

2014/31

3 June 2014

Pocket Watch – Apprenticeship Latest

Introduction

This week the annual gathering of education and training providers brought Ministers from both sides hurrying down to set out their stalls. The hot topic has been apprenticeships where the Government claims to be on track to meet both quality and quantity targets but where debates continue about the impact of the funding reforms. In a speech laced with extravagant metaphors, "*I think of our apprenticeship reforms like the digital switchover to television*" the Minister argued that things were on track and they were '*getting behind apprenticeships like no Government before us.*' The Opposition could perhaps equally claim some credit for the apprenticeship revival and for them Liam Byrne was on hand to set out their current thinking. This is a brief summary of three key messages from the Matthew Hancock's **speech**.

Current context

Both major Parties remain committed to the apprenticeship route and see it as essential in providing both high-quality training opportunities as well as a skilled workforce for the future. In pursuit of this the Government has introduced new quality features, committed funds to high-level apprenticeships and pledged to position apprenticeships as the standard alternative option for young people leaving school but the implementation of a more employer-driven system under the Richard reforms and in particular the funding contribution through employers is proving controversial. For the Opposition, Ed Miliband has equally highlighted the importance of a more employer driven apprenticeship system in two Conference leadership speeches while its Skills Taskforce has called for no less than "*a revolution in apprenticeships*" in which employers would be given large chunks of the youth budget to help devise a high-quality training route built around apprenticeships increasingly positioned at L3.

Three big messages from the Minister's speech

1. The Government sees its reforms of apprenticeships as not just an essential modernising exercise (hence the reference to the digital switchover and the launch of the new online toolkit to help employers recruit those with disabilities) but as part of its broader sweep of qualification reform intended to bring greater reassurance of value to users (hence the reference to both end testing and grading in the new standards)
2. Trailblazers remain the preferred vehicle for creating a new employer-orientated skills system, hence the reference to the number of employers already involved (more than 400,) to the importance of the new standards being developed ("*creating a world-class basis for occupations from software developers to engineers*") to the launch of a third phase of Trailblazers in September and to the commitment that every apprenticeship start will be on the new (employer designed) standards by Sept 2017
3. Funding reform is proving to be a long haul. While it continues to chew over how best to transfer funds to employers with perhaps the Credit system getting the edge, the Government will test out a new system for new standards starts, potentially from this summer but more realistically from next Jan. This will see a co-investment model of a 2:1 balance of contributions from Government and employers, with Government contributions capped at one of five levels and employers able to negotiate costs. Functional skills, 16-18 yr olds and SMEs would attract additional contributions but, and it's an important one, the funding would be routed through existing training providers or in certain cases, employers. Price comparisons and employer required cash contributions now become the battleground

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