

Mixing tradition with enterprise: The case of English Apprenticeships

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Abstract

The paper is an empirical critique of the use of tradition in the field of apprenticeship education in England. The paper briefly traces the history of apprenticeship schemes over the last 300 years in order to provide the historical and cultural context in which the new apprenticeship scheme has been launched and supported by the current coalition Government. In so doing the paper throws light on new forms of power and dominance that such a return to tradition may invoke. Indeed, the apprenticeship discourse, while building on the traditional values of providing education and employment, has now been coupled with an enterprising and citizenship discourse in an attempt to normalise behaviour at an individual and institutional level.

Keywords: apprenticeship, tradition, invented tradition, enterprising selves, training

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Introduction

Apprenticeships are a core element of the British Government policy for skills development, for tackling youth unemployment and within its social mobility agendas. In England, apprenticeships are defined as a combination of employment and skills development which provide relevant skills for the chosen occupation along with more generic life skills (Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act, 2009). Apprenticeships are deemed formal in England if they are based on the Government endorsed training frameworks and comply with Government regulations. In return for compliance, the Government provides funding towards the training element of some apprenticeships.

Political rhetoric regarding apprenticeships as a key element of the skills development policy has become prominent, featuring predominantly in political manifestoes. David Cameron (2013d) calls for a higher focus on apprenticeships for young people: ‘we want a new expectation: as you leave school you have a choice - go to university or do an apprenticeship’. The Labour leader, Ed Milliband (2013), went further, suggesting that there should be a legal requirement for employers to take on apprentices:

‘We’ll say if you want to bring in a skilled worker from outside the EU then you’ll also have a legal duty to provide an apprenticeship to the next generation. I’ll also say to companies doing the right thing, training their workforce, that they will have power to call time on free-riding by competitors who refuse to do the same. That’s where how we win the race to the top, friends.’

The political rhetoric, unquestioningly links apprenticeship to a future high skilled workforce which will be required to ensure the UK can compete globally as a high skills economy.

This comes at a time of uncertainty and instability within the British economy and the apprenticeship is offered as part of the solution to current poor employment prospects by portraying a future in which high income, stable jobs will be available to all those willing to develop the required skills and attributes. Whilst there are many avenues for skill development, apprenticeship appears to have come to the forefront in political campaigns. As argued in this paper, the apprenticeship has been championed due to the potential for public appeal. As highlighted by John Hayes(2011a), then Minister for Skills, the term ‘apprenticeship’ is understood and accepted by the public and employers as having “durability” (Hayes, 2011a) and having a “legitimate appeal to popular sentiment” (Hayes, 2011b). For many, apprenticeship infers a sense of pride, with inter-generational transfer of skills, communal ways of working and a sense of continuity and stable employment. As argued in this paper, Government draws heavily on these sentiments to ‘sell’ modern forms of training as apprenticeship, when in reality they bear little resemblance to these portrayals of apprenticeship.

In recent years there has been a plethora of Government backed campaigns to raise awareness of apprenticeships. Some of the campaigns are targeted at employers by encouraging them to take on an apprentice, with key officials such as the Prime Minister, Deputy-Prime Minister, Business Secretary and Under Secretary of State for Skills making regular press conferences whilst visiting organisations deemed as portraying the desired apprenticeship message. These campaigns have a number of different messages, such as promoting the business case for apprenticeships including the opportunity to develop a highly skilled workforce, yet others portray a responsibility of employers to give the young disadvantaged an opportunity; apprenticeship as a form of corporate social responsibility. Other campaigns are targeted at potential apprentices; the focus of much of this is on talented young people who would normally

take the academic route, asking them to consider doing an apprenticeship instead. These campaigns tend to be aimed at not only young people but others who may influence the young, such as parents and teachers. Much of the focus is on trying to improve the image of apprenticeships and to raising its profile away from low-level or remedial training to high class vocational education suitable for the development of a highly skilled workforce.

I believe that the apprenticeship scheme is currently in a state of flux, with much ambiguity about what an apprenticeship is and what purpose it serves, yet government is keen to portray the apprenticeship as a clearly defined brand which is understood and embraced by all. In this paper, I claim that, in order to provide a sense of permanency and foundation to the apprenticeship, Government draws on the notion of apprenticeship as being a traditional form of work engagement, going back centuries, aiming to confer a sense of stability in a time of change and uncertainty.

Tradition offers a link to the past providing a sense of continuity and stability over time. For Shils (2006), tradition means many things but its primary meaning captures the endurance and continuity of human affairs from one generation to the next by handing something down from the past to the present. This can include customs, beliefs, rituals, rules, practices, material objects, images, or even institutions (Shils, 2006; Otto & Pedersen, 2005). Hobsbawm (1992, p2) claims that tradition is often used in a normalising way within the present as a way to “establish continuity with a suitable historic past”. He develops the idea of ‘invented tradition’ where:

... insofar as there is such as reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.

Accepting this notion, traditions can be seen as new constructions which have political and social functions in the present (Otto & Pedersen, 2005). Otto and Petersen (2005) argue that such traditions are particularly frequent in times of rapid social change, often serving to legitimise particular institutions and relations of authority, typically through social cohesion and group membership.

In one sense, and for many individuals, the idea of apprenticeship fully embodies the notion of tradition. For them, the aim of apprenticeship is a form of inheritance from the past, the passing of skills and knowledge, and possibly even physical emblems such as tools, from one generation to the next, ensuring that traditional crafts and trades continue to survive. The idea of apprenticeship is often sentimentalised by people and confers positive images. Doug Richards (entrepreneur) was recently asked by Government to conduct an independent review of apprenticeships. Whilst the report, in places, was quite negative about the current state of the apprenticeship scheme, his report began with the following words (Richard, 2012, p2):

Everyone likes apprenticeships. No matter who I speak with, when I mention apprenticeships people react warmly. The warmth crosses ages and party lines, regions of the country and backgrounds, ethnicity and gender. People tell anecdotes of people they've known who have succeeded through apprenticeships and they talk about what a fulfilling route to success it can be. Apprenticeships, or at least the notion of them, are popular.

I believe that the British Government is attempting to capitalise on this nostalgic view of apprenticeships to raise awareness of the modern day offering of 'apprenticeship'. Yet, within this paper, I argue that rather than tradition, it is 'invented tradition' which is being utilised to

reassemble nostalgic feelings from the past into the modern apprenticeship which is only tentatively linked to past understandings of apprenticeship.

At the same time as drawing on the past, in a nostalgic way, Government also draws on the threat of global competition and continuous change to impel young workers to accept the role of enterprising workers who are flexible and always willing to adapt in anticipation of market needs (Zemblyas, 2006). Using clips from political speeches, Government sponsored policy reports and media stories, I show how the apprenticeship discourse, while building on the traditional values of providing education and employment, has now been coupled with an enterprising and citizenship discourse in an attempt to normalise behaviour at an individual and institutional level.

The paper will begin with a brief history of apprenticeships to provide a historical and cultural context before discussing the ‘modern’ apprenticeship. The idea of apprenticeship tradition will then be explored to demonstrate how tradition is used to invoke particular understandings of apprenticeship. Finally, I will explore how Government combines the traditional with modern imperatives of enterprise to offer the apprenticeship as a modern panacea for the workplace.

Understanding the English Apprenticeship

The ‘traditional’ apprenticeship through the ages.

Formal apprenticeships trace back to the medieval times in England, but in a more basic form, the transfer of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next, has occurred since time immemorial. Early forms of formal apprenticeship acted as barriers of entry for craft trades through a guild system that prevented people from trading unless they had served an apprenticeship and then been accepted by the guild. The incentive was through the control of the number of

artisans permitted to trade, enabling monopolistic control over the market to ensure premium prices for their wares. These practices became enshrined in law with the 1563 Statute of Artificers (Arnold-Baker, 2001). At this time, apprenticeships were typically unpaid but in return for services rendered, the apprentice would receive board and lodgings. The master (i.e. employer) would effectively become locus-parentis, taking responsibility for not only the training needs but also the moral development of apprentices under his care (Dunlop & Denham, 1912). Whilst this form of apprenticeship continued well into the eighteenth century, the structure was deemed too restrictive for the increasingly industrialised society as it limited the number of entrants to market and thus free trade (Smith, 1776).

By 1814, the 1563 Statute was repealed for being unsuited to the modern workplace, leading to new forms of apprenticeship deemed more appropriate for the developing industrial landscape. The master was still responsible for the education and welfare of the apprentices but, increasingly, the apprentice no longer lodged at the master's home, instead receiving wages in an economic contractual employment arrangement. Whilst there was more flexibility within these new arrangements, many claimed that apprenticeships were open to abuse by unscrupulous employers who used apprentices as cheap labour, whilst providing inadequate training (Howell, 1877). Apprenticeships, whilst still popular, became less governed and led to many apprentices failing to complete their full seven-year term. Instead, many apprentices would learn the basic skills of the trade, and then would quit their apprenticeship to seek higher paid employment elsewhere.

By the late 1800s there were concerns being raised that British industry would cease to be competitive unless there was an improvement in training and development of skills (Dunlop & Denham, 1912). At this point, we see a split between work and employment, with Government

taking on more responsibility for vocational training and education. By 1900, general education became compulsory to the age of 14 (within towns and cities) and technical schools were established to encourage part-time vocational training beyond the age of 14. Whilst Government was also keen to promote training and development within the workplace, there was an understanding that it would not interfere in what was deemed an employer's prerogative as to whether training was necessary or not (Burgess, 1994).

By the late 1930s apprenticeships were increasingly being used in many industries as cheap labour, with employers dismissing the apprentice on completion of the apprenticeship in favour of recruiting new apprentices (Thelen, 2004). During economic downturns, skilled men would be made redundant and apprentices would be expected to perform the work of the skilled workers (Childs, 1992). Unrest during this time led to apprentices gaining the right to belong to the union and, through collective action, the wages of apprenticeships steadily rose. Whilst this provided better conditions for apprentices it also acted as a disincentive for employers to take on apprentices.

Apprenticeships faced steady decline, particularly during the early 1960s when increasing numbers of young people began to stay in full time education. Increasingly, the apprenticeship was being criticised as a poor mechanism for training young people for employment skills. Accusations of poor development of skills, being too inflexible for modern industry and for discrimination against women led to the disappearance of apprenticeships in all but a few industries (Rudd et al., 2008).

By the 1960s, there was a change in Government approach to workplace learning that led to the 1964 Industrial Training Act. This aimed to establish a tripartite approach to training and apprenticeships and the responsibility for designing and managing apprenticeships would now be shared between employers, unions and Government bodies (Rudd et al., 2008). To incentivise

employers to train apprentices, a levy was imposed on all businesses, forcing all employers to share the cost of training. The logic behind this was that the whole industry would benefit if there was a greater pool of skilled workers. Despite this proactive approach to training, the new system was highly problematic and there was little improvement in apprenticeships.

Development of the (modern) apprenticeship.

During the 1970s and 1980s Government moved its focus away from skill development more towards tackling high unemployment, experimenting with its own funded schemes, such as the Youth Opportunities Scheme and Youth Training Scheme, to get the young unemployed into work. Despite the ambitions of Government with these schemes, many deemed them as failures, with much criticism claiming that the schemes: were just cheap labour, a political trick, and a disciplinary vehicle of work socialisation (Jarvis, 1998; Finn, 1987; Payne, 1999; Fuller & Unwin, 2007).

Despite the criticism levied at it, Government decided that it had a role to play in workplace learning. This led to the launch of a public-funded Modern Apprenticeship (MA) in 1996. The idea was to draw on the tradition of earlier apprenticeships to generate a new form of training which would be embraced by both employers and young people alike. According to Unwin (2007) this approach by the Government was an attempt to disassociate itself from its earlier experiments into training by linking to apprenticeships which had a history, and in which employers and the general public tended to trust. For apprenticeship “has a familiar ring to it, and carries connotations of quality training, leading to meaningful and reasonably well-rewarded work in what were traditionally seen as the ‘skilled trades’.” (Keep & James, 2012).

Initially, the MA was designed to progress the young person to a high technical skill level, which was equivalent to academic ‘A’ levels. The scheme proved popular with many organisations

willing to take on these apprentices which were partly funded by Government but the completion rate was less than 24% (Harris, 2003). After gaining the initial training (and having received funding), the apprentices would be turned into normal employees and the apprenticeship abandoned.

Government decided that the principles of the MA were sound but that the level, for most workers, was too high. A lower level apprenticeship was introduced that developed apprentices to either semi-skilled or low-level skill, which was the equivalent of GCSEs. Since this time, the apprenticeship has seen numerous amendments and re-invention of the way the scheme is operated but the underlying principle of public-funded training to gain workplace skills remains the same.

The focus of apprenticeships has widened from the more traditional trade and craft vocations, typically associated with apprenticeships, to encompass most industries. Apprenticeships are promoted as offering “more than 250 different types of Apprenticeships ... offering over 1,400 job roles in areas from ‘Arts, Media and Publishing’ to ‘Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care” (NAS Website, 2013). The largest sectors for apprenticeships are: ‘Business Administration and Law’, ‘Health, Public Services and Care’ and ‘Retail and Commercial Enterprise’ which together made up 73% of all apprenticeships in 2011/12 (BIS & Evans, 2013). At the time of writing, there are plans to try to further increase the range of apprenticeships with apprenticeship frameworks being developed to the level of degree and post-graduate degree, aimed at competing with higher education. These will provide ‘professional apprenticeships’ for people not wanting to go to university but wanting a career in areas such as Accountancy, Law and Banking.

The association of apprenticeships as being for young people is no longer valid either, as apprenticeships are now without age restriction. In 2011/12, there were 520,600 new

apprenticeships started, only 25% were aged under 19, 31% were aged 19-24 years, with the remainder being 25+ learners (BIS & Evans, 2013). Similarly, the association of apprenticeships with males is also outdated with slightly more females taking apprenticeships than males; this is a likely consequence of the change of the nature of apprenticeships to service roles as outlined above. This has also had an impact on the qualification level of the apprenticeships with 63% of apprenticeships being at the lower GCSE equivalent and less than 1% at the higher/foundation degree level.

Despite the current picture as depicted above, Government is keen to portray apprenticeships as a successful route into employment for young people. As part of the 2013 National Apprenticeship Week campaign, David Cameron (2013a) declared that “Apprenticeships are at the heart of our mission to rebuild the economy I want it to be the new norm for young people to either go to university or into an apprenticeship”. Apprenticeships are central to Government policy on training and are understood as “at the heart of any vision for skills attainment” (Hayes, 2011b). This is particularly salient, as the age at which young people can leave compulsory education is being raised to 18 by 2015. The Government's ambition is that many young people who do not wish to continue on the academic route will seek apprenticeships as a suitable alternative. This, of course, assumes that businesses will be willing to recruit more young apprentices as currently there are not enough apprenticeship places for present demand let alone any anticipated increase brought on by the new leaving age.

Aligning apprenticeship with tradition

Tradition as collective belonging – Building an apprenticeship community.

Tradition can offer a sense of belonging through collective memory (Schulz, 2009) with people having a shared view of significant artefacts and beliefs which are perceived to link back through the generations. Shils (2006) claims that tradition can give a sense of cohesion to society with older living members of a group inducting younger members into the beliefs and patterns which in turn had been inherited from the generation before. The idea of apprenticeship is often portrayed in these terms with the tacit knowledge and culture associated with particular trades and crafts being imparted from one generation to the next through an extended period of working together. Modern politicians often draw upon these discourses when talking about apprenticeships (Hayes, 2011c):

They [apprenticeships] certainly remain highly valuable for traditional crafts. The special quality of the interface between an apprentice and his mentor, the vital symbiosis, can inspire both; between one generation eager to pass on all it knows and the next ready to learn. Too rarely are, these days, generations brought together in that way. But the potential for knowledge to be passed on from one generation to another, and for them to find common cause as craftsmen, goes far beyond a particular discipline.

The use of a single name can foster a sense of identity with those who feel they belong in the community (Shils, 2006). Having been part of the tradition remains with the individual regardless of whether they are still active in the community or not. In this way, the ideas of the tradition can be disseminated to other communities. These links by association are often prevalent

in apprenticeship discourse and are utilised by politicians to spread the apprenticeship message. Speeches promoting modern apprenticeships are often done through celebration of high profile personalities who have completed apprenticeships in the past:

It's a telling fact that Sir William Siemens himself, who founded Siemens in the UK 169 years ago, progressed from the shop floor to the top floor, having started his career as an apprentice. (Clegg, 2013)

...an apprenticeship isn't just about getting great skills and great training; it can be the stepping stone to a fantastic career and to running some of the best businesses in the country. That's what has happened in Mercedes. That's also what's happened in Rolls Royce; half of the board of Rolls Royce, one of Britain's finest engineering companies, did apprenticeships, and I think it's a really important point to start National Apprenticeship Week with. (Cameron, 2013b)

The use of past apprentices to promote the 'modern' apprenticeship is a way of providing status and stability to what is, in effect, a new model of apprenticeship training. Within the discourse, the association from old to new is portrayed as seamless. This is problematic in the first instance as the modes and practices of the apprenticeship scheme, past and present, are different as discussed earlier. Even more interesting is the individuals chosen as exemplars, the first quote above links back to Sir William Siemens, who served an apprenticeship in Germany but only did so after completing a university degree. Similarly, David Cameron talks about the Board of Rolls Royce having served apprenticeships, these claims were also proven to be false as the majority of the board followed the traditional university education route (Channel 4 News, 2012). To enhance

the credentials of apprenticeships it appears that what used to be known as graduate training has become relabelled under the apprenticeship brand.

In the past much has been made about apprenticeships offering a more cohesive and fair society through the provision of opportunity for social mobility. Vickerstaff (2003) found that, for many young people from working class backgrounds growing up in the 1940s-1960s, apprenticeships were seen as a way to improve life prospects. This element of apprenticeship is drawn upon by a number of politicians, for example, David Cameron (2012a) portrays apprenticeships as a mechanism “where people have a real chance to get on and get up – to escape the circumstances of their birth” and Vince Cable (2013) proclaims that “apprenticeships can take talented young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into the boardrooms of our top British companies”. For John Hayes (2011b), then Minister of State in the Department for Education, the benefits of vocational education and apprenticeships span much wider than individual or commercial benefit:

The benefits of such a change have the potential to reach far beyond the economy, helping to mould a more cohesive society. By recognising, developing and rewarding practical ability we can also inspire the many young people who do not want to follow a purely academic path. By building a clear, well respected route to high-level, practical skills that matches the academic one, we will also be building a fast track to greater social mobility.

The portrayals and images of apprenticeship offered in these quotes draw on the traditions of past apprenticeships depicting a substantial apprenticeship which leads to high skilled workers and the opportunity to progress far in the organisation. Whilst there are some very good examples of organisations that do offer this type of apprenticeship, those that do, typically, have a long

history of recruiting apprentices and in many cases operate their own apprenticeship rather than following the prescribed form offered by the Government-sponsored apprenticeship. The majority of other apprenticeships typically last 12 months and are at a low skill level, often in the service sector which appears incongruent with this portrayal of a highly skilled workforce and opportunities for social mobility. The 2012 survey of apprentices and former apprentices found that only 13% of respondents who had completed their apprenticeship felt that the apprenticeship had offered progression in the workplace, more positively, nearly 44% had received a pay rise at the end of the apprenticeship (BIS, 2012), but much of this will be as a result of minimum wage legislation as the apprenticeship minimum wage is lower than the normal minimum wage.

To try to establish a community of apprentices, Government not only draws on the tradition of apprenticeships but also has started to borrow traditions from elsewhere. An example of this is the recent introduction of apprenticeship completion graduation ceremonies, borrowing from the university tradition of holding such ceremonies:

Celebration of achievement is vital. In homes up and down the country, there are graduation photographs on parents' and grandparents' sideboards. But there is no equivalent for apprentices and I want that to change. Last year, we published the names of everyone who achieved higher-level apprenticeships in the Times. For too long, we've been shy about celebrating practical vocational accomplishments: that needs to change. (Hayes 2011d)

The National Union of Students (NUS) has begun to recognise apprentices and to offer student-like benefits to them (NUS website, 2013). There is also a call to generate a Royal Society of Apprentices:

Creating an umbrella organisation that brings all qualified apprentices together as a single “cohort” (as already promoted by Robert Halfon MP) would create more of a sense of belonging and would generate a large pool of apprentice champions to promote apprenticeships as a rewarding and noble career path. (Holt, 2012)

Associations such as these have a number of aims including attempting to raise the status of apprenticeships akin to academic and professional education, to encourage apprentices to consider themselves as students/learners and to provide a sense of belonging.

Call for a manufacturing and apprenticeship renaissance – back to traditional values?

One of the main ways that the Government is trying to appeal to both employers and potential apprentices is through association with traditional apprenticeships and through the nostalgia of the British “manufacturing heritage” (Clegg, 2012). Many political speeches call “to re-industrialise the UK” (Cameron, 2011), to once again develop our “manufacturing excellence ... [which] is absolutely crucial to a thriving and prosperous future for the United Kingdom in years to come as well” (Clegg, 2012). Linked to this return to manufacturing is a call for an “apprenticeship renaissance” (Hancock, 2012), where apprenticeships are key to Britain’s economic success:

To change our national prospects, we must change our view of what matters to each of us and all of us. Apprenticeships are an economic imperative, a social mission, a cultural crusade—such is the scope and scale of our ambitions. We want to reinvigorate practical, technical and vocational skills by reigniting the fire of learning. We want lives lit up by achievement, with a new

generation of craftsmen shaping a bigger Britain and building a better future
(Hayes 2011a)

Apprenticeships are right at the heart of the kind of economy we want to build: one where many more young people have the chance to learn a proper trade; where we have a highly-skilled workforce; where we're not just borrowing and spending huge amounts but really earning our way, making and selling the goods the world wants to buy. Apprenticeships are a vital thread running through this vision. (Cameron, 2012b)

In particular in David Cameron's quote there is an invocation to the past through terms such as 'proper trade' which is left open as to what constitutes a 'proper trade' but for many is likely to have connotations of traditional apprenticeships in areas such as engineering. Similarly, the phrase 'really earning our way, making and selling goods' appears to call for a return to the past, focusing on manufacturing rather than the service sector. All this is then carefully weaved into the apprenticeship discourse. Interestingly, much of the discourse appears to be about manufacturing/engineering based apprenticeships, yet currently most apprenticeships (and still growing) are within the service sector.

Portraying apprenticeships in such a way appears to offer a return to traditional values and a sense of training for 'a proper job', one which requires training to become highly skilled, offering a sense of permanency and the promise of progression for those who work hard.

Using tradition as a form of power.

Shils (2006) claims that traditions often have normative elements which act as a precedent or prohibition for future actions. Yet traditions are not static, in the process of transmission there

can be elements of interpretation and modification (ibid). Tradition symbolically links to a perceived past which is socially constructed within the present, thus history becomes retrospectively and selectively reformed by individuals living in the present. Complex past social interactions are reduced and become embodied in particular traditions which evoke certain versions of the past, expressed in particular ways to solicit understanding of the present (Scott, 2008 as cited in Kelemen & Kostera, 2002). Jenkins and Munslow (2003) remind us that these representations are imbued with societal power relations and are a source of power which can be used to legitimise certain practices or claims to authority or resources in the present (Bond & Guillian, 1997).

The apprenticeship discourse draws on a sentimentalised image of traditional apprenticeships, which exalts the best aspects of these schemes and appears to disregard the problematic experience that led to the demise of many of the traditional forms. Most of the discussions on apprenticeships today, ignore the problems of the past and offer a glorified image of people progressing through their apprenticeship to high skilled jobs and career advancement. As highlighted in the brief history of apprenticeships, there were many criticisms of traditional apprenticeships as offering limited skill development and enabling employers to capitalise on a form of cheap labour.

Many of the political speeches regarding apprenticeships are delivered during visits to prominent engineering/manufacturing organisations such as Bentley Motors, Rolls Royce, Siemens, Airbus and Mercedes Benz. Many of these organisations have a long history of apprenticeship training and are considered to represent the ‘gold standard’ of apprenticeships. There appears to be an attempt to capitalise on the reputations of these companies and to associate this with the apprenticeship brand. Yet this is problematic in a number of ways. Firstly,

apprenticeships have moved away from the traditional engineering/manufacturing apprenticeship model to a more service sector model. In 2011-12, only 11% of all apprenticeship starts were within engineering or manufacturing frameworks. Secondly, despite Government promoting engineering as a gender-neutral occupation, male apprentices/workers fill most jobs in this industry. The association of apprenticeship to engineering/manufacturing has gender implications. Historically, apprenticeships were understood as predominantly a masculine route into the workplace, steeped in the tradition of an entry into the world of work and into “becoming a man” (Tolson, 1977, p47). Females had limited access to apprenticeships and, for the few that did serve, there tended to be shorter terms than for males (Simonton, 1998). Whilst examples of female apprenticeships existed in trades such as millinery and dressmaking (Collins, 2013), the largest form of ‘apprenticeship’ for females, pre-1900s, was in domestic service where a young female would serve ‘an apprenticeship’ learning how to perform household chores. During the mid to late 20th Century, apprenticeships for females in occupations such as hairdressing and childcare became popular but these apprenticeships offered much lower salaries than available to the apprenticeships that were geared towards males. Although the number of female apprentices has increased, gender is still an issue within today’s apprenticeship. Female apprentices earn 21% less, on average, than male apprentices due to the type of apprenticeship they take (TUC & YWCA, 2010).

Finally, the focus on the ‘elite’ apprenticeships as a marker of the apprenticeship brand tries to deflect the many issues and criticisms of the current apprenticeship scheme. As previously discussed, most of the apprenticeships being undertaken are at a low skill level within the service sector. Many have been critical (c.f. Kennedy & Mehta, 2012; Jofre, 2012; James, 2010) of the use of apprenticeships as a form of cheap labour with limited access to training. For example, Loveys

(2012) challenges McDonald's use of apprenticeships, arguing that the company is using Government funding to complete generic training that the company used to pay for. The short length of time to complete an apprenticeship, which is typically one year but in some cases has been much less, is often challenged as the tradition of apprenticeship is that the trainee will work closely with skilled workers over a long period of time to gradually gain understanding of the role and to gain full acceptance into the working community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In response to some of the criticisms, the Government has mandated that, in most circumstances, apprenticeships should last at least a year and that employees should be encouraged to progress to take higher apprenticeships once they have completed the lower level apprenticeships. In practice many do not get this opportunity, with employers claiming that higher skill levels are not necessary for the job role being performed.

Focusing on high status organisations and schemes obscures the reality that the apprenticeship scheme, for many, is the socialisation into low and semi-skilled occupations. The use of the apprenticeship brand and the association with tradition/high skill is an attempt to translate these mundane roles into more 'aspirational careers'. The roles and activities of these jobs have not changed but, through the apprenticeship scheme, there becomes an association of learning and development, an act of progression into a 'career'. Whilst these days nobody talks about 'a job for life', which was often conferred within traditional apprenticeships, there is still a sense of stability and permanency associated with apprenticeship. There is a notion of learning a trade or career, which implies longevity and stability within the role, yet as will be discussed in the final section, this is in contrast to elements of the apprenticeship training which implies learning to be enterprising workers.

Transition from the past to the future – apprentice as enterprising worker

It's certainly true that apprentices are not the same as they were even a few years ago, never mind in the Victorian era which many people still see as the golden age of apprenticeship. If memory serves me right, the conditions in which apprentices worked for much of the nineteenth century were determined by the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act of 1802. And the young learners who are with us this morning might like to reflect on some of the more humanitarian changes that this put in place. For example, it required apprentices to be given an hour's religious instruction every Sunday and to attend church at least once a month. In my view, that's a rule whose time might well come again. But that's a fanciful thought, not a Government policy. So, too, could that of the even older, Elizabethan statute under which any apprentice guilty of "default" - which would be subject to whatever punishment the local mayor or justice of the peace thought appropriate. Apprenticeships have certainly changed over the many centuries during which this form of training has existed. And they will continue to adapt to the modern world's changing training needs. Yet as with so much else, their essence has not changed. Above all, they remain perhaps the most effective way of passing on complex practical skills that has ever existed. (Hayes, 2010)

Whilst John Hayes harks back to the "golden age of apprenticeship", he acknowledges that modern apprenticeships are different than apprenticeships of the past. Global competition and an increasingly complex and continually changing world of work, require a new form of apprenticeship which teaches the need to be flexible, engaging in lifelong learning and

development (Denham, 2008; Cameron, 2013a) as outlined by Hayes (2010), “Indeed, the truest measure of the success or failure of our work will be found in how well-equipped or otherwise today’s young people will be in future years to face the shifting challenges of life and work”.

Within the apprenticeship discourse there appears to be an agenda which attempts to socialise young people into becoming enterprising workers who continually seek progression. There is an understanding that employees, especially young people, should be aiming to, “get on at work” (DIUS & DCSF, 2008, p3) seeking “more fulfilling work and better wages” (Conservative Party, 2008), ensuring that they “make the most of their opportunities” (DCSF, 2010, p8). The apprenticeship scheme is designed to facilitate the continual progression through work by offering increasingly higher levels of apprenticeship to continue learning once a lower level of apprenticeship has been completed. This is currently being enhanced to degree and master’s degree level of training. There is an aspiration by Government to ensure that all citizens gain a high level of skills:

But our commitment does not stop at 19. It is essential that young people continue to learn and develop skills and we have set an ambition for three-quarters of people to participate in higher education or complete an advanced apprenticeship or equivalent technical level course by the age of 30 (DCSF, DWP & BIS, 2009, p3).

Success in life is portrayed in terms of the ability to learn and develop through the achievement of credentials (Garrick & Usher, 2000). But this learning has to be a continuous process, a “learning unto death” (Rikowski, 1999, p63), forever chasing the “escalating demands of employers” (Coffield, 1999, p488) in an attempt to remain wanted (Zemblyas, 2006). Within apprenticeship schemes there is a requirement for the apprentice not only to learn the skills and

knowledge required for the specific job, but also more generic skills. The generic training is often provided by external training providers and focuses on ensuring that the apprentice develops skills which provide flexibility to the apprentice's career. One of the key elements of this training is the encouragement of a positive attitude to learning (learning to learn) which is aimed at socialising the apprentice into accepting learning as a way of life. This is deemed particularly important for individuals who have become disengaged with learning, or have been unsuccessful at school as deemed by Government's targets on education.

In line with the idea of flexible worker and continuous lifelong learning, the opportunity to become an apprentice is no longer limited to young people. There is no longer an age limit on becoming an apprentice and, recently, the largest growth area has been in apprenticeships for over 25s. This is portrayed as providing people with the opportunity to have multiple careers during their lifetime and to progress in their current career through qualification enhancement.

Apprenticeship discourse is typically very aspirational, with slogans such as "the sky's the limit" (National Apprenticeship Week 2013 promotional banner) promising the successful apprentice great rewards, as promised by Waugh, former Chief Executive of NAS (2010), "There are real advantages to be gained in terms of employability – your earning power is greater, you are much more likely to get into management, and your experience makes you much more attractive to an employer". The speeches promise many things to the enterprising worker from progression into managerial positions, to being able to pick and choose the employer that they want to work for. These portrayals offer aspiration and provide encouragement for the apprentice to complete his/her training and to work hard in the hope of future progression and success. This puts a positive spin on the reality of the uncertain work environments alluded to at the beginning of this section. Apprentices and workers are encouraged to make themselves more employable and thus more able

to cope with the flux and uncertainty which is part of contemporary workplace. The aspiration and future success promised to successful apprentices can also be understood as an attempt to make more palatable what, in reality for many apprentices, is mundane work, minimal training and limited prospects, for less than the minimum wage.

Conclusion

In a time of economic uncertainty, there appears to be a need to re-assure the public of a better future, something to prepare for, the apprenticeship is offered as a mechanism to achieve this. The focus is on preparing the next generation for high skilled jobs and a brighter future. The apprenticeship discourse focuses attention on the individual and the employer as a way to achieve future success. Individuals are asked to take responsibility and to undertake apprenticeships as a way of securing the development of skills and attributes which, according to many employers are lacking (CBI, 2011). Future success is couched in terms of successful completion of schemes such as the apprenticeship.

In an era of increasing demands of flexibility, insecure employment and uncertainty, this paper has argued that choosing to focus on apprenticeship offers a portrayal of security, community and continuity to employees and prospective employees, yet these are just smoke screens, with apprenticeships, in the main, being offered as training for jobs which are low skilled and offer, limited employment prospect.

The past appears to be constantly fabricated by the Government in an attempt to offer individuals and businesses a more secure sense of the present and to project a positive future for all. The language of the present in terms of competitiveness, tough economic environment and the need for lifelong learning is aligned with all the things that made Britain a great industrial super

power in the past in order to substantiate the real possibility of a future that will deliver for all. The future offers promise of achievements that the present cannot fulfil. According to the Government discourse it is only a matter of time that the young generation will become up-skilled and ready to win the economic game, providing benefit to the individual, organisation and society as a whole:

Real success for us must lie in the difference that the new knowledge and skills that learners acquire will make to their lives and to Britain as a whole. And not just at work but at home, too. It will lie in the contribution, both economic and social, that learning emboldens them to make in their local communities and in the part they play, individually and collectively, in creating a bigger, more open and more humane society. It will lie, perhaps most significantly of all, in the tradition of taking pride in knowledge and skills that they will in turn pass on to the next generation (Hayes 2010).

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