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THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

The road less travelled: The passage towards a market-based apprenticeship system in England

Emily Erickson*, Terence Hogarth

Institute for Employment Research, The University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

Abstract
This paper reviews the path England has taken to create a market-based, demand-led apprenticeship system. This paper documents 30 years of policy reforms to the English apprenticeship system assesses the impact of reforms on the composition and quantity of apprenticeships and the content of training curricula.

Keywords
skills policy, apprenticeship system, England, curricula

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, publicly funded apprenticeships were introduced in England to, amongst other things, increase the supply of intermediate, technician-level skills and, in doing so, improve the education-to-work transition of young people. Apprenticeships in England combine employment with occupational training that lasts between one and five years depending on the program. Since their roll-out in the 1990s, the apprenticeship system has been subject to numerous reviews and reforms as successive governments sought to address concerns about the quality of training provision, participation levels, eligibility for funding, and the employer role in determining the structure and content of training. Over time these reforms moved England further along the road towards a demand-led apprenticeship system which cedes substantial control over the content and structure of apprenticeships to employers who are considered best placed to determine which skills have economic value in the labor market. Given the frequency of policy reforms that attempt to create an increasingly demand-led apprenticeship system, this paper addresses the impact of these policy twists and turns on the content of apprenticeship curricula and the composition and level of participation within the apprenticeship system. The evidence demonstrates that despite providing employers with more influence over apprenticeships, in practice, changes to content have been modest. At the same time, because employers have had to fund an increasingly large share of the cost of delivering an apprenticeship, they are now more inclined to offer apprentices to existing employees, often at degree level. The result is that apprenticeships have increasingly become a form of continuing vocational education and training rather than one which supports the education to work transition.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper draws upon evidence from the Horizon Europe (EU) funded study Skills2Capabilities, which has undertaken comparative research into the supply and demand for VET skills in nine European countries. As members of the Skills2Capabilities research consortium, the authors undertook the UK-England based research on skill and VET policy and curricula change over the last 25-30 years. This paper brings together findings from that study to determine the impact of policy reform on the content and composition

*Corresponding Author:
Emily Erickson, Institute for Employment Research, The University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK. Email: Emily.Erickson@warwick.ac.uk.
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of apprenticeships. Please see Unterweger *et al*. (2024) and Roos Breines *et al*. (2024) for results from the original study in comparative perspective.

This paper draws upon findings from two parts of this broader study concerning England: First, an analysis of strategic policy instruments; and second, an assessment of the responsiveness of the apprenticeship system to changes in the demand for skills. The analysis is based on: (1) A detailed historical analysis of policy reforms relevant to apprenticeships; (2) content analysis of training curricula over time in selected occupations to identify change in response to policy reforms; (3) interviews with eight policy-makers and sectoral leaders; and (4) an assessment of the changing characteristics of apprentices based on administrative data from the Department for Education (DfE). Due to variations in apprenticeship systems across the UK, this paper focuses only on England.

In the content analysis, which providing an understand the impact of these reforms on the content of apprenticeship training, the authors analyzed Standards (and previous Frameworks) on selected occupations from the year 2000 to the present. This paper focuses on the results for two occupations, industrial mechanics and healthcare support workers. Further analysis including a third occupation heating and ventilation engineers is available in the comparative study (Roos Breines *et al*., 2024).

RESULTS

Policy twists and turns

England continues down the road leading toward a demand-based system where vocational qualifications or programs can be created or amended to meet emerging labor market demand in a timely manner. The development of the apprenticeship system, dating back to the 1994 rollout of Modern Apprenticeships (MAs), sought to address the shortage of intermediate, technical-level skills in a demand-led way (Fortwengel *et al*., 2019). Originally designed for 18 to 19-year-old apprentices to work towards a qualification at the European Qualification Framework (EQF) level 4, this was soon expanded to broader age groups and to apprenticeships at levels 2 and 3 (Mirza-Davies, 2015). The standards for training in the MA were to be designed by sectoral groups and focus on competency-based training that led to a qualification (Fortwengel *et al*., 2019). Almost from the start, concerns were expressed about the quality and volume of apprenticeship provision, for example, the report from the Modern Apprenticeship Advisory Committee (2001). This led to repeated government reviews and policy reforms over the last 30 years (Hogarth & Gambin, 2021). The path to an employer/demand-led system went through many reforms (Banks, 2010; Leitch, 2006; Richard, 2012), and the introduction of the apprenticeship levy announced in 2015 (applied to UK employers with an annual pay bill over £3 million who are charged 0.5% of their pay bill as an apprenticeship levy). In particular, the Leitch Review advocated greater use of markets to ensure that supply meets demand (Unterweger *et al*., 2024).

The award of externally accredited qualification was formerly an essential part of an apprenticeship. This was criticized as reinforcing the supply-led approach by the Richard Review, which drew attention to the "welter of qualifications that, like stepping stones, serve to support the apprentice's progress often without ever declaring their final competency" (Richard, 2012). Qualifications were thought to be too far removed from the field of work, too cumbersome to adapt, and too numerous for employers to fully understand what the qualification represented regarding skills obtained. As a result, the government phased out Frameworks and introduced Standards (other changes included the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, an increase in the quality and length of apprenticeships, and a drive to increase the use of apprenticeships; Hordern, 2021). Apprenticeship Standards were to be focused and directly tied to occupation. Employers would design the Standards, not sector bodies, as was the case with Frameworks. Rather than embedding qualifications, Standards would introduce End Point Assessments (EPA), to be undertaken at the conclusion of the training, which would "assess the competence of apprentices against the requirements of the occupation" (Hordern, 2021). A newly formed governmental agency, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) would oversee the development of Standards by creating Trailblazer groups—employers in the given occupation. The Trailblazers would define the occupation, identify the knowledge, skills and behaviors at the core of the occupation, and create an EPA plan to assess the apprentices' competencies against the occupational standard. Qualifications may remain in an apprenticeship standard, but only if the Trailblazer group supports this approach.

Many interviewees described the frequency of policy reviews and reforms as, in the words of a training leader, "difficult to keep up with". Another explained that the apprenticeship system is prone to "tactile policymaking" wherein each government aims to tweak the system—echoing Keep (2006) who wrote that "national policy is now locked into a cycle whereby the state finds it necessary to intervene, frequently and in detail".

Depending upon one's perspective, the system might be regarded as flexible in that it is responsive to demand or a

free-for-all that produces a profusion of apprenticeship Standards where would-be learners cannot see the wood for the trees. Despite the Richard Review's call for streamlining provision, the number of apprenticeship standards has ballooned, from 79 Frameworks in 2005 to 569 Standards in 2024 (Richard, 2012). Although originally designed to support the school-to-work transition and provide the labor market with intermediate skill levels, the composition and level of participation has drifted from these original aims. Data from the DfE show that following the introduction of the levy, new apprenticeship starts have fallen substantially (Fortwengel *et al*., 2019; Roos Breines *et al*., 2024). Employers are now more inclined to provide apprenticeships—and thereby recoup their levy payment—to upskill existing employees. Linked to this is an increased provision of apprenticeships delivered at a level equivalent to EQF level 5 and above (Fortwengel *et al*., 2019; Roos Breines *et al*., 2024). Similarly, the number of young people starting an intermediate level apprenticeship has declined. In short, after the introduction of the levy and related changes to the structure of apprenticeships, there are fewer new apprentices and those in apprenticeships are older and in receipt higher-level training.

Impact of reforms on apprenticeship content in two occupations

Industrial mechanics mechatronics maintenance technicians are trained in various manufacturing and engineering capacities. Reflecting the broader trends, new apprenticeship starts in this route are down overall, but manufacturing and engineering generally remain strong, and industrial mechanics remains one of the more popular apprenticeships in the route (Enginuity, 2023). The apprenticeship is delivered at a level equivalent to EQF level 4 and lasts 42 months (not including the assessment period). Despite the general policy churn surrounding apprenticeships in England and the degree of changes in the field of work (computers, digitalization and robotic equipment becoming the norm in this period), the industrial mechanic apprenticeship demonstrates a large degree of stability. While curricula have been subject to many updates related to the technologies utilized at work, the core remains the same. For example, while previously apprentices learned how to use milling and cutting machines, now they learn computer-aided processes for milling and cutting through computer aided design (CAD) and computer numerical control (CNC) machining.

Healthcare support workers operate under the guidance of nurses or other healthcare professionals in hospitals, clinics, and general practitioner (GP) surgeries (NHS Careers, 2024). The duties of a healthcare support worker will vary depending on the location of work. In hospitals, they may wash and dress patients or make beds, while in a GP surgery, workers may sterilize equipment or perform health checks (NHS Careers, 2024). The apprenticeship is at EQF level 3 and takes 12 to 18 months. As with industrial mechanics, the healthcare worker apprenticeship standards demonstrate a large degree of consistency over the last three decades. This is despite rapid technological changes that will have impacted the field of work, ranging from electronic medical records to equipment to monitor patients' vital signs. The text, however, of the apprenticeship standard is suitably vague so as not to name technologies utilized by healthcare support workers. This allows for flexibility by the employer and training providers to more quickly adapt to changing demand in the field of work rather than waiting for standards to be updated, a process which can take multiple years.

CONCLUSION

Despite 30 years of policy reforms, technological advances and digitalization, the content of apprenticeship standards for healthcare workers and industrial mechanics in England remains largely intact. For the field of industrial mechanics, this may be due to the continued presence of a qualification embedded within the apprenticeship. The consistency may reflect the legacy impact of sector-wide skills councils, which helped define and defend occupational boundaries clearly. Alternatively, it may represent a practical response to the pace of change in large bureaucratic systems, meaning that broadly written standards allow training providers and employers to adapt the curricula to fit their needs in real-time. Finally, the rising number of apprenticeships available means that change also occurs not within a given apprenticeship standard but through the development of new standards in closely related fields.

The pace of policy reform in the apprenticeship system shows no signs of slowing down—the newly established Skills England promises to bring renewed efforts to address the skills and productivity crisis facing the country. With the proposed introduction of a Growth and Skills Levy to replace the current apprenticeship levy, employers will have greater flexibility in how they invest levy funds for skill development beyond apprenticeships. At the time of writing, it has been announced that English and maths requirements can be removed from apprenticeship requirements age 19 and over at the discretion of their employer. While the impact of such changes is yet to be seen, what is evident is that these are two significant policy changes taking English apprenticeship further down the long and

winding path in search of a mass participation, demand-led system.

A long-term goal for UK policymakers has been to cede increasing control over the apprenticeship system to employers, as they are seen to be best positioned to ensure that skill development is in line with real-world demand. The declining number of new starts and the continued shift to the use of apprenticeships for older and higher-skilled apprentices and standards that are not dissimilar to earlier iterations, are an indication that despite the policy twists and turns, the original goals of the MA system—more intermediate skills and support for the school to work transition—are proving to be elusive.

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Ethical approval
The study protocol was approved by the University of Warwick HSSREC 89/23-24.

Informed consent
Written informed consent was obtained from the participants for publication.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Generative AI use declaration
None.

Data availability statement
Some of the data utilized in this study will be available on the Skills2Capabilities project website at the conclusion of the project (est. 2026). Please visit Skills2Capabilities.eu for more information.

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