

Training for skills in crisis – a critique and some recommendations

Martyn Sloman

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Martyn Sloman is principal consultant to the *Training Journal* L&D2020 project. He has held a number of visiting professorships at UK and overseas universities and has extensive practical experience as a training manager. For a full biography and contact details, see his website www.martynsloman.com. He can be contacted at martynsloman@me.com

List of key observations and recommendations

The learning and development profession should not remain silent on vital skills training issues [p4].

Skills training interventions by government are not working and current thinking is muddled and confused [p5].

Continual exhortation to employers to participate in voluntary schemes does no harm but little good [p9].

There are too many initiatives: most have uncertain objectives and unhelpful titles [p13].

Apprenticeship schemes are shamelessly oversold. The term ‘apprentice’ is losing its meaning [p15].

The provision of effective learning opportunities in the workplace is resource-intensive; this takes time and expertise [p19].

A well-thought-out apprenticeship scheme is not readily scaleable in the organisation nor is it easy to transfer to a new context [p20].

Interventions must proceed from a realistic understanding of the place of skills training in corporate organisations [p23].

Excessive and inappropriate criticism of the NEET generation should cease; they should not be held to blame for a situation they did not create [p27].

Employers are rational. They are generally aware of how skills training will benefit their organisations and training is a ‘third-order’ decision to them [p30].

The education system is not equipped to provide oven-ready raw material for employers, nor should that be its purpose [p32].

At times of recession, there are fewer skills shortages and hence little incentive for employers to engage in the skills debate [p35].

Larger employers must accept obligations for skills development. The practical challenge is to create an effective framework to make this possible [p38].

The role of the UKCES should be changed to provide independent scrutiny of training and skills and welfare-to-work initiatives [p39].

An enhanced role for local government would create opportunities for a consistent and co-ordinated approach in a confused and crowded area [p39].

Introduction and scope

This *TJ* White Paper considers one of the most pressing problems of our time.

What is to be done about training for skills in the UK? What are the policy options and interventions that can ensure that workers acquire the skills that will equip them to obtain and retain employment in the modern economy?

There is a particular focus throughout on the challenges involving younger workers, reflecting the concern about the social consequences of the chronic employment problems this generation is facing.

The Paper is unapologetically a polemic: it takes a stance and a position. The last three decades have witnessed a raft of government policy initiatives grounded in muddled objectives. This will continue unless we address some fundamental questions about the underlying purpose of such interventions, and proceed from a realistic understanding of the place of skills training in organisations. More of the same will not do. There is an urgent need for new thinking and new approaches grounded in an honest understanding of the nature of the problems we are facing and recognition of the limitations of many of the solutions that have been offered to date.

The scope of this Paper is wide but the focus will be on vocational education and training: education and training in skills for the workplace ('skills training' or 'training for skills' for short). Although this mainly relates to the acquisition of the workplace skills that are appreciated and valued by employers, discussions inevitably overlap with those that concern the social provision of what has become known as 'welfare-to-work'. Both are areas in which policy has failed and will continue to fail. The problem is more than an operational one. A move towards a solution requires an open debate on what might be called 'the politics of training'. Some radical options should be considered and this will require a change of direction, preceded by political debate on what matters.

The investigations that led to the production of this Paper formed part of the *TJ* L&D2020 project; further information and some background submissions to this "Great Skills Debate" can be found on its website¹. Thanks are due to many people who tried to raise questions and offered comments but the work of three leading academic commentators deserves particular acknowledgement: professors Ewart Keep of Cardiff University, Alison Fuller of the University of Southampton, and Lorna Unwin of the Institute of Education, London University. The analysis and arguments remain my own.

They are drawn from the UK context, but the issues raised apply to developed economies throughout the world.

A way forward

The national skills debate is complex and nuanced. It is difficult for training professionals to step back and gain a clear overall view of current policy direction; it is hard enough simply to keep track of the bewildering number of policy initiatives that

appear and disappear. This situation is not helped by the continual over-promotion of the latest initiative by government, irrespective of political persuasion. Moreover, there is a general absence of interest from opposition politicians (again irrespective of political persuasion) in a subject that is very detailed and offers limited political opportunities.

However, we are at an important juncture in skills policy. Although initiatives are confused and muddled, there are underlying threads that can be discerned. For decades UK skills policies have been based on a consensus. Recognising that enhanced skills are 'a good thing', there has been a voluntarist approach: an attempt to secure tripartite (government, employers and workforce representatives) support for policy initiatives. There have been seemingly endless launches and conferences – what can be described as continuous hortatory activity (inciting or encouraging). This voluntarist and hortatory approach will continue with renewed intensity but, as will be seen, the coalition government elected in 2010 has adopted a more ideological stance underpinned by its belief in market solutions to economic and social problems.

Most of the hortation today is focused on apprenticeships – which later in this Paper I describe as the “new silver bullet” of skills training (p14). At this stage in the UK's national economic development, the potential contribution from apprenticeships is considerable. The contention here is that the growing interest is greatly to be welcomed: a sustained expansion of well-structured apprenticeship programmes could make a thoroughly worthwhile contribution. However, apprenticeships are increasingly oversold and over-promoted: discussions are characterised both by an underestimation of the extent of shift required to make apprenticeships effective and an overestimation of the extent of their potential contribution. They will only be effective as part of a well-considered and well-resourced wider framework for skills development in the UK. Given the present approach, we can anticipate another policy failure. Moreover, one consequence of the over-promotion of apprenticeships is the absence of a serious wider debate on training for skills and a recognition of some ideological issues that are at stake.

This Paper advocates a major shift of policy direction. Apprenticeships, and indeed all other effective initiatives, will not succeed through promotion accompanied by the odd incentive. The argument presented here is that we should recast the dialogue in terms of obligations: larger employers should accept obligations for skills development. This approach would necessarily involve the introduction of new reporting arrangements for companies. In addition, the role of the central national body on skills development, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, should be changed so that it becomes an agent of independent review rather than a source of policy initiatives. Enhanced local authorities should play a key role in co-ordination and delivery.

These and other arguments will be developed throughout the White Paper. Key observations and recommendations will be highlighted throughout. The section immediately below will consider how we arrived at the current situation. The recent history of training and skills interventions and the shift from compulsion to voluntarism will be outlined; some recent new initiatives and the political philosophy that lies behind them will be reviewed. This will be followed by a detailed review of the most important of the new initiatives: apprenticeships. Finally, the new economic context, and the practical

problems that emerge, will be considered before the solutions advocated above are presented.

It is hoped that these arguments will engage the attention of learning and development professionals. They have a unique understanding of the practical challenges involved in implementing effective change in the workplace. Too often they have remained silent when asked to support policy initiatives that they know to be unrealistic. Given the serious economic and social consequences of continued policy failure, their contribution to the debate is desperately needed.

The learning and development profession should not remain silent on vital skills training issues.

The current policy failure

In his May 2012 contribution to the *TJ* Great Skills Debate, the widely respected observer of policy and practice Professor Ewart Keep, of Cardiff University, opened his argument thus:

“Skills policy in England is now in a zombie-like state. The two things that gave it life – increases in publicly funded education and training, and ‘reform’ of the institutions charged with delivering skills – are both decisively off the agenda.”²

He is correct in this depressing analysis. There is broad agreement on the aims and objectives of training and skills policy. There is a good understanding of the skills development process in organisations, whether in the public, private or voluntary sectors. However, since the move away from prescription and compulsion in the 1970s, there has been a bewildering and confusing sweep of initiatives, most of which have had limited impact. Moreover, more so than in any other policy area, there is a lack of honesty and realism from politicians accompanied by a damaging tendency to talk up the latest idea. Criticism is ignored or disregarded because ‘we don’t want that sort of talk round here’.

Undoubtedly the politically explosive issue within the VET debate is youth unemployment – in particular what has become known as the growing number of NEETs (16- to 24-year-olds currently not in employment, education or training). A useful analysis that underlined the gravity of the problem was presented in a Work Foundation report published in May 2012. This pointed out that “in the third quarter of 2011, the number of young people who were outside employment, education or training in England reached over a million [1,163,000]”.³

Similarly, a July 2012 report published jointly by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development and (CIPD) the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) also contained a useful, up-to-date analysis. Specifically:

“At 22 per cent, the UK youth unemployment rate is near the European Union average. While this may not look too serious when compared to the Mediterranean states, it would be wrong to be complacent. ...At over a million, the UK has the largest absolute number of unemployed young people of all the EU member states.”⁴

That the employment situation faced by NEETs is dire is beyond question. There is little evidence that there is any imminent prospect of sustained improvement. In December 2012 the IPPR think tank predicted that youth unemployment in the UK might again rise above the million mark⁵. It is accepted that youth unemployment extends across Europe with the European Union's (EU) research agency, Eurofund, reporting that some 14m young people are not in employment, education or training across the EU as a whole⁶. Disturbingly, however, the UK's relative position appears to be deteriorating. In January 2013, the Work Foundation issued a report that pointed out that, since the start of the recession, the UK has experienced the fastest rise in youth unemployment of any of the Group of Eight (G8) countries. The report also stated that the UK is behind only Spain and Greece in the OECD in terms of the worst level of joblessness amongst under-25s⁷.

Given the scale of the problem, the lack of opportunities for NEETs has received much attention at local as well as national levels. One illustration will suffice. On 8th May 2012, the *Eastern Daily Press* carried a front page article reporting that more than 1,500 people had applied for 28 apprenticeship posts advertised in a joint Norfolk County Council/private sector scheme. The regional chairman of the Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing was reported as saying in response: "There are jobs for those who really want to work. But they have got to be passionate about wanting a job. They have got to put themselves out"⁸ 1.

Skills training interventions by government are not working and current thinking is muddled and confused.

Initiative, initiative and initiative

A consensus on aims

For at least the last 60 years it has been accepted that devoting resources to the development of work-related skills in organisations is a 'good thing'. Employers benefit because capable employees produce a more competitive organisation. Employees benefit because the acquisition of skills leads to enhanced self-respect, greater satisfaction at work and the ability to find other work, as skills are often transferrable.

Although it is possible to question every element in this argument, this view has formed the cornerstone of government policy and intentions, irrespective of its position on the political spectrum. Enhancing the skills base has achieved greater currency in the global economy with its emphasis on competition through the production of higher value goods and services that can command a premium price. Whatever the country and whatever the sector, governments seek to avoid their industries getting stuck in what is becoming popularly known as the 'commodity trap' – where profit margins are thin and there is no surplus to invest in skills, research and development or to develop the brand⁹. However, it is the firms or corporations themselves rather than national economies that deliver the higher value products.

¹ During my youthful backpacking days, I once spent several days at a busy, crowded hostel. There was insufficient hot water to allow every resident to wash in the morning. When I complained, the warden told me that we should all get up earlier. I honestly believe that he thought he was offering a solution.

Skills enhancement becomes even more attractive if it can be achieved with minimal direct expenditure from government. Again, to quote Ewart Keep:

“Education and training came to provide a form of magic, get-out-of-jail-free card for politicians, whereby government could achieve intervention-free intervention in the economy (boosting the supply of skills, but not intervening in the product or labour market) as well as loser-free redistribution for individuals (whereby everyone could become better educated and therefore obtain access to better jobs).”¹⁰

Most recently, in an under-reported speech delivered at the Stock Exchange in September 2012, opposition leader Ed Miliband re-emphasised the case for higher value production. Indeed, this became elevated into a new concept of “predistribution”: a way of achieving redistribution of wealth and opportunity without resorting to unpopular taxation. “Predistribution is about saying we cannot allow ourselves to be stuck with permanently being a low-wage economy,” he said¹¹.

It is regrettable that, although it could prove attractive for many, competition through skills may be an idea whose time has gone. It would have enjoyed greater credibility as a central plank of industrial and employment policy in the 1990s. Now other countries throughout the world have digested its implications and are acting accordingly. In an excellent book reviewing the nature of global competition, Philip Brown, of Cardiff University, and others argued that important new forces must be recognised. One of the key changes is what they describe as the “quality-cost revolution”. The new competition is no longer based on quality or cost but on quality *and* cost. Firms who can compete through high skills and high labour productivity are as likely to be found in India and China as anywhere else¹².

From compulsion to voluntarism

Trying to identify and categorise the full range of government initiatives intended to promote skills training in organisations would try the patience of a research archaeologist. Interventions have come and gone and the training manager has been left with a fleeting memory of a set of ephemeral acronyms. Remember TECs (Training and Enterprise Councils), the LSC (Learning and Skills Council), the MCI (Management Charter Initiative), NTAs (National Training Awards) and LLUK (Lifelong Learning United Kingdom)²?

However, the broad pattern is easy to describe. In the 1960s, there was broad agreement that ‘something must be done’. A prescriptive framework of compulsion to train was formulated by a Conservative government and implemented by the incoming Labour one following the 1964 election. The high point of intervention was the establishment of 23 industrial training boards with regulatory responsibilities and the power to impose levies on non-training organisations in their sectors.

² To add to the confusion names often don’t describe ‘what is in the tin’. LLUK was the sector organisation for further and higher education, work-based learning, community learning and development, and libraries, archives and information services. It was abolished

in April 2011 and many of its objectives are now under the remit of the CAVTL (Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning) which falls under the umbrella of the LSIS (Learning and Skills Improvement Service). Everybody clear?

There were criticisms surrounding the amount of administrative bureaucracy or 'red tape' necessary to comply with reporting requirements. However, over time and following a change of government, there was a shift back to a voluntarist approach and an attempt to secure tri-partite (government, employers and workforce representatives) support for more modest policy initiatives. This became the consensus position for the final quarter of the last century.

Initiatives adopted by governments since then have been a mixture of the following:

- statements of overall strategy and the creation of bodies or organisations with responsibility for promoting or monitoring that strategy
- statements of strategy for individual sectors and the creation or support of bodies or organisations with responsibility for promoting or monitoring that strategy
- reform of qualification structures and attempts to encourage the acquisition of vocational qualifications
- promotion of best practice through conferences, awards or competition or general hortatory activity (inciting or encouraging)
- direct provision or funding of support of training or consultancy at a micro or organisational level.

In the UK, only one initiative achieved the desired impact. This was the creation of the standard or kite-mark known as Investors in People. It was successful because it caught the mood of the time. Training was seen as series of sequential steps enshrined in what became known as the systematic training model: identify training needs, plan and design training, deliver training and evaluate training. First introduced in 1991, there were at its height almost 40,000 UK organisations working with IiP¹³. In 2012, when promoting the Youth Policy (see p12), the UKCES laid claim to a "20,000-strong community of IiP employers" and announced that it was "developing materials that IiP specialists can use to advise employers who are interested in recruiting more young people"¹⁴.

In 2006, the Leitch Report was published and offered a comprehensive review of the skills challenges facing the UK economy¹⁵. Leitch identified a disturbing and growing skills gap between the UK and competitor countries in the global market; too many members of the UK workforce dropped out of learning at an early stage and were left without qualifications. New targets were required, particularly at lower levels. There was little criticism of the report and it secured general support. Its publication was the high-water mark of consensus and the last occasion when skills and training was noncontroversial and non-political.

Voluntary and tripartite with exhortation

Given the rejection of compulsion, governments of all persuasions have adopted what can be described as an institutional and voluntarist approach. Skills development should proceed within a framework based on partnership between government, companies and

workers. These parties should then identify and promote good practice. Information is published; people are brought together in conferences and asked to do helpful things in the spirit of voluntary good will – the corporate equivalent of supporting bob-a-job week³.

Moreover, this approach is a European-wide phenomenon. To quote from the European Commission's Copenhagen Statement, adopted in 2012:

*"We, the Directors for Vocational Education and Training and the European social partners, commit ourselves to promoting the development and implementation of strategies and measures supporting VET - business co-operation and partnerships including all relevant stakeholders and actors at national and regional level."*¹⁶

Sometimes voluntarist solutions have been accompanied by the creation of new bodies or organisations with responsibility for promoting the strategy, or by shuffling the pack of the existing bodies. Sometimes voluntarist solutions have been accompanied by the introduction of a new scheme. There are regular appeals for 'joined-up thinking'.

In fairness, calls for voluntarist solutions can be well-meaning and are often based on grounded research. For example, the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations' Commission on Youth Unemployment was chaired by the prominent opposition MP David Miliband and reported in October 2011. It called for action in four areas: young people need more job opportunities to be available; young people need better preparation and motivation for work; young people not heading for university need high-quality options for progression; young people need reform of the welfare state, including guaranteed back-to-work support¹⁷.

The July 2012 TUC/CIPD/IPPR report, cited previously, proposed the following: adopting measures such as a Youth Guarantee, which provides young people out of work for more than a year with access to a high-quality training placement or job; create more diverse, high-quality routes into work, in particular by strengthening the quality of apprenticeship and other vocational qualifications; develop a single youth policy agenda with joined-up policy-making across government departments¹⁸. Earlier, in May 2012, a Work Foundation report on NEETs, *Lost in Transition*, had similarly identified a number of policy areas: clear pathways into employment, support during transition periods, better co-ordination of services and an improved qualifications structure¹⁹.

In October 2012, the CIPD formally launched a 'Learning to Work' Campaign "to create a step change in the level of engagement between employers and young people in order to build their employability skills and Job prospects". The campaign has three elements: establishing the business case for employing young people, advising employers and raising awareness²⁰.

These and similar efforts should not be denigrated. However, to return to a recurring theme in this Paper: good intentions and promotional campaigns are not enough.

³ Bob-a-job week, first introduced after the Second World War, became an annual fixture in which Scouts knocked on doors to ask for work to do and expected a shilling in their fundraising envelope in return.

The case for a more interventionist and active skills and employment policies has its advocates. For example, the central feature of the Labour opposition's policy is a 'real jobs guarantee' for under-25s who are long-term unemployed. This was announced at a conference on jobs held on 16 March 2012. In launching the guarantee, Labour leader Ed Miliband argued that government has a responsibility to provide opportunities, employers have a responsibility to train, and young people themselves have a responsibility to make the most of their chances.

Under the guarantee, anyone aged between 18 and 24, and unemployed for a year, would be required to do a minimum of 25 hours a week of paid work on a six-month government scheme, or lose their right to benefit. According to analysis presented at the time, the proposal would, on current figures, require at least 100,000 people aged 18 to 24 to go on the six-month job guarantee scheme. They would be paid at least the hourly minimum wage. The scheme would be financed by a bank bonus tax used to pay the wages of young unemployed people taken on by businesses who would be expected to meet the costs of their training²¹.

Continual exhortation to employers to participate in voluntary schemes does no harm but little good.

Coalition policy in context

May 2010 saw the election of a new government in the UK – a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. The dominant Conservative partners were firmly of the neoliberal economic persuasion, believing in the promotion of market forces wherever possible and in all sectors. This found its strongest expression in the introduction of the employer ownership of skills initiative, described later in this section (p10). This was first introduced as part of an innocuous umbrella White Paper.

In November 2010, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Vince Cable (a Liberal Democrat), published *Skills for Sustainable Growth*²². Its main thrust was to put in place the public expenditure cuts announced in the previous month's comprehensive spending review, including a 25 per cent reduction in the further education (FE) resource budget. A number of schemes were abolished and some small-scale initiatives introduced. Among the changes, liP was to be revamped and absorbed into the UKCES. The rhetoric of the White Paper was on targeting areas of greatest need, of transparency of information, of consumer choice and increased competition – hence the emphasis on employer ownership. The reality was the justification of cuts in the FE sector, which dominates vocational education provision and offers the widest range of work-related qualifications.

Finally, and most importantly, in introducing his White Paper, Cable placed considerable emphasis on the expansion of apprenticeships. Apprenticeships had taken the central place in skills policy and now carried a heavy burden of expectations. Given their importance, I will consider them more fully in a later section of this Paper. First, however, I will review some of the other current initiatives.

Any dream will do

I made a reference earlier to the bewildering number of skills training interventions that have emerged and disappeared. Often these initiatives seem to have limited connection with the ideology of the government concerned.

There is an old black-and-white comedy western called *Destry Rides Again*. James Stewart plays Destry, an unassuming character who takes on the job of cleaning up a lawless Wild West town. In a memorable scene, the leading outlaw challenges Destry to explain why he is asking everyone in town what happened to his predecessor as sheriff. In his carefully understated way, Destry drawls: “Well... it’s like this... we figured that as long as we had a sheriff’s office we might as well do something.” Initiatives from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, from its variously named predecessors and from the UKCES seem to mirror this approach. They’ve been given a badge and an office so they might as well do something.

In the 2010 *Skills for Sustainable Growth* White Paper, it was announced that Train to Gain, an advisory service introduced by the previous government, was to be abolished but there was to be a new initiative on training in small and medium-sized enterprises. The Skills Pledge, a public commitment from an organisation that it supported good training practice, was to be discontinued. Lifelong Learning Accounts (not to be confused with the discredited Individual Learning Accounts, suspended by the previous government (see p24) were to be introduced.

The result is that there is now a hotchpotch of initiatives on offer: three of them will be briefly considered below. By examining these schemes and the assumptions behind them, it is possible to fully comprehend the extent of the policy impasse today. Bluntly, other than apprenticeships, BIS and UKCES have run out of ideas.

Initiative I: Employer ownership of skills

The November 2010 White Paper argued that employers must take more responsibility for skills development in their organisations. A specific initiative was to follow with the launch of a two-stage pilot funding project. To quote from the UKCES website:

*“The Employer Ownership of Skills pilot offers all employers direct access to public investment; up to £250m over two years to design and deliver their own training solutions... It asks employers to set out how they would use public investment, alongside their own, to improve the skills of their current and future workforce. In return for greater flexibility in the design and delivery of publicly funded training, employers need to tell us how the pilot will increase the impact of investment in workforce development.”*²³

In his supporting statement on the site, John Hayes MP, the skills minister at the time, described the initiative as “a substantial commitment, backed with public investment, to step back and give space to employers to take ownership of the skills agenda”. In the September 2012 ministerial reshuffle, Hayes moved to the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and was replaced at BIS by Matthew Hancock MP.

The first-round winners in the Employer Ownership Pilot were announced on 11th September 2012 by the UKCES²⁴. Sixty seven million pounds were made available with (by implication) another £32m of matching funds from the organisations. There was an understandably positive tone, greeting, amongst others, “radical proposals from Siemens, Aria Foods UK and BAE systems to train employees not just within their own company but also within their supply chain”. Doubtless such initiatives will be well-constructed. If a note of cynicism intrudes, it is not surprising. PriceWaterhouseCoopers was awarded the pilot for skills in professional service: this will help employers identify their training needs and evaluate training providers, and, in the case of SMEs, offer to manage the entire training provision end-to-end for them. This does not appear to demand much in the way of altruism and self-sacrifice on the part of PriceWaterhouseCoopers.

In round two of the pilot, £240m will be made available. Generally the emphasis seems to be on projects that operate across the supply chain. This was stressed in an interview that the chairman of the UKCES, Charlie Mayfield, gave to the *Financial Times* in support of the first-round announcements. He argued: “What we want to see is this being employer-led, working with the unions and providers of various kinds in industrial partnerships aimed at improving the competitiveness of different sectors.” Further, one of the weaknesses is having “two skill systems going on – a government-led one and one run by companies, which spend £49bn a year on training”. This led him to the conclusion that the country needs a decisive shift to an employer-led training system²⁵.

Doubtless, the BIS/UKCES dream scenario is that some original, innovative ideas will receive funding under the scheme and form the core of yet another high-profile set of road shows. If these winners involve learning technology, so much the better: this will allow the minister to have his or her picture taken in front of a nest of PCs. Presumably the hope for the Employer Ownership Pilot is that an employer or a consortium will formulate and implement an approach to skills development that is not only new but that can be transferred elsewhere. However, in training, learning and development, context is everything. Recent findings emerging from the Teaching and Learning Research Programme²⁶ emphasise the overwhelming importance of business context in determining best training practice. This makes such transfer unlikely but, in fairness, not impossible. What will be effective in an IT consultancy is quite different from what will be effective in a hotel, a supermarket or a steelworks. Successful initiatives will not be readily transferrable to another environment nor will they be scaleable (capable of being ramped up across the economy as a whole).

Underpinning all this is the explicit conviction that employers must ‘own’ the skills agenda. Only they can determine future business needs and must therefore be given ‘space’. An answer to a question submitted at a recent UKCES webinar produced the following clarification of this nebulous concept: “In this context, by ‘space’ we mean government stepping back and allowing employers to step up and take the lead on defining what they need to meet their skills needs.” It is hard to see how this could ever work in practice and the declared aim of “giving employers space” fits uneasily with the raft of competing initiatives that emanate from DoE/BIS/UKCES

Be that as it may, employer ownership is proceeding without challenge or criticism. The CIPD has firmly endorsed employer ownership. In a March 2013 press release issued to

support proposed changes in the apprenticeship system, it argued that concerns about the extent to which apprenticeships could be sufficiently tailored to their needs was one of the biggest obstacles to the employment of apprenticeships²⁷. This included a distorted take on the statistics produced in the CIPD survey and, distressingly, features prominently in the BIS press release. In fact, the relevant CIPD survey, undertaken in support of its Learning to Work initiative, paints a most positive perception of apprenticeships amongst organisations that employ them²⁸. When organisations that recruited young people but didn't employ apprentices were asked why not, the biggest response was 'don't know' (26 per cent) followed by 'apprenticeships are not sufficiently tailored to meet our needs' (25 per cent) and 'not relevant to the sector' (24 per cent). (Sample number 293 and respondents could choose more than one answer.) Hardly overwhelming evidence for a major change of policy.

Similarly, the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning, an independent body established to identify and promote best practices in further education, appeared to have no objections to this shift to employer ownership. In a report entitled *It's about work* issued in March 2013, it called for a two-way street: "Genuine collaboration between college and training providers, and employers."²⁹

Further, when Labour leader Ed Miliband made skills training a central feature of his party conference speech at Manchester in October 2012, he also implicitly endorsed employer ownership. He promised that an incoming Labour government would give business control of more than £1bn of spending on apprenticeships: "Sector by sector, we are going to give business the power and responsibility to make sure the training happens."³⁰ He also raised the prospect of legislating for a training levy in some sectors. Another idea floated was that all large firms with government contracts would be required to provide apprenticeships. Greater control of budgets and standards for apprenticeships would be linked to an increase in the numbers of employers introducing schemes.

As I will argue later, most employers approach their skills development in a rational manner. If enhanced skills are needed for business purposes, they will seek a cost-effective way of acquiring these skills – whether through recruitment or through training. The argument that they need space, itself a most nebulous (almost meaningless) concept, to do this is a new arrival to the skills and training debate. Further, an obvious criticism of the £250m is the well-known dead-weight argument: you are subsidising firms to do something that they would be doing anyway.

Initiative II: Careers-Learning accounts revisited

Another feature of *Skills for Sustainable Growth* was the reintroduction of a form of learning accounts. To quote from the White Paper:

"We will offer every adult a Lifelong Learning Account. This will provide access to the new FE student loans and other forms of financial support for learning, such as an enhanced discretionary learner support fund; and allow adults to signal where they have demands which the market is not meeting. An account will also provide incentives for learning, including a means of recognising the social contribution made through volunteering."

Accounts will provide access to personalised information on training already achieved and information on the wage and employment benefits of different courses.”³¹

The unfortunate history of Individual Learning Accounts, introduced by the Labour government in 2000, will be considered in a later section (see p29). What has been implemented to date as a result of the 2010 White Paper has taken the form of an online advisory service³². ILAs are now available to everyone. Participants can secure assistance through a helpline. They can register and open an online account. They can then create and save a CV using a recommended format, undertake a self-assessment and develop an action plan.

This cannot do any harm but is unlikely to do much good either and only makes sense as a spending cut in the public provision of careers advice – this will prove to be particularly damaging in the case of young workers. In her excellent contribution to the *TJ* Great Skills Debate, Shelagh O’Leary, a public sector service director and L&D specialist, offered the following comments on the launch of the new national careers service:

“From September 2012, as a result of the 2011 Education Act, schools will take over responsibility for securing independent impartial career guidance for their pupils. Other provisions include an online advice and helpline, with a face-to-face service available to those aged 19 plus or 18 if on jobseekers allowance. Local authorities also have a legal duty to make available to all young people under 19 support to encourage them to participate in education and training. The launch follows the publication of statutory guidance to schools that stresses the importance of quality-assured career education, information and advice.

“The new service, it is claimed, does not do enough to help young people in the current context with a bewildering range of routes to further education and training by not providing face-to-face impartial advice, and yet it offers this to adults.

“Schools are committed to providing a level of support by September without increased funding. In the context of tight financial settlements and freedom to determine the level of provision, it will not be surprising if schools opt for the minimum – there is scope in interpreting the guidance to do so. While the need for clear quality standards are being established, many are totally unprepared for the changes and will be purchasing careers services from a range of providers where they have little knowledge of the market.”³³

There is a rich literature emerging on the use of online resources. There are circumstances in which it is appropriate and circumstances in which it is not. Those searching for a job need sympathetic face-to-face advice from a supportive counsellor. Putting it online is a cheap but ineffective option.

More generally, in January 2013, the House of Commons Education Select Committee published a devastating report on the changes. It warned that careers guidance services for young people have deteriorated and will continue to do so unless the government takes urgent steps.

“The government’s decision to transfer responsibility for careers guidance to schools is regrettable. We have concerns about the consistency, quality, independence and impartiality of careers guidance now being offered to young people. We heard evidence that there is already a worrying deterioration in the overall level of provision for young

*people. Urgent steps need to be taken by the government to ensure that young people's needs are met. Independent careers advice and guidance has never been as important for young people as it is today. Too many schools lack the skills, incentives or capacity to fulfil the duty put upon them without a number of changes being made. Young people deserve better than the service they are likely to receive under the current arrangements. Schools cannot simply be left to get on with it.*³⁴

Initiative III: Adopt a youth policy

In July 2012, the UKCES produced a report on the youth employment challenge. As is characteristic of its publications, it was thorough, thoughtful and clear in its analysis of the problem.

While emphasising that “the principal cause of the current situation is the level of demand in the economy”³⁵, the report discussed some areas in which interventions in the employment market could assist young people: one was improved recruitment practice, with less emphasis on informal networks; a second was enhanced opportunities for work experience.

In its main recommendation, the UKCES returned to the voluntarist approach. The suggestion this time was that every UK business should adopt a youth policy and “take a conscious decision to do at least one thing to support young people in their community”³⁶. This is but a small step away from inviting employers to sign a ‘youth policy charter’ to place alongside the Skills Pledge introduced by the government in 2007 and abolished in the White Paper of November 2010. To repeat an observation made on the previous initiative: this will do no harm but little good.

There are too many initiatives: most have uncertain objectives and unhelpful titles.

Apprenticeships: the silver bullet

Taken as a whole, UK skills training policy is best characterised as an ever-changing set of unrelated strands without cohesion. Initiatives, like the three outlined immediately above, have been introduced because of the need to be seen to be doing something at a time of mounting youth unemployment but tight constraints on expenditure.

By contrast, the promotion of apprenticeships has been far and away the most prominent feature of the coalition government's policies for training, skills and youth employment. It is easy to see why.

Apprenticeships tick all the right boxes. They provide employment, particularly for young people who have practical rather than intellectual interests and ambitions. Effective apprenticeships offer a valuable transformation stage for young people entering the labour market. They teach recipients skills that are of evident practical value – countering the ‘you can't get a plumber any more while all these young people are doing media studies’ dinner-party conversation. The skills are taught in the work place where they can best be learned. Employers have control and ownership.

This underlying aspiration was well expressed in a 2012 report produced by the McKinsey management consultancy. It stated that companies throughout the world believe that they cannot get enough skilled labour – a perceived skills shortage. It then suggested that a major cause is that “education and employers act in parallel universes”. The solution is to bring them together and the best way to do that is to enhance and improve vocational education. The author of the report argued that: “Hands-on learning is the best technique for learning and the best way to impart the skills that businesses need. The problem is that there are simply not enough high-quality apprenticeships”.³⁷ The expansion of universities had meant that Germany was the only place where technical education was not seen as inferior to academic education.

Equally importantly, the number of participants is increasing and, with a certain amount of sleight of hand, apprenticeships can be made to look as though ‘the solution’ has finally been discovered. At times the tone can move beyond mere propaganda into triumphalism. As a BIS press release issued on 28th June 2012 proudly put it:

*“New statistics published today show a continued increase in the number of people starting an apprenticeship. The provisional data shows that in the first nine months of the 2011/12 academic year (August 2011 to April 2012), 383,200 people started an apprenticeship. Skills Minister John Hayes said: “The growth in apprenticeships is really welcome news. The government has put apprenticeships at the heart of our skills policy because they equip people with the skills they need for a prosperous future and provide businesses with the expertise they need to grow. As we look to rebalance our economy, it is particularly encouraging to see an increase in the number of apprentices in the engineering and manufacturing sector. At the same time as increasing the number of apprenticeships, I have been relentless in my commitment to quality – striving to ensure that every apprenticeship is as good as the best.”*³⁸

The interest of young people in apprenticeships is beyond dispute. The National Apprenticeship Service has reported that, for the year 2012, there were 1,127,000 apprenticeship applications submitted online for 106,510 places³⁹. There is no official statement as to whether this is a good thing (indicating the popularity of the idea) or a bad thing (young people desperate to get opportunities).

Overall, it would be grudging to be anything other than very pleased with the increase in the number of apprenticeship places, but a word of warning is in order. Although apprenticeships are a ‘good thing’, they are not necessarily what they appear to be. The popular conception of an apprenticeship as an intensive and extended vocational training that provides career opportunities for the less academically gifted has not kept pace with changing definitions⁴⁰.

Today’s apprenticeships are very different from the indentured apprenticeships of the past where young people (almost always male) entered into a formal agreement and spent time under a master craftsman to get what was known as their ‘ticket’. Today’s apprenticeships are a framework for work-based learning, used as the basis for paying training providers. To qualify as an apprentice, an employee must learn practical skills in the workplace within the terms of an agreed pre-determined framework that involves a knowledge element and a competence element. This is all good stuff but those progressing through the framework could be existing employees who have been on the

payroll for many years. It is not necessarily about creating new jobs for the young unemployed.

There have been a series of attempts to extend the notion of apprenticeships – for example, make them available for a range of professional qualifications including law, accountancy and engineering. There have also been attempts to improve quality – all apprenticeships must last at least a year. The worst abuses have been eliminated. However, set against that, many employers have figured out how to rebrand ordinary jobs into the apprenticeships mould, framing them as part of a structured programme – comprehensible to educators and parents, and tapping into student reserves of careerism and altruism.

Apprenticeship schemes are shamelessly oversold. The term ‘apprentice’ is losing its meaning.

The practical challenge

Far and away the best ongoing analysis of the place of apprenticeships and the way that provision can be improved is that offered by two academic commentators, professors Alison Fuller of Southampton University and Lorna Unwin of the Institute of Education, London University. In their contribution to the *TJ* Great Skills Debate⁴¹, they drew attention to ongoing quality issues and in particular the practice of what has become known as ‘conversions’ – certifying existing employees who had been on the payroll for some time for skills they already have. In a letter timed to follow some much-lauded 2011 statistics, Fuller and Unwin argued that “converting existing employees to apprentices is a means by which governments can boost the number of qualifications to lift the UK up the international league tables”⁴².

Most disturbingly, they established, in the course of a Freedom of Information request, that figures relating to the practice of converting existing staff into apprentices are no longer collected. Government statements on apprenticeship numbers allow the impression that these are all new starts whereas this is far from the case.

As I argued early in this White Paper, the potential contribution from apprenticeships is considerable. However, given their positioning and promotion, they now carry a burden of impossible expectations. At the heart of this problem is an evident conflict between quantity and quality – between boosting the numbers and providing a good learning experience. In their contribution for the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, Fuller, Unwin and others distinguished between expansive and restrictive work environments, which they suggested should be seen as a continuum⁴³. One of the main areas in which this framework could be applied was the training and learning of apprentices:

“From our research on apprenticeships over several years, we have developed the ‘Expansive – Restrictive Framework’ as a tool for analysing why some apprenticeships represent much stronger models of learning than others. The key characteristics include the extent to which apprentices are given access to: (new) knowledge and skills and recognised vocational qualifications; structured on- and off-the-job training, including the opportunity to learn about the whole work process rather than only discrete tasks; and the extent to which the

*apprenticeship provides a platform for higher learning and career progression. Organisations that run the best apprenticeships are more likely to understand the importance of workforce training and development and how to develop and utilise the skills and knowledge of their employees. These employers create the conditions for 'expansive apprenticeships', as opposed to the 'restrictive' practice of conversions."*⁴⁴

The Richard Review

In June 2012, in response to growing concerns about quality of provision and potential abuse by unscrupulous providers, the government announced that the head of School for Startups, Doug Richard, was to lead an independent review into the future of apprenticeships. Included in the remit was a need to ensure that "every apprenticeship delivers high-quality training and the qualifications and skills that employers need". The call for evidence inevitably 'talked a good game' - the review was to "look at how to build upon the record success of recent years"⁴⁵. It was but the latest in a whole series of enquiries into apprenticeships.

To support the Richard Review, BIS and the Department of Education jointly produced background evidence. One of these documents was a hugely detailed slide pack that presumably was intended for use in presentations. It contained a wealth of information, including a statement and hard data on 'conversions': "The government is committed to using the apprenticeship programme both to train new recruits and upskill the existing workforce" and "70 per cent of apprentices worked for their employer before starting their apprenticeship; the remainder were new recruits. This appears to have increased from 48 per cent in 2007..."

Earlier in the same document, it was evident that the government departments were comfortable with loose definitions: "An apprenticeship is a job with training. This is distinguished from other types of learning" and "the aim of the apprenticeship programme is to improve the skills base of the workforce by supporting young people's entry into work and supporting the existing workforce to upskill and reskill"⁴⁶.

This overall message was consistent with the precursor Holt Review on apprenticeships for SMEs. Jason Holt, a businessman who founded the UK's sole provider of government-accredited training to the jewellery industry, authored this Review, which was published in May 2012. His intentions were good and his knowledge extensive. However, it is surely worth questioning why the government would commission two separate reviews of apprenticeships, timed to appear within six months of each other.

In his Review, Holt observed that the take-up of apprenticeships in SMEs is under 10 per cent. What was required was "communication: raising awareness of the benefits of apprenticeships" (predictably the first recommendation); "empowerment: SMEs to get the best of their training providers" (market efficiency); "simplification: ownerships and responsibility for the apprenticeships programme and removing barriers" (this last yet another plea for 'joined-up thinking')⁴⁷. Under "empowerment", the Review recommended that the relevant government bodies "develop an online tool to enable all employers, including SMEs, to identify and access the most appropriate apprenticeship training provision for their needs in real time. Such a tool should have a feedback mechanism so that employers can see other employers' experiences of each provider".

This last lies firmly in the tradition of ideas that will sound attractive, will look good and will have no effect whatsoever. Astonishingly, the National Apprenticeship Service has announced that it will be developing the recommended online search function. It remains to be seen if anyone will use it.

The central place of apprenticeships in the coalition government's skills and employment policy had become fully evident by the end of the year 2012 – half way through the lifetime of the parliament. At this stage, two very important and challenging reports on the current state of apprenticeships were published.

The first was a most comprehensive report published in November 2012 by the Select Committee for Business, Innovation and Skills, which recommended considerable changes in the existing arrangements. As the committee chairman, Adrian Bailey MP, put it when introducing the report, "the apprenticeship programme needs clarity, oversight and, in these straightened times, to demonstrate that it is providing value for money"⁴⁸. What the committee found were fuzzy definitions and sloppy management.

The main recommendations from the Select Committee were, first, that the government should define an overarching strategy and clear purpose for the apprenticeship programme and, secondly, that BIS should produce a formal definition of an apprenticeship. Moreover, "any definition should state clearly that apprenticeships are for developing skills not simply for the validation or consolidation of existing skills"⁴⁹.

The committee was also uncompromising in arguing that quality, not quantity, should be the over-riding measure of success. Training and development specialists know that schemes take time and resources and many effective schemes are simply not scalable. Governments of all persuasions want to produce figures that seem to indicate that problems are being solved so the more apprenticeships the better.

In the course of its deliberations, the committee took evidence from Wm Morrison, the retailer, and Elmfield Training, a private training provider. It noted that, in 2010-11, Elmfield Training received £41m from the Skills Funding Agency; apparently half of that sum resulted from its contract with Morrison. Not surprisingly, the committee expressed deep concern at the hands-off approach adopted by government in respect of profit levels and value for money delivered from training providers.

Later that month, Doug Richard presented his long-awaited *Richard Review* on apprenticeships. His report, delivered on 27th November, was well written with clearly expressed views and mercifully light on acronyms, and firmly identified the major current problem. Building on the recent Business and Innovation Select Committee report, he effectively destroyed the notion that apprenticeships are the easy solution to the problem of NEETs.

His first recommendation was that "apprenticeships should be redefined" and, additionally, the government should introduce a new, separate, work-based programme to support entry into employment. Early on, he stated: "There has been a drift towards calling many things apprenticeships which, in fact, are not... Simply enough, not all instances of training on a job are apprenticeships. Apprenticeships require a new job role, a role that is new to the individual and requires them to learn a substantial amount before they can do that job effectively. An apprenticeship without a job is a form of

vocational training. An apprenticeship in an old job is on-the-job training. There must be a job and the job role must be new.”⁵⁰

The *Richard Review* also contained a raft of recommendations that would follow as a consequence of the need to tighten the concept of apprenticeships. He argued that government subsidies should be routed through the employer not the provider. One unexpected recommendation was that the government should set up a competition for the best qualification – the best designed apprenticeship programme for a sector.

The challenge that Doug Richard posed is profound. If apprenticeships are to become the blue riband of vocational training, with a precise definition and clear criteria, the numbers participating will not be as great.

The government’s response to the Select Committee, issued in January 2013, offered a menu of procedures designed to avoid scandal and to ensure the integrity of payment systems, but indicated that policy decisions would await their response to the Richard Review. Subsequently, after some delays, the government chose National Apprenticeship Week, March 2013, to issue its formal response to the Richard Review of Apprenticeships. It took the opportunity to underline the central importance of apprenticeships in skills and employment policy and also to re-emphasise the commitment to employer ownership. Prime Minister David Cameron, taking the opportunity of a visit to a Buckinghamshire training academy, both emphasised the value of apprenticeships and claimed success:

*“Apprenticeships are at the heart of our mission to rebuild the economy, giving young people the chance to learn a trade, build their careers, and create a truly world-class, high-skilled workforce that can compete and thrive in the fierce global race we are in. There are record numbers of people taking up and apprenticeship, with a million starting on in the last few years”.*⁵¹

In the same week, the results of a bullish study undertaken by the Centre for Economics and Business Research for the National Apprenticeship Service were unveiled. Cebr forecasted that, between 2012-13 and 2021-22, 3.8m people will complete an apprenticeship. It estimated that this could contribute £3.4bn to the UK economy a year in productivity gains by 2022⁵².

This upbeat tone extended into the formal response document, *The Future of Apprenticeships*, which was published on March 13⁵³. Produced in the form of a consultative document, it was tentative in tone and equivocal when it came to the details of implementation. However, the overall direction was clear: employers must now own the skills agenda.

There were two major recommendations on scope:

- every apprenticeship should be targeted at a skilled job, involving substantial new learning that will provide the foundations for a career and a springboard for progressions
- training and accreditation of existing workers who are already fully competent in their jobs should be delivered separately.

And three on content:

- apprenticeships should be focused on the outcome: clearly setting out what apprentices should know and be able to do at the end of their apprenticeships
- apprenticeships will move to a final holistic test which has the full confidence of employers
- All apprentices will work towards a level 2 qualification, either through GCSEs or functional skills in English and maths, from August 2014, if they have not already achieved this⁵⁴.

The government accepted that apprenticeships should be redefined so that they became targeted at those new to a job or role and that such jobs should require sustained and substantial training. There was a certain amount of wriggle-room contained in the following two sentences of the response document: “This is not a narrow definition. It includes offering a ladder opportunity to help people advance within their existing employment where the apprenticeship is firmly focused on training them to do a higher skilled job⁵⁵.” However, hopefully, this will deal with the problem of conversions – accrediting current staff with existing skills and calling them apprentices.

Encouragingly, and somewhat surprisingly, the government also committed to introducing a new scheme of traineeships for those who were not ready to embark on apprenticeships. This picked up on Doug Richard’s call for a “new, separate, work-based programme to support entry into employment”. To quote from *The Future of Apprenticeships in England*: “Traineeships will offer unemployed people aged 16 to 24 years a combination of extended work placements, work skills training, English and maths and other support suited to individual needs. They will help young people prepare for Apprenticeships and other employment opportunities⁵⁶.” The government agreed to explore this option and produced (yet another) discussion paper – *Traineeships: supporting young people to develop the skills for Apprenticeships and other sustained jobs*. Issued in January 2013, this was as far-reaching in scope as it was timid in its recommendations. The intention, it appears, is to provide “a structured opportunity for young people who are motivated by work to develop the skills and experience that they need to be attractive to employers⁵⁷”. As an aside, “Apprenticeships” was spelled with a capital ‘A’ throughout – as a noun it now appears to have acquired the same status as ‘God’ and the ‘Internet’.

Considered as a whole, there were positive features to the government’s response to the Richard Review and some areas for concern. Certainly there was an acceptance that the definition of apprenticeship needed to be tightened, while not accepting the precision demanded by Doug Richard. Only time will tell if the government can resist the temptation to boost the numbers and claim success by continuing to call looser initiatives apprenticeships. The introduction of traineeships is certainly to be welcomed but it is going to be difficult to deliver meaningful provision at a time of cuts in public sector budgets.

However there is an even more important question to be addressed. This surrounds the central commitment to give employers greater ownership and allow them more flexibility in the creation of apprenticeship programmes in their organisations. It is hard to see how this can work in practice without diluting the quality of the apprenticeships brand. The new structures may increase diversity of provision but is there any benefit, beyond the purely promotional, of calling trainee accountants, solicitors and, indeed, human

resource managers apprentices? Neither the numbers nor the content will change but these places can be added to the national figures to claim increased success.

Overall, the public profile of, and debate about, apprenticeships are surely to be welcomed if they serve to focus on issues that are important to a wider discussion on training, skills and employment. We need to recognise that the provision of effective learning opportunities in the work place is resource-intensive: it takes time and professional expertise to develop such schemes and time and commitment from managers at all levels to maintain them. However intense the promotion, and whatever incentives are made available, a well-thought-out apprenticeship scheme is not readily scalable in the organisation nor is it easily transferable to a new context. This is more fully discussed in a 2011 *TJ* article that outlines two excellent schemes⁵⁸.

More generally, despite all these reservations and qualifications, the sustained development of apprenticeships unquestionably offers something really positive in terms of skills development – though less so as a vehicle for job creation. To attempt to achieve both of these objectives simultaneously damages the prospects for success. There are a number of conditions that must be met for apprenticeships to make a significant and lasting contribution to skills development in the UK: the purpose and objectives must be clear; there must be honest monitoring and reporting; public sector provision through the colleges must be protected, and the dangers of dubious commercial practice recognised and countered. Further, the ongoing, but painfully slow, work on establishing a single, over-arching, credible and recognised structure for vocational qualifications must be continued, at a faster pace and with greater commitment. Only if these wide-ranging policies are in place can apprenticeships move beyond their role as a convenient propaganda weapon. There is no quick fix. The truth is that the government faces a nasty political problem. If apprenticeships are to become the blue riband of vocational training with a precise definition and clear criteria the numbers participating will not be as great.

The provision of effective learning opportunities in the workplace is resource-intensive; this takes time and expertise.

German apprenticeships

One recurring feature of the apprenticeship debate is the near-reverential respect shown towards the German system: it is often cited as the model for transition from school to work. There is a detailed section on the system in a thorough IPPR report on apprenticeships that was published in November 2011⁵⁹.

In its report *The Youth Employment Challenge*, the UKCES argued that the recruitment and development of young people through well-established apprenticeship routes was embedded in the German employment culture. However, this clearly requires extensive commitment to this approach and the consistent deployment of resources over time. The UKCES quoted a recent blog post by Klaus Zimmerman, director of the Institute for the Study of Labour, in Germany, who said:

“The apprenticeship system is really one gigantic microeconomic management exercise that involves all the relevant stakeholders in society. It spans from young people and their teachers

to the local companies and small businesses, chambers of commerce, industry associations, commercial banks, to trade schools, technical universities and multinational companies. Indeed, the core lesson from Germany is that this is not a top-down approach, but really a bottom-up one."⁶⁰

It takes time to effect a culture change, but that must be an aspiration for the UK economy. However, simply casting admiring glances in the direction of Germany will not be productive. Moreover, the dilution of the concept of apprentices discussed above indicates that we are heading in the opposite direction; it would take a huge investment and change in approach to reverse direction on apprenticeships.

The admiration for the German system extends throughout Europe. In December 2012, six European countries (Spain, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Slovakia and Latvia) signed a memorandum of agreement to work with the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The aim is to introduce a vocational system based on the German 'Mittelstand' model elsewhere⁶¹. It will be easier to duplicate educational programmes than it will be to duplicate the ethos, spirit and commitment to build for the long term that underpins them.

A well-thought-out apprenticeship scheme is not readily scaleable in the organisation nor is it easy to transfer to a new context.

More of the same but different

All the elements of the coalition government's skills policy were brought together in a strategy review document published in April 2013 as *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills Strategy*⁶². There was comparatively little new information and no new departures on skills policy in the document. It summarised and endorsed current government policies. It reinforced the philosophy of employee ownership; re-emphasised the central role of apprenticeships (claimed as a resounding success); stressed the need for the reform of the vocational qualification structure, and heralded the forthcoming introduction of traineeships. It confirmed that there would be a long-lad time before changes were made in the apprenticeship framework: "We will carefully stage full implementation over the coming years." However, the main focus of the document was on improvements in the further education sector: a commissioner would be appointed to advise on failing or inadequate colleges and, where this occurred, governing bodies could be replaced or completely dissolved. Capital investment amounting to £214m across 47 colleges was announced. The statement reflected the government's desire to drive educational standards through central intervention where necessary and fitted less easily with the devolution of power to employers and to local communities. As far as the government is concerned, it appears that the course of skills and training policy has now been settled until the 2015 general election.

The coalition's neoliberal philosophy is embedded in a belief that efficient markets alone can produce long-term sustainable economic growth. Such markets depend on the free flow of information and on informed consumers making rational choices. One of the

justifications for incessant promotional campaigns of the latest government initiative is that consumers (whether employers or learners) are simply unaware of what is on offer and hence hampered in making a rational choice. However, there is an unrecognised contradiction in current government policy: some initiatives – for example the traineeships and the work programme – are clearly not about improving market efficiency but are interventions aimed at a serious problem to which the free market cannot provide a solution.

Either way, the long-established tradition of a stream of initiatives with similar-sounding names will continue. There will be launches, events and conferences based on the assumption that there is an underlying willingness on the part of employers to solve the nation's skills and employment problem through voluntary action, hampered only by their lack of awareness of the initiatives that are available and the benefits of implementing them. Depressingly, this will be accompanied by attempts to talk up and over-promote any success – of which any increase in the number of recorded apprenticeships will be the most prominent feature. As an aside, I note that the term 'celebration' or 'celebratory' appeared no fewer than nine times in the February edition of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills FE & Skills newsletter. Perhaps we should go straight from the announcement to the celebration and save everybody time by cutting out the intervening initiative.

Making it all work

A new context

So far the discussion in this Paper has focused on the initiatives and schemes that have been introduced in the post-compulsion era. This next section will consider the wider economic context. In particular, I will argue that a consensus has emerged on skills development in the modern organisation.

Sadly, this consensus has not been adequately reflected in the training and skills debate. The arguments below draw heavily on material that has been presented in *TJ's* L&D2020 project and is freely available on its website⁶³.

A starting point is the now-received wisdom that globalisation, the impact of information and communications technology, and more demanding, sophisticated consumers require a change in our thinking on competition. The CIPD has used the term "service-led and knowledge-driven economy" to describe this shift⁶⁴. Different skill sets are needed; the way in which they are developed has changed. This is of profound significance to government policies on training and skills.

What matters to the management of an organisation is the acquisition of knowledge and skills by individuals and teams and their appropriate application in the workplace. The acquisition process is encouraged or facilitated by interventions. Training is one of these interventions, but only one. The skill sets that are needed to build value demand a growing focus on their acquisition by the learner and less focus on the trainer's skills of delivery; these skills are increasingly acquired by learning rather than taught through training.

If many of the skills critical to the modern business are learned rather than taught, an appreciation of the distinction between training and learning is fundamental: training and learning are related, but conceptually different, activities. The 2004 CIPD research report *Helping People Learn* offered precise definitions of the terms ‘training’ and ‘learning’: training was defined as “an instructor-led, content-based intervention, leading to desired changes in behaviour” and learning as “a self-directed, work-based process, leading to increased adaptive capacity”⁶⁵. Learning is a discretionary activity that takes place in the domain of the learner. Learning activities, of whatever form, will only receive managerial support if they are seen to add value to a business and its customers or clients. They will only receive support from the learner if the learner is motivated and feels capable of undertaking them.

Indeed, for some ‘new economy’ jobs, the skills that are most valued are seen entirely as self-directed: something to be developed by the learner. The organisation’s role becomes one of facilitation – ensuring that the learner has the appropriate learning opportunities and is supported in his or her endeavours. More demanding tasks involving IT, for example interrogating data (or data mining), offers a good example. Although there are differences of opinion on the pace and extent of the change, there is almost universal acceptance that there are changes taking place in the pattern of training delivery. There have been a series of recent books that emphasise the importance of what is described as ‘informal learning’⁶⁶ and the shift is evident in repeated surveys from the ASTD and the CIPD.

One other consequence of the changing business models is the importance of context. What will be effective in one sector is quite different from what will be effective in another. This was well articulated in some major UK research: the Teaching & Learning Research Programme, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. The most relevant summary of the TLRP work is contained in a document prepared by Professor Alan Brown of Warwick University, which concluded: “learning at work is related to the productive system of the company, the organisation of work, and the type and range of activities at work”. Skills development at work must be seen in the context in which the individual is working and a wide range of factors must be taken into account.⁶⁷

Individual skills development depends partly on the environment (whether work offers an expansive learning environment). It depends also on the individual’s response and the extent to which he is self-directed in terms of taking advantage of learning opportunities: “People vary in their self-awareness about their goals, aspirations, motivation, personality, interpersonal skills and resilience” and “willingness to engage in a wide range of activities such as asking questions; getting information; locating key resource people; listening and observing; learning from mistakes; giving and receiving feedback; trying things out; independent study, and working for a qualification”⁶⁸.

Partly as a consequence of the changes described above, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of effective management. One important argument that is frequently presented is that there are adequate or, indeed, abundant skills present in today’s workplaces; what is lacking is appropriate job design and effective first-line management to ensure that the organisation makes use of them. A second is the more general point that the value of good management is under-recognised. For example, in

July 2012, BIS published a paper that “puts forward the arguments for business investment in leadership and management skills”⁶⁹. In his introduction, the then Minister of State argued that “too many of our organisations, both private and public, are failing to achieve their full potential: managerial shortcomings and a lack of strategic thinking are holding them back”⁷⁰.

All the above brings into question initiatives that are based on encouraging, recording and rewarding traditional training activity; those that focus on lectures and instruction delivered in a room by a designated trainer to learners who are regarded as recipients. This view of ‘training as an event’ formed the basis of the last serious attempt at compulsion in the UK – the levy and grant system introduced in the 1960s (see p6). Not only could it be criticised for the administrative burden it created but also because it focused attention exclusively on just one dimension of training and learning activity.

This section has identified a number of important strands: changing skill sets, a shift from training to learning, new approaches to delivery, the need to create an effective learning environment, the need to see learning in its wider context and its inter-connection with other human resource policies. Bringing all these strands together produces what could be called a new orthodoxy: the effective learning of relevant skills is best enhanced by the creation of an environment in which employees feel that they are well-respected and well-managed.

This approach, with its emphasis on a communicated vision and on good feedback and support, has become known as high-performance working. It involves people believing in what they do and having the skills they need, or believing that they can readily acquire them. All this takes time.

Interventions must proceed from a realistic understanding of the place of skills training in corporate organisations.

Some practical problems

Developing an effective government training and skills policy in this new economic and business context is challenging. Recycling old models will not do. Movement up a business value chain through enhanced skills may well be a continuing government objective (and one that has been embraced throughout the world), but this can only be achieved by organisations at the micro-level. Equally, the role of training interventions to promote skills must be increasingly learner- and business-centric. An understanding of the new context is a pre-condition of success before problems of delivery can be overcome. This next section will look at some practical difficulties that will be faced. The section that follows after this will consider some of the more fundamental, or ideological, issues involved.

Training or employment?

The first of these practical issues may appear to be trivial or obvious. Is an initiative about training or employment? Is its purpose to develop the skill set of individuals to the

potential benefit of employers and the national economy or to help the unemployed or disadvantaged back to work? The former is surely a vocational education and training scheme, under the direction of BIS; the latter a welfare-to-work scheme, which falls under the remit of the DWP.

However, things are far less clear in practice.

An important and all-embracing current welfare-to-work initiative is the prosaically named Work Programme. This was introduced in summer 2011 by the coalition government to replace the Flexible New Deal that was the flagship welfare-to-work policy of the previous Labour government. Payment is made to private sector providers who 'help participants into sustained work'.

These providers can claim a job outcome payment after a participant has been in a job for three or six months, and further payments if the participant remains in work for longer periods⁶⁰. Problems have arisen because of uncertainties in forecasting the numbers of eligible participants and, in July 2012, it was reported that a revision of official forecasts showed "1m fewer people would be eligible" and, ironically, "there are now fears that people hired to find work for the unemployed could in turn lose their jobs"⁷¹. Subsequently, a report from the Public Accounts Committee indicated that, during the first 14 months of the Work Programme, only 3.6 per cent of claimants on the scheme moved off benefits into sustained employment⁷².

An even higher-profile scheme is the Youth Contract. This was launched by the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, in April 2012 and was designed to counter public concern about mounting unemployment among young workers. It offers a wage incentive to firms to take on up to 160,000 under 25-year-olds and is also intended to create an additional 250,000 work experience places⁷³. A report published by the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee six months later concluded that the scheme represented a good start in attempting to tackle youth unemployment. However, according to committee chairwoman Dame Anne Begg:

*"The Youth Contract is welcome but on its own it will not be enough to address the current unacceptably high level of youth unemployment. Young people need effective support from government to counteract the disadvantage they have long suffered in the labour market but they also need a return to economic growth and a substantial increase in the number of new jobs."*⁷⁴

The committee also expressed concerns that "the government will fall sort of its more eye-catching targets".

Such schemes are immensely complicated and probably the only people who understand them are the private sector providers who form what now appears to be known officially as 'the welfare-to-work industry' (this term was used by the then Secretary of State for Employment, Chris Grayling, on 9th July 2012 to celebrate the first anniversary of the Work Programme⁷⁵). Indeed, in a speech to the organisation's Action for Jobs Summit in June 2012, CBI Director-General John Cridland argued for a simpler interface for employers who wanted to get involved:

“There are 47 different employment initiatives for employers in England alone, which offer funding and support for businesses taking on and training young unemployed people. Busy firms need the whole process to be easier to navigate.

“Business will step up, but government has to meet it halfway. If ever there was a case of not being able to see the wood for the trees, this is it. Confusion dilutes well-intentioned policies and the impact they should have and we cannot have our young people being denied life-changing opportunities.”⁷⁶

This multiplicity of initiatives has undoubtedly contributed to the blurring of the distinction between schemes aimed at enhancing skills and those aimed at welfare-to-work. However there are more general causes behind this understandable confusion.

As was discussed above in the section on changing approaches to delivery (see p16), many of the more valuable work-related interpersonal skills are best learned less formally through on-the-job support and feedback. Given that, any work experience can be regarded as a form of training – this is particularly the case if the ‘learner’ has had very limited recent experience of a work environment. A related point is that lack of experience is now seen as a major impediment to employment prospects, arguably because one consequence is a failure to acquire these work-related skills.

However, it is one thing for there to be confusion in the minds of the general public on the purpose of a scheme and it is another for there to be confusion in the minds of employers. What is even more critical is a deliberate obfuscation in the way that government ministers promote such schemes.

Inevitably this must lead to ambiguity on how they should be reviewed or evaluated.

Apprenticeships are an obvious case in point: if they are a work experience scheme, it is the numbers of placements that matter; if they are a contribution to national skills, it is the quality and relevance of the training. In practice, there is now a general confusion. Consider the argument that the Prime Minister, David Cameron, made in November 2011 when launching Employer Ownership of Skills (see p10):

“I know times are tough – especially for young people who are trying to get their foot in the door and launch their career. That is why I am determined to do all we can to give people the very best skills, training and opportunities to succeed; and why, despite tough spending decisions, we are investing in a record number of apprenticeships. We are seeing an incredible take-up of these apprenticeships, and now we are giving employers the power to take control of the training so that it best meets the skills they need.”⁷⁷

Youth unemployment: a structural issue

That young people have suffered particularly badly in this recession is beyond dispute. However, the topic has become confused with a recurrent debate on their attitude to work. As a July 2012 TUC/CIPD/IPPR report on youth unemployment in Europe put it: “Traditionally, concern about youth unemployment in the UK has centred on the skills deficiencies and lack of work ethic among young people, and on the failure of the education system to produce ‘job-ready’ young workers”⁷⁸.

Such views are frequently expressed. In November 2009, when speaking at the CBI conference, the then executive chairman of Marks & Spencer issued a statement that attracted the headlines: “School-leavers are not up to the job, claims Sir Stuart Rose”⁷⁹. He is reported as saying that “we have to worry about those people who don’t have the 21st -century equivalent of metal bashing, whether that is computer literacy or something. They are not fit for work when they come out of college”. The same report carried earlier comments by the then chief executive of Tesco, Sir Terry Leahy, who in the previous months had said that standards in schools were often “woefully low” and that the education system left it to companies to “pick up the pieces”.

Further, Tesco was unhappy that it had to spend time training recruits in basic numeracy and communications skills, including writing⁴.

A relevant counter-observation is that considerable numbers of today’s young people are working in their spare time – and a high proportion of this work takes place in the retail sector where they receive training from companies like those led by Sir Stuart and Sir Terry. However, a fundamental question is whether the purpose of the education system is to provide oven-ready raw material for employers. If business leaders choose to sound off, they owe it to young people to be far more specific about the nature of the deficiencies and what needs to be done by whom. Simply blaming the school system will not do.

In fact there is little evidence that prejudices apart, skills at entry-level present a real problem in today’s job market. There are, however, structural problems and deficient demand.

In July 2012, the UKCES produced a report on the youth employment challenge. As is characteristic of UKCES publications it was thorough, thoughtful and clear in its analysis of the problem but fell short in terms of offering any solution. The report recognised that youth unemployment is both an economic and a social issue and a structural problem for the economy:

“The large number of young people unemployed and not in education, employment or training (NEET) is predominately down to the recession, however youth unemployment was high and began rising in 2005, well before the recession.” It argued that the labour market has changed, with fewer available jobs in sales and “elementary occupations”. The proportion of small businesses had risen and “small companies are more likely to emphasise the importance of experience”⁸⁰.

The UKCES report was at its strongest in its discussion of young people’s work-readiness. This it recognised as a persistent theme when discussing youth employment. However, “while only a minority of employers actually recruit young people, the majority of them find them well or very well prepared for work”. The report emphasised that “the principal cause of the current situation is the level of demand in the economy”⁸¹.

⁴ Those of us who are in our 60s will recall, as we entered the workforce, being told repeatedly that ‘a bit of national service would have done you some good’ (though the solution of sending us all to dig ditches in Kowloon or peel potatoes in a Cyprus canteen was rarely suggested as a serious option).

Calls for more opportunities for work experience are an inevitable consequence of rising youth unemployment. As has been seen, they are the essential components of welfare-to-work programmes. Work experience is seen as beneficial to university, college and school students. Participants are given an exposure, and by implication some training, in the skills required in the workplace; they also gain insights into the attractions or disadvantage of various career options. Moreover, an attachment with a company in a relevant sector or with an organisation with a good brand name can considerably enhance an individual's curriculum vitae when he applies for full-time jobs. At the higher levels this has become known as internships – a term that has crossed the Atlantic from the United States.

Internships, and work experience have now entered the politics of training in two respects. First there is the social dimension of access: those with better connections stand much better chances. Most notoriously, it was reported that work experience opportunities with banks and hedge funds formed auction lots at a £400-a-head fund raising event held in February 2011⁸². A second issue is that work experience and internships lend themselves to abuse from unscrupulous employers who can take advantage of free labour.

Such problems are now widely recognised. In July 2011, BIS published a best practice code that had been developed by its Collaborative Forum on Fair Access⁸³. Like so much in this area, the code was well researched, well meaning and intended to be purely voluntary. As such, it will have negligible impact. The code built on an earlier internship guide published by the CIPD⁸⁴.

In June 2010, the CIPD argued for an end to unpaid internships. In April 2012, it produced a work experience charter with an explicit endorsement from the Secretary of State for Employment⁷⁶. This charter does not, however, focus on internships but limits itself to offering sound advice on the operation of welfare-to-work programmes⁸⁵.

Excessive and inappropriate criticism of the NEET generation should cease; they should not be held to blame for a situation they did not create.

The wrong sort of headlines

Over the wider training for skills area, but most particularly in welfare-to-work initiatives, an unfortunate combination of circumstances can all too easily lead to negative headlines. These circumstances include: a desperate desire to be seen to be acting; working through a large number of private sector providers; awarding contracts on the basis of demanding and visible targets; a multiplicity of overlapping schemes. There have been some high-profile scandals and controversies. It is fair to ask if such problems are inevitable.

Perhaps the most serious was the difficulties experienced with the Individual Learning Accounts scheme. This was an idea introduced by the Labour government following a manifesto commitment in the 1997 general election. It is not to be confused with the embryonic scheme with a similar name currently under development by the coalition. ILAs were designed to support adult education through a system of tax incentives from

employers, as well as a cash contribution of £150 to each of a million individuals. It was launched in 2000 with financial reimbursement given to providers of educational courses.

According to the Wikipedia article on the scheme:

“By the time the scheme was abandoned in October 2001... the Department for Education and Skills was investigating 279 providers on the basis of substantial evidence of mis-selling, and police had arrested 30 people. ...Following its investigation, the Parliamentary Committee of Public Accounts reported that the total expenditure on the scheme exceeded £290m... with fraud and abuse amounting to £97m. The fraudulent activity was in the form of obtaining learning account numbers from individuals or of buying them from corrupt providers and simply cashing the credit, knowing that there was virtually no chance that the fact that no education had been delivered would be detected.”⁸⁶

Other, more recent, difficulties that made headline news include the investigation of the welfare-to-work provider A4e and also various reported abuses of work experience.

From its Sheffield base, A4e achieved considerable business growth and success, much of it through the delivery of work experience, training and placement skills for the then Labour government in the early 2000s⁸⁷. In January 2012, four former employees of A4e were arrested on suspicion of fraud dating back to 2010. Amid mounting press criticism, in late February, the high-profile chairwoman, Emma Harrison, resigned her position. On 9th March 2012, the DWP announced it had “been made aware of an allegation of attempted fraud in relation to a Mandatory Work Activity contract with A4e”. It stated that it had begun an investigation into this allegation and also, as a result of the allegation, an “independent audit of all our commercial relationships with A4e”. In May, the DWP terminated a contract for the organisation of mandatory work placements in the Southeast region. In August, following a complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority, A4e was banned from describing itself as a social purpose company. I have also been left with a negative experience of A4e⁵.

⁵ In April 2010 I answered an advertisement that appeared in the *Big Issue*. The headlines were “A4e Mentoring Get Involved!” and “enthusiastic motivated people needed”. The advertisement called for highly motivated volunteers to mentor long-term unemployed people on a weekly basis within London. It stated that the minimum commitment would be five hours a week for six months; that free training and support would be provided. The work would be unpaid. I mentored at the Hounslow centre on four occasions and met with five clients over a two-month period. Other sessions were cancelled or postponed by a very stretched and over-committed coordinator who was performing multiple jobs for A4e elsewhere in London. There were no interview facilities available at the premises and most of my discussions took place in a canteen, where there were frequent visitors coming to use the vending machines. The emphasis seemed to be on throughput with resources pared to a minimum. At one time I assisted a refugee from Afghanistan. He was an intelligent young man but had very limited IT skills and was struggling to progress on the formal IT training sessions that he was receiving from Skills Training UK. I therefore went to see the IT trainer concerned, introduced myself, and outlined the problem. In response, I was told that the trainer was obliged to teach to a pre-determined syllabus, was unwilling to depart or deviate from the syllabus, and if the client was unable to keep up or benefit there was nothing he would do. See <http://www.trainingjournal.com/blog/articles-blogs-clients-deserve-better/>

Such examples concern excess profits; others concern employers taking advantage of potential sources of free or cheap labour. On 12th February 2013, a 24-year-old geology graduate, Cait Reilly, won a case in the Appeal Court that led to enforced changes in the government's back-to-work scheme. She had been obliged to leave her voluntary work at a local museum to work unpaid at a Poundland shop in Birmingham. This scheme was described as a 'sector-based work academy' but Miss Reilly said the work involved stacking shelves and cleaning floors and did nothing to enhance her skills and employability⁸⁸.

More generally, reports of work experience abuses are frequent occurrences.

A particularly prominent incident concerned the use of unpaid stewards at last year's Diamond Jubilee celebrations. A newspaper reported it as follows:

*"On the night of Saturday 2nd June, a security firm called Close Protection UK bussed around 80 people from Bristol, Bath and Plymouth to London where they were to work as stewards in and around the jubilee river pageant. Fifty were classed and rewarded to the tune of £2.80 an hour and another 30 were 'customers' of the government's work programme, given training placements with Close Protection UK and promised paid work at the Olympics – but for their travails at the jubilee celebrations, they were paid nothing. Having arrived in the capital on Sunday morning, all of them were told to sleep under London Bridge from 3am to 5.30am."*⁸⁹

The following week a Downing Street spokesman described it as a one-off and isolated incident.

What we should have learned?

The previous section outlined a whole number of practical issues that arise in the inevitably complicated design and implementation of government skills and training initiatives. The analysis in this section will focus on some more fundamental, often ideological, issues. These take us firmly into the area of what was described in the introduction as the politics of training.

Employers are rational

The first of these issues concern the underlying view that is taken of employers and their attitude to skills training in their organisation. Three points can be made here.

First, employers are generally a savvy lot. If, in their experience, older and more committed workers from Eastern Europe offer better value for the business than the local teenager, they will hire the former. More generally, if they are in an SME, they will have a clear understanding of what is needed to operate profitably, deliver a service or grow. In a larger undertaking, managers with responsibility for decisions on training spend are likely to have had exposure to many of the practical issues of designing and delivering training. However, many of the recent skills and training initiatives seem to be based on the assumption that what is required is to bring best practice to the unaware. Historically, there have been desperate attempts to find evidence that 'proved' the value

of training – a hopeless and pointless task given the overriding importance of the context in which it was delivered.

Secondly, skills development will not be the highest thing on employers' minds. The TLRP report cited earlier commented that “one interesting finding is that the development of higher skills at work is often not the prime focus of the activity undertaken, which might be to solve a problem or to improve performance in some way”⁹⁰. Earlier, two leading commentators on skills policy, professors Ewart Keep and Ken Mayhew, argued that there are two elements to employer demands for skills: “First-order decisions relate to the choice of product market and competitive strategy. Once these strategies have been established, they have an impact on second-order decisions, which concern the way in which work is organised and jobs are designed”⁹¹.

We may extend this useful distinction to argue that the decision on how, when and where to invest in skills development inside the organisation is a third-order decision. There is nothing that any government can do to make it become a first-order decision. No amount of exhortation will persuade employers to do something they do not see as being in their interest.

The third point to be made on employer attitudes to training and skills has already been identified in the earlier discussion on apprenticeships. This is that supporting learning, training and development takes resources. Problems of priorities are more acute in a recession. If firms are struggling to prevent redundancies, or think they may have to so in the near future, they will try to avoid taking on extra staff, whoever they are and for whatever purpose.

Moreover, management resources are likely to be heavily stretched and any employment scheme requires management.

Employers are rational. They are generally aware of how skills training will benefit their organisation and training is a ‘third-order’ decision to them.

What are qualifications for?

The second fundamental set of issues concern the role and place of vocational qualifications. This has given rise to recurring discussions in the training arena and, as is the case of so many topics in the skills debate, they have ranged from the informed through to saloon-bar prejudice.

A starting-point in disentangling the debate is to recognise that qualifications act as the link between training and the employment market: they certify that an individual has acquired skills and this helps him gain employment. In order to do so, the qualification needs ‘currency’ – it needs to be known and valued by prospective employers. This is not always as straightforward as it may appear. Accountancy qualifications have currency; qualifications in personnel management have achieved currency in the UK (through the CIPD) but not elsewhere; there is no IT qualification with real currency.

One argument frequently advanced is that vocational qualifications should have greater esteem – sometimes that they should have equal esteem with academic qualifications.

Unfortunately, this often seems to be accompanied by a suggestion that some types of young people are suitable only for vocational jobs. These young people are, of course, other people's children – to draw on an argument explored by Professor Alison Wolf in her excellent book⁹².

Wolf was also the author of a recent important report on education and training in the UK. Her review of vocational education was commissioned by the Department of Education and contains a damning indictment of aspects of the VET system. It is cogent, coherent and well argued; it seems to have commanded support from across the political spectrum. It deals with a complicated subject and many of its 27 separate recommendations are difficult to appreciate outside their context. However, the main conclusion is stark: "I estimate that at least 350,000 young people in a given 16-19 cohort are poorly served by current arrangements. Their programmes and experiences fail to promote progression into either stable, paid employment or higher-level education and training in a consistent or effective way."⁹³ No-one disagreed with this verdict.

So, it is evident that many young people are staying in the education system but are doing courses that do not benefit them and are not valued by future employers. The Wolf Report argued that, in part, this must be remedied by changes in the way that colleges are rewarded and monitored. However the boldest proposal advocated by Wolf was the emphasis she placed on the two important core subjects of maths and English.

As well as exposing many practical issues, Wolf most helpfully raised the level of the overall debate on vocational qualifications. This has been overdue.

Creating a ladder for the ambitious and motivated by facilitating the transition between different qualifications is something that receives wide support in principle but poses difficult problems in practice. The idea of an over-arching framework of qualifications that allows people to progress at any stage in their careers, whatever their age and starting point, is an attractive one for many.

Establishing and implementing a more understandable and accessible qualification route at a national level is evidently something that government can seek to achieve. Such an ambition has been on the agenda for decades. It can, however, conflict with educational aims that are articulated in terms of preventing the dumbing-down of qualifications and reinforcing educational standards. National Vocational Qualifications were first introduced in the UK in 1986 but struggled to gain currency – not helped by the alphabet soup of acronyms evident in the changing bodies set up to support their development.

However, the huge energy put behind the promotion of apprenticeships has breathed new life into the place of vocational qualifications and an ongoing debate about their relative value can be expected.

In his October 2012 Conference speech Labour Leader Ed Miliband promised, if elected, to introduce a technical baccalaureate at 18 that would raise overall standards of numeracy and literacy - presumably this was intended to echo the Wolf Report. On this basis there could have been new (and potentially competing?) educational and technical baccalaureates. In 2004 the Tomlinson Report recommended replacing GCSEs, A-levels and vocational qualifications with a new single diploma over a ten-year

period of reform⁹⁴. This radical recommendation attracted considerable support amongst the educational community. However the potential political unpopularity of ending A-levels meant that the Labour government of the day decided not to proceed.

The contention here is that the debate on vocational qualifications cannot be conducted effectively in the absence of a parallel consideration of the broader role of education. This will be presented next.

The role of education

Agreement on many aspects of the Wolf Report should not divert attention from an emerging ideological division evident across the wider agenda of lifelong learning. What is at issue here is the damage caused by the distinction between the academic/educational route and the vocational one. In part this reflects a view of the educational system that qualifications should be a mechanism for educational institutions to sort out applicants rather than a way of improving capability.

This is rarely expressed as such but was a recognisable current in the debate surrounding the proposed introduction of the English Baccalaureate Certificate. Whatever the other pros and cons, it was evident that the EBC would have been a tougher examination taken by fewer students. This would not be good news for the development of vocational qualifications but could have made life easier for university admissions tutors. However, in February 2013, the education minister, Michael Gove, announced that his plans to replace GCSEs in key subjects with the EBC would not be proceeding⁹⁵. He had faced considerable opposition from MPs and teaching unions. The EBC would have involved a harder syllabus, a focus on core subjects and more emphasis on examinations. The debate on the EBC was intense but a more fundamental problem in secondary education is emerging.

This concerns the raising of the school leaving age. The education leaving age is due to be raised to 17 in summer 2013 and then to 18 in 2015. The last time it was raised (to 16) was in 1972. Educationalists have warned that there will be significant implementation problems – not least dealing with bored and demotivated pupils who could be disruptive or play truant.

It should now be evident from my earlier discussions that many employers put a considerable part of the blame for skills problems on failings in the education system. I discussed this more fully in the section on the structural dimension of youth unemployment, where I reproduced the statements from two retailers. I described this as a view that the education system should provide oven-ready raw material for employers.

However, set against that view are those who believe that continuing access to education in its broadest aspect is necessary for both economic growth and social cohesion. They hold that the education system should fulfill broader objectives and that excessive categorisation of students should be avoided.

To quote from the philosopher John Dewey: “Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly

conceived for the masses, and, for the higher education of the few, the traditions of a specialised cultivated class⁹⁶." Those who have sympathy with this viewpoint would argue that education for inclusion and citizenship is vital in a society that has recently see a growth in disaffected young people who are prepared to riot, seemingly without any underlying motivation. Interestingly, while qualifications delivered in an educational institution often serve as a sort mechanism (three 'A's at A-level for a Russell Group University or a 2:1 for a job with a blue chip law firm), training in organisations has never been seen in this way. Here the underlying assumption has been the more skills, the better.

Quite apart from the ideological arguments on the place and role of education, there are more immediate issues to be addressed. Are educational institutions equipped to give students the learning experiences that allow them to acquire the skills needed in the modern workplace? In a previous section of this Paper, I argued that many of the more important skills needed at work could only be learned through experience. This was recognised in the Wolf Report when it called for major efforts to be made to provide greater access to the workplace for 16- to 18-year-olds – below the age at which most people start apprenticeships. Wolf also called for a greater involvement of employers in training generic skills.

The education system is not equipped to provide oven-ready raw material for employers, nor should that be its purpose.

The end of voluntarism

Sadly, the arguments I present above make depressing reading.

We have now reached an impasse, where government training and skills policies are not working nor are they likely to work. It is evident that serious reflection and new approaches will be required to address two inextricably connected problems: skills training for national economic growth; equipping the unemployed, particularly NEETs, with the skills they need to find employment and, more generally, to recover their self-respect and become effective citizens in an increasingly complex society.

What we have witnessed under both Labour and Conservative governments is a muddled series of programmes, schemes and initiatives. Some are best characterised as skills programmes, some as welfare-to-work programmes; some, like apprenticeships, seem to hover uneasily between the two.

Schemes are announced without any articulation of purpose or where they fit into any broader vision. They are then shamelessly over-hyped and over-sold. The preference has been to look for a silver-bullet solution that solves all problems. If it looks attractive, has a resonant title, and allows politicians to have their picture taken surrounded by glittering modern technology, so much the better. However, a brief review of post-war experience, and the way that schemes and institutions have come and gone, shows that life is not like that.

The training and skills area is complex and nuanced; one is reminded of the famous aphorism attributed to the US columnist H L Menken: “For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat and wrong.”

Moreover, many of the initiatives that have been introduced seem to be predicated on the assumption that there is a degree of ignorance among employers and human resource professionals. That there is something that can be labelled best-practice that would be adopted at the micro-level if only business was aware of its existence. What is then required is to assemble a working group of experts, involve the professional bodies, produce a report, establish a website, and hold a large number of conferences in different parts of the country. This hortatory, or ‘shout a little louder’, way of proceeding holds attractions for governments of all persuasions. It is also comparatively cheap and there is little comeback since these initiatives can be allowed to fizzle out and people’s memories are short.

One further assumption is central to the current government’s philosophy but this one separates it from the opposition. This is the view that problems will be solved if impediments to markets are removed. Hence, there should be better information available for the firm on the economic benefits of training. This ignores the central importance of context and the impossibility of measuring the intangible. A related view is that there should also be better information for the individual on the benefits of pursuing personal investment in skills acquisition. This ignores the obvious difficulties of predicting many shifts in employment opportunities (for example in IT) two years in advance, let alone a decade, and the complex and opportunistic nature of most career paths.

Two other arguments should be considered before I present my recommendations. The first, which admittedly now commands decreasing support, is that all will be well once the debt has been paid off and the economy recovers. However, there is now universal recognition that the problem of NEETs is a systemic one. Economic growth is a necessary but not a sufficient for a solution. A second argument is that the problem would be solved if only the NEETs would make more effort to help themselves and actively seek to acquire the skills they need. Here it is increasingly recognised that so many of today’s skills that are valued in the workplace can only be acquired on the job, and that the core of the problem is that there are insufficient jobs available.

Looking for voluntary action from employers to solve this systemic problem would have been unduly optimistic at any time. However, it becomes even less likely in a recession. The July 2012 TUC/CIPD/IPPR report on youth unemployment in Europe, which firmly promoted the voluntarist approach, argued “the main incentive for employers to engage is to meet skills shortages” This is true, but skills shortages are most evident at times of high demand not recession. Almost unnoticed, the UKCES Employer Skills Survey for 2011 (published in May 2012) reported:

“The labour market is largely able to meet the requirements of most establishments. Four per cent had a vacancy they considered ‘hard to fill’. A total of 144,000 hard-to-fill vacancies were reported, equivalent to 23 per cent of all vacancies. Three per cent of establishments reported having vacancies at the time of the survey that they had difficulties filling specifically due to a lack of skills, qualifications or experience in applicants for the role (i.e. a ‘skill-shortage

*vacancy'). A total of 103,000 skill-shortage vacancies were reported and 16 per cent of all vacancies were due to skills shortages."*⁹⁷

This is a small number in the context of wider staffing and recruitment and is most unlikely to provide the 'incentive to engage'.

At times of recession there are fewer skills shortages and hence little incentive for employers to engage in the skills debate.

Recommendations and conclusions

Hopefully the arguments I have presented above will have made the case that, as far as skills training policy is concerned, it is time for a major rethink.

Fundamental questions must be faced and we need to draw a line under the past and start again.

Apprenticeships, while they have an important contribution to make, have become a propaganda weapon to deflect legitimate and mounting criticism over youth unemployment and now carry the burden of unrealistic expectations. More generally, it is evident that simply exhorting employers to do more – whether to offer more apprenticeship places or sign up to the other initiatives on offer – is not enough. Proceeding along the lines established in the last decade will not succeed in alleviating the failure to provide access to employability skills to the disadvantaged in the labour market. It is impossible to proceed through a series of ad hoc measures; it is impossible to find the right single mechanism. So, a change of direction is needed. If voluntarism will not succeed, there is a need to consider alternative approaches.

Obligations and reporting

One alternative is compulsion – but compulsion to do what? No one with any understanding of modern training practice would advocate a return to the training grant and levy of the 1960s and 1970s. Quite apart from the bureaucracy involved, this model of compulsion ignores the two developing features of training and learning in organisations that have been identified.

The first is that today's skills are increasingly learned skills developed informally by motivated employees; recording and rewarding the incidence of events delivered by instructors in a classroom (or e-learning modules accessed) is no longer appropriate. Secondly, training and learning is all about context; it is a function of an organisation's business model and must be considered as a constituent of wider HR policies and procedures.

However, there is a distinction to be made between a prescriptive top-down approach based on compulsion and a requirement that organisations fulfill broader obligations. The key word here is obligations. The political challenge is to make the case that, by accepting the protection that a modern economy affords them, larger employers should accept obligations for skills development.

What is proposed therefore is that corporate law, and in particular the Companies Act, should be reviewed to introduce more specific obligations for workforce development, including obligations that reflect wider societal needs.

Such a recommendation would necessarily involve the introduction of new reporting arrangements. There will, of course, be considerable objections but it is now time to review such radical options. Before siren voices are raised, it should be noted that such a revision has taken place in the UK in the last decade – but that it passed almost unnoticed by the HR profession.

As is well known, the Companies Act is the primary source of UK company law and, at its simplest, sets the framework for the objective of increasing member (shareholder) value. The Companies Act 2006 offered the first major legislative update since 1985. Far and away the greatest controversy concerned Section 172 (1), which widened the responsibilities of directors and required them to act in a way that “would be most likely to promote the success of the company for the benefit of its members as a whole, and in doing so have regard (amongst other matters) to:

- (a) the likely consequences of any decision in the long term
- (b) the interests of the company's employees
- (c) the need to foster the company's business relationships with suppliers, customers and others
- (d) the impact of the company's operations on the community and the environment
- (e) the desirability of the company maintaining a reputation for high standards of business conduct, and
- (f) the need to act fairly as between members of the company.”

Most of the debate when the new Act was introduced concentrated on corporate social responsibility – the green agenda (sub-clause d). There was little discussion on the HR management and development implications in sub-clause b.

While this was taking place, the HR profession was engaged in a parallel discussion with government on statutory requirements to report on what could be called ‘people measures’. This was, like so many topics in the area, a complex and carefully nuanced subject and is discussed in detail in a recent book by Andrew Mayo, a professor at Middlesex University Business School.

His stark conclusion is that such initiatives “seem to have petered out”⁹⁸. A taskforce was set up by the then Department of Trade and Industry in 2003; this reported to government (the Kingsmill Report). However, the recommendations were never incorporated into a formal Operating and Financial Review in legislation.

With hindsight, an opportunity was missed. The HR profession became preoccupied with its internal and fruitless debates on measuring human capital and missed the big picture on the social obligations of employment.

It is now a good time to revisit the debate. Interestingly, the summer of 2012 saw an emerging debate on wider obligations, though this was undertaken for very different purposes. In his July 2012 review of UK equity markets, undertaken for BIS, the

economist John Kay stated that “British business must invest and develop its capacity for innovation, its brands and reputations, and the skills of its workforce” but importantly went on to include a proposal to “improve the quality of engagement by investors with companies emphasizing and broadening the existing concept of stewardship” and that “regulation should focus on establishment of market structures which provide appropriate incentives, rather than fruitless attempts to control behaviour in the face of inappropriate commercial incentives”⁹⁹. More generally, the continued economic recession is raising questions on on-going bank lending with (again) a failure of an approach based on encouragement and exhortation; major structural change may well be on the agenda in the near future.

So it may be that trying to change systemic corporate behaviour is no longer ruled out of court. The practical challenge is to create an effective framework to make this possible.

There has for some time been an undercurrent of discussion on structural models that reflect wider stakeholder interests – for example, the German model of co-determination with a two-tier board structure has been a subject of ongoing interest. However, there are many alternatives beyond such major restructuring and the approach adopted in South Africa offers one model.

There, all organisations must produce a Workplace Skills Plan and an Annual Training Report. They are governed by a range of legislation with the Broad Black Based Employment Skills legislation (the triple B) of particular importance. Taken together, the skills legislation means that records must be maintained to secure claims against a 1 per cent levy.

The South African legislative framework for training has had a considerable impact and inevitably there is criticism of the system. One training manager argued: “What is in place is very statistical and administrative and does not take sufficient account of the need for quality.”¹⁰⁰ There is an obvious danger that decisions on training management can be distorted by the need to comply with legislation. What is most interesting about the South African framework is the explicit recognition that skills training in organisations, and indeed more general HR activities, fulfill social as well as business objectives.

Larger employers must accept obligations for skills development. The practical challenge is to create an effective framework to make this possible.

Structure, policy and delivery

I am presenting the suggestion that requirements for workforce development should become as much a part of the framework governing company behaviour as an area for urgent debate. It is something that merits considerable discussion and exploration. However, the second proposal, which is also about institutional and structural change, is far from tentative.

This proposal concerns the role of the UKCES.

It is unfortunate that the UKCES has been the object of much criticism throughout this paper. The quality of its analysis is excellent; its reports are comprehensive, well written and concentrate on important, current issues; staff are capable and committed. Inevitably, the UKCES is stronger on diagnosis and analysis than it is on prescription. Unfortunately, commissioners and staff feel obliged to promote the latest scheme and objectivity departs in a flurry of over-promotion and over-selling.

Apprenticeships are the best example. There is an evident need to adopt a critical review of the progress of this initiative: to offer a serious review of the balance between numbers and quality; to monitor potential abuse from private sector providers who focus on numbers through the scheme because that is how they are paid. Any such review would have picked up the shameful sleight of hand in the presentation of 'conversions' as apprentices. The role of the UKCES needs to change so it can undertake such reviews.

A good model of what is required is the role played by the Office of Budget Responsibility. This body was created in 2010 to provide independent and authoritative analysis of the UK's public finances. It is one of a growing number of official independent fiscal watchdogs around the world. It produces forecasts, judges progress towards targets, assesses the long-term sustainability of public finances and scrutinises the costing of budget measures⁹⁶.

The case for independent scrutiny of skills training and welfare-to-work initiatives is powerful. The formulation and promotion of initiatives is a political activity undertaken by the government of the day – and it should be held accountable.

The role of the UKCES should be changed to provide independent scrutiny of training and skills and welfare-to-work initiatives.

In February 2013, the Local Government Association issued a report in which it argued that a local approach to tackling long-term youth unemployment could see the number of young people out of work cut by 20 per cent in three years. The report, *Hidden Talents II*¹⁰¹, argued that personalised local approaches are most effective in reducing the number of young people out of work and training, but that such schemes are undermined by national funding, performance and procurement systems driven by Whitehall. The analysis presented of current efforts to tackle youth unemployment identified an overly complicated system, with 33 different national schemes that span 13 different age boundaries at a cost of £15bn a year.

The report argued that councils and their partners will be better able to spot and offer early help to young people struggling at school, train young people in skills to take local jobs in local labour markets, help improve the performance of the Work Programme for hardest-to-reach young people, and target job subsidies to local businesses offering the best opportunities for young people.

This report makes eminent sense. If there is one theme running throughout this paper it is that a proliferation of schemes causes confusion. Competing schemes, however well meant, do not assist and enhanced and empowered local government could play the central role in coordinating and promoting the response to youth unemployment.

In this respect, it is worth noting that an innovative scheme to promote apprenticeships in Cheshire, the A team, won the best apprenticeship programme in the 2012 *TJ* Awards competition. This was based in, and managed by, a local authority (Cheshire East Council) but its reach was extended to other organisations in the area.

An enhanced role for local government would create opportunities for a consistent and co-ordinated approach to a confused and crowded area.

A new mind-set and new voices

So there we have it.

The unpalatable truth is that we have a structural problem that will continue indefinitely without determined government intervention; this problem is something the market cannot resolve. All that has altered under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition is the reinforcement of market forces – reflecting their underlying belief in the economics of neoliberalism. This strand became evident in the 2010 White Paper *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, with the introduction of the employer ownerships initiative, and was endorsed in 2013 in *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills Strategy*. Unfortunately (or deliberately?), the timing of the Employer Ownership pilots means that their effectiveness will not be evaluated until after the 2015 general election.

Neoliberal economists argue that unfettered price mechanisms should determine the allocation of resources and that any interference will have damaging consequences. The neo-liberal solution is to seek to improve market efficiency – hence ‘employer ownership’ and schemes and initiatives to make improve the employability skills of young people. In contrast, Keynesians believe that, without intervention, the economy would settle at a natural equilibrium with high unemployment and limited opportunities for young people – particularly the less academic.

Hopefully, by now, the ideological nature of many decisions in the skills and training arena should be evident. It is not a neutral subject. A good example concerns the framework of the qualification structure and the link between educational and vocational qualifications. As I have argued earlier, it will be impossible to attain parity of esteem but it is important to aim at parity of respect. In part, this is about ensuring that vocational qualifications have currency – and this is something that people of all persuasions can support.

My final recommendation therefore concerns the behaviour required of various parties to the debate. It is inevitable that, given today’s political process, elected politicians will not necessarily be measured and objective; they will talk up their solutions and we can expect a continuation of the hype and over-selling by government and, when things go wrong, opportunistic criticism from their opponents.

It is however a shame that more training, learning and development professionals have not found a stronger voice. It has been left to some courageous academics – some of whom have been listed in the acknowledgments in this paper – and committed journalists to draw attention to the recurring inconsistencies and plain abuse that seems to have become endemic in the skills training and welfare-to-work areas. The training, learning and development profession comprises individuals who hold a range of political

views. However, there is difference between being neutral and being neuter – adopting a position of passive resignation when things are so obviously wrong.

In some important policy areas the underlying problems have not been fully appreciated by the public – that is to be expected as they are carefully nuanced. Training and skills is, however, most unusual in that the underlying problems seem to have been under-appreciated or ignored by the profession.

In the recent past, learning and development practitioners seem to have been content to turn a blind eye to the over-statements and inconsistencies. They can avoid going to the launch and ignore the propaganda, knowing that the debate will soon move elsewhere.

In conclusion, I must again stress that time is short and the problem serious. We are starting from a poor base. In June 2012, the former Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesman Lord Oakeshott was widely reported as saying: “The Treasury looks like a beached whale after the tide has gone out – there is the odd spout about yet more cuts but basically they are clueless and helpless.” Alter ‘Treasury’ to ‘BIS and UKCES’ and alter ‘yet more cuts’ to ‘yet more programmes’ and you have a good description of the state of UK skills and training policy today. That this should occur at a time of wide concern about the future prospects for young people is a serious cause for national concern.

If we allow things to continue, we will be the first generation to deny the next the life opportunities that we ourselves enjoyed.

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