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Changing political narratives on apprenticeship

Higher Education,
Skills and Work-
Based Learning

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to consider the political rhetoric surrounding apprenticeships in England since 2012 in the light of publicly available data on the implementation of apprenticeship policy.

Design/methodology/approach – A series of key speeches made by skills ministers have been analysed using political discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2008), identifying the key messages for different stakeholders and the potential reasons behind these messages. From this, a narrative policy analysis is used to consider any key changes since 2014 to the dominant narrative about apprenticeships. This narrative is compared to the adoption of key changes to the apprenticeship system – the levy, the development of standards and the role of assessment and qualifications – and their implementation using publicly available data.

Findings – The paper finds that there is one dominant narrative focused towards employers, highlighting the value of apprenticeships to fill skills gaps and provide well-trained staff (including progressing existing staff) for employers. When speaking to training providers and employers, politicians focus more on apprenticeships at all ages and on quality, in addition to employer-led apprenticeships.

Originality/value – This paper uses methods from political analysis in the context of apprenticeship policy, establishing how narrative can be similar to or detached from policy implementation. This paper considers the extent to which the development of this policy is affected by the political narrative and the individual Skills Ministers.

Keywords Apprenticeship, Skills, Policy, Political narrative

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1. Introduction

Apprenticeships are culturally considered as a form of training taken at the beginning of a career in England (Winch *et al.*, 2025), but over the past 15 years have been taken by adults as well as young people (DfE, 2025). The debates in 2012 focused on the quality of apprenticeships, following an expansion that prized quantity above quality. This led, in 2015, to the primacy of the employer, who would dominate the reforms and return quality to the system through meeting their needs. As the results of these changes fed through, concerns about young people “missing out” on apprenticeships dominated political discussions. This paper analyses political speeches and government documents relating to apprenticeships, since 2012, analysing policy change and political rhetoric. It uses narrative policy analysis to track the story being told about apprenticeships as the political landscape changes. The paper finds that the reforms that began in 2012 have been implemented with fidelity and achieved their objectives to put employers at the centre of apprenticeship and that rhetoric by Skills Ministers was remarkably consistent.

1.1 Foundation for policy change

Apprenticeship policy has changed over time, although criticisms of the quality and breadth of apprenticeships in England has been more consistent. When compared with the more-established and long-lasting German system of apprenticeship, the English modern

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apprenticeships of the 1990s fell short (Ryan and Unwin, 2001; Steedman, 2001). Much of the criticism focuses on the statist nature of apprenticeships prior to 2012 (Keep, 2006), as one of the key success factors for apprenticeship delivery in England has consistently been the role of employers (Fuller and Unwin, 2007). In this earlier period, apprenticeship was seen as solely for young people (Unwin and Wellington, 1995).

In 2012, three key policy documents signalled the need for change. First, the National Audit Office (NAO) report in February (NAO, 2012) highlighted the poor quality of apprenticeships, which in some cases were rebranding existing training (as explained in Pullen and Clifton, 2016). This was followed by a review of apprenticeships undertaken by the appropriate Select Committee in the UK Parliament (Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee, 2012). Select Committees are made up of Members of Parliament (MPs) from different political parties based on the proportion of MPs from each party and scrutinise policy in key areas (UK Parliament, 2025). In 2012, apprenticeships were part of the Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) department of government, and the Chair was a Labour MP, while the government was a conservative and liberal democrat coalition. As these committees are made up of representatives from different parties and can focus on specific policy areas, they are seen to be effective (Dunt, 2023). However, they are not able to make policy and cannot compel the government to make changes to the law. The government can and does respond to Select Committee reports (here as BIS, 2013).

As there was a political imperative to tackle apprenticeships following the NAO report and the announcement of the Select Committee review, the government sought to seize the mantle and commissioned its own independent review of apprenticeships (FE Week, 2012). This review was undertaken by Doug Richard, best known for his appearance in a television programme called “*Dragon’s Den*” where individuals pitched business ideas to a panel of potential investors, including Richard. The Richard Review was published in November 2012, and it heavily influenced the government’s later response to the Select Committee (BIS, 2013).

1.2 Apprenticeship policy since 2012

These policy documents in 2012 led to a significant shift in apprenticeship policy, which created the system that still exists. It began a move from a statist approach to apprenticeship (Keep, 2006) to one which focused on employers. The new system included trailblazer groups of employers coming together to create apprenticeship standards, no longer developed by awarding organisations but by employers. These standards do not have to include qualifications, but recognition of professional status is encouraged. An independent end-point assessment was introduced, as suggested by Richard (2012), as a way of assuring quality outside traditional awarding organisations. In 2015, an apprenticeship levy was announced with a start date of 2017. This was based on a report produced by Alison Wolf (2015), later an adviser to the conservative government on skills. This levy on larger companies would cover the majority of the cost of apprenticeships at both larger and smaller firms.

These changes cemented the concept of employer-led apprenticeships, as employers were setting the standard, employing the apprentices and mostly paying for the training. However, the government still regulates apprenticeships in a similar way to other post-16 education, setting the cost band and approving standards through the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, which has recently become Skills England. There have been a range of smaller policy changes, mostly relating to either additional funding to employers taking on apprentices aged 16-18 or technical changes about the operation of the end-point assessment or apprenticeship training provider paperwork.

The focus is on apprenticeships be employer-led, and despite initial criticism of the English approach in comparison to other European countries (Brockmann *et al.*, 2010), increasingly there are examples where engaged employers offer and deliver high-quality apprenticeships (e.g. Bravenboer, 2016; Crawford-Lee and Morwood, 2019; Brockmann and Smith, 2023). This paper considers the extent to which the development of this policy reflects the political narrative of individual Skills Ministers.

2. Research methods

This paper reviews speeches by Skills Ministers in the UK Government since 2012. The position has changed slightly over time, with 11 holders of this office between 2010 and 2025. It has often been seen as a stepping stone for those aiming for full ministerial office, with ambitious Skills Ministers working to make an impact. In some cases, Skills Ministers are successful in reaching higher office, for example as Matt Hancock, who later became the Health Secretary, and Gillian Keegan, who later became the Education Secretary. Others either have less interest in progressing or other factors are at play, for example, the current Skills Minister in 2025 Baroness Jacqui Smith, who operates from the House of Lords and was the Home Secretary from 2007 to 2009. Reaching ministerial office depends on a range of factors, including being loyal to the government of the day, which cannot be considered a reflection of ability (Dunt, 2023).

Searches were made for speeches published on the government website by a minister from the Department for Education containing the word “apprentice” and then reviewed for this paper. Speeches made by Skills Ministers at the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) annual conference often contained the most relevance to apprenticeships, as this is the membership body for apprenticeship training organisations. Other speeches were made at annual conferences of the Association of Colleges, a membership body for colleges and education conferences like the Times Education Summit. Given the methodology, the audience was important context for analysis.

Amongst the Skills Ministers during the period who made relevant speeches, four individuals stood out: the three mentioned above and Robert Halfon. All except Baroness Smith were conservative MPs, as conservative-led governments were in power from 2010 to 2024 under four different prime ministers. Robert Halfon was the Skills Minister in 2016–2017, then the Chair of the Education Select Committee prior to becoming the Skills Minister again in 2022 and, therefore, had experience of the sector and policy issues before taking on the role for the second time.

Other key Skills Ministers during this period include Nick Boles (2014–16) and Anne Milton (2017–2019). Both presided over the full development of policies including the introduction of the apprenticeship levy (announced in 2015 and implemented in 2017) and left the conservative party in 2019 due to disagreements around Brexit with Skills Minister being their highest ministerial office.

Two types of discourse analysis were used for the analysis in this paper. The first is narrative policy analysis using the narrative policy framework (Jones *et al.*, 2022). This framework has two key elements – the narrative form and the narrative content. In this case, we consider the narrative form, particularly the setting and characters to be drawn from both the cultural understanding of apprenticeship as something explicitly to introduce young people into the workplace (Winch *et al.*, 2025) and the specific issues raised by the 2012 policy documents. The narrative content is then the values and strategies set out in the speech.

Political narrative is a well-established framework for delivering political speeches (Shenhav, 2006). Recent evidence (Westen, 2008; Haidt, 2012) suggests that emotive narratives can create an “us”-and-“them” mentality, in which individuals already identify as belonging to a particular group. Although mostly considered in the context of populism, this highlights the role of narrative in speeches designed to appeal to particular groups.

As these are explicitly political speeches, destined not just for those attending the conference but also for media outlets and, therefore, the wider public, we also use political discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2008). This prompts us to consider how the speech reflects a common ground of cultural knowledge, norms and values, which reflect the narrative policy framework. We then reflect on the three political levels involved in what is being spoken, the implications for the individual – particularly important for those who were ambitious for future ministerial office, for the group – both the political parties here but also the stakeholders and setting of the speech at a particular organisation’s conference, and thirdly for the political system. Although there is an employer-led focus, this creates a situation where the government

has less control on how many apprentices, in what areas, etc. Therefore, in reviewing the speech, we consider how this power shift manifests (or not).

These frameworks for analysing speeches about apprenticeships by Skills Ministers over time enable us to reflect on the policy changes being made or beginning to be clear in the data on apprenticeships and how the political objectives of the individual might affect either the way the policy is being announced or the policy itself. This in-depth study helps us understand why some rhetoric around apprenticeships continues and sheds light on any disconnect between the political speeches about apprenticeships and the policy implementation.

3. Findings

3.1 Skills Minister Hancock

In all cases, we consider the situation and motivation of the individual, as well as the policy at the time of the speech. The first excerpt is from a speech that Skills Minister Matt Hancock gave to the AELP conference in 2014. As explained above, the government had produced a response in 2013, so the policy changes had been announced and were only just beginning to be implemented. Trailblazer groups of employers had been established to begin developing apprenticeship standards, but by 2014, there was no apprenticeship levy, and only 11 approved standards for delivery. The government was a coalition of the conservatives and the centrist liberal democrats, and Matt Hancock was an ambitious Skills Minister who was seen as a protégé of the then Chancellor of the Exchequer. In this speech, he focuses on the employer-led nature of apprenticeships:

So that side by side with university, apprenticeships are the norm for young people leaving school.

Alongside that goal, I want apprenticeships to become the first choice for businesses, professions and employers of all kinds across the country to train their next generation of skilled staff. . . .

For too long, the antennae of the apprenticeship system have been pointed towards government and towards committees that have tried their best to act on behalf of employers. What if we were to retune the system to pick up directly on the clear signals from employers about what they need . . .

Apprenticeships are popular with young people and that popularity is growing.

Top apprenticeships are more competitive than undergraduate places in the best universities and last year alone, apprenticeship applications rose by almost 50%.

Most importantly, they are also popular with employers. . . .

We want to build on the changes we have already made to place employers at the centre of apprenticeships and to further drive up quality. (Hancock, 2014)

Here, the narrative stresses the specific role of employers within apprenticeships and highlights the cultural norm of apprenticeships for young people by equating them with university. Although speaking to a group of apprenticeship training providers, who in this speech he refers to as his “salesforce” for apprenticeships, he focuses on employers, the benefits of apprenticeships to employers and how to encourage more employers to engage and take on apprentices. He also accepts some of the challenge in the [Richard Review \(2012\)](#) and creates traineeships, a pre-apprenticeship shorter programme for young people. His focus on quality echoes the 2013 government response and the demands from all three reports in 2012.

His aim is to position himself as driving the policy forward and making it a success with employers who are closer to the conservatives than to other political parties, stressing how apprenticeships will help them produce the skilled workforce they need. He is balancing this objective to meet the needs of employers with recognising the value of apprenticeships for young people. His narrative is to equate employer-led with quality, while believing that high-quality apprenticeships will encourage employers to offer more apprenticeships to young people. He acknowledges the challenge to maintain high numbers of apprenticeships while improving the quality in the speech but argues that employer-led apprenticeships will do both.

Economically, this was a period of slow growth and austerity for the public sector, as the country recovered from the 2008 financial crash. Although growth was limited, by 2014, employers were not facing uncertainty that would affect their recruitment of apprentices. The 2015 election was won by the conservatives and that government implemented the three key apprenticeship policies discussed above. Later in 2014, Nick Boles became the Skills Minister as Matt Hancock was promoted. The same policies were promoted after the 2015 election, with the addition of the apprenticeship levy and in the same vein.

3.2 Skills Ministers Boles and Milton

Nick Boles and Anne Milton, although different characters, shepherded the key changes to the apprenticeship system – the levy announced in 2015 by the Prime Minister and implemented from 2017, the introduction of degree apprenticeships in 2015 and apprenticeship standards begun through trailblazer groups of employers and then implemented from 2017. It is perhaps due to the heavy burden of policy change and implementation that fewer speeches and remarks are published on the UK Government website from these ministers. However, those that exist suggest they continued the broader government narrative on employer-led apprenticeships and the value of apprenticeships for young people.

In comments on the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, Boles said:

The apprenticeship levy will ensure that businesses invest in skills and training, and will act as a much needed shot in the arm for the country's productivity. (Boles in UK Government, 2015)

Boles had set up the conservative think tank Policy Exchange in the 2000s, so the use of the word "productivity" suggests he is talking not just to employers and the general public but also to researchers and policymakers. His focus on businesses and employers is predictable, given the apprenticeship levy is paid by employers. The range of individuals quoted in the press release, from sector stakeholders to academics to business people, all focus on employers in their remarks.

Milton gave her first speech to AELP conference only days after being appointed, and her second speech exists as a podcast but not on the UK Government website. In other remarks, for example, the below during National Apprenticeship Week adheres closely to the government line of focusing on young people and employer-led apprenticeships:

[I] have heard incredibly inspiring stories from apprentices working across a huge range of sectors and at all levels.

And from such different backgrounds - women with children returning to part-time work doing degree apprenticeships, people who started university and decided it wasn't for them, and young people who didn't do well at school but for whom an apprenticeship has opened a new world of work and learning, building not only their skill but also their confidence and self-esteem . . .

All of these stories show that apprenticeships change lives, lead to rewarding jobs, and change businesses for the better. (Milton, 2018)

Milton's style highlights individual narratives and the benefits to individuals and employers as anecdotes, without her own individual narrative. Both Boles and Milton, from their speeches, appear to be focused on the implementation of the apprenticeship policies, rather than trying to convince or "sell" a particular narrative. This is partly timing, as they were ministers when implementation was the priority. Also perhaps, their views on Brexit and the wider shifts in the political landscape towards a more populist conservative party under Boris Johnson from 2019 means that delivering apprenticeships well and spending less time in the media, was politic given both had more centrist leanings.

Their limited available public remarks as well as their approach to toeing the line on apprenticeships while implementing the policies mean they can both be considered part of the prevailing narrative on the value of apprenticeships for employers. Milton, with examples of

apprentices from different backgrounds can be seen as in more of a Halfon tradition, identifying how apprenticeships can change the lives of individuals. It is a more expansive approach to apprenticeship in description (Fuller and Unwin, 2003) but lacks an individual narrative from Milton to analyse. It also lacks some clarity on the purpose of apprenticeship.

3.3 Skills Minister Keegan

Gillian Keegan became Skills Minister in 2020, having been an Apprenticeship Ambassador in Parliament in 2019. Keegan was a former apprentice and came from a business background, so he came to the role with personal experience of apprenticeship. After only a month in post, the pandemic, hit meaning events and conferences were cancelled, and, therefore, there are very few speeches to review. However, Keegan introduced regulations to the House of Commons to support apprentices during the pandemic in 2020 and provided a quote for a policy relating to apprenticeships in 2021. Both pieces of text provide an indication of the narrative and motivation behind apprenticeships from this time.

In 2020, the government adopted regulations to allow apprentices who were three-quarters or more through their apprenticeship to complete their training if they were made redundant during the pandemic. Keegan introduced these regulations to the House:

As we have replaced apprenticeship frameworks with new higher quality employer-designed standards, the average length of an apprenticeship has increased: up from 498 days in 2015–16 to 611 days in 2018–19. In recognition of that, we are now legislating to enable redundant apprentices to complete their apprenticeship if they are more than six months from completion at the time of redundancy and they have completed 75% or more of their training programme. . . .

In extending this policy we are acutely sensitive that apprenticeships are jobs, not simply training programmes, and that the unique benefit of an apprenticeship is its combination of off-the-job training and the on-the-job application of those skills. Without an employer for a sustained period of time, it becomes increasingly difficult for an apprentice to develop the on-the-job experience necessary to attain occupational competence and to pass the end-point assessment. . . .

I am delighted that apprenticeships seem to be hugely popular. People are focused on understanding how we can improve them, how we can improve the system, how we can create more of them and how we can make sure that every young person is aware of them, because we know that some young people do not hear about those fantastic opportunities to train and have career-led study until it is too late. (Keegan, 2020, col. 5, 9)

This excerpt stresses the role of employers and the nature of an apprenticeship as a job not simply a training programme. This reflects the policy documents (BIS, 2013) but differs slightly from the narrative of being a popular alternative to university for young people that was expressed by Hancock. The values here are not just for an employer-led apprenticeship but one where employers are fully in control of apprenticeships.

The focus on length of apprenticeship is interesting here also. Albeit relevant to the issue at hand, it shows a shift in government from the balance of both high numbers and quality, towards the primacy of quality and longer apprenticeships, to meet employer need. Although the initial statement makes limited mention of age, in response to the discussion from MPs, Keegan responds focusing on young people and apprenticeships. This reflects perhaps the importance of employers foremost and, secondly, young people in the eyes of this Skills Minister.

In September 2021, a new government system was launched to allow larger employers to more simply transfer levy funds to smaller employers, making taking on apprentices easier. This system relies on larger employers wanting to transfer their funds, but it was launched with a press release including the following quote from Skills Minister Gillian Keegan.

Apprenticeships are a fantastic way for employers to ensure they have a highly motivated and diverse pool of talent in their workforce, while also enabling people to get the skills and experience they need to get ahead.

I'm pleased we're making it easier for smaller and medium-sized businesses to offer apprenticeships, which will unleash exciting new opportunities for apprentices and ensure that every business can benefit from the productivity and skills of apprentices. (Keegan, 2021)

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This quote reflects a similarly employer-focused view but does not focus on young people. The mention of skills twice in this short quote shows how it has become increasingly important, while quality is now assumed as all the changes that began in 2012 are operational by 2021. Although there is not a specific mention of the fall in numbers of apprenticeships, which could be seen in 2021 (DfE, 2025), they were partly due to the pandemic, partly a result of the implementation of policy changes. However, the new system to enable easier levy transfer is itself designed to increase the number of apprenticeships, being offered by smaller businesses. Here, the narrative has shifted from 2014 to focus specifically on employers, with a suggestion that the tension between quality and numbers of apprentices is beginning to show.

3.4 Skills Minister Halfon

Robert Halfon was Skills Minister twice, first in 2016–2017 and then from 2022 to 2024, holding the position of the Chair of the Education Select Committee. Halfon was well known in education circles for his interest in social mobility, and during his time as Skills Minister for the second time, he spoke often about learning offering a ladder of opportunity. “In this speech to the Times Education Summit in 2023, Halfon describes his ‘ladder of opportunity’ in more detail and considers who apprenticeships might be for”.

You may have heard about my Ladder of Opportunity. It is not just a slogan but a way of thinking about what we need as a country, to create a skills system that supports people of all backgrounds up the ladder into secure and well-paid employment.

The Ladder has 2 pillars:

Opportunities and social justice, and strengthening Higher and Further education.

These aren't just two slogans slotted into a framework. They are fundamental and interconnected. . . .

The second rung on the Ladder of Opportunity is about championing apprenticeships and the skills employers need. Apprenticeships are at the heart of this government's skills agenda. They are about widening the skills pipeline to drive economic growth, and bringing paid opportunities for progression to those who may not otherwise choose further training.

Our aim is that every occupation should have a quality apprenticeship attached to it. That is why we moved from apprenticeship frameworks to standards. These are carefully designed in partnership with industry, in order to truly serve their utility for the employer and their value for the apprentice. . . .

70% of all apprenticeship starts are at Levels 2 and 3 [2021/22 AY], and young people under the age of 25 make up more than half of all starts. But we still want older people to consider apprenticeships among their options to retrain or return to work. . . .

We want more and more people to build the skills needed for good employment in this age of “persistent newness” – skills for new and shifting industries, that business leaders are crying-out for.

Successfully matching high quality training with the talent found in all walks of life will not only enhance our country's skills and economic profile. It will allow people to truly thrive at work and in their communities. (Halfon, 2023)

This speech extends the narrative identified above in terms of employer-led apprenticeships but focuses more on the value for individuals and for the economy. The skills agenda and meeting employer need concepts continue from Keegan's words. However, Halfon addresses more straightforwardly the tension between young people and adults. Instead of either avoiding the issue or focusing on young people, despite his interest in social mobility, Halfon highlights the value of apprenticeships for adults and draws out ways that it can be beneficial

for them and for the country. The notion of lifelong learning is not mentioned, but Halfon is drawing on this tradition. This is an evolution of the policy from focusing on system change and the political and economic benefits to finding a way to make it real for an individual.

3.5 Skills Minister Baroness Smith

A Labour Government was elected in the UK in July 2024, and part of their manifesto involved changing the apprenticeship levy into a growth and skills levy, where up to 50% of the funds could be used by employers to fund training that was not an apprenticeship (Labour Party, 2024). Other changes that have been proposed are to reduce funding for masters-level apprenticeships (Level 7) and to develop foundation apprenticeships for young people that may be similar to the traineeships introduced by Hancock.

As noted above, Baroness Jacqui Smith has previously been Home Secretary in a Labour Government and was a new appointment following the election in 2024. Given the 14-year gap since the Labour Party being in power, this appointment could suggest a need to bolster the skills brief or big changes are ahead, or it could simply have been an opportunity to have someone experienced as part of the wider government.

In her speech to the AELP conference in 2024, Smith set out some of the policy direction for apprenticeships from the new government.

Too many young people, who have the most to gain from apprenticeships, have been locked out of accessing these opportunities.

While too many employers, who want to build the skilled workforces they need for long-term success, have not been able to find the right training options. . . .

We are clear, however, that levy funded training is only one element of the investment from employers in the skills needs of their workforce.

We will encourage and support employers to go further in investing in these training needs as we build towards a responsive and collaborative skills system.

With a continued focus on driving up apprenticeship quality and achievements in order to maximise the benefits of that training. (Smith, 2024)

This narrative is a continuation and evolution of the narrative over the previous decade. We can see references to apprenticeship quality, employer needs in their workforce and young people. However, unlike the previous narrative, there is a challenge for employers to provide more funding for training outside the apprenticeship levy. It is a balanced picture, whereby government commits to building an effective skills system, but employers have responsibilities for their workforce and to the country, as well as simply being able to receive support. This narrative recognises the value of the current system while highlighting the change that the new government will bring. The reference to a skilled workforce as well as to young people echoes the more straightforward speech by Robert Halfon, who explicitly stated that apprenticeships were for both adults and young people.

4. Conclusion

The political narrative surrounding apprenticeships has shifted in subtle ways since 2012. A common thread throughout the period has been the role of employers. Although the revelations of short apprenticeships and exploitation of workers were highlighted in 2012, there has been a belief that employers would not want short or poor-quality apprenticeships. The foundation of quality apprenticeships, which would necessarily meet employer need can be clearly seen as a strong narrative for all Skills Ministers. Only in the most recent example is there a challenge to employers. This is explained in part by the narrative context, and the second political narrative level focused on the party and stakeholders. For the conservative party, employers are a key stakeholder, and the narrative context of the period, particularly in the coalition government of

2010–2015, was of trusting private sector employers. Therefore, it follows that this would form a core tenet of political narrative around apprenticeship.

For Hancock and Keegan, both ambitious politicians, and Keegan with a business background, this support for employers was a related part of their personal political narrative. Both saw the Skills Minister role as a stepping stone and focused on employer-led apprenticeships as a coherent policy to promote. It also enabled them to engage with stakeholders, who might be useful in future roles.

Boles and Milton both continued the rhetoric around employers, with Milton using anecdotes to highlight how apprenticeships could benefit individuals from a range of backgrounds. However, their focus on delivering the changes to apprenticeship policy and the dominant politics of Brexit meant neither developed their own individual narrative around apprenticeships and nor deviate from the employer-led narrative.

For Halfon and Smith, the employer-led narrative is still there but has softened, with a greater focus on the individual. Halfon, with his values around social mobility, and Smith in a new Labour Government, have different political narratives that are of more importance to them personally, but they continue with the employer-led narrative, as it is core to the policy implementation.

The age of apprentices has caused significant debates in policy circles, with many academics and advisers arguing that apprenticeships should be solely for young people (e.g. [Layard et al., 2023](#); [Richmond, 2025](#)). Although this narrative is used by Hancock, it again softens slightly with Keegan and Halfon, before returning with Smith. There is, despite this cultural perception, a more nuanced view put forward by Skills Ministers in the recorded speeches reviewed here. This partly reflects the reality that the apprenticeship system works well for adults ([Pullen, 2024](#)) and that numbers of adults taking apprenticeships has increased over the period ([DfE, 2025](#)). However, it is interesting that despite perceptions of politicians focusing on young people, the full speeches are more balanced and include more references to adults and upskilling than would be expected.

England is often criticised for having short-term policies, particularly in vocational education and training ([Unterweger and Steinheimer, 2025](#)), while those in continental Europe benefit from longer-term established systems ([Rauner and Wittig, 2010](#)). In the case of apprenticeships, a period from 2012 to 2017 involved significant change to develop employer-led and large employer-funded high-quality apprenticeships and has broadly been in place since 2017, with some smaller changes. The political narrative around apprenticeships, established by Hancock from 2012 has also been remarkably consistent. The longevity of this narrative is positive for the establishment of a new system, with even the newest Skills Minister from a different party of government using similar narratives. The shifts of emphasis, either to focus on the day job of making the policy work from Boles and Milton, towards opportunity for Halfon and Smith, or for the primacy of employers from Keegan, have been slight.

An implication of this analysis is that those individuals who were outwardly ambitious, here Hancock and Keegan, as well as those with specific values, here Halfon, used the issue of apprenticeships and the position of Skills Minister to further develop their individual narratives. Those ministers who prioritised the work in front of them deviated less from the party narrative – mostly Boles and Milton but this may include Smith – had less of an individual and overtly political narrative on apprenticeships specifically. Boles can be seen to have a political narrative but often more about the economic situation more generally, particularly productivity, than on apprenticeships specifically. Their different approaches perhaps highlight some of the shortcomings of this kind of narrative policy analysis, focusing on using speeches given to specific conferences. Further research covering more of their speeches and remarks, as well as interviews given at the time and now reflecting on their time as skills ministers, may give different answers.

This analysis also highlights how the media narrative of social mobility and apprenticeships for young people was not the same as the full speeches given by the

ministers. As most ministers, with the exception of Keegan, and most journalists follow more traditional university pathways, often at elite institutions, it suggests that there might be either a lack of understanding of apprenticeships from those reporting on them, or that there might be a more deliberate attempt to reflect the cultural understanding of apprenticeships in reporting, rather than a more faithful discussion of the content of speeches.

The analysis in this paper could provide a model for international reviews of political speeches on apprenticeships, particularly in considering consistency and change between different ministers. The individual motivations and experiences of the ministers and how they manifest in political narrative, in combination with existing expectations may be more relevant in countries with longer-term visions for apprenticeships. Differences between regional politicians where policies are decided at a federal level may also be of interest (e.g. places identified in Bertuletti *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, this analysis could provide a baseline for the analysis of the political narrative around English apprenticeships in future.

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