

Worshipful Company of Educators

Education Committee

Discussion Evening

9 November 2015

'Levelling the playing field for vocational training – what is needed?'

David Johnson and Professor Ray Clark OBE

In introducing the evening, Dr Martin Gaskell (Upper Warden) noted that apprenticeships had attained a high profile and now formed part of politician's aspirations. There was now a widespread understanding that apprenticeships were vital both for the economy and for developing a skilled workforce. However, there was a lack of consensus about how apprenticeships should operate and it was vital that the system should become really effective during the life of this parliament. Martin pointed out that 'apprenticeship' as a term was sometimes misused and applied to jobs that provided little or no substantive training. Issues around the concept of apprenticeships and their delivery urgently required resolution and the nation was at a pivotal moment for the development of effective apprenticeships.

Professor Ray Clark started the presentation by pointing out that what followed was an example of a successful enterprise within the Livery movement and he emphasised that the focus was on small and micro-businesses. Small businesses wanted to take on an apprentice were faced with considerable administrative and regulatory burdens. There are signs that the tide is turning and that more members of the public are coming to realise that an apprenticeship is equal to but different from a traditional academic route.

For small and micro-businesses, in particular, there were significant barriers to training and employing apprentices:

- Short term government thinking
- Financial support procedures (gain less than the pain)
- Lack of standards set by the trade that are meaningful for businesses
- Lack of commitment of young people to long term engagement
- Impossible administrative request of meeting Ofsted standards
- Business lack of control over the training system
- Niche trade demands not met in training provision

It was clear that the government was not focussed on the right problem.

However, there is a scheme that addresses these needs and this is the Livery Companies' Apprenticeship Scheme (LCAS) which was designed by David Johnson. This started in 2013 and will continue until 2017. 52 apprentices were recruited into 16 different trades in 43 small businesses. A common framework and set of standards for those involved in training young people have been established. The scheme had demonstrated that micro-businesses could provide world-class training for niche industries and also enabled Livery companies to engage more fully with their traditional trades with government support.

David Johnson then went on to describe the scheme that focused on locations and skill areas that are currently neglected by present government provision. For example, LCAS enabled an apprentice to be employed by a Devon wheelwright for the first time in over a century. It was emphasised that those in higher education was less than 50%.

Employers were able to make use of several models of training delivery such as 'on the job'; delivery on the job supplemented by a specially designed college course or distance learning; or delivery on the job with one peripatetic trainer moving between several employers. Each apprentice maintained an electronic portfolio of evidence which included weekly reporting and the completion of set tasks. Summative assessment and examination took place at the end of the apprenticeship.

The pre-existing funding arrangements were complex but the LCAS pilot scheme had devised a structure which simplified the process which allowed a 'trusted dispenser of funds' to allocate funding which gave greater freedom to the employer to provide appropriate training. The LCAS scheme generated Framework Standards although the government has planned that every funded apprenticeship will have a 'Trailblazer' standard set by the employer and approved by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

In summing up Ray Clark described how the Livery Skills Council Apprentice sub-committee is proposing a survey of the skills gap and how employers would react to a simplified approach with a view to the LCAS pilot being trialled on a larger scale. The applicability of the scheme to small and micro-businesses is very important when one considers that there are 16,000 SMEs in the City, 1 million across Greater London and 5 million in England. The scheme aspires to:

- Produce a manual of how the scheme worked and how it can be applied regionally and nationally
- Have the scheme accepted nationally
- Establish a much larger study to prove the new scheme

An outcome of the pilot scheme is that a body of knowledge and practice has been established which addresses the barriers faced by small firms taking on apprentices. The Livery Companies' Skills Council will be sending full details of the pilot scheme, its finding and recommendation to the new Apprenticeship Delivery Board set up by the government to advise on its target of starting 3 million apprenticeships in the current parliament. The pilot has shown that the quality of apprenticeships can be improved and that the funding and training systems can be simplified.

Discussion then followed. A member of the Company, the chair of governors of a FE college, suggested that one of way of moving forward was to spin out a company because of the inability of FE to deliver the need. This had the benefit of harnessing local enterprises as well as devolving funding to where it was needed. Ray and David stressed the importance of identifying skills gaps so that the needs of small businesses were met. The pilot scheme had shown that such ideas had to be sold to SMEs because they have had bad experiences in the past. It was also very important that trades were actively involved in the design and delivery of the scheme.

A comment was made about the predominance of the supply side when considering apprenticeships. It had been estimated that in future people would be employed in seven or eight different occupations during a working life, some of which may not even be known about at the moment. Young people needed to be aware of this challenge. The speakers acknowledged that this would be a characteristic of future working lives but pointed out modern-day apprentices are learning a great deal via nano-technology, biotechnology and electronics and other new technologies so that there is an element of

future-proofing. It was important that teachers were able to teach to the trade standards demanded and that they are familiar with what employers need.

A member of the audience referred to a view that vocational qualifications are 'second rate' and wondered whether this might be why young people were not keen to take up apprenticeships. The speakers' view was that the government does not have an effective mechanism for enabling people to move between academic and vocational education/qualifications. The government needed to 'start at the top and move down, not start at the bottom and push up'. The Enterprise Bill undermines the concept of apprenticeship such that the LCAS apprenticeships will not meet the government's current definition of an apprentice.

A former college principal commented that private colleges have been over-regulated out of existence and that a similar fate could befall SMEs and micro-businesses. The questioner asked the speakers what benefit tradespeople would derive from signing up to the scheme that had been described. David and Ray pointed out that there was a need for a trade group as a reference group for training needs and standards to ensure that the upskilling of the workforce would take place as technology advanced. It may be that a term other than 'apprentice' was now needed. If rolled out regionally or nationally the LCAS concept could possibly be supported by a levy on trades or employers but that needed further discussion.

Another member of the audience announced that he had experience of a type of apprenticeship through his training with the Magic Circle. He wanted to know the nature of the relationship between vocational training and qualifications that had been described and university degree courses. The speakers argued that the principle should be one of choice and reminded everyone that 50% of 18 year olds are not at university. There was a perception currently that only a degree would guarantee a 'good' job but it was clear that not all university courses led to high incomes or security of employment. What should be evaluated was whether there is a difference in the *quality* between university education and apprenticeships. Employers are demanding that the government upskills the workforce and apprenticeships are a vital part of that improvement.

Picking up on that point, a member of the audience noted that most parents' aspirations for their children include higher education and a degree. The traditional routes into the professions, such as articles, have disappeared and possession of degree-level qualifications is now demanded for entry. What needs to be considered seriously is what will happen to that 50% who do not go to university. That is where the LCAS scheme could provide a real alternative and route into employment.

David Johnson commented that education funding could be applied in a more efficient way. LCAS has demonstrated that educational and employment needs could be met without extra expenditure. A questioner asked about the place of soft skills in the LCAS scheme and Ray explained that these were built into the standards and were judged by continuous assessment and examination. A member wondered what would be the position if a trades/craftsperson had insufficiently high standards which could undermine the apprenticeship model. The speakers noted that this had been addressed within the LCAS scheme where there is a facility for the employer to be mentored: that was especially important for single traders.

Martin Gaskell thanked the speakers for their clear account of how the LCAS scheme had developed and for identifying steps that need to be taken by government and employers to improve the quality and standing of apprenticeships and for supporting niche trades. He had derived particular pleasure

from the evening in that not one acronym had been used: this was a major achievement for an educational discussion!

David Johnson is Second Warden of the Worshipful Company of Management Consultants and Apprenticeship Project Director, Federation of Small Businesses – London Policy Group. Ray Clark is Treasurer and Past Master of the Worshipful Company of Educators and Chairman, Livery Companies' Skills Council Apprenticeship Sub-committee