to recognising academic achievement. As the Chairman of this Report said, *"most teachers have come up through the academic route; their whole experience is affected by their experience."* Lacking experience and understanding about apprenticeships, teachers thus naturally find it difficult to act as enthusiastic advocates for them. As the Edge survey concluded, *"this lack of knowledge could be a factor in why so few teachers see apprenticeships as a good alternative to A levels or equivalent qualifications."*

The Commission propose a number of measures to improve things. These include ensuring information on apprenticeships is included in Initial Teacher Training and Continuous Professional Development Programmes; supporting the National Council for Educational Excellence (NCEE) recommendations on having employer ambassadors attached to each school; and beefing up careers visits to employers.

All of these might help but giving careers advice to young people is not easy; the youngsters are not always clear about their career interests and the labour market is constantly shifting. High Streets are changing in front of our eyes while the sorts of jobs being tipped for a post recession recovery are also evolving. On top of all this, an apprenticeship qualification is not easy to understand. In fact it's not a



qualification in the traditional sense at all, rather it's a framework of different components, some skills based, some knowledge based, laced with a dash of personal development and plenty of good old fashioned learning in the workplace. The current consultation on the Apprenticeship Standards in England will help in that it should standardise some of the features, such as the amount of time to be spent in supervised study away from the workplace, "*off-workstation learning*" to use the consultation's Orwellian description but it still leaves a qualification that can be difficult to get your head around.

So what else might help? Perhaps four things. First, the Association of Learning Providers and DCSF are working on a campaign to go into schools to highlight what apprenticeships are; another spoonful of 'Sugar' to complement the current campaign from Sir Alan. This could become part of the NCEE business links relationship. Second, work is also going on to align apprenticeships to other routes in the 14-19 framework, a Report on the relationship with Diplomas is due out shortly. This may help teachers at least see how the different routes interrelate. Third, under new planning arrangements for 14-19 provision, greater emphasis is being placed on matching 14-19 provision to the needs of local economies. This should make apprenticeships feel more relevant to young people. And fourth, many qualifications are now becoming modular, unitised and in effect composite; thus apprenticeships frameworks as a model for learning may become the norm.

What about the second problem that of improving progression opportunities into further and higher education for apprentices?

Both Parties have taken an interest in this area. At the Conservative Party Conference last September, David Willetts promised to strengthen the '*vocational pathway into higher education*' by creating a system of "*skills scholarships*" aimed particularly at apprenticeships in STEM subject areas and covering the costs of part-time study for those in work. As for Labour, in welcoming this Report, John Denham confirmed the Government's commitment to incorporating Apprenticeship frameworks into the UCAS tariff by 2010 and, as stated in the New Opportunities White Paper earlier this year, reviewing "*how we can expand and promote such pathways to higher education.*"

The numbers progressing from an apprenticeship into higher education are pretty miniscule, just over 200 according to the figure quoted in this Report and dropping so there is enormous room for improvements. Part of the problem is that it's difficult to get precise figures on progression which is why one important recommendation in this Report is for "*a new and comprehensive method of data collection*" using the Unique Learner Number Record. Other recommendations are for greater access to bridging courses and, as for school teachers, a campaign of awareness raising amongst admissions tutors.

Are there other things that might help here too? Again a few are worth mentioning. One is to ensure that the apprenticeship route is included as part of the Government's proposed new vision for HE due this summer; it received little mention in last year's reviews. Another is to look at the issue of bursaries for part-time provision and another is to use the proposed completion certificate for apprenticeships to focus UCAS tariff discussions.

A higher level skills strategy is due out next month. You certainly don't have to wait long for Reports in this area.

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