

2015/29

22 October 2015

Pocket Watch – Ofsted raise questions about Apprenticeships

Introduction

'Guilty parties,' 'abuse of trust,' 'organise yourselves,' just some of the strong language used by Ofsted's Chief Inspector this week as he launched the inspectorate's latest **report** on apprenticeships. The report follows concerns raised by the Chief Inspector in his Annual Report last year particularly about the poor take-up among young people and the lack of skill development in some programmes. Subsequently, Ofsted undertook further survey and visit work and this report is the result of that. The sub-text is: *'how well do apprenticeships meet the needs of young people, their employers and the economy?'* The answer is not well enough...yet

The current context

As has been regularly touted, the government has positioned apprenticeships as a major policy priority for the duration of this Parliament. 2.38m apprenticeship were delivered over the last Parliament and a new target has been set of 3m over this one. The argument is that these are good for business, good for individuals and good for the country at large. The latest data published a couple of weeks ago shows that there were 492,700 apprenticeship starts in the academic year 2014-15 but that at 16-18 and for higher level apprenticeships, both key priorities for the government, there were only modest increases. That said, the government is undertaking a major reform programme designed to ensure that apprenticeships are high-quality, meet employer and learner needs and deliver what's needed more generally. The reforms include the development of recognised industry standards through industry-led trailblazers, the introduction of an employer's levy and provision for a statutory definition of apprenticeships to be applied. In fairness these reforms have yet to be implemented meaning the Ofsted report reflects a 'before' rather than an 'after' position

What did Ofsted find?

In the words of an accompanying press release Ofsted found that *"the government's ambition to boost apprenticeships in England and create a higher skilled workforce is being undermined."* And it is being undermined by a number of problems summarised as follows:

- There's too much variable and poor quality provision. *"Inspectors found that in a third of the 45 providers visited, apprenticeships did not provide sufficient, high-quality training that stretched apprentices and improved their capabilities."* The report went on to cite examples of too much making of coffee and sandwiches and cleaning the floors rather than specific skill development, a claim disputed by AELP in Conference this week and one which was clearly not the case in many 'traditional' apprenticeship schemes but where the service industries appeared to be the main culprits
- Not enough young people, 16-18 year olds, are taking up apprenticeships. This has been an issue for some time and debate continues to rage about why this is the case. As the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) pointed out in its response, the decimation of careers guidance for young people has hardly helped but Ofsted feel that more could and should be done by schools and colleges both to inform and to prepare young people for apprenticeships. It's a point the Edge Foundation and the British Chambers of Commerce in their recent reports have been making for some time and it well may be as the Association of Colleges argue that we need a return to some kind of pre-apprenticeship programme as a way in. Either way the issue of information and careers guidance continues to ring loud and clear
- Apprenticeship growth hasn't been focused on the sectors where the skill shortages are at their most acute. Again not a new issue and one that the Engineering and Construction Boards respectively have been raising for some time but one that's becoming increasingly important as the government's Productivity Plan takes shape. *"Nationally the number of*

apprentices starting since 2009/10 has almost doubled in business, admin and law and nearly tripled in health and care. Over the same period, in IT and engineering, the increase was at a lower rate and in construction, the number declined." Websites like 'Go Construct' and 'Tomorrow's Engineers' all help, let alone the 'Get in.Go far' marketing drive from the National Apprenticeship Service and other agencies but it's clearly a hard slog and in need of some new momentum

- Employers, especially small and medium-sized business need to do more. This year's CBI/Pearson Employers' Survey reported that 66% of employers surveyed were involved in apprenticeships in some form with two-thirds of them looking to do more. Things like the apprenticeship Grant for Employers and the current publicity around apprenticeships have clearly helped but Ofsted is concerned that too many employers have been slow to get involved and many, particularly small businesses, find the whole engagement process daunting. *"They told inspectors they fear that a burden of bureaucracy would fall on them."* The Chief Inspector urged businesses not to hold back: *"organise yourselves. It's no use waiting for others to put structures in place...use your networks and knowledge to find solutions."* How far such strictures work remains to be seen but for many, the uncertainty over the levy and where to start at a local level, remain big issues

So what would a 'good' apprenticeship look like?

The report goes on to list some of the key features of what it considered to be 'successful' apprenticeships, most of which were to be found in the more established areas of motor vehicle, engineering and construction

Broadly this comes down to good practice before, during and after. So at the before stage, best schemes invite the candidate in for a probationary period, establish rules and set clear goals. During the programme, apprentices are encouraged develop relevant skills including English and maths and are supported through regular reviews. And after, apprentices are helped with progression onwards and upwards and their contribution evaluated. It sounds motherhood and apple pie stuff but involves a lot of time, effort and resource and as Ofsted found, many schemes were not able to provide all this

What's Ofsted recommending?

The report lists 15 recommendations, mainly aimed at government and providers and at this stage fairly broad brush in nature

Urging schools and colleges for instance to *"provide impartial careers guidance about apprenticeships to all pupils and their parents,"* is of course worth highlighting but as the ASCL comment earlier indicated, if there's no formal mechanism in place for this to happen then it's not going to get very far. Having said that if, as the report indicates, some schools were actually blocking providers and employers from going in and offering advice, then this raises a bigger issue about the impartiality of such advice and guidance.

The issue seems to be as the Chief Inspector put it in his closing remarks when launching the report: *"we have won the argument over the value of apprenticeships but we have yet to make them a sought-after and valid alternative career choice for hundreds of thousands of young people."* That's the challenge that sits alongside the dash to deliver 3m more apprenticeship places



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Ofsted on Apprenticeships Oct 2015