

The History of Apprenticeships

Britain has a long history of Apprenticeships, which stretches back to the guilds of the Middle Ages. In 1563 the system became more prescribed and regulated: the Elizabethan Statute of Artificers set out terms and conditions for training (including duration of seven years and for the master-apprentice relationship). Apprenticeships expanded in the following two centuries, with new legislation on working conditions, environment and the conduct of apprentices in their leisure time.

Another milestone of legislation was passed in 1802 - the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act, whose provisions included a 12-hour working day and a requirement that factory apprentices were taught reading, writing and arithmetic. These developments led to the repeal of the 1563 Statute in 1814. After that year, practising a skill although un-Apprenticed was no longer illegal. The new act also loosened statutory controls over Apprenticeships, by removing the requirement for a minimum of seven years to be spent on one.

By the late nineteenth century, Apprenticeships had spread from artisan trades such as building and printing to the newer industries of engineering and shipbuilding - and later to plumbing and electrical work. Although there were approximately 240,000 apprentices by the mid 1960s, there were growing concerns about the effectiveness of Apprenticeship training. It was criticised for its exclusivity, for being male-dominated, for focusing on serving time rather than on outcomes, and for a failure to embrace new and expanding occupations. Numbers had decreased to some 53,000 ('average in learning' figure) by 1990 - the decline was exacerbated by rising post-16 participation in full-time education, a lack of public funding for Apprenticeships, and the effect of the Youth Training Scheme and Youth Training programme. These initiatives catered for young people who might otherwise have done an Apprenticeship, but the quality of provision was often questionable and both programmes contributed to a poor perception of vocational training generally.

Since the mid 1990s, governments have been rebuilding the programme in an adjusted economic and institutional context. This has required state support, as has been the case in almost all countries with a sizeable Apprenticeship programme (the level of state intervention in this country has varied over recent decades, from levy-funded programmes via the industrial training boards in the 1960s and 1970s, to no support or intervention at all in the early 1990s). In response to concerns about skills shortages, especially at intermediate levels, in 1993 the Government announced plans for a new Apprenticeship scheme at Level 3 - Modern Apprenticeships. Prototypes were introduced the following year and the scheme became fully operational in 1995. The Modern Apprenticeship was focused almost entirely on occupational competence, and did not require specific technical learning.

Since 1997 a number of the programme elements have been reformed.

- In 1998, the Training Standards Council (subsequently the Adult Learning Inspectorate) began an inspection of work-based learning providers. In 2007, responsibility for inspection was transferred to Ofsted.
- Level 2 Apprenticeships were introduced in 2000.
- In 2000, the LSC took on responsibility for funding Apprenticeships from the Training and Enterprise Councils.
- The technical certificate was introduced in 2003/04 to explicitly require theoretical knowledge from Apprentices (and, implicitly, structured off-workstation training).
- The Apprenticeships family was re-branded in 2004.
- The Apprenticeships blueprint was introduced in 2005 to provide updated guidance for Sector Skills Councils on how to define their Apprenticeship frameworks.

The result of these changes, coupled with the increased investment made by the Government since 1997, has been a major improvement in the number of Apprentices and in the quality of Apprenticeships. The number of learners of all ages starting on the programme has more than doubled from around 75,000 to around 180,000 today. Completion rates - which once indicated severe problems with recruitment practice and quality - have been transformed. In 2001 only 24% of learners completed the full framework, and today the figure stands at 63% (and this is rising). More than 100,000 learners now leave the programme each year having passed all elements of the framework for their chosen occupation. This is unprecedented in this country. By 2010/11, more than 900,000 learners will have completed a full Apprenticeship.

In January 2008 a new organisation, the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS), was announced and officially launched in April 2009. The service was created to bring about a significant growth in the number of employers offering Apprenticeships.

The NAS has total end to end responsibility for the delivery of Apprenticeships that includes: Employer Services; Learner Services; and a web-based vacancy matching system (Apprenticeship vacancies). This online system enables individuals to search and apply for live vacancies and allows employers, and their training providers to advertise their vacancies to a wide range of interested applicants.

The service has ultimate accountability for the national delivery of targets and co-ordination of the funding for Apprenticeship places. It acts to overcome barriers to the growth of the programme and assumes responsibility for promoting Apprenticeships and their value to employers, learners and the country as a whole.