

Hello – and welcome to my November newsletter. Accounts of what an apprenticeship should look like have left me little confused over recent weeks. Many people suddenly seem to have become apprentice experts, in itself, that is nothing new, though it has left me wondering, just ...

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When is an apprentice not an apprentice?

Cast your mind back and you will recall the introduction of a minimum timescale of twelve months for apprenticeships. Whilst I have no real issue with that (one of my first pieces of independent work was to be invited up to Liverpool by the then Learning and Skills Council to review a provider who was completing the off-the-job training in under a week), I did have an issue with the absurd notion that lay behind it; that a longer programme somehow meant a better quality one. It seems to me that the opposite is the case; a good quality programme will have at its heart the right programme length. Converting a not-very-good six-month course into a twelve-month programme simply means learners are on a not-very-good programme for twice as long!

I am just as puzzled by more recent statements, including government plans to make misuse of the term ‘apprentice’ a criminal offence. Let’s be clear: I don’t condone any misuse of the term; but is it such a big issue? The CBI and the AELP don’t seem to think so. Their views expressed in FE Week tell us there is little evidence to suggest that misuse of the term is widespread and that the case for new legislation hasn’t been made. I have to say I agree! I have worked in the work-based learning sector for many years and have only once come across the term when it shouldn’t have been used.

I read comments about funding and that only SFA funded apprenticeships should qualify as a “real” apprenticeship. I would have to say – why? What does it matter where the money comes from? If I wish to complete an apprenticeship and pay for it myself, as long as I have completed all its component parts, what else matters?

Some views have surfaced telling me that any apprenticeships other than those in construction or engineering aren’t apprenticeships at all. Certainly those valuable skills form the basis of many traditional apprenticeship routes, but I can’t recall any limitations being put on sectors when ‘Modern Apprenticeships’ were introduced back in the nineties (can anyone else recall the introduction of FMAs and AMAs?).

More worryingly, we have our government and shadow government ministers determined to show their complete lack of understanding, and indeed, their dubious English skills, when they tell us about apprenticeships in burger flipping or floor cleaning. I also recently read a question put by FE Week to Ofsted head, Sir Michael Wilshaw:

Q: Can tasks like cleaning not be part of an apprenticeship in, for example, the care home industry?

A: If that is the view of that particular organisation, it certainly isn’t the view of the government, it’s certainly not the view of Ofsted and it’s certainly not my view. We’re not against people getting jobs in those sorts of companies and that sort of work – but don’t call it an apprenticeship. It debases the whole brand, and that something that we should guard against.

Is it not the government, or at least government bodies, that approve what is in an apprenticeship and indeed, what the public purse pays for?

And speaking of Ofsted, we have the much on hype but little on content (or at least new content) report on apprenticeships. Naughtily leaked headlines so far ahead of the release of the report had me questioning whether I had missed its launch when I saw so many discussions on its content. Better people than me will debate its merits, but unquestionably, it does contain messages that need to be reviewed. Before we do that however, it seems to me that we need to have a common and shared understanding about what an apprenticeship really is.

I would call on the AELP, the ETF, FE Week and any other organisations that can influence and affect the sector to encourage our politicians, would-be politicians, civil servants, quango heads and even colleges and training providers to have one unanimously agreed, stated and understood definition of an apprenticeship. Only when we all agree what an apprenticeship really is, can we properly begin to address the points raised in this report.

Kevin Dowson