



David Sherlock's regular soundings from the learning and training frontline

'Tis the Season to be Jolly

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In 1948 there was a national exhibition called 'Britain Can Make It'. Three years later the Festival of Britain showcased British science, technology and industry not only as the saviours of our own battered economy but as the solution to many of the world's ills and to the challenges of a future full of promise. In the past few weeks a new Queen's Award has been announced, offering million pound prizes to anyone worldwide who can contribute to a renaissance in British inventiveness. What went wrong? For most of the past half-century, every assessment of British technical education has been made in terms of crisis.

On the wobble

From Industrial Training Boards and levies, to TVEI, to NVQ and GNVQ, to Entry to Employment and Individual Learning Accounts, to Vocational GCSEs and Diplomas, we never seem able to find an enduring solution to our concerns with under-performance. Recurrent change, the plaything of every new political administration and every fresh minister, bears mainly on the learning experience of the less privileged and less able. The 'golden road', passing lightly over the hummock of GCSE to the GCE A level and the global currency of a university degree, has changed very little in its basic architecture. Certainly there has been a recurring anxiety that not enough of our 'golden' children study maths, science and engineering, from the Finniston Report of the 1960s to the present day, but the concern has never grown to the extent that we mandate overwhelmingly favourable conditions for study or employment in the 'STEM' disciplines. Choice is for

the prosperous and able while educational experiment is forced upon 'other people's children'.

The nice folks next door

There are clues to what has gone wrong and how to put it right in some other European countries. The education systems of France and Germany are highly stable. They have no aspiration to put half their young people through university, preferring in their different ways to prepare the majority thoroughly for practical careers. Apprenticeship in Germany is apparently keeping youth unemployment low, in marked contrast with many other developed countries, including our own. Education and training in mainland Europe are not solely the province of government but of co-ordinated efforts by the state and 'communities of practice': the 'social partners', employers and trade unions.

The evolution of our own approach to apprenticeship is revealing. Where we apparently stand today is that we have eliminated the Programme-Led Apprenticeship, often in essence a vocational course of study, and all apprentices are now employed. Except that new scandals are with us. The 13-week retailing 'apprenticeship' happens to take place over Christmas. According to *The Times* (24 November) Morrisons supermarkets have 16,000 apprentices, just 300 of whom are learning trade skills such as butchery or baking for a year, while the rest spend only six months learning 'retail skills'. We are told that steps are being taken to weed out abuses, but the pretence goes on that a secure foundation to a skilled career can be

laid down in a few months in many fields while a full engineering apprenticeship takes four years in this country and 3-4 years is the norm for all trades across Europe. You know the Emperor has no clothes. I know it. It is, however, concealed from many young people and their parents to their disadvantage and to that of our national economy and credibility in the world.

Internecine strife

Quite why we continue these lurches from crisis to crisis, even where ministers prove their goodwill in every policy statement, efficient public servants labour to make the infrastructure more efficient, and high youth unemployment delivers up a host of smart young people to populate flavour-of-the-month apprenticeships becomes clear with another glance across the North Sea. In the heartlands of the 'Dual System', Germany and Denmark, a struggle is going on. It has been going on for much of the last half-century. The struggle is between governments and communities of practice for control over apprenticeships, the guaranteed continuity of supply of skilled people. The struggle is both honourable and open: employers and unions intend to control the numbers, content and quality of apprenticeships, and to pay for their main work-based element. Governments, haunted by NEETs, high unemployment and the threat they present to social cohesion, seek to take away that control, to maximise college-based study (the 'Dual' element) and to do so by taking over payment.

The British government won that struggle for artificially high volume and a social agenda for apprenticeship so long ago that we have all forgotten what an employer-controlled and employer-funded regime was like. Research in Germany has shown that, however much money government pours in, the proportion of employers who take on apprentices remains unchanged at around 25 per cent. Employers train to meet their own business needs, not those seen as national

priorities by governments. In Denmark just a few years ago the government tried to introduce 'flexible', that is shorter, apprenticeships and was roundly rebuffed by employers determined to hold on to an indentured, four-year structure. Why? Because for the first couple of years apprentices are a net cost to the business while in the second two they contribute more than they earn. Unlike in our NVQ-based system, the employer gets a fair return on investment and has a motivation to offer training places.

First principles

The future for apprenticeship is for government to leave it alone. It should stick to those investments which only it can make, in decent schooling for all, long-term education in colleges and universities, and in retraining unemployed people. Apprenticeships should be offered by employers or employers' group training associations. There should be legally-binding guarantees of completion, overseen by employers' associations and trade unions. An apprenticeship should be of fixed length, with only restricted flexibility to take account of adult re-trainers. Employers should pay and should administer sound peer-review schemes to ensure that apprenticeships remain fit-for-purpose and that they conform to national occupational standards as a minimum. (Worldskills is the 'standard'). If government wishes to make a contribution its funding should go directly to reputable employers (One strike and you're out), to major employers for distribution through their supply chains, and to employers' group training associations. Bah, Humbug? Certainly we would save a great deal of money, but we would also face the new year with a fair prospect of rebuilding our industry and our economy.

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info@beyondstandards.net