

2015/10

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Pocket Watch – Three Lessons from National Apprenticeship Week

Introduction

So as another busy National Apprenticeship Week draws to a close, what have we learned? Arguably three things. First, that there's growing interest in both pre-level and higher-level apprenticeships; second that the Apprenticeship Trailblazers and Traineeship schemes are going OK but that more needs doing; and third that a number of issues around apprenticeships remain. Here's a quick run-down on each of these three key areas.

Young and higher-level apprenticeships

Re-creating a young or pre-apprenticeship route has been a source of debate for some time and surfaced again this week with the **Education Committee**, the **AoC** and the **AELP** all calling for a dedicated programme. The Education Committee proposed reviving the 14-16 Young Apprenticeship scheme or something similar while the AoC and AELP called for the Traineeship scheme for 16-24 year olds to be built in as a stepping stone programme. At the other end of the scale where Labour has been focusing its interest recently and where the government has been promoting its new Degree Apprenticeships, Professors Sir Keith Burnett and Sir Nigel Thrift, Vice-Chancellors at Sheffield and Warwick Universities respectively published a **Paper** calling for a new HEFCE funded higher vocational route leading to 40,000 more higher apprenticeships as part of a new 'gold standard' higher vocational route. It's getting to be a busy route.

Apprenticeship Trailblazer and Traineeship Schemes

Commissioned evaluations on both of these were published by the BIS Dept this week, early days in both cases but with some useful initial analysis all the same. On the **Trailblazers**, closer employer working has helped raise the quality and status of the standards though there have been issues over assessment, grading and general working practices that have not been helped by uncertainty over the future funding regime and over initial remits and roles. On the first year of **traineeships**, numbers are growing and according to the Skills Minister hoping to double to 20,000 this year, most (79%) trainees appear happy with their training and over a half have progressed on to an apprenticeship, work or further training. Some teething problems remain over the referral process, guidance and support and English and maths provision and a fuller survey will be undertaken next year.

Current Issues

Nothing particularly new here perhaps but three areas where concerns remain high. First funding, variously highlighted by the Education Committee, the think tank Demos and Edge where the general consensus is that any new regime should allow employers some element of choice and shouldn't be so complicated as to put employers off. The Skills Minister has recently confirmed that *'giving employers direct control over funding for apprenticeship training and assessment remains a non-negotiable part of our reforms.'* Second, mentioned by all of the above and more, the need to improve guidance and information especially at a school level and especially about work-based alternatives where, as the Education Committee reported: *"there remains a cultural preference for the academic over the vocational."* And third, also a pretty universal issue, quality and how best to ensure it with Labour's Chuka Umanna in his **speech** during the week citing his Party's commitment to 2yr/Level 3 apprenticeships as part of *"a new universal gold standard."*

Steve Besley
Head of Policy



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