

Why can't we get apprenticeships right?

England has had a skills problem for at least 200 years. The causes are deep and cultural. We have not valued vocational education in the way that others like Germany have done. We spend much less money on it, whether that is when funds are scarce or plentiful. We look down on apprenticeships, which all too often our leaders of industry and society see as something that could be good for other people's children but obviously not for theirs.

Ever since the publication of the reports of the *Parliamentary Committee on the Education of the Lower Orders in the Metropolis and Beyond* in 1816-1818, there has been a long catalogue of reports that have either ignored the problem completely or lamented the lack of attention to it. As the historian Correlli Barnett observed in his hugely influential book, *The Audit of War. The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation*, published in 1986, the cost of this blind spot nearly robbed the UK of its life. In the Second World War Britain had a poorly educated workforce that could not compete with the far better German system of vocational education. The result was that German industry out-performed British industry by a considerable way. Britain was rescued as much by American machine tools for its war industries, which were far better than anything Britain could produce, as by the GIs who stormed ashore on the beaches of Normandy. It is not as if the signs were not clearly there. The Carnegie Trust report, *Disinherited Youth*, published in 1939, showed that no more than 1% of young people in the cities surveyed had emerged from the education system with any paper qualifications at all, academic or vocational.

When the Conservatives decided to reform apprenticeships during their recent period in power they found a system that was in desperate need of improvement. Apprenticeships were often of poor quality, under-funded and poorly understood. The Tory reforms of 2017 significantly changed the way apprenticeships were delivered and funded across the UK. It introduced the Apprenticeship Levy and aimed to create three million new apprentices by 2020; giving school leavers a viable alternative to traditional career and educational paths, which in turn aimed to upskill the UK's workforce and reduce the skills gap.

The Conservatives gave apprenticeships a priority that they had not previously had and spent a lot of money on them. Yet somehow they never managed to get the apprenticeship system right. It was too bureaucratic, resulted in companies spending Levy money on training courses that they would have run in any case and did not meet the targets for new apprenticeship starts.

Now, on Tuesday, at the start of National Apprenticeship Week, the Labour government has announced its plans for apprenticeship reform. It promises to cut red tape "to boost economic growth by giving employers more flexibility over maths and English requirements. Rules slowing down the training of workers in key industries like construction will also be changed as the government reveals plans to turbocharge growth industries with reduced bureaucracy for apprenticeships".

Yet, as Stephen Evans, Chief Executive of the Learning and Work Institute, said: "It is a mistake to reduce the minimum length of an apprenticeship and remove the need to study English and maths. England is already an outlier compared to other countries with shorter apprenticeships and far less general education like English and maths. Lowering standards in this way will increase this disparity, and only gives the false illusion of increasing opportunity. If training doesn't require 12 months, it can still be valuable but isn't necessarily an apprenticeship. Apprenticeships should prepare people for future careers, which will increasingly need good English and maths. We should invest to make that work, or risk limiting opportunity and growth."

On the other hand the Sutton Trust said the opposite. Its Chief Executive, Nick Harrison, said: 'Removing the requirement for apprentices to complete level 2 maths and English qualifications is a sensible move that takes away a major barrier to accessing and completing apprenticeships. We have long called for this change so that employers have more flexibility while still ensuring apprentices have opportunities to develop the maths and English skills needed in the world of work.' Some praised the move towards more apprenticeships for young people, while others like the National Centre for Universities and Business feared reducing apprenticeships for older adult workers. There is no consensus, and the fear is that politicians keen to meet political targets will again undermine what apprenticeships should really be for. Once again, we will end up with something seriously sub-optimal, which while it might help hit short-term political targets won't achieve the growth required.