

Apprenticeship or bust: An analysis of Coalition policy development

Abstract

Introduction

“Our preoccupation with education as an engine of growth has not only narrowed the way we think about social policy. It has also narrowed – dismally and progressively – our vision of education itself.”

(Wolf, 2002, p.254)

The issue of how to successfully improve education, skills and training is one that has exercised Governments for over 25 years (Wolf, 2002), the current Secretary of State for Education suggests a real period of 160 years, since the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Gove, 2010a). This focus has intensified as the World economy has struggled and youth unemployment has risen. Politicians see apprenticeship and work place training as a means to managing unemployment and stimulating economic growth; what has been referred to as a “silver bullet” (LSN, 2011, p.1)¹ or “panacea” (Doel in Bynner et al., 2011, p.48). This is a belief which has been tested by Alison Wolf in several pieces of work and she draws conclusions that show the evidence for such positive outcomes is “extremely weak” (Wolf, 2004, p.316). However, as she describes, such beliefs are reinforced by the greater economic success / growth of other developed nations, where vocational education / apprenticeship is a well established and, arguably, successful approach (Wolf, 2002).

International comparisons for education and skills have long been quoted by Government ministers as justification for reform (Wolf, 2002), particularly comparisons, even “fixation” (Wolf, 2002, p.71) with the German ‘dual’ system, which sees Apprenticeship as a major alternative to traditional

¹ LSN – Learning and Skills Network

academic routes. This approach even, supposedly, inspired the development of the British Youth Training Scheme in 1983 (Wolf, 2002). Yet, according to Wolf:

“there is no correlation whatsoever between teenagers’ performance on international surveys of attainment and economic performance in the following decades.”

(Wolf, 2004, p.322)

Despite this lack of clear empirical evidence, both members of the coalition government made ‘Apprenticeship’ an education and skills priority in their 2010 election manifestos and it is an area in which policy implementation has been rapid, heavily publicised and criticised..

In this review I will discuss the development of policy from pre-election to the present phase of policy implementation. Vocational training and Apprenticeship, within policy, sits in a zone of tension between Education (Pre-18 schooling and Further Education) and Skills (Business / Industry, H.E and adult learning). It is also a very broad area to discuss and so this paper seeks to review how the coalition government is addressing it with a particular focus on apprenticeship as education. Although the belief that successful development of skills will boost growth is questionable, the cost benefit to the treasury of keeping young people in education or training at a time of high youth unemployment seems obvious to me.

My approach will be based on my constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology and will draw on the work of Bourdieu, Foucault and Bernstein. I will follow policy development from intention through to actual policy, whether as text or as practice, using an analysis framework proposed by Ball and Bowe (Ball & Bowe, 1992) . I will also discuss policy-in-use and the outcomes and unintended consequences of the policy as implemented to date.

Method

I have already stated my ontological and epistemological standpoint and these underpin my methodology, which will be mainly qualitative in nature. There may be some points in the review where there is a need to discuss or analyse data presented in the literature and from that perspective I cannot completely discount the possibility of a more quantitative element to the analysis. However, in general, the nature of the review suggests that interpretation of policy discourse is more likely to provide insight into the policy development.

The method will take the form of literature / documentary review and analysis. It is important to note that I recognise the weakness inherent in this approach, both in terms of the short time period of the review, which will limit the information I can engage with and the potential risk in an interpretative approach to my projecting my own misconceptions and political views on to my analysis. Being aware of this I can at least do all I can to minimize these risks.

About Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship has a long history in the UK (Bynner *et al.*, 2011), but what is referred to as Apprenticeship now does not necessarily reflect the historic notion of the title. The concept of apprenticeship is used internationally as a means to defining work based learning or training schemes, but my preferred definition is:

“Apprenticeships combine the development of theoretical knowledge about a particular occupation or range of occupations with practical experience gained from doing the job. Apprenticeship training should lay the foundation for occupational competence and the capacity to add to this as required throughout working life.”

(MacLeod & Hughes, 2006, p.3)

The definition loses a lot of the historic significance of apprenticeship as a well established ‘model of learning’ and concept, which “transcends occupational boundaries and hierarchies” (Unwin & Fuller in Bynner *et al.*, 2011, p.29).

In medieval guilds, young people (usually boys) were funded by their parents to undertake an apprenticeship with a Master craftsman – this could take seven years. They learnt in the workshop until they had developed the necessary skills and techniques to undertake a “chef d’oeuvre” (a work demonstrating his skills) , successful completion of which would see the end of the apprenticeship and promotion to the rank of Journeyman (Sennett, 2008, p.58) and from there on to their own Mastery. This approach not only allowed the apprentice to develop their skills with the support of the Master, his Journeymen and more senior apprentices, but exposed him to a ‘community of practice’ where he was both trained and socialised – learning how to *behave* as a craftsman in that particular craft as well as developing the essential skills and knowledge. Often the apprentice would live with the Master and their family, with the Master acting in loco parentis – indentured through a “religious oath” (ibid). This legally bound, familial approach to learning acted as a route to adulthood and citizenship in a greater sense (Bynner *et al.*, 2011, p.30).

The community of practice approach of apprenticeship can be described, in terms of learning theory, as a “situated” approach, grounded in the social constructivism and cultural mediation of Dewey and Vygotsky but perhaps best described as a specific paradigm by Lave and Wenger (Halpern, 2009).

The immersive approach outlined above can be seen as a craft-specific culture or form of everyday life, rather than training. The everyday routines and practices become a mode of experiential learning within the situation or context of the apprenticeship, or as Jean Lave states:

“participation in everyday life may be thought of as a process of changing understanding in practice, that is, as learning”

(Illeris et al., 2009, p.201)

The experience of apprenticeship, according to Lave and Wenger, is dependent on a “legitimate peripheral participation” in the “community of practice” (Fuller & Unwin, 2003, p.408). The community of practice conveys:

“ how people learn through mutual engagement in an activity which is defined by the negotiation of meanings both inside and outside the community”

(Fuller & Unwin, 2003, p.408)

I would suggest that such immersion in a culture and community would effectively ‘construct’ not just the skills of the craftsman but also the habitus – developing, shaping and embedding the broader shared values, beliefs and social behaviours of that craft (field) community or guild. Cultural capital would increase over time as the apprentice moved further into the community of practice - “from the periphery to the middle” (Lave & Wenger in Halpern, 2009, p.139); as an increasingly experienced member and demonstrated mastery of both skills and social practices. Ultimately, becoming a Master within the chosen field could offer significant symbolic, cultural and economic capital with Master craftsmen being held in great esteem across society.

So how does this social model of learning relate to apprenticeship today? It is clear that things would be bound to change over hundreds of years and against societal upheaval and revolution. In the modern Industrial context apprenticeship has been defined as:

“a method of employment and on-the-job [usually complemented by off-the-job] training which involves a set of reciprocal rights and duties between employer and a trainee (usually a young person)”

(Gospel, 1995, p.32)

In more recent times a third stakeholder has been added to this arrangement in the form of the state who increasingly provide funding (Fuller & Unwin, 2003) and regulatory structures.

The most recent history of apprenticeship in the UK is fairly turbulent. Having maintained a presence in the education landscape for much of the 20th century, a decline started in the 1960s (Cable in Bynner *et al.*, 2011) and continued through the Thatcher years of Conservative government, which saw reductions in the scale of the British manufacturing industry. The decline became more pronounced after 1992 (Maguire, 1998) despite attempts being made to resurrect apprenticeship in 1995 with the ‘Modern Apprenticeship’ brand. Modern Apprenticeship:

“was introduced to build on the positive aspects of the old-style apprenticeship, revitalising the notion of apprenticeship training”

(Maguire, 1998, p.247-248)

Since the 1990s there have been fundamental differences in the level of involvement of the state in terms of funding, (which I will revisit in the policy analysis section), standards and the replacement of the ‘time-serving’ element of apprenticeship with ‘competence-based’ qualifications (ibid).

Reducing the time spent on apprenticeship made them more 'restrictive' in nature (Fuller & Unwin, 2003) and removed the opportunity for the apprentice to develop in a more 'expansive' (ibid) situated way, mastering skills and becoming 'socialised' in the craft – it became less of a method of learning and more a 'Brand' for general training programmes (Fuller & Unwin in Bynner *et al.*, 2011) and I would suggest, is now less easily described as a deeply situated approach to learning.

Modern apprenticeships were also increasingly prevalent at level 2 (GCSE equivalent) and could best be described as conversions from low level training schemes (ibid) such as 'Train to Gain', which attracted Government subsidy – this in turn has generated concern over the lack of 'Advanced' apprenticeships working at level 3 and progressing to University level (level 4) (LSN, 2011). This change, which sees the UK system as characterised by "low status, poor standards, and in general, an undemanding route for low attaining students" (Nilsson, 2010, p.261); could have been driven by pressure on agencies attempting to meet the ambitious training and skills targets that came out of the Leitch review (Keep & James in Bynner *et al.*, 2011) which have since been dismantled by the coalition (Maude, 2010). To summarise in the words of Keep and James:

"Even the New Labour architects of Train to Gain would probably have balked at describing this training as 'apprenticeship' – and employers elsewhere in Europe would certainly do so."

(Keep & James in Bynner *et al.*, 2011, p.56)

This begs the question of how apprenticeship is delivered in the rest of the World. The Apprenticeship model is used in Austria, France, Germany, Ireland and Switzerland as well as in Australia (Steedman, 2010) and parts of the USA (Halpern, 2009). In Germany, Switzerland and Austria the state operate what is known as a 'Dual system' where apprenticeship combines the industrial training delivered by an employer, with general education (as opposed to the UK style technical certification) delivered by a vocational school or college (Steedman, 2010). The details of each system differ. Time spent in European schemes can last between 2 and 4 years, however UK

apprenticeships were between 1 and 2 years (ibid) but now average 28 weeks (Keep & James in Bynner *et al.*, 2011) due to the recent inclusion of training programmes within the apprenticeship brand. In Australia the time spent is 3 to 4 years (Knight & Karmel in Bynner *et al.*, 2011).

Apprentices are paid as employees in the UK where they have an average pay well above other apprenticeship countries (Steedman, 2010), but in Germany they are paid a small allowance and are treated as students, offsetting employer costs.

Perhaps one of the biggest differences is in take up. In Germany, where the system is highly regulated (Wolf, 2002), nearly two thirds of school leavers each year become apprentices (Steedman, 2010) and completion of the apprenticeship is a culturally accepted 'transition' to adulthood. Even if an apprentice goes into a different industry after completion, they are considered employable – while those who refuse or fail to complete apprenticeship or higher education can be seen as not worth employing (Wolf, 2002). The German system has “had an enormous influence on other countries' policy makers” (Wolf, 2002, p.162) but as Wolf explains, it is not a perfect system and has been uniquely crafted by Germany's history and experience so that it can't simply be copied by other nations (Wolf, 2002).

Intended Policy

The coalition partners follow a philosophy of education, which is neo-liberal in nature and their rhetoric and policies seem to closely mirror the 1980's – privatisation, greater independence for schools and less regulation (Ball & Exley, 2011, p.97-98). This core ideology advocates a minimal state and a belief that the market model is the best solution. Ball summarises this as including:

“ a push for privatisation, ‘liberation’ of schools to innovate and diversify and an enhanced role for parents as consumers in an educational market place.”

(Ball & Exley, 2011, p.97)

Thatcherite neo-liberalism, which in my view has been reinvigorated in the current Conservative agenda, despite discourse around compassionate conservatism; promotes a culture of ‘competitive individualism’ (Ball, 2006), where the individual has the right to choice and self-interested control and should be free to exploit the consumerist society without regulatory structures inhibiting opportunity. Ball describes this in Hayekian terms as ‘Freedom from’ – a type of negative freedom, rather than ‘Freedom to’ (Ball, 2006). The argument is that freedom of choice will ensure more effective, efficient and (ultimately) cheaper to the taxpayer; public services.

These views are clearly illustrated, at least in general ‘education’ terms, by the pre-election speeches of both coalition partners. Both parties promoted freedom of (consumer) choice through creation of Free schools and Academies (Gove, 2010b), freedom from “Meddling politicians” (Laws, 2009) and local bureaucracy, freedom from an overly constraining National Curriculum, inspections and, in the Lib Dem case, excessive power for the Secretary of State (ibid). Michael Gove has, instead, adopted additional powers by subsuming many of the Quasi-autonomous bodies (Quangos) that were a feature of the previous administration.

Conservative policy on education and skills seems to have dominated the coalition agenda,

promoted by Mr. Gove, who represents a strong “Traditionalist” lobby within his party:

“In Gramscian fashion the Conservatives believe that a return to traditional teaching methods in primary schools will raise attainment of working class students”

(Ball & Exley, 2011, p.102)

He tries to construct hegemony within the education discourse through ‘truth’ that outcomes could never improve without this traditionalist approach – a ‘common sense’ justification for reform.

(Gove, 2010b). This traditionalist agenda is reflected through the discourse that Gove constructs. He uses terms like “rigorous” to describe “traditional subjects” and “soft” when referring to newer subjects like Media studies. He demonstrates distrust of ‘progressivism’ through describing new developments as “fashionable nonsense” and “faddy ideologies” (ibid). Using the educational ideologies described by Ernest, he fits the ‘Old Humanist’ model – promoting a return to previously established standards through traditional methods of selection and the transfer of cultural information (Ernest, 1991).

Cosin parallels the ‘Old Humanist’ description to conservative / elitist ideology (Ernest, 1991) and I would argue that the ultimate end of the elitist is to reproduce inequality. In a free market some must lose out for this to happen (Ball, 1994) “Conservative philosophy focuses on liberty and ‘fraternity’, but not equality.”(Ball & Exley, 2011, p.15). This is achieved by reproducing that inequality through the ‘distribution rules’ of the policy or system. The ‘best’ schools attract greater numbers of ‘middle class’ children because their parents are more able to make informed choices and to exploit the system (attending church, moving house). This can be attributed to the greater ‘cultural capital’ of the middle class in relation to choice (Ball, 1994, p.119). In addition, better social and financial resources combine with a class-based habitus that drives them to maximise opportunities (music lessons, languages, clubs, exposure to Culture) to their offspring’s advantage – i.e. they benefit from the “domestic transmission of cultural capital” (Bourdieu in Ball, 2006, p.265).

This leaves more socioeconomically deprived children to access the 'sink schools' – Mr. Gove's term (Gove, 2010b) or end up in low level vocational training.

Coalition education policy also has the techno-rationalist underpinnings of the Industrial Trainer ideology (Ball & Exley, 2011) – in that they recognise the need for a suitably trained workforce. Consequently, the neo-liberal, traditionalist ideology was also reflected in pre-election discourse around apprenticeship. The Liberal Democrat manifesto and Conservative green paper - "Building skills and transforming lives: a training and apprenticeship revolution" summarise the policy intentions. Once again there was neo-liberal intent to provide 'freedom from' in that the system should be 'controlled' by companies to determine and freed from Ministerial 'whims' and bureaucracy (Cameron in Makepeace, 2008, p.3).

I would summarise the key policy intentions as follows:

1. Significant additional funding - £775 million to fund 100000 new apprenticeship places each year. (Makepeace, 2008)
2. Funding direct to employers
 - a. fully fund 77000 existing places (Makepeace, 2008)
 - b. try to support more small & medium sized businesses to take on apprentices - £2000 per place bonus (Makepeace, 2008)
 - c. address an 'opportunity gap' through the public sector (Makepeace, 2008).
3. Greater emphasis on apprenticeship as an alternative to University (Clegg, 2010) and address standards (replace Train to Gain (Clegg, 2010))– targeting 'Technician' level (level 3 – 4)
4. Ensure apprenticeships are 'real' – combining workplace training and off-the-job general and

academic skills with progression to higher level (Gove, 2009)

5. Treble 'Young Apprenticeships' – a programme for 14-16 year olds introduced by the Labour administration (Gove, 2009)

There are some key questions from these proposals. Why give more money to employers, is there a capacity to provide significantly more places and what does 'real' actually mean? I will address these questions as part of discussion of 'Actual Policy'.

Actual Policy

Changes to funding arrangements happened quickly, perhaps because policy and legislative infrastructure was already in place (Ball & Exley, 2011). In May 2010 the coalition announced £150 million to fund 50,000 new apprenticeship places for the over 19s and October saw a further £250 million per year committed to apprenticeship (Rhodes, 2011); this is clearly less than the Green Paper proposed. However, the economic and employment landscape was significantly different to that which existed at the time of the Green Paper and the reduced amount was consistent with other governmental 'austerity' measures. Despite the reduced levels of funding, Vince Cable sought to maximise the political capital that could be made from any expenditure by stating "I regard the growth in apprenticeships as one of the government's most notable successes" (Cable, 2011)

The Government re-stated their intent to 'improve the programme' with level 3 being the target for apprentices and employers along with provision for progression to level 4 (Rhodes, 2011) Cable again stating that they had ensured "stringent new standards" resulting in an apparent 82% increase in 'Advanced apprenticeships' (Cable, 2011). However, the figure he quoted was against 2009 – giving no real insight in to how many had occurred under the coalition policy implementation.

Despite the initial rapid implementation of the funding aspect of apprenticeship policy, there was

uncertainty about education / skills in the schooling phases. Actual policy became the commissioning of Prof. Alison Wolf to undertake a major review of Vocational Education, including apprenticeship. There had been several significant reviews in the preceding years, including Leitch and the Nuffield Foundation published one in 2010, but the Nuffield 'demands' may not have sat well with the coalition agenda as they were, in my view, more socially democratic in nature (Pring et al., 2009).

The Humanist, Oxbridge educated, Conservative habitus of the Michael Gove would not naturally resonate with the modern world of vocational training. He recognised the 'long-term weakness' of practical learning in England and even acknowledged an "inherited aristocratic disdain for trade" (Gove, 2010a), but when discussing the issue he focused on 'the beauty of craft skills' and the 'submission to vocational disciplines', evoking Sennett's work and promoting an historic, cultural image of training which sits with his classicist philosophy.

In Bourdieu's terms: practice= field +[(capital)(habitus)] (Maton in Bourdieu, 2008, p.51). Michael Gove's capital in the field at this point was low because of the problems which had beset the Department for Education - the cancellation of BSF² funding deemed unlawful (Dowell, 2011), criticism of the 'English Baccalaureate' (Stewart & Ross, 2011) and the rapid implementation of free schools, which was also received less than positively in the education community (Garner, 2011). Is it possible that this, combined with his 'habitus', suggested a need for some 'capital reinforcement' to underpin the next phase in policy delivery?

Alison Wolf is a respected professor who holds symbolic capital within the education field. However, her relationship to Gove via her daughter's role in NSN³ (Ball & Exley, 2011) could, perhaps, have led to a potential conflict of interest. In my view, her report essentially underlines some of the policy statements that Michael Gove had made prior to the commissioning (my selection in summary):

² Building Schools for the Future

³ New Schools Network

1. Core English / maths with vocational training
2. Need to address the equivalency of qualifications to address perverse incentives for boosting league tables
3. Design of occupational standards removed from SSCs⁴
4. Allowing iGCSE⁵
5. Payments to employers for 16-18 apprentices
6. Review of contracting arrangements
7. Allow colleges to enrol under 16s

(Wolf, 2011).

However, she was also critical of governmental interference and of the focus of performance measures on the narrow A*-C range, consistent with her previous appeals that governments ‘abandon their love affair with quantitative targets’ (Wolf, 2004, p.330). Accepting the role of Government advisor provided Alison Wolf with significant symbolic capital in a capital ‘exchange’ with the Minister. It is also ensured economic capital, personally and institutionally, as she was then retained as a Government advisor. I am absolutely certain that, from her perspective, she was acting with the best intentions and aimed to achieve positive benefits to the system and learners. I think it is also fair to say that her review was well-received (Hobby, 2011), although Mr. Gove’s view of it as ‘brilliant’ and ‘groundbreaking’ may be a little obsequies. The Government adopted all of Wolf’s recommendations as policy (DfE, 2011).

Coalition policy rhetoric refers to ‘real’ apprenticeship. This can best be illustrated by reference to the companies that are named by Mr. Gove and Prof. Wolf – BT, Rolls-Royce and Network Rail (Gove, 2010a) and JCB (Wolf, 2002) . Each of these companies provides extended, advanced level and ‘expansive’ (Fuller & Unwin, 2003) apprenticeship programmes, they invest their own money and have done so consistently despite policy turbulence because “they needed and wanted highly skilled young employees and could see no other way to get them” (Wolf, 2002, p.161). Their programmes

⁴ Sector Skills Councils

⁵ International General Certificate of Secondary Education

are heavily oversubscribed and offer progression into Higher Education and to faster promotion (Gove, 2010a) . I would argue that they have proven the exception to apprenticeship policy rather than the rule. Getting business to follow this level of investment and self – development has consistently proven difficult (Keep & James in Bynner *et al.*, 2011), thus the push to ‘subsidise’ the apprenticeship market. The policy of funding apprenticeships directly through employers reflects the neo-liberal ideology of promoting growth and reducing central bureaucracy. However, Keep and James highlight a key issue of successive neo-liberal market driven policies which become evident ‘in-use’:

“the mass expansion of further and higher education in the UK over the last 30 years, much of it driven by demands from employer bodies such as CBI⁶, has greatly weakened the need for companies to organise themselves to deliver apprenticeships.”

(Keep & James in Bynner *et al.*, 2011, p.60)

Although successive governments have ‘talked-up’ (ibid) the need for apprenticeship, the expansion of ‘free’ higher education and the availability of pre-trained workers from the Europe-wide labour market (ibid) has acted as a disincentive for employers to undertake an approach which costs them money. This, combined with successive training programmes funded by Government “seems to have led employers to develop a learned reliance on government subsidy to pay for training” (Keep & James in Bynner *et al.*, 2011, p.58). Keep highlights an interesting ‘observable problem’ in that:

“many actors within the debate (most notably government and organisations that purport to represent employer views) endorse the notion of markets until the market delivers some outcome of which they disapprove, whereupon they suddenly become enthusiastic converts to the necessity of state subsidies in order to produce the effect that the market is not delivering.”

(Keep, 2009, p.18)

⁶ Confederation of British Industry

In order to generate the increased capacity for apprenticeship policy, the coalition believed that they would need to stimulate demand via subsidy, even though the increased demand may only exist as long as the subsidy (Keep, 2009, p.19) is being offered. However, changing the distribution rules for access to Higher Education (i.e. making it expensive) and more restrictive immigration policies may well yet have the effect of decreasing the pool of Graduates that employers have previously been able to access and ultimately support the policy.

A policy change which came from the Wolf Report was the ending of the Young Apprenticeship programme. Wolf said that the scheme was expensive, outcomes were poor and that “YA participation had a significant negative impact on the likelihood of a YA passing maths and English GCSE at A*-C” (Wolf, 2011, p.110). The 3rd cohort review of outcomes did show that the 43% of YA learners achieved the 5A*-C including English and maths measure, as opposed to 45% in YA schools and 48% nationally (Golden, O'Donnell & Benton, 2010). However, this measure is for YA students who **started** the programme. When the figure is calculated for those **completing** the programme the figure rises to 48% - in line with the national, even though the review stated that participants had “statistically significantly lower probability of achieving five A* to C grades at GCSE including English and maths” based on their prior attainment (ibid,p.17) . Results for GCSE are only ever for those who are entered for the exam rather than those who start courses – so the comparison is unfair as well as inaccurate.

Policy in Use

One unintended, although not (arguably) unexpected, outcome of the additional funding combined with the relabeling and branding of existing training as ‘apprenticeship’ (Keep & James in Bynner *et al.*, 2011) has been to skew the apprenticeship figures (Fuller & Unwin, 2011). Despite coalition rhetoric about ‘real’ apprenticeships and addressing the low level and quality of provision, the reported 447,000 new apprenticeships were mostly for over 25s with only 11000 going to 16-18 year

olds and the majority were at level 2 – not 3 (Stratton, 2011a). In fact, for a programme partly aimed at ‘ameliorating’ youth unemployment there was a “900% rise in apprenticeships for over-60s” (Stratton, 2011b). It is clear that by failing to address the distribution rules through regulation, the market is yet to respond to the need to target younger trainees. Employers are demonstrating a continued preference for trainees with more life experience and youth do not have equality of access to the field of reproduction. Newer apprenticeships continue to simply replace the heavily criticised Train to Gain programme, against intended policy, and are also failing to materialise in the identified priority area of construction (Shepherd, 2011).

Another unintended outcome which may be linked to this was the resignation of the two top executives in the apprenticeship schemes. Geoff Russell (SFA⁷) and Simon Waugh (NAS⁸) announced their intentions to stand down after a number of criticisms of misuse of public money by training providers. Mr. Russell felt this was only likely to increase given the greater use of sub-contractors (Barnes, 2012) under current policy. Resignations cause concern about stability and direction of policy and act as a negative pressure on political capital. So, in December 2011, John Hayes (Skills Minister) announced a review into “the quality and duration of all apprenticeship schemes” (ibid) alongside a major select committee enquiry. This creates an impression that the Ministry is in control and acting responsibly – an attempt to re-position the government against criticism.

Finally, there is the additional impact of the English Baccalaureate on the curriculum in schools, the changes to vocational equivalencies for league tables and the removal of funding for vocational / Young Apprenticeship routes; are already impacting on the curriculum choices of schools and students (Press Association, 2011). The coalition is promoting a ‘traditional’ academic route as preferred and opportunity for children to discover a vocation through College collaborations has reduced. This may well have later unintended consequences and the raising of the participation age

⁷ Skills Funding Agency

⁸ National Apprenticeship Service

to 18 will also apply more pressure to provide the apprenticeship and training places to cater for those who are unable to access higher level learning through A levels. Given my previous comments over the restricted access to the apprenticeship for those under 25, this will offer the coalition a persistent challenge unless something else changes.

Conclusions and recommendations

In order to achieve their stated policy intentions, I believe that the coalition have to address two key issues highlighted in my analysis.

The first is the 'learned dependence' of the business sector on state subsidy to provide training. This may yet be addressed by the current policies on Higher Education and immigration. Reduced numbers of graduates and skilled immigrants will increase the relative cost of their employment and make cheaper non-graduates seem more appealing. In addition, I would suggest that replacing direct subsidy with higher 'payment by outcome' would encourage greater employer investment and an aspiration to deliver higher level attainment. If this was 'ramped' with age, it could act as an incentive to take on greater numbers of younger apprentices – the reward for taking on a 16 year old and training them through to Level 3-4 should be generous. However, such reward should be coupled with high levels of expectation of the quality of apprenticeship and be linked to an 'expansive' provision which develops technical, general academic and social skills.

The second area that the coalition must address is inequality of access to the apprenticeship reproduction field for younger people. The Apprentice brand should be reserved for youth training programmes and should only describe the expansive approach mentioned above. Time served elements should be included and at least parallel other systems – this is important for the 'situated learning' and socialisation of the apprentice. Finally, although it doesn't sit well with neo-liberal

philosophy; the coalition must review whether additional legislation is needed to ensure equality or even preferred access for young people. This could be achieved in part through the means described above, but German style labour market regulation (allowing only successful apprentices to be certified and employed) or tax benefit incentives could also be used to stimulate greater take up. The Market must see that the benefits of investing in training and apprenticeship are good despite the cost, while the negatives are punitive and costly.

If the Coalition are able to address these two key issues, the opportunities for young people at a time of raised participation and reduced benefits; could easily pay dividends on many social and fiscal levels.

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