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Mediating apprenticeship learning for young people: the role of training providers

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Abstract

This article reports research designed to increase knowledge of the ways in which the training provider sector works in England. The research focused upon the role of the providers in relation to government-funded apprenticeship programmes. Although training providers enrol only a small percentage of 16-18 year-old learners it is significant because of the importance attached by all political parties to expanding the quantity and improving the quality of apprenticeships. With over 50% of current apprenticeships being run through training providers these political aims will only be met where providers participate effectively. Case study methods were used in six providers offering training in engineering, hairdressing and customer care. The research showed that despite restrictions imposed by funding regimes and curriculum regulation the providers were not passive deliverers of apprenticeship programmes but brought values and interests to their work which helped to shape apprenticeship programmes.

Introduction

The thinking behind the research reported here had its origins in work which Jeremy Higham and I conducted on 14-19 Pathfinders (Higham and Haynes, et al., 2004, Higham and Yeomans, 2005, Higham and Yeomans, 2006). This brought us into contact with training providers (sometimes called independent learning providers). When writing up the research it became clear that despite growing interest in work-based learning (see Malloch and Cairns, et al., 2013 for a recent collection) there was little or no research on the work of training providers. This lack of research had implications for both policy and practice. The need to begin to address this gap in knowledge became increasingly salient as both the previous Labour government and the current Coalition government placed heavy emphasis upon a significant increase in the number of apprenticeships and raising their quality. As I will show below, training providers play an important role in the implementation of apprenticeships and therefore understanding the ways in which they work took on greater significance. I was subsequently able to follow this line of research through the award of an Emeritus Fellowship by the Leverhulme Trust. This article reports some of the findings from the research.

The training provider sector

For the purposes of this paper training providers are defined as commercial, not-for-profit or charitable organisations which provide training and/or assessment leading to recognised qualifications for young people with employed status in companies and other organisations. This excludes further education colleges, which perform similar roles, and companies which provide all training and assessment in-house. The paper is also only concerned with government-funded training and with young people mainly aged 16-19. Thus it is important to acknowledge that there are aspects of the work of training providers concerned with older learners and with commercial work i.e. where they are paid directly by the organisations and individuals who receive training and assessment, which are not addressed here.

There were approximately 900 training providers registered with the Skills Funding Agency in England to provide government-funded work-based learning in July 2013 (Skills Funding Agency, 2013). According to government statistics only 6% of 16-18 year olds participated in work-based learning in 2012 (DFE, 2013). As explained below, to a large extent this reflects the small size of the apprenticeship programme as a destination for 16-19 year olds.   Of 16-18 year olds starting apprenticeships in 2011/12 56% (129,900) were enrolled with training providers (SFA/BIS, 2014). Thus in terms of a context in which around three-quarters of 16-18 year olds are in full or part-time education the training provider sector is small. It is, however, significant partly because it serves several thousand young people, but also because the government is placing considerable emphasis upon apprenticeships, as the

premium brand within work-based learning, in terms of both quantity and quality. The Raising of the Participation Age to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015 may mean that a proportion of the 15% of 16-18 year-olds currently not in education, employment or training (NEET) will enter work-based learning through apprenticeships or the new traineeships. As this paper will show training providers play an important role within apprenticeships and therefore are likely to have a significant impact upon the achievement of governmental aspirations for the programme.

The training provider sector is marked by considerable institutional volatility with bankruptcies and mergers occurring regularly. For example, Elmfield Training which held government training contracts of over £100m, had more than 1700 learners and employed 600 staff, went into administration in October 2013. The business was subsequently split up and sold off to other providers (Cooney, 2013). There has probably been some consolidation of providers offering government-funded training, although the extent of this is difficult to measure (NIACE, 2009). Despite this, although there are some large, national providers, the great majority are small (employing fewer than 50 people) and local. There is something of a 'cottage industry' feel to parts of the sector which offers a contrast to the increasingly corporatized profile of colleges and schools.

Where training providers receive government funding they are subject to various forms of regulation. They must provide regular information to the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) on the number of learners enrolled on government funded courses in order to draw down funding, 20% of which is withheld until successful completion by learners. Providers are also only funded for the provision and achievement of government-approved qualifications. Thus they are subject to the regulatory regime operated by Ofqual, which approves the qualifications, and the awarding bodies which provide and accredit them. Providers are also subject to Ofsted inspection. On inspections, overall, the proportion of providers receiving an 'outstanding' grade has been lower than for most other post-16 providers e.g. sixth form colleges, further education colleges, and the proportion graded 'inadequate' has been slightly higher than for colleges. However, the gap between providers and colleges has narrowed over recent years, and quality, as measured by Ofsted, appears to have been improving, although it is difficult to ascertain general trends because of changes in the inspection frameworks in 2009 and 2012 (Ofsted, 2013).

Thus training providers occupy an intermediate position between, on the one hand, the state which funds and regulates their work and, on the other, the employers of the apprentices to whom the providers are expected to be 'responsive'. The providers must operate within a training market in line with successive government's commitment to neo-liberal approaches to the provision of publicly-funded services. They have to compete with schools, colleges and other training providers both for learners and employer partners within this market. The ways in which the case study providers negotiated their intermediate positions within training markets is explored in later sections.

Apprenticeships programmes

In the 20th century apprenticeships, which go back to medieval times, enjoyed their greatest prestige in the 1950s and 1960s , when they were recognised as a key route for young people into skilled jobs. However, it is worth noting that in the period between world wars I and II apprenticeships were not always well regarded. In engineering, for example, there was trade union concern that apprentices were being used to substitute for skilled workers and drive wages down (Ryan, 1999). In addition, apprenticeships prior to the 1990s were mainly available within the engineering, manufacturing and construction sectors. They were heavily male-dominated. From the 1970s apprenticeships began to decline as youth unemployment grew and labour markets changed. 'Time served', which had been seen as the guarantor of the skilled worker, instead came to be seen as an inefficient approach, incapable of meeting the challenges thrown up by changed circumstances. Thus many apprenticeship schemes disappeared and were replaced by a variety of government training schemes which were of much shorter duration and featured, allegedly more focused, competence-based pedagogy and associated standardised assessment. However, considerable public and political nostalgia survived for the possibly illusory 'golden age' of apprenticeships and in 1994 the label, suitably embellished, was revived in the form of Modern Apprenticeships. These programmes have subsequently undergone various revisions, including dropping the term 'Modern'. I do not have space to explore these changes here, nor to elaborate the many ways in which the current version of apprenticeships differ from the 'traditional' model (Fuller and Unwin, 2009).

Apprenticeships are now the premium brand within work-based learning and have been strongly encouraged by successive governments. The coalition government sees apprenticeships as the main alternative to the academic route through A-levels and higher education for young people. Apprenticeship numbers overall have risen rapidly over recent years, with starts up from 167,700 in 2002/3 to 520,600 in 2011/12. However, this has been achieved mainly through increases in numbers of adult apprentices. The number of apprentices aged 16-19 has remained relatively stable over the last decade and registered a 4% decline between 2009/10 and 2012/13 (Mirza-Davies, 2014). In addition, the definition of what counts as an apprenticeship has been stretched to contain most work-based learning, including courses of a few months duration provided to existing adult employees (Business Innovation and Skills Committee, 2012). This provision accounts for much of the 352% increase in apprenticeships for people aged 25 or over since 2009/10. There has been a reaction against this conceptual stretching with the government imposing a minimum 12 month duration on apprenticeship schemes and the recent Richard Review (Richard, 2012) calling for the restoration of the brand by limiting it to those 'new to a job or role that requires sustained and substantial training' (p.17).

A recurring feature of apprenticeship practice has been the relatively low demand from employers. In 2012 only 9% of UK employers were reported as actually employing an

apprentice. This varied considerably by sector and size of companies with larger companies being more likely to offer apprenticeships than smaller ones (Institute for Employment Research, 2013). Thus one thrust of apprenticeship policy has been to encourage and incentivise employers (especially small employers) to take on apprenticeships.

In some ways more important than the numbers game played around apprenticeships have been debates about their quality. Unflattering comparisons are often made, not least by English commentators and stakeholders, between the English and other European apprenticeship systems, especially dual system approaches (Allen and Ainley, 2014). In Germany, for example, the dual system is long-established, relatively high status and much more extensive than the UK apprenticeship system (Brockmann, 2012). In the space available I will highlight just two of the many criticisms made of UK apprenticeships in the light of international comparisons. The first concerns the level of apprenticeships.   There have consistently been far more people taking level 2 apprenticeships rather than level 3, although in 2012/13 the gap was at its narrowest since the re-introduction of apprenticeships (57% level 2 starts, 43% level 3 starts). For critics, the preponderance of level 2 apprenticeships is evidence that training is not at the required level (Allen and Ainley, 2014). A partially inter-related criticism concerns the narrowness of UK apprenticeships, in terms of both the extent of theoretical and technical knowledge and a focus on general education (Brockmann and Clarke, et al., 2010). In the UK general education has been translated into core/key/functional skills and other transferable personal learning and thinking skills (PLTS). In Germany, in contrast, there is an explicit commitment to further the general education of apprentices (Brockmann, 2012). It should be noted, however, that surveys in UK have shown high levels of satisfaction with apprenticeships both from learners and employers (Vivian and Winterbotham, et al., 2012, Winterbotham and Vivian, et al., 2012).

This highly selective description of the current state of play in apprenticeships in the UK and just a few of the associated issues provides a context for the mediating work of the training providers, since in the research reported here it is apprenticeship programmes in hairdressing, engineering and customer service which were being mediated by the providers. The main tasks carried out by the providers were: providing or arranging off-the job learning for apprentices; assessing apprentices work for nationally recognised qualifications; administering the apprenticeships, especially in relation to funding. Before going on to analyse that mediation I first provide brief details of the research methodology of the project.

The Research

The research upon which this paper is based was funded through an Emeritus Fellowship granted by the Leverhulme Trust. Funding began in October 2011 and ended in March 2014.

The research had three aims: (i) To explore and analyse curriculum practice in different occupational sectors in a range of training providers; (ii) To understand the factors which influence curriculum practice in the selected training providers; (iii) To begin to theorise curriculum practice in training providers. At the heart of the research was thus an exploration of the relationship between curriculum practice and institutional context in training providers. This involved not only analysis of the relationships between skills, knowledge, values and attitudes, pedagogy and assessment but the ways in which these were shaped by a wide range of national, regional, local, institutional and individual factors.

A case study approach was chosen as the most effective way of achieving the research aims. I aimed to stay close to the day-to-day practice in the providers and not get too immersed in the labyrinthine financial and regulatory frameworks which surround their work, except where these could be clearly shown to impact upon the day-to-day work. I planned to work with six training providers – two each working in the engineering, hairdressing and retail sectors. These sectors were chosen as representing rather differing traditions and cultures of training – historically strong and seen as high-status in engineering, perhaps somewhat less so in the case of hairdressing and generally weak in retail. In the event a third engineering provider was substituted for one of the retail providers because it proved extremely difficult to gain access to retail training and it was only relatively late in the project that a provider of customer care apprenticeships agreed to participate. Within each case study I observed classroom and workshop training in the providers, witnessed review and assessment visits to employers, interviewed training provider staff, learners and employers and analysed relevant documentation.

At the outset I also hoped to include a range of different programmes in which training providers worked with young people including partnerships with schools in provision for 14-16 year-olds, provision for 16-19 year olds unable to enter apprenticeships (at that time known as foundation learning now traineeships) as well as level 2 and 3 apprenticeships. In practice it only proved possible to access apprenticeship learning. Thus, in effect this became a study of the role of training providers in apprenticeship training for young people. In retrospect, this tighter focus was advantageous to the research. The table below summarises some characteristics of the six case study providers:

Table 1 Case Study Providers

Provider	Sector	No. of government funded learners	No. of staff	Inspection grade	Governance	% government funding
Insight Hair	Hairdressing	130	16	1	Commercial	80%
Personality Hair	Hairdressing	179	16	2	Commercial	c.90%
Engtrain	Engineering	527	11	2	Not-for-profit	c.80%
Engineering Academy	Engineering	180	10	2	Charity	87%
Yorkshire Engineering	Engineering	215	91	2	Charity	40%
Training for you	Customer service	1038	33	2	Commercial	95%

(Provider names are fictitious)

Thus the final sample of case studies comprised a reasonably wide range of different sorts of providers in relation to size and governance (although it did not include any large, national providers). They also illustrated several different models of apprenticeship (not explored in this paper) and these explain the apparently large differences in staff/learner ratios. In one respect, however, the sample is relatively homogeneous. Within the parameters of the current approach to apprenticeships in England these are all 'good' training providers. While inspection grades should be treated with a degree of caution representing only a snapshot of provision at a particular time and being constrained by the inspection framework, they do provide one indicator of 'quality'. These grades taken together with data on retention and completion rates, the duration of the apprenticeships and my own observations suggest that this is a relatively strong group of providers. The research, therefore, provides insight into apprenticeship programmes working roughly as intended under the existing arrangements and thus helps to understand these arrangements rather than highlighting glaring deficiencies in individual providers.

Conceptualising mediation

The concept of mediation has been used in recent studies of post-16 education and training (James and Biesta, 2007, Spours and Coffield, et al., 2007) to describe the ways in which a range of actors interact with policy. A common approach to studying mediation involves following particular policies as they travel through different levels of education and training systems. I used this approach in my own study of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (Yeomans, 1997) and, with colleagues, in other studies (e.g. Higham and Sharp, et al., 1997). These studies traced policies as they passed through the vertical levels and across the horizontal sites in which mediation took place, for example, in different schools and colleges within which particular policies were constructed and contested. The essence of mediation is thus acknowledgement of the exercise of a degree of autonomy for individuals and institutions. This seems particularly appropriate where systems are loosely coupled (Weick, 1976). The approach is broadly pluralist and sees power and influence as both diffused and flowing in a variety of directions e.g. 'up' as well as 'down' within system hierarchies. In this it stands in some contrast to both Marxist/neo-Marxist analyses where ultimate control lies with the capitalist state (Gewirtz and Ozga, 1990) and to deliverology which prescribes a direct line from what is in a minister's mind to what occurs in classrooms and workshops throughout a system and seeks to tighten the 'delivery chain' (Barber, 2007).

However, in a sense, to say that mediation involves the translation of policies at different levels and sites is not to say very much. Clearly much hangs upon the specificities of particular policies, policy regimes, institutions and actors. There may also be a significant temporal dimension. For example, since the notion of a loosely coupled system was first elaborated, the education and training system in England has overall become more tightly coupled. Thus, while I argue that the broad concept of mediation is useful, it needs

elaborating and evidencing in particular contexts. I turn next to analysing some of the ways in which mediation occurs in relation to training providers and apprenticeship programmes.

Mediation, training providers and apprenticeship learning

Figure 1 provides a training provider-eye view of the institutional landscape within which mediation operates.

Figure 1: Training providers – the institutional landscape
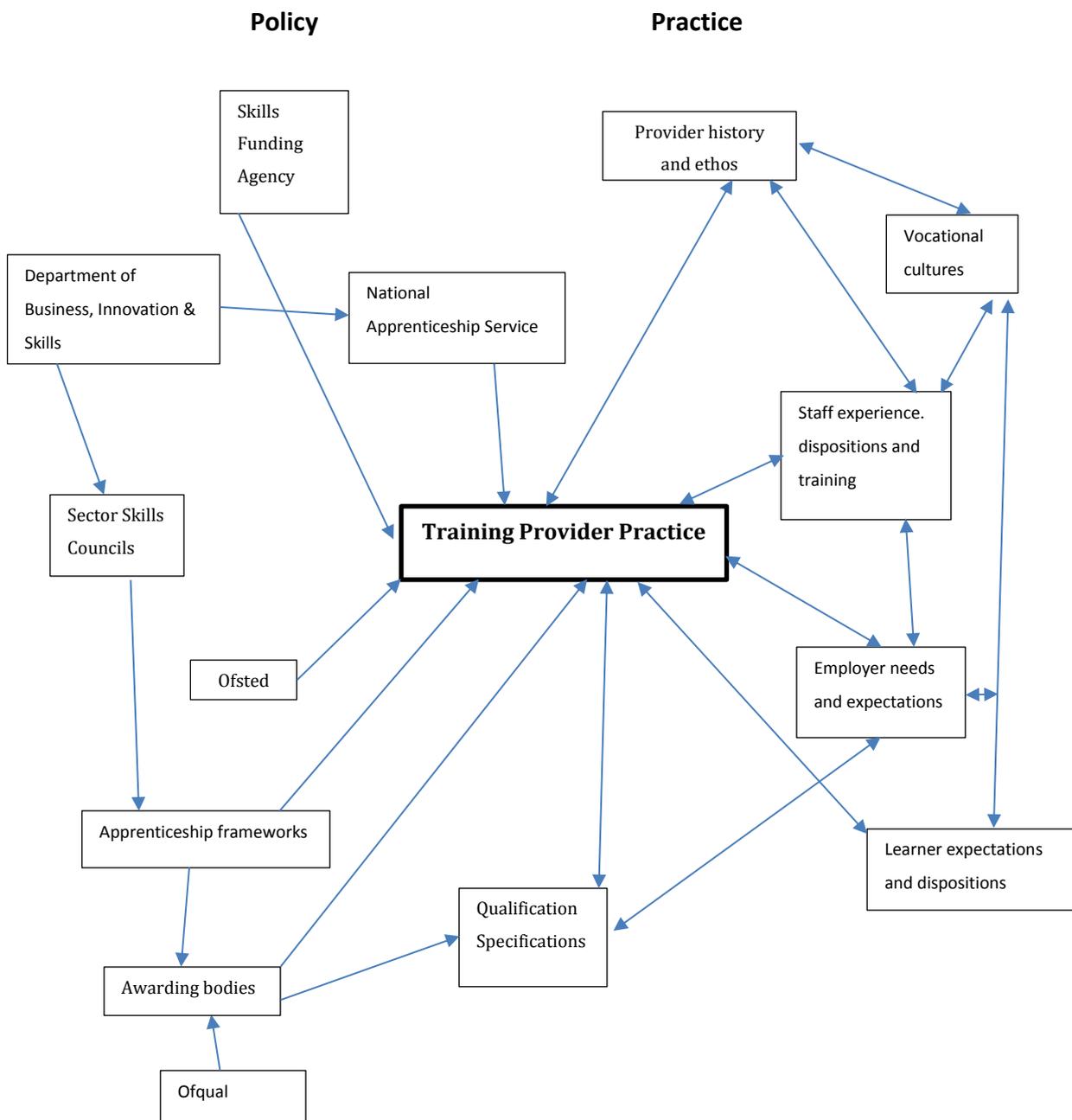
The left-hand side of the figure consists of the policy-making terrain within ministries and government agencies. It will be noted that the left hand side shows far less interaction between the various policy-making elements. This reflects the case study focus of the research and does not imply that such interaction is absent. The right hand side is more closely related to practice and to the internal, local operations of the providers. The concept of mediation tends to eschew any strict division between policy and practice, seeing them as inextricably inter-twined. However the distinction is retained here because it reflects the prevailing perspectives of the providers. They largely saw 'policy' as something which was done to them, rather than as something which they could shape and influence. There is a national association of training providers, the Association of Employers and Learning Providers (AELP) which seeks to exert influence at national level but none of the case study providers were members and, insofar as they were aware of AELP at all, tended to see it as representing large providers. The sector skills organisation for hair and beauty, the Hair and Beauty Industry Authority (HABIA) did consult employers and providers on changes to apprenticeship frameworks and specifications and one of the case study providers did respond to these consultations although without any great enthusiasm:

> Yes, you get surveys from HABIA (...........) which I every time complete. "We need this, we need that and minor changes". There is a list somewhere of who sits on this standards committee. They're people that are not always working in industry, but people who did 20 years ago and now are consultants etc., etc.

Thus mediation in relation to policy was seen largely as responding to whatever was passed down. For the case study providers this speaks to the commercial and practical everyday pressures they experienced and the consequent difficulties of becoming involved in 'policy work'. Added to this was the weak institutionalisation and fragmentation of the training provider sector which provided relatively few mechanisms for involvement. However, it should also be acknowledged that most training provider staff showed little inclination to become involved in such work.

I now turn to three examples of the ways in which mediation operated. The first is drawn from the policy arena and the other two from training provider practice.

Mediating SFA sub-contracting requirements

The SFA is the agency with which training providers have the most regular contact. A significant change occurred in 2011 when the SFA, concerned that it was contracting with several thousand providers (including colleges and adult education providers), introduced a Minimum Level Contract requirement. Under this only providers with annual contracts of over £500,000 could contract directly with SFA. Where contracts were below this level providers had to become sub-contractors to larger, lead providers. Three of my case study providers were affected by this requirement. At Insight Hair the owner was determined not

to become a sub-contractor and thus lose the contract with the SFA. Showing considerable savvy, the owner formed a holding company partnership with another local provider in order to get over the threshold. Subsequently the holding company became a lead provider and took on a smaller provider as a sub-contractor. Personality Hair found itself just below the threshold and decided to take on more apprentices in more salons in order to exceed the threshold. According to the principal this led to what was expected to be a short-term slight dip in quality as they adapted to larger numbers of learners and salons. The most dramatic effect was at the Engineering Academy which was forced to become a sub-contractor. This proved to be an unhappy and unproductive relationship. On every visit I made provider staff and directors complained about the way in which the lead provider top-sliced the apprenticeship funding by between 10% and 15% while providing little or nothing in return. A member of staff said:

> ……….it's crucifying us here (………….)It annoys me in the fact that we're paying really good money that we desperately need to invest in new kit. If we're paying a management fee that's costing us thousands and thousands of pounds a year, there's no benefit, for the learner or for us out of that, really. It just doesn't seem right.

This account of the ways in which the new system was working gained support from an Ofsted review (Ofsted, 2012) which showed that this sort of relationship between lead and sub-contractors was not unusual.

These examples show the ways in which different providers mediated a new policy which directly affected them in different ways. This was partly explained by their circumstances. For Insight Hair a suitable partner in the same sector and where there were existing personal links between the two owners was on hand. In the case of Personality Hair there was sufficient local demand for apprentice hairdressers to be able to exceed the threshold, although with some short-term costs. Neither of these possibilities were seen as being open to the Engineering Academy. They had no existing links with other providers, indeed part of their concerns was entering a sub-contracting relationship with a competitor who could take advantage of the situation. Thus they chose a geographically relatively distant lead provider which was not involved in the engineering sector only to subsequently find that these characteristics brought its own problems. It was acknowledged within the provider that with hindsight they had taken a wrong decision, but at the time the staff and directors had felt pressured and hurried and without any obvious sources of support and advice. They found themselves tied into a contract with an unsuitable lead provider but once that ended planned to look for a more appropriate and cheaper lead provider, possibly through a local Group Training Association (Henwood, 2012).

Constructing the apprenticeship curriculum

This second exemplar of the mediating role of training providers focuses upon the ways in which the enacted apprenticeship curriculum is negotiated, especially between the providers and the employers.

As noted above the formal apprenticeship programme has become more prescribed, particularly following the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, which introduced statutory frameworks for all apprenticeships. Interestingly, it is possible for employers and/or training providers to propose new frameworks and specifications. However, this had not been considered by any of the employers or providers in my study since it was, probably justifiably, considered to be too time consuming and requiring specialist technical curriculum development capabilities. Therefore a key mediating process involving the providers and employers scrutinising the available frameworks and specifications and selecting those which were most appropriate for the employer and their apprentices. This process sometimes brought to the fore different priorities between the employers and the providers. This revolved around the degree of customisation/standardisation which could be provided for apprentices by the training providers. This was comparatively muted in customer care and hairdressing. Customer care frameworks were relatively generic and could be adapted to a wide variety of workplaces. In hairdressing there was a high degree of consensus among employers and relative satisfaction with the frameworks and specifications on offer. However, one competence around which there was some disagreement concerned perming. One interviewee explained:

> Perming over the last few years has been an interesting one because perming has not been in vogue if you like with clients. The fashion industry is very straight hair and not – trends have gone away from the perming process. Actually being able to deliver it as a competence qualification where you need clients, a large number of clients actually taking or having that piece of service done, makes it difficult to make into mandatory if very few clients are actually having that process done.

Where there were few clients it therefore became difficult for the apprentice to demonstrate competence and an assessor to accredit it as the Principal at Personality Hair explained:

> It's one of those things where, just as a really simple example, everybody was having their hair straightened with straightening irons. Nobody wanted it curly but perming was still in the criteria and it was a must. Well they (the apprentices) had a right job trying to get people to come and get their hair permed because nobody wanted it because they all wanted it straight. It took so long to get this taken out of it and to replace it with straightening...

However, due to their particular clientele, some salon owners wanted perming to still be included in the qualification. The way this was addressed was explained by the Principal:

> We don't teach them all of the theory (of perming), it's quite a big unit. The employers, in
> general, don't want it, which is fine. They find it old fashioned and they don't want it.
> However, there are some who kind of say, "It's a shame they've taken perming out." What
> we do to alleviate that is actually just get them practicing the practical part of it. If they
> want to study the theory, we've got packages that they can actually sit with themselves.
> (……….) It would be difficult to fit it in for certain people in the timescale.

Customisation was a more complex and pressing issue in relation to engineering. This sprang from the diversity of the sector. Engineering employers I visited were included those involved in: the design and manufacture of emergency power supply equipment; the hand-crafting of knives largely for use in sailing; the design and manufacture of cable cleats; the production of cold drawn wire products; the production of a wide variety of forged products. These companies and others looked for opportunities to tweak the apprenticeship curriculum for their apprentices in order to better meet the requirements of their business. I will explore this through one example. One company provides metering equipment for measuring flows of liquids in pipes and pipelines. They mainly provide equipment for the gas and oil industry. There are existing metering methods but their customers demand more accurate, reliable and resilient equipment and better value for money. The company focuses mainly upon the development of software with some electrical and hardware elements, although their designers and technicians need to be able to hold dialogues with other engineering specialists. The work for which the apprentices are being trained is thus complex, technical and highly specialised. At the time of my visit they had one apprentice who they sent to the Engineering Academy. The training manager at the company explained what they wanted from the Academy was:

> ………….to provide that broad based engineering training and then also the narrow
> engineering training into the specific channel of engineer that we're looking for. So more
> electrical and computer based.

While they were satisfied with the professionalism and competence of the Academy staff they felt their apprentice was not getting sufficient specialist training in electrical and computing skills. Even the broad-based engineering training, the training manager felt, was oriented rather too strongly towards mechanical engineering. Historically, this was because the Engineering Academy had been established by a group of local employers largely involved in mechanical engineering.

This pressure for greater customisation was also experienced by Engtrain and Yorkshire Engineering. At Yorkshire Engineering the apprenticeship coordinator commented:

> Employers often ask for these little add-ons and that's fine, we try to accommodate them.
> But beyond a certain point it becomes a problem for us. The SFA will only fund complete
> qualifications and employers don't want to fork out themselves. In any case they're not
> particularly interested in qualifications only that their apprentice can pick-up the skills.

Thus customisation presented the engineering providers with issues of economies of scale, potential capital investment in specialist equipment and recruitment of staff with specialised

skills. Set against this relations with employers and the retention of their custom was vitally important and so they were anxious to meet employer requirements where possible.

Underlying this were issues around the respective responsibilities of providers and employers for the training of apprentices. This was illustrated when I accompanied a provider reviewer to a company. The owner of the company complained that his apprentice had not been taught a particular engineering operation. The member of staff from the provider explained that this was not part of the framework which the apprentice was following (and which, he emphasised to me afterwards, the employer had agreed to). However, placatingly, he told the employer that the provider would look around and see if there was a unit or part of a unit which the apprentice could pick-up later in the programme. However, as we drove away his exasperation showed:

> If (engineering operation) is so important in his business and used everyday why the bloody
> hell can't *he* teach (the apprentice) to do it!

This reflected a view in all three engineering providers that if customisation was required it was primarily the responsibility of employers to provide the relevant specialist training in the workplace. The providers considered that some employers failed to fully recognise the role which they were expected to play in training apprentices and placed an unrealistic emphasis on them to cover all aspects of training.

The providers also saw it as part of their role to mediate between the apprentice and the employer. This could lead to extremely tricky situations. At Personality Hair I was told of one situation in which an apprentice hairdresser was inadvertently placed in a salon in which drug dealing was taking place. The provider was able to find the apprentice another salon so that she could move elsewhere. Less extreme situations could occur, for example, when an apprentice was not being given opportunities, to practice and gain skills required for assessment. Recent BIS research has shown that nearly a third of apprentices were not paid the legal minimum wage in 2012 and that time spent on workplace training had reduced (Higton, 2013). TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady said:

> These findings are shocking and show how many apprentices are currently seen as little
> more than cheap labour. Apprentice exploitation is getting worse across the board. In some
> industries, such as hairdressing, abuse has become endemic. (Cooney, 2014)

None of this was evident in the providers and employers in this research, emphasising that this study reflects generally good apprenticeship training. However, the examples above show that in some respects the interests of employers and training providers differ. This is not to claim that relationships were overwhelmingly conflictual. This was far from the case as overall employers and providers worked well together and within the constraints of their circumstances all genuinely wanted to play fair by their apprentices. The examples above do show, however, that there was need for negotiation between employers and providers in the construction of the apprenticeship curriculum.

Teachers, vocational cultures and the mediation of the curriculum

It is a truism that teachers are key to the enacted curriculum. Even the arch-deliverologer Barber accepted that his mythical child in Widnes might be more influenced by their teacher than by the Secretary of State sitting in London (Barber, 2007 p.85). What is at issue is why, how and what ways teachers mediate the curriculum.

In their study of vocational teachers in Ontario high schools Farnsworth and Higham (2012) suggested that these teachers had hybridised pedagogical and vocational professional identities. They further suggested that the teachers acted as a bridge or link between vocational sectors and cultures and the schools. In their study this hybridisation was a strength in the specific circumstances of the programme in which they were involved. This concept of hybridised professional identities has been useful in my research for thinking about the teachers in the training providers and the ways in which they help to construct the curriculum. However, it became apparent that it was important to consider the particular mix of hybridisation which was at play and the specific curricular and institutional contexts within which the teachers operated.

A common feature of all the training provider teachers was that they had all been engaged, most for many years, in the sectors in which they now trained apprentices. It was unthinkable, for example that someone who had not been a hairdresser could have been employed at either Insight Hair or Personality Hair. Some had been salon owners and many continued to practise as hairdressers, perhaps a day a week or at weekends. At the engineering providers it might, in principle, have been possible to employ someone with an engineering degree straight from higher education. This was rejected out-of-hand by the provider managers, since in their view such a person would lack practical experience and credibility with employers and apprentices. The ways in which staff came into teaching was often serendipitous and ad-hoc and quite often based upon some existing professional or personal links with the provider. In this it was rather similar to the ways in which many teachers in further education colleges are recruited (Goodrham, 2008). Recruitment also featured forms of the 'long interview' (James and Biesta, 2007). Here the owner of Insight Hair describes how she recruited teachers:

> Nicola came to us – I'm trying to think if she did her assessor qualification. She did her assessor qualification. She wanted to teach. She wasn't ready. She was very shy. Very different to what she really is, actually. But struggled in a classroom environment, particularly with challenging learners. It was almost the rabbit in the headlight look, and the tears. Obviously she just wasn't ready, and I told her this. I said she's a lovely girl, she's very committed, "But I feel that you need to get a bit more life experience, bit of time on your side." So she said "Can I come and shadow?" and she did.
>
> It was a fantastic move for her, because it gave her the confidence. I would have hated to have been employing her in that first year. Because we'd have been having informal meetings and "This isn't good enough." Whereas because there was always a teacher in the classroom and she was the secondary teacher, what we do... We do it a lot. We've got about

> four girls with us at the moment that are doing it. It's not paid and it's voluntary. It's entirely
> up to them. But they have to tell us when they're coming in, can't just pull up. They work
> with a mentor, so one educator looks after them.

In engineering several of the teachers had had responsibility for apprenticeship programmes in the companies in which they worked and therefore a switch into teaching at a provider was seen as a 'natural' move.

In terms of hybridisation the teachers still saw themselves as primarily members of the hairdressing or engineering sectors. Their attitudes to education were quite ambivalent. On one occasion I presented my business card to a manager at one the engineering providers. It included the title of my project 'Training Providers: Explorations of Curriculum Practice in Work-based Learning'. He looked at it quizzically and said:

> We don't use the word 'curriculum'. That's too academic. We talk about programmes or courses.

At Yorkshire Engineering a member of staff explained how the apprentices attended the provider full-time for the first year of their apprenticeship. As well as engineering theory and practice and functional skills they also received some general education and took part in recreational and extra-curricular activities. Betraying my own assumptions and experience I said it sounded a bit like a sixth-form college for engineers. He responded vehemently;

> It's nothing like any sort of college. It's completely different, this is about the industry and
> learning how to operate in the workplace, it's not academic in any way.

This rejection of the 'academic', which incorporated anything which was redolent of schools and colleges came out in many responses, along with a privileging of the practical. This perhaps partly explains the reluctance of provider staff to get involved in, or even show much interest in, curriculum (or course or programme) development since many equated this with 'meetings' and 'academicism'.

Another aspect of the teachers' professionality was their close attention to the achievement of the competence-based criteria. All the review and assessment sessions I attended were based around these and involved inspection of the apprentice portfolios, giving feedback on already completed tasks or planning ahead for uncompleted units. In hairdressing this involved encouraging the apprentices to bring in models so that they could demonstrate particular cuts and skills. In engineering it might involve negotiations with employers so that apprentices could be given access to areas of work which they needed in order to meet certain criteria. This criteria-chasing has been recognised by others studying competence-based learning (Ecclestone, 2007, Spours and Coffield, et al., 2007, Torrance, 2007). Knowledge of the assessment criteria, being able to explain these to apprentices and understanding the ways in which they could be met in the particular workplace or at the training provider was a crucial part of the teachers skill and was an adjunct to their emphasis on the 'practical'.

Set against this, however, was a certain educational commitment. Partly this was a willingness to undertake staff development and training, including in teaching. Staff did not assume that because they had 'done the job' they did not require any teacher training. Under the previous Labour government training provider staff had been required to have or be working towards obtaining teaching qualifications. This requirement was abolished in 2012 following the Lingfield Review (Lingfield, 2012), thus reflecting the government's overall approach to the requirement for teaching qualifications. This was widely opposed in the training providers and five of them stated they would continue to require staff to work towards teaching qualifications. A typical view was:

> I know just at the moment that just very recently they're saying that QTLS, Cert Ed, you don't need a teaching qualification anymore. I said "Well I do" because I just think it devalues it, anybody could go in and teach. I think they learn a lot from it. At the end of the day they learn a lot from it and I actually like to have somebody studying towards something because it keeps us up to date with things as well. Me personally, everybody has either got or is working towards either the Cert Ed at least or the QTLS.

More important than this though was a commitment to certain forms of what I called 'teacherliness' (not that the participants would have embraced such a term!). This took two forms. First, there was a strong sense of commitment to individuals, both in helping them through the programme in relation to the formal requirements but also in going the extra mile to address all sorts of other issues apprentices might have. These might include housing, health, finance, parents, relationships and so on. Thus beyond the commitment to getting through the course and boosting the provider completion figures there was pastoral concern for the whole learner (see James and Diment, 2003 for a similar example).

Second, there was a commitment to the essence of the vocational sector which went beyond the bald achievement of assessment criteria. A teacher at Insight Hair put it like this:

> You have to allow them to be creative. Being a tutor is not showing off your knowledge; it's allowing the learners to explore themselves and be creative themselves. That's what hairdressing is all about for me. It's not about getting Brownie points for knowing everything, if that makes sense.

An engineering assessor explained it like this:

> Now, this question sounds a bit bald but do you see yourself as an assessor, a teacher or a bit of both?

> Everything. We have to be everything. Theoretically we can't do any training, that's not our job. We don't train them but we can go in and mentor them, guide them and give them advice on where they need to improve their skills or their competence. We're not just an assessor, we do go in and take on the whole project really. The assessing is perhaps just at the end bit. But leading up to the assessment we have to guide them and give them advice as to what they can do, how they can do it and where they can get certain information. We're not just assessors. We wouldn't consider ourselves, well I wouldn't consider myself as

just an assessor. I don't know what other assessors are like, whether they do that, I don't know. I can't speak for other people but I do like to get really involved and I get to know the lads in a fair amount of detail. We do develop a relationship where I can have a chat with him and say, "You need to do this, this and this. You're strong on here, you're weak on here so develop this part and then we'll look at getting the evidence for putting in your portfolio". The short answer is no, I'm not just an assessor, I don't think so.

In engineering there was a recognition that an apprentice required commitment and enthusiasm but also what was sometimes described as an 'intuitive' feel for materials and processes. Thus the teachers had a commitment to the vocational sector which went beyond the achievement of the apprenticeship qualification and included the initiation of the apprentices into well-established vocational cultures and localised communities of practice (Yeomans, 2013).

Thus in the hybridised professional identities of the training provider teachers it was evident that the vocational element of the hybridisation was considerable stronger than the educational or pedagogic. This was in contrast to the teachers studied by Farnsworth and Higham (2012) where the two elements seemed roughly balanced. As described above this could be partly explained by the experiences and values of the teachers in my research. It can also be explained by the structure of apprenticeship training. The teachers in my study only had access to the learners for 20% - 25% of their apprenticeship programme, for the rest of the time they were in the workplace under the supervision of the employer. Their employed status meant that the teachers were limited in the extent to which they could exercise influence, let alone control, of what happened in the workplace. Their teaching was also constrained by the restrictive and prescriptive financial and curricular frameworks for apprenticeship learning. However, the teachers identities were complexly hybridised and, despite their eschewal of 'academic' purposes, their values and teaching embodied broader conceptions of learning than might be assumed by a commitment to an apparently hard-edged vocationalism.

Concluding comments

This article reports research designed to increase knowledge of the ways in which the training provider sector works. The research focused upon the role of the providers in relation to government-funded apprenticeship programmes. Although training providers enrol only a small percentage of 16-18 year-old learners it is significant because of the importance attached by all political parties to expanding the quantity and improving the quality of apprenticeships. With over 50% of current apprenticeships being run through training providers these political aims will only be met where providers participate effectively.

Providers are restricted by the requirements of governmental funding. The table on page 6 showed that five of the six case study providers were very heavily dependent on this funding. The curriculum is regulated through the apprenticeship frameworks and awarding qualifications. The providers must also work closely with employers and attempt to be responsive to their demands since employers always have the option of switching to other providers or pulling out of apprenticeships altogether.

Despite these restrictive circumstances this article has shown that the providers were not passive institutions simply 'delivering' apprenticeship programmes. While they did not challenge problematic basic assumptions about apprenticeships in England, they did bring their own sets of values and practices to their mediating work. This came through the strong commitment of staff to vocational sectors, leavened by sometimes unrecognised educational practices and the ways in which they responded to policy changes and employers requirements.

As I write there are currently proposals for significant changes to the apprenticeship system (HMG, 2013). If these proposals go through there will be changes to funding, curriculum and assessment. The proposals are intended to put employers in 'the driving seat' (once more!). They have met with a mixed response, including from employers. The most contentious suggestion is that funding will be channelled through employers rather than through providers as in the current system. The idea is that employers will then be able to seek out the best deal from competing providers. The worst case scenario foreseen by some critics is that this will lead to competition on price and thus a 'race to the bottom'. In any event, it seems likely that the proposed change will affect the ways in which partnerships between employers and providers work.

A significant feature of the proposals and consultations to date is that, despite the efforts of AELP and individual providers, the provider voice has barely been heeded. This is unfortunate since whatever reformed system ultimately emerges providers will have an important role in making it work.

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