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Pocket Watch – Implementing apprenticeships and youth training

Introduction

Three weeks after the Prime Minister's Conference speech highlighted the importance of tackling youth unemployment, the Government has **announced** two further developments intended to do just that. One is the launch of a 4-year implementation plan, designed to develop and test out a series of reforms to the apprenticeship system in England first proposed in the Richard Review last year. And the other is the creation of a number of employer backed training schemes designed to help young people get back into work or into an apprenticeship. They come as the latest unemployment figures show youth unemployment failing to match the drop in adult unemployment and as alternative 'training' schemes such as the Youth Contract struggle to deliver. There may already be a review under way looking at 16-25 yr old provision, the Heywood review, but the Government is clearly keen to be seen taking action in an area that has always been politically sensitive.

What's being proposed for apprenticeships?

In the words of the Prime Minister, the aim is to make the apprenticeship system "*the best in the world.*" World class qualifications has been the mantra for reform of the 'academic' system and a similar approach is being adopted here in the hope of creating an equally respected system. Essentially that means three things.

First making the apprenticeship system '*more rigorous and responsive,*' applying therefore the two Rs that have been driving so much of the reform of the current vocational system and which the Government hopes will provide a model template for vocational reform generally. The aim here is to generate greater clarity about what an apprenticeship is by applying four principles. Also to develop a more rigorous approach to assessment where three principles are listed, ensure greater emphasis on minimum programme duration ("*all apprenticeships will be required to last at least 12 months,*") and on requirements in English and maths, increasingly through reformed GCSEs.

Second, granting employers greater ownership and oversight of the apprenticeship system, building on for instance the model being used for Employer Ownership Pilots (EOPs.) Apart from increasing the direct funding of employers, for which consultation has just closed and won't be reported on until "*later this year,*" this means giving employers greater ownership not just of assessment but also of the design of standards where up to seven principles are listed.

Third, putting in place a system to stress-test these proposals over the next couple of years through a system of industry-led partnerships. At present, eight such Trailblazers have been designated, broadly matching many of the key sectors in the Government's current industrial Strategy. Others will come on stream over the next year or so and with funding support from the Gatsby Foundation will help develop new employer-led standards for each occupation.

That's the theory but in practice a lot of the detail remains sketchy. There's little for example on improving awareness and careers guidance on apprenticeships. Also, funding arrangements as indicated remain to be resolved while other changes would require amendments to the current legislation although the Government appears to have precipitated this by using the forthcoming Deregulation Bill. More immediately, many practitioners will be concerned about quite how standards, "*one for each occupation identified by employers*" will be drawn up particularly as they need to be short (1 side of A4,) easy to understand, describe right levels of skill, knowledge and competency, and focus on mastery. That's some brief. Likewise assessment where the three principles (at least 2/3 must be at the end, there must be a synoptic element and the end product should be graded) also leave a lot of questions. Grading, for instance, provoked "*mixed reactions*" in the consultation and still does; to quote AELP, "*the diversity of delivery will make grading apprentices a very difficult task that will add substantial bureaucracy to the system.*"

What about the new youth training schemes?

These were announced by the Prime Minister at the same time as the implementation plan and appear to be a further attempt to generate more employer-backed opportunities for young people. *"We've been talking to some of the biggest companies in Britain, massive global brands where young people have a real opportunity to progress up the ladder, and they have said they want to offer 100,000 vocational training schemes for young people."*

At present the fit with Traineeships, let alone the funding and design of such programmes remains unclear but the role model is the successful programmes run for many years by the Prince's Trust. Many of these were highlighted in a report from the Trust that came out during this year's exam results time in the summer stressing how important it was for young people to acquire vocational skills.

The sorts of programmes the Trust runs for young people include the well-known Fairbridge and Enterprise programmes but also programmes such as Get Started and Get Into, all run by professionals and targeted at unemployed 16-25 year olds. It is these sorts of programmes that the Prime Minister is keen to emulate.

A headline summary of the main proposals

- An Apprenticeship to be defined in future by four principles: a job, requiring substantial training, leading to full competency as defined by employers, with transferable skills
- All Apprenticeships to last a minimum of 12 months with 20% minimum off-the-job training
- Apprenticeships to be based on standards designed by employers
- A single standard for each occupation identified by employers
- Standards to meet particular criteria including occupational competence, stretching content, related professional skills and required levels of English and maths
- A single assessment 'approach' to be applied for each standard incorporating independent assessment
- 75% end-point assessment
- Grading of pass, merit, distinction to be applied to the full standard
- No minimum entry requirements for English and maths but an expectation that apprentices will either have achieved or be working towards requisite standards
- Employer-led Trailblazers to test out development of the new Apprenticeships in a sector
- Ofsted to monitor and report on provision
- Transitional arrangements to apply during 2015/16 and 2016/17 and full implementation of new Apprenticeships to apply from 2017/18



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Apprenticeship implementation Oct 2013