1. Background to Advanced Apprenticeship in the UK

Direct government support for and formal involvement in apprenticeships began in 1994 when the then Conservative government, under Prime Minister John Major, introduced the Modern Apprenticeship (MA) programme for 16-25 year olds (Unwin and Wellington, 2001; Fuller and Unwin, 2003a). Up until then, apprenticeship had been regarded as a private matter for employers, though from the late 1970s onwards, successive governments had been funding various forms of youth training schemes as a response to rising youth unemployment. Actual apprenticeship numbers had been falling since the late 1960s due largely to changes in the economy, but Major’s government argued that the term ‘apprenticeship’ still had a strong appeal for employers and the general public. The MA was announced as an opportunity to create a high quality work-based pathway (with employed status) for young people, one that would be separate from the existing training schemes which had struggled to gain respect. The use of the term, ‘Modern’, also reflected the intention to make the new programme different to apprenticeships in the past. First, the MA would be available in many more occupational sectors than traditional apprenticeship, in order to attract females and young people from ethnic minorities. Second, the MA would lead to a nationally recognised Level 3 (intermediate/technician) qualification as part of the UK’s drive to increase the numbers of 16-18 year olds qualified to this level and to align apprenticeships with advanced level qualifications in general education. Third, whereas traditional apprenticeships lasted set periods of time (typically between 3 and 5 years), the MA would vary in length according to the amount of time deemed necessary to gain a competence-based qualification – hence, an MA in Retailing or Business Administration may take between one and two years, whereas an MA in Engineering would take three years.

This paper discusses the developments that have taken place since the MA was introduced and highlights the key issues that relate to introduction of the Higher Apprenticeship in Italy. It is important to note at this point that government devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since 2001 has meant that policies with regard to vocational education and training, including apprenticeship, are now diverging within the UK. The following discussion, therefore, relates mainly to developments in England.

1.1 From MA to ‘Apprenticeships’

In 1997, when Tony Blair’s New Labour government came to power, the MA had some 75,000 young people in training. Concerns were raised over the low completion and retention rates in many sectors, notably the service areas of the economy where traditionally apprenticeship did not exist. The new government split the MA in England, Wales and Northern Ireland into two: a level 3 ‘Advanced Apprenticeship’; and a level 2 ‘Foundation Apprenticeship’. Level 2 is regarded as the basic level of attainment for employability and is the level expected of a 16 year old on
completion of the compulsory phase of secondary education. Scotland, however, retained the MA as a level 3 programme and continued to call its level 2 programme, 'Skillseekers', a situation which still continues today. In Wales and Northern Ireland, the term Modern Apprenticeship is still used, but covers both the Level 2 and Level 3 programmes.

In 2001, the Labour government in England rolled all its remaining youth training schemes into one programme, which it now called ‘Apprenticeships’. The vast majority of apprenticeships were, therefore, now offered at level 2, whilst the term ‘Advanced Apprenticeship’ was retained for the level 3 programme. The content of both level 2 and 3 apprenticeships is determined by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) representing employers. All apprenticeships have to include a competence-based National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and Key Skills (Communication, Numeracy and Information Technology). A requirement to include a Technical Certificate (knowledge-based qualification) introduced in 2001 was dropped in 2006. The government funds the cost of training to acquire the mandatory qualifications. The employer pays the apprentice a wage. Some apprentices on the level 2 programme do not have an employment contract and are paid an Education Maintenance Allowance by the government. Although apprentices are required to complete mandatory qualifications, there are considerable differences between the content of these qualifications across sectors, particularly with regard to the type and amount of knowledge required. For example, some Level 2 qualifications for service sector apprenticeships (e.g. retailing, customer service, and hospitality) will focus almost entirely on procedural knowledge in contrast to qualifications in engineering which will require mathematical and scientific knowledge. Furthermore, some apprentices spend time studying off-the-job (e.g. at a college of further education), whilst others acquire their qualifications through being trained and assessed entirely on-the-job. This has led Fuller and Unwin (2003b) to categorise the nature of the UK’s apprenticeship system as stretching from ‘expansive’ programmes through to ‘restrictive’ programmes in terms of their quality and the extent to which they provide apprentices with a strong platform for progression.

To complicate the concept of an apprenticeship ‘brand’ even further, there is also a Youth Apprenticeship for 14-16 year olds, run by schools and colleges in partnership with employers, and a Programme-led Apprenticeship (PLA). The PLA consists of a full-time vocational course taken in a college, followed by a short period (usually six months) as an apprentice in the workplace. Whilst most employers and the general public would relate the term apprenticeship to the level 2 and 3 programmes, the existence of these other forms of apprenticeship has been criticised for diluting the meaning of a universally understood model of vocational learning.

Unlike some other European countries, there is no statutory underpinning to apprenticeship in the UK (Ryan and Unwin, 2001). Currently, the government is introducing a new Apprenticeships Bill to Parliament in order to “…establish a statutory basis for the Apprenticeships programme”. This would mean that one government department (and therefore Secretary of State) would have direct responsibility for apprenticeship. The proposals include the establishment of a new National Apprenticeship Service and the entitlement for all school leavers to have access to an apprenticeship (see DIUS/DCSF, 2008). The Bill also confirms government’s very ambitious intention to expand existing apprentice numbers from around 250,000 to 400,000 by 2020.
Advanced Apprenticeship

The success of the Advanced Apprenticeship has been seen by successive governments, employers and other stakeholders as crucial to the reputation of apprenticeships more generally. The numbers increased steadily between 2001/02 and 2004/05, then plateaued and began to decrease. There are a number of possible reasons for this, but it is also difficult to obtain precise figures due to problems with the validity of national statistics. A key reason for the decline is attributed to the continued lack of demand by UK employers for higher level skills. At the same time, the increase in the numbers of 18 year olds entering universities means that the Advanced Apprenticeship has to compete for recruits. There has been some progression from Advanced Apprenticeship to university, but the data is imprecise and figures are still not collected on a national or systematic basis.

Despite the aspiration of the MA to counter the gender segregation of traditional apprenticeships, males still dominate the programme, and the imbalance is greatest for 16-18 year olds in the Advanced Apprenticeship as the following tables show.

**Table One**: 16-18 year olds, ‘average in learning’ 2006-07 (12 months) by gender and Apprenticeship level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Apprenticeship L3</td>
<td>10,217</td>
<td>42,800</td>
<td>53,017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeship L2</td>
<td>40,541</td>
<td>56,690</td>
<td>97,231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>50,758</td>
<td>99,490</td>
<td>150,248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table Two**: aged 19+, ‘average in learning’ 2006-07 (12 months) by gender and Apprenticeship level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Apprenticeship L3</td>
<td>20,585</td>
<td>25,558</td>
<td>46,143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeship L2</td>
<td>22,138</td>
<td>25,315</td>
<td>47,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>42,723</td>
<td>50,873</td>
<td>93,596</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.apprenticeships.org.uk/partners/frameworks/apprenticeshipsdata/reports20062007/

This means young women tend to be in the lower paid apprenticeships and have less access to level 3 qualifications which are seen as the platform for further and higher study (see Fuller et al., 2005). Although apprenticeships are available in over 100 sectors, over three-quarters of apprentices are found in just 12 sectors:
2. **Potential Transferability of Higher Apprenticeship**

2.1. **Progression to higher level study**

The UK has a long tradition of what are termed ‘sandwich’ degrees in which students spend one or two years in a university, followed by a year out based in a related field of employment, and then return to university for a year to complete their degree. In recent years, there has also been an increase in the number of degree programmes that include some element of work-based learning. As a result of the expansion of students in HE since the late 90s, there has been an expansion of vocational degree programmes, including the new Foundation Degree (FD), which is aimed at people in work who want to study at a higher level. The FD is classified as an intermediate, work-related higher education qualification, and is designed in conjunction with employers to meet skills shortages at the higher technician and associate professional levels. The FD is usually delivered through a partnership between HE and further education colleges. On completion of an FD, students can progress to the later stages of a full honours degree. The involvement of employers in the design of FDs is part of government’s strategy to increase the proportion of funding coming from employers and other non-government sources. In addition, government has set a target for 40% of the workforce to be qualified to Level 4 (FD level) and is putting pressure on universities to achieve this (see Leitch, 2006).

There is now considerable interest in the potential for apprenticeship to be seen as a platform for progression to higher education. The main parliamentary opposition, the Conservative Party, has published its proposals for the expansion and development of the Advanced Apprenticeship. This would include ensuring that any qualifications included in the level 3 frameworks were recognised as valid for entry to university. In addition, it has also announced that it would create 1,200 Skills Scholarships for apprentices wishing to enter higher education, with a particular emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics. These proposals would create a much stronger pathway from apprenticeship to higher education.

Whilst it is not clear whether UK employers will support both the government’s and the Conservative Party’s proposal to extend apprenticeship places, leading employer representatives (e.g. Confederation of British Industry and the Small Business Federation) have stated they want
to see the vocational route strengthened. This is partly due to employer dissatisfaction with the
skills of university graduates and school leavers more generally. At the same time, those higher
education institutions that focus on applied subjects and who work more closely with employers
have been increasing the amounts of work-based learning in their courses in order to better
develop the employability of their students.

3. Policy Issues

3.1. Apprenticeship as an instrument of government policy

Apprenticeship in the UK, and notably in England, has become an instrument of government
policy, primarily focused on raising the number of qualifications at levels 2 and 3 for young people
(see Fuller and Unwin, 2008). Hence, a major criticism is that too many apprenticeships are not
properly embedded in employers’ business strategies. At the same time, employers complain that
they are put off from employing apprentices because there is too much bureaucracy involved and
too much government interference in the content and delivery of training. To improve
apprenticeship, and certainly to increase its status, government needs employers to be actively
involved, but the current arrangements mean that apprenticeship policy is very centralised and
‘top-down’. Unlike in Italy and some other countries, the UK has no institutional architecture at
regional or local level to support apprenticeship. The training providers and employers have to
follow the plans of central government and its agencies. This is problematic with regard to
achieving greater involvement by the universities who would also have to comply with the
centralised control of apprenticeships.

3.2. Changing economic climate

Clearly, the current global financial crisis could have a serious affect on the numbers of
apprenticeship places as employers reduce their workforces and/or cut back on training. At the
same time, there are signs that some sectors of the economy are trying to develop more
innovative forms of formation training in order to recruit from a much broader section of society
and to find the range of so-called soft skills they require.

4. Concluding Questions

The role of apprenticeship as a model of formation training still has universal meaning and its has
adapted over centuries in accordance with changes to the social, political and economic climate
within different countries. The following questions have been raised as a result of studying the
Italian concept of ‘Higher Apprenticeship’:

- Is apprenticeship a model of learning that transcends vocational/academic and
  institutional boundaries?

- How can apprenticeship programmes adapt to the contemporary economic climate whilst
  retaining pedagogical and occupational integrity?

- Is the Italian Higher Apprenticeship a new name for vocational higher education?
- Is it a Trojan horse to get universities to be more work-based and innovative?
- Do Higher Apprentices have triple identity: student, apprentice, worker? – are they the soldiers inside the Trojan horse?

References


