
How can Apprenticeships offer an inclusive opportunity to people with disabilities?

Introduction

Apprenticeships and internships are often spoken of in the same breath, but they play very different parts in a young person's move from education to work. Internships can provide an important opportunity for developing career aspirations and understanding the world of work. They may or may not be a step towards a specific career, but have value in both circumstances. Apprenticeships offer a work-based but still formal route to a chosen vocational occupation over a longer period of time. Apprenticeships will include continued study and qualification alongside skills development. In the UK, for many years apprenticeships were dropped in favour of a college/qualifications-led post school experience. Although this may have been part time with paid employment, there was little formal structure and this lack of strategy contributed to skills shortages in various employment areas. Over time a new apprenticeship policy has been developed, more tailored to the needs of employers and offering an improved experience for young people.

Widening Apprenticeship opportunities

At a time of wider opportunities for entering higher education, it has proved difficult to engage young people with this vocational alternative. As fees in HE continue to rise, especially in England, it is only now that the prospect of study alongside paid work is becoming an attraction once again. Initially the data shows that completed apprenticeships were most common in the 25+ age group, suggesting that employers were offering apprenticeships to existing staff to increase their skills. In July 2016 the Department for Education in England assumed overall responsibility for apprenticeship policy. There are three levels of apprenticeship from an Intermediate offer leading to a level 2 qualification (equivalent to 5 GCSE's), to advanced apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships which include degree apprenticeships. In April 2017 an independent and employer-led Institute for Apprenticeships will be created and its role will include regulating the quality of apprenticeships. Under the measures set out in the Technical and Further Education Bill, the Government states that

The Institute for Apprenticeships remit will also expand to encompass all technical education and will deliver reforms across both apprenticeships-based and college-based routes, ensuring a more consistent approach to high-quality technical and skills-based education.

Both employer-led and college-based routes will need to meet the duties under the Equality Act 2010, particularly with regard to selection and provision of reasonable adjustments for disabled people, and in the case of colleges, the anticipatory duty regarding students with disabilities.

The UK government has a stated target of an overall number of apprenticeship starts of 3 million between 2015 and 2020. However, there remain many issues to be resolved in delivering this target; these are highlighted in the

National Audit Office report 'Delivering value through the apprenticeships programme' published in September 2016. From April 2017 larger employers will be required to set aside funding for apprenticeship opportunities within their business through a 'levy', over which they have control of expenditure. This is part of the Government policy that provision of apprenticeships should be employer-led.

Participation in Apprenticeships by people with disabilities

During this time, data continually highlights the very low take-up of apprenticeships from young people with disabilities and from ethnic minority backgrounds. Not only is this of concern on equality and diversity grounds, it is also recognised that there may be inbuilt barriers to progression to apprenticeships. In the rest of this article I look at the work done to identify these barriers affecting people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, but many of the barriers will apply also to those in other minority groups. In this article the terms 'learning difficulties' and 'learning disabilities' refer to the presence of some intellectual impairment.

In 2011 the Apprenticeships Unit, then a cross-department unit working across Department for Education and Department of Business Innovation and Skills, (now Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy - BEIS) commissioned a report to give informed and up-to-date description and analysis of the issues related to the inclusion of people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in apprenticeship provision. A working group chaired by Peter Little OBE, supported by Robert Holland, both previously involved with Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, set out to examine the evidence and issues relating to the aspiration of creating an inclusive apprenticeship offer. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/387040/AU-CreatingAnInclusiveApprenticeshipOffer-Report-May2012.pdf

The Little Report: Creating an Inclusive Apprenticeship Offer published in January 2012

The Report highlighted particular issues in up-take of apprenticeships and success rates, funding issues, aspects of key skills and functional skills in English and maths, mentoring and job coaching. It made 20 recommendations which were broadly accepted by Government. (I recommend reading this Report for its detailed approach and still-relevant information.)

The Report highlighted the decline in the participation of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities over a five year period, but also identified an increase in the success rates of these learners over the same period. This positive outcome narrowed the attainment gap between those declaring a learning difficulty and/or disability and their non-disabled peers. It is important to dispel the myths that apprentices with a learning difficulty and/or disability are unlikely to succeed. The collection of robust data is an essential part of promoting opportunity and identifying vocational frameworks where participation and success may be lower. It recommended that particular focus should be put on the decline in take-up by those with moderate learning difficulties, visual impairments, and medical conditions. The Report also identified issues regarding the assessment of English and maths, where an employer was satisfied with a learner's accomplishment but, due to a learning difficulty, this was not replicated in national exams. The provision of additional support through mentoring and job coaching was recommended. The provision of support through the Government's 'Access to Work' scheme was found to be insufficiently flexible. Additionally, the success rates for those with mental ill health and emotional/behavioural difficulties remained consistently lower and further work to support these groups was recommended.

Moving Forward

Since the Government accepted the Little Report's recommendation, progress was hampered by a re-organisation of responsibilities between Government Departments until a final structure and home could be found for the Apprenticeships Directorate within the Department for Education. In May 2016 a taskforce, chaired by MP Paul Maynard, was commissioned by Ministers to explore access to apprenticeships for those with learning difficulties. The taskforce comprised a range of stakeholders and set out to reach an understanding of current issues and barriers in accessing and completing an apprenticeship, identify solutions and recommend options to pursue. The taskforce published an independent report in July 2016 'Apprenticeships: Improving access to people with learning disabilities'.

[The Maynard Report: Apprenticeships: improving access to people with learning disabilities.](#)

The Maynard Report identified many of the same issues as the Little report in 2012, and had the opportunity to bring some urgency to the need for change, following the Government's stated intentions to meet the target of an overall number of apprenticeship starts of 3 million between 2015 and 2020.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeshipsimproving-access-for-people-with-learning-disabilities>

It identified issues for a range of stakeholders, notably for Government; individuals with disabilities; employers and training providers.

Issues for people with disabilities

English and maths requirements have stopped some people completing their apprenticeship. This might be because the attainment level is difficult/unfeasible for some to achieve, even with reasonable adjustments, or that the method of assessment, e.g. an exam, doesn't enable them to demonstrate their attainment, or because they may use British Sign Language as a first language.

Individuals are able to do the job but rigid recruitment and selection processes and a limited range of ongoing assessments types means they can't demonstrate their competence.

The possibility of flexibility in ways of working, such as how working hours are structured is not obviously available, and although this is a reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act 2010, individuals may be reluctant to raise it at interview or when starting a new job.

There is a lack of awareness and aspiration to apprenticeships by parents and advisors, and lack of support to prepare for and apply for apprenticeships

Issues for employers

Employers lack awareness and understanding of an apprentice's impairment and are not aware of how to support them through reasonable adjustments including flexibility, and how additional support funding such as Access to Work is available.

Some people will find formal interview processes difficult and lack the confidence to ask for reasonable adjustments

There is a lack of awareness of the business benefits of hiring apprentices with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, or other diverse backgrounds.

Funding for apprenticeships and disability support comes from different streams and the bureaucracy may be off putting.

Issues for training providers

Training providers find the complexity of funding rules and types of programme they can offer difficult to navigate. The offer from training providers varies across the country, making it difficult to provide individuals and training providers with information and advice.

Issues for Government

Government messages on the benefits of employing disabled people may be insufficiently targeted.

Data on applications, starts and completion of apprenticeships by disabled people is poor and not recorded robustly.

Changes in Departmental responsibilities mean that cross departmental co-operation needs to work well

The report made 14 recommendations and these were accepted by Ministers. The following themes have been identified. Actions will be brought in during 2017.

Communications and guidance

A communications plan will be developed to increase employer knowledge of the benefits of hiring apprentices with disabilities and the funding and financial support available. This will include examples of good practice by employers and providers through case studies and role models.

English and maths

Three recommendations focused on apprentices who could achieve full competency in a job, but whose disability prevented them from meeting the English and maths requirement of their apprenticeship, even after the application of reasonable adjustments. This had resulted in them being unable to achieve their apprenticeship.

For example

Engineering apprentice Max Buxton said:

Being deaf and dyslexic, I find English tests really hard. It's very difficult to translate BSL into English and for it all to make sense. My employer has said how well I'm doing and doesn't think my language skills are an issue, but I still can't complete the apprenticeship without passing that test. It's an unfair, unnecessary rule that has created a lot of stress, so I'm very pleased things are changing now.

The Department for Education have now announced British Sign Language is acceptable as an alternative to English in demonstrating functional skills.

Other developments are underway, with pilot work in 2017

Funding

Opportunities to make the funding model more flexible to incentivise employers will be explored. When the Apprenticeships Levy is introduced from May 2017, the Department for Education will assess the impact of the new incentives to see if they have the desired effect for people with disabilities.

Support funding

Apprentices are eligible to receive Access to Work from the Department for Work and Pensions, which funds practical and financial support in the workplace, and Learning Support for reasonable adjustments in college or training from the Skills Funding Agency. The task force recommended aligning and simplifying the application process for these two funding streams. In the meantime, a revised letter of entitlement to Access to Work has been agreed and issued.

Data

Recommendations were made to improve data collection and to do further analysis to identify both the actual and desired levels of representation of apprentices with different disabilities.

Technology

Options will be identified for greater use of technology to support apprentices with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

How change can happen

Although the taskforce concentrated on the issues related to those with learning difficulties the Government believes there will be a positive impact on a broader group of disabled people as the recommendations are implemented. The fast response to the changes for British Sign Language Users is most welcome. There is a much stronger message that disabled people can succeed than in 2012.

The Government has recently announced big changes to the way vocational qualifications are set. New T-levels for 16 to 19 year old technical students will be introduced from autumn 2019. Students will be able to choose from 15 different routes such as construction, digital or agriculture. This offers a great opportunity for inclusive practice. It is important that stakeholders in education, careers guidance and voluntary sector policy roles work to encourage emphasis on Universal Design to be embedded in these changes.

Taken together, the three policy actions of

1. implementing the Maynard review recommendations
2. encouraging employers to invest some of the money set aside in the new Apprenticeship Levy to promote

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- diversity in Apprenticeships; and,
3. revamping the vocational qualifications using Universal Design principles,

could really create a big increase in the number of opportunities available to young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in England.

References

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British Sign Language <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/equal-opportunities-forpeople-who-use-british-sign-language>

Access to Work <https://www.gov.uk/access-towork/overview>

Government reforms to vocational qualifications announced in Budget speech 8 March 2017

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