

# APPRENTICESHIP AND THE CONCEPT OF OCCUPATION

**BRIEFING PAPER**

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### INTRODUCTION

This report summarises findings from a study which examined the extent to which occupational identity underpins contemporary apprenticeships in England, and the implications for policy and practice when apprenticeships are decoupled from occupations.

### METHODOLOGY

Evidence for the study was collected via:

- a review of the research literature on occupation and occupational identity
- b analysis of the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) 'Library of apprenticeship frameworks' database to identify three STEM-related frameworks suitable for development as case studies
- c analysis of the characteristics, content, pedagogical and assessment features of the case study apprenticeship frameworks
- d comparison of the descriptions of apprenticeships on the NAS website with the way they are described on the equivalent national website in Germany.

### ENGLISH APPRENTICESHIPS: SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The term 'apprenticeship' has been used to describe a model of on-the-job learning that results in acceptance into a wide range of occupations including the professions, crafts and skilled trades.

Up until the late 19th century in many European countries, including the UK, apprenticeships were the responsibility of occupationally-based 'guilds' who used this model of learning to ensure they could both protect their trade and craft 'secrets' and continue to reproduce generation after generation of experts.

In the UK central government has come to play an increasingly important role in the organization and funding of apprenticeships, and it has done this through a variety of sector-based bodies. As a result, qualifications and apprenticeships have come to be grouped in sectoral and sub-sectoral terms, rather than in occupational terms, with apprenticeship being a 'wrapper' for a set of mandatory outcomes (specified as qualifications in a sector-based 'framework') rather than a programme of learning leading to a recognisable occupational identity with labour market currency.

## ENGLISH OCCUPATIONS AND APPRENTICESHIPS: THE ISSUES

A useful way to approach the meaning of occupation is to consider the term 'job' which, in the UK, is sometimes used interchangeably with occupation. The term 'job' has a much more limited meaning than 'occupation' because it is connected to an employment contract in a workplace. In contrast, an occupation is a much more general and all-encompassing term for 'employment in which individuals are engaged' and is not restricted to a particular workplace. The concept of occupation is aligned with the German concept of *Beruf*; an occupation as a vocation which may be manifested at different levels as the individual matures.

The UK approach to apprenticeship (and workforce development more broadly) is mired in lists of skills and job-related activities which have become detached from a concept of occupation. This detachment makes it harder for apprentices to construct meaningful occupational identities and, therefore, to have a vision of what they are trying to 'become'.

Apprenticeship should be a model of learning for skill formation which takes the apprentice on a journey to becoming a full member of an occupational community. This assumes that there is a defined occupational community to join; and that apprenticeship is a recognised and formalised route to achieving the relevant occupational expertise required to join the community. What follows from this is that each occupation has a defined knowledge-base and an associated curriculum which has to be completed and examined in order for the apprentice to show that they meet the requirements to practice as a recognised member of the community. As a result, the apprentice has at the outset a clear sense of the occupation they are aiming for, and that if they meet the requirements they will gain the necessary certification for employment in that occupation.

As our full report shows, the government-supported apprenticeship programme in England is not currently underpinned by a strong conception of occupation and so does not guarantee for all apprentices who complete their programme that there will be a straightforward transition into recognised occupations. Even with strongly occupationally-based apprenticeships such as engineering, the occupational dimension is not always clear in the framework descriptions.

Where the employer is strongly situated within the occupational community, as is frequently the case in engineering, the apprenticeship is more likely to be occupationally focussed and to involve a programme of learning for occupational expertise that is respected by others as well as allowing the apprentice to gain a footing on the occupational/professional registration ladder.

The 2012 Richard Review's proposal for the certification of performance in apprenticeship to be based on meeting an agreed standard (one qualification covering the whole apprenticeship) has the potential to reconnect apprenticeship with its occupational roots. As our report will show, government needs to ensure that there is greater clarity about the details of individual apprenticeships and more consistency in the way that apprenticeships are presented.

## COMPARISON OF APPRENTICESHIPS IN ENGLAND AND GERMANY

Our full report gives details of case studies for three apprenticeships: engineering manufacture, Information Technology, and laboratory technicians. In each case, the English and German frameworks are analysed and compared.

Regardless of sector, there is in England only a weak articulation between apprenticeship and the concept of occupation, in contrast to the way apprenticeship is conceived and organised in Germany. Here are five key differences:

- 1 There is vertical and horizontal differentiation in the English frameworks. The vertical differentiation is between Intermediate, Advanced and Higher Apprenticeships, whereas in Germany there is just one apprenticeship level per occupation. The horizontal differentiation can be thought of as different ways of navigating through an apprenticeship framework. This results in apprenticeships with the same title having different amounts of on- and off-the-job training and a range of possible qualifications included within a framework.
- 2 Whilst there is a minimum length of 12 months for an English apprenticeship, some frameworks suggest the length may be longer. This is in contrast to the German descriptors which specify the mandatory length.
- 3 In England there is no clear specification as to where the off-the-job training will take place or how it will be organised. Again this is in contrast to the German descriptors which specify that the training will take place in both the workplace and the vocational school.
- 4 In England there is diversity and inconsistency among the job titles listed within pathways with no apparent underpinning principles. For instance, Level 2 titles for IT include clerk, technician, administrator, and assistant; and Level 3 include helpdesk support, supervisor, manager, and officer. The titles between the levels do not overlap, but there is no obvious reason why particular descriptors such as 'officer' and 'helpdesk support' should be Level 3 rather than Level 2, or why 'manager' and 'supervisor' should both be listed at Level 3.
- 5 It is not evident from the English framework documents which qualifications should be linked with which job titles/roles.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our study concludes that, whilst there are some high quality apprenticeships in England, particularly in fields related to engineering and technology, the 'anything goes' approach to the inclusion of job titles and job roles across and within frameworks has created a highly inconsistent and overly complex system.

The lack of clear articulation between apprenticeship levels undermines the frameworks' statements about progression. In particular, there is a risk that Higher Apprenticeships are viewed as a programme for A-level entrants rather than apprentices progressing from a lower level framework.

Where apprenticeship has been grafted onto an occupation with a strong history and culture, supported by institutional regulation and professional registration, it is more likely that there will still be a strong connection between occupational identity and apprenticeship. However, overall the picture is one of a weak relationship as apprenticeship is conceived first and foremost as a job. Developing holistic

definitions of occupations would entail a shift in the conception of the government-supported apprenticeship programme, as well as triggering reforms to support the recognition of designated apprenticeship occupations in the labour market.

Our study argues that this approach would strengthen the quality of the apprenticeship programme and its ability to foster occupational identity. It would also make the strengths and benefits of apprenticeship more transparent for prospective apprentices, employers, parents, careers guidance staff and other stakeholders.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Each apprenticeship should be clearly related to one occupational title.
- 2 The current organisation of apprenticeship in terms of framework, pathway(s) and job roles should be replaced with one specification document per apprenticeship.
- 3 The detail of each apprenticeship should be provided in standardised format in a document written in clear language. (Currently, some frameworks use equivocal terms such as 'an apprentice may be able to ...' and 'could find themselves...' in relation to what they may be doing on an apprenticeship and their occupational career progression options.) The revised documents should be made available on the NAS website in a form that makes them easily accessible by the general public, as it is in Germany. This is vital for effective careers information, advice and guidance.
- 4 The use of the terms technician and technologist within the apprenticeship frameworks should be reviewed to bring them in line with the Technician Council's stipulation that they should only apply to Level 3 and above.
- 5 In line with the Richard Review, each apprenticeship should lead to one qualification/form of certification. There are already qualifications that are recognised and have status in the labour market for entry to skilled employment and, where available, these should be used. This would ensure that every apprentice who completed their programme would know that they had met the requirements for entry to their chosen occupation and had acquired sufficient skills and knowledge to progress within and beyond their immediate job role.
- 6 To put apprenticeship on a much stronger footing will require government to seriously consider extending the use of mechanisms such as licence to practise and registration of technicians.

**Full report available on the Gatsby website from mid-November 2013.**

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