

Future apprenticeships in England: The role of mediation in the new model

Ann Hodgson, Ken Spours and David Smith

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Abstract

Apprenticeship systems across the globe are having to adapt to changing international economic and social trends. England is no exception. This article examines the latest model of apprenticeship in England from the perspective of the 'mediators' who work at local and regional level with employers to construct and deliver the majority of current apprenticeships. The role of these actors is examined through a conceptual framework analysing different forms of mediation in the context of 'the modern expanded state'. Their views were collected through 27 focus groups in nine regions of England in Spring 2016 and involving over 100 participants. These data suggest that the new apprenticeship model faces a number of challenges; notably how to engage small and medium-sized enterprises and how to better support the mobility and progression of apprentices. Participants advocated the development of regional and local networks comprising employers, FE colleges and other providers, HEIs and local government, as ways of sustaining the 'apprenticeship market', providing learner progression routes and stimulating employer demand for skills. The article concludes by arguing that these types of networks might develop into 'high skills ecosystems' providing certain conditions are met.

Key words

Apprenticeship, SMEs, partnership, policy, skills ecosystems

The global context for apprenticeship reform

The dominant economic trends associated with globalisation and technological change have, over the past 30 years, seen the transfer of much of the manufacturing base of major western economies and their associated jobs to South East Asia, South America and Eastern Europe (Brown *et al.*, 2011). At the same time, and as a result, western labour markets have undergone structural change with the decline of certain technical occupations and the growth of managerial, digital and service sector jobs. There have also been changes in the nature and size of companies with a growth in the importance of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and self-employment (Eurostat, 2015). These are some of the economic ‘mega trends’ to which economies and education and training systems in Western Europe, North America and Australia are having to adapt. Even the Germanic countries, which have traditionally been admired for their strong work-based routes, have had to consider how to reform these in order to address both the economic and social changes associated with globalisation (Kuhlee, 2015). While all national economies are subject to these trends, they will approach them according to their respective national histories and the prevailing economic and political conditions.

The English response

England continues to reform its relatively small apprenticeship system, in part because repeated efforts by successive governments to grow it over recent decades have met with limited success, particularly for young people. While there has been a substantial increase in apprenticeships over the last five years, this has been mainly among those aged 25+, in less traditional sectors, such as Business, Administration and Law, Health and Public Services, Retail and Commercial Enterprises, which offer shorter periods of training; and among those already in employment (CVER, 2016). The nature of this expansion has led to questions about quality (Ofsted, 2015) opportunities for young people starting out in their career (Allen, 2016), transactional costs (Steedman, 2001), the core functions of apprenticeships (Fuller and Unwin, 2016) and gender inequities (Fuller and Unwin, 2013a; Young Women’s Trust, 2015).

In order to rebalance modes of full-time and work-based education and to create a more direct link between education and the world of work, the current Conservative Government introduced a new model for apprenticeships from October 2013 (DfE/BIS, 2013) set in train following the Richard Review (Richard, 2012). The '*Apprenticeship Trailblazer*' model marks a paradigm break with the previous apprenticeship frameworks. It is centred on apprenticeship standards that '*set out the full competence needed in an occupation*' as defined by 'leading companies' and '*are sufficiently stretching so that they will require at least a year of training*' (BIS, 2015: 19), with a single summative assessment point of competence rather than the gradual acquisition of national qualifications. The model is being driven by a target to create three million apprenticeships starts by 2020 and, from April 2017, will be financed through an apprenticeship levy that applies to UK companies with a wage bill of over £3 million per year.

This paper captures early perceptions of the emerging standards-based model in England by analysing literature, policy documents and the records of 27 focus group meetings held across nine English regions in the Spring of 2016.

Like others (e.g. Pullen and Clifton, 2016), we will argue that the new model carries a number of risks of repeating past mistakes associated with government sponsored approaches to apprenticeships. We will also suggest that there is a constructive role for those who act as '*mediators*' of apprenticeship policy at the local and regional levels in supporting the system to grow, particularly in relation to micro businesses and SMEs. The initial evidence from participants in the research points to a supportive role from local and regional networks that bring together a range of social partners. This organic growth model seeks to move beyond the dominant logic of top-down policy and market-oriented approaches with an emphasis on creating the optimum conditions for the growth of work-based learning.

A brief history – from employer-based arrangements to government involvement

Apprenticeships, based on a formal relationship or contract between employer and apprentice has a long history in the UK (Clarke and Winch, 2007; Mirza-Davies, 2015;

Fuller and Unwin, 2016). Historically, the number and type of apprenticeships were primarily regulated by professional bodies and employers in relation to the needs of their particular workplace. However, declines in participation of young people in apprenticeships in late 1970s and the 1980s, together with criticisms of the quality and equity of the system, led eventually to the announcement in the 1993 Budget of proposals for a new apprenticeship scheme – Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) (Harris, 2003). The introduction of the MA was seen as part of a drive by the Employment Department to treble the number of young people gaining a Level 3 qualification by 2000 to meet the National Targets for Education and Training (Hunt, 1994) ¹. According to Fuller and Unwin (2013b), the apprenticeship's fundamental principle of occupational identity formation changed with the introduction of the MA in 1994. *'At that point, apprenticeship became a "wrapper" for a set of mandatory outcomes (specified as qualifications in a sector-based "framework" by government) rather than being seen as a programme of learning leading to a recognisable occupational identity with labour market currency' (p.1).*

The MA brand continued under the New Labour Government, but went through a series of reviews and reconfigurations that increased the role of government. The Cassels' Report (2001) introduced the idea of an entitlement of all young people to an MA. The MA Task Force, under the chairmanship of Sir Roy Gardner (HM Treasury, 2003), announced measures to further expand and diversify the type of provision that went under the MA banner (Andalo, 2004) and put Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in charge of determining the content of apprenticeships in their sectors within a broad national blueprint for apprenticeship frameworks. The Leitch Review of Skills (2004-06) included an increase in the target of apprenticeships to half a million by 2020 (Leitch, 2006), which led to a diversification of what was understood as an apprenticeship. Foundation MAs became 'Apprenticeships', Young Apprenticeships were introduced for 14-16 year olds and 'Pre-Apprenticeships' were brought in for those not yet ready to take on an Apprenticeship, with Level 3 Apprenticeships (the original MA) becoming known as Advanced MAs.

Looking back over the period from 1994-2011 we can see a pattern of constant review and revision of apprenticeship models, a desire to expand the role of apprenticeships in increasing the skills-base of young people and a relentless move towards using national policy steers - targets, performance tables, national qualifications, funding and inspection – to drive this agenda. This form of government involvement contributed to persistent problems of status, poor completion rates and a dilution of the central purpose of the apprenticeship as occupational formation, leading to tensions between quality and quantity; inclusion and status; education system demands and employment demands; and the different needs of the young person, the employer and the government. It was these thorny and historically embedded issues, amongst others, that the Richard Review in 2012 was to consider.

The new model of apprenticeship

The Conservative Government's current apprenticeship reform programme is aimed at ensuring apprenticeships in England become more rigorous and responsive to the needs of employers. Its origins lie in the Richard Report (2012), central principles of which were accepted by the Coalition Government in March 2013 (DfE/BIS, 2013). Employers have been put in the driving seat of creating new 'standards of competence' and apprentices will be required to demonstrate these through a rigorous graded assessment at the end of their apprenticeship; together with appropriate skills in English and mathematics.

Trailblazer groups in a range of sectors have been used to develop the first new standards and high level approaches to assessment, with all other sectors due to follow. The progress of the Apprenticeship Trailblazers at the time of writing includes the involvement of over 1,300 businesses in 100+ sectors, 228 standards published with 100 ready to deliver with the standard and accompanying assessment plan approved and funding cap allocated, of which over 40 per cent are at a higher or degree level (BIS, 2013).

While employers are in charge of the design of the new apprenticeship standards, the role for government is to make sure that apprenticeships are of high quality, with

sufficient content and transferability to justify public investment. They therefore set a number of key criteria that all new apprenticeship standards should meet (see BIS, 2015). The Government's 2020 Vision (BIS, 2015) includes a commitment to switch over to the new standards over the lifetime of the Parliament, with the majority in place by 2017-18, and the establishment of the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA). This new body, led by an independent chair and a small board of employers, will regulate the quality of apprenticeships within the context of achieving three million starts by 2020. It will be established by April 2017, having existed in shadow form from 2016.

The way apprenticeships are to be funded is also being reformed. New funding regulations for 2016-17 were published at the end of January 2016 (SFA, 2016).

Alongside this, the Digital Apprenticeship Service (DAS) is planned for launch in April 2017. It will provide a '*new simple online employer portal*' (BIS/DfE, 2015: 23). Finally, and of great significance, the Government is introducing an apprenticeship levy on all large UK employers, which will be collected by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). The levy has been set at 0.5 per cent of an employer's wage bill if this exceeds £3 million. Employers will have an allowance of £15,000 to offset against their levy payment (BIS, 2016). In these funding arrangements, it was anticipated that SMEs would, for the first time in recent policy memory, have to contribute to the cost of taking an apprentice.

Recent announcements from government (August 2016), however, have made it clear that those not paying the levy will have to co-invest only 10 per cent of the cost and nothing at all if they are an SME employing a 16-18 year-old or a 19-24 year-old care leaver. There is also additional financial support to meet the costs of English and mathematics training (DfE, 2016). Clearly the DfE had been receiving similar messages to those that this research unearthed in early 2016 regarding the problems of continued SME engagement with apprenticeships.

Research approach

The following sections are based on empirical research undertaken as part of the Future Apprenticeship Support Programme led by the Association of Employment and

Learning Providers (AELP) and funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). The evidence is taken from 27 focus group 'hub' meetings held in nine regions across England³. Each regional hub held three meetings between January and March 2016.

At each hub meeting there were representatives from independent training providers (ITPs), further education (FE) colleges and local enterprise partnerships (LEPs). Some meetings also included networks of training providers or employers, local authority officials and public sector employers. The participants will be characterised as '*mediators*' because of their role in translating government policy at the local and regional levels in order to work directly with employer partners and particularly with the SMEs that currently provide the bulk of apprenticeship places. The hub meetings were facilitated and chaired by the researchers. Notes were taken at each meeting and these were subsequently shared with participants for checking and elaboration. Overall, this research reflects the views of around 100 participant voices.

Mediator perspectives – views on the strengths and weaknesses of the new model

In early 2016 at the time of the research all participants in the focus groups were positive about the potential of the new apprenticeship model and wanted it to be successful. However, they raised a number of key issues and questions related to both the policy and implementation processes. These have been grouped under seven major themes that pertained across all regions.

Theme 1. Complexity, uncertainty and a rushed policy process

The first and most prevalent concern was about the scale and rapidity of change, with uncertainty as to the eventual outcomes. The participants, and reportedly the employers they work with, were not yet clear about the new approach to apprenticeships and what it would involve in practice. This confusion was compounded by what they perceived to be the complexities of the new model, as well as the constant changes in policy, with announcements coming in different forms and from various sources.

Participants also expressed concern over the large number of apprenticeship standards being produced, potentially much greater in number than the previous frameworks, with uncertainty as to how these standards relate to each other and whether they will be as appropriate for SMEs as they are for the larger employers currently involved in developing them.

The apprenticeship levy is clearly a cornerstone of current policy, but there is uncertainty about how large employers will react to it. Initial evidence points to a variable response. According to participants, discussions with large employers suggest that some will use the levy to fund rebadged higher level and degree programmes or current training programmes designed for their existing workforce, thus begging the question of what value the new standards will add.

Providers have been finding it difficult to make decisions about provision because of a lack of fine-grained data on labour market information and demographic trends, apprenticeship vacancies and starts, skills gaps and which sectors are growing or shrinking.

Overly ambitious policy timescales were mentioned repeatedly during discussion with many providers voicing concerns that insufficient attention was being paid to reviewing progress and informing all the key stakeholders.

While it was recognized that many of these transitional issues may be resolved in the medium- to longer-term, there is currently a perceived lack of the information needed for immediate decision-making and planning. This problem was summed up in one participant's comment, *'It is very difficult to sell uncertainty'*.

Theme 2. Large, medium, small and micro enterprises – one model, different needs

The participants, mainly involved in working with SMEs, were unanimous in their perception that the new apprenticeship model was focused on the *'corporates'* and on the development of skills standards at the higher levels. While they saw this as

important, they also questioned its practical impact on the rest of the individuals and organisations they work with. ITPs and FE colleges have been the main message-bearers about apprenticeships, stimulating demand from employers, but they now feel they do not have the required knowledge to build a diverse '*apprenticeship market*'.

There was a widely shared perception that in all regions SMEs and micro businesses are in the majority and currently offer most apprenticeship places, particularly at the lower levels. Participants were therefore anxious about how the SME-dominated market would be able to continue with up-front payments under the levy system and highlighted the difficulty facing SMEs and small providers in recouping the cash outlay. Prevailing practice has been for employers to pay for apprenticeships in kind rather than in cash. Unless there is greater clarity about funding arrangements for SMEs, the researchers were told, then in the short term many will simply opt out of apprenticeships, which could impact on participation and the apprenticeship target. Given that the new apprenticeship model has '*privileged*' the large employer, participants cited examples where the standards, that are now being designed by large employers, especially those at the higher levels, are not necessarily appropriate for SMEs. Conversely, SMEs do not always have the capacity to develop the new standards and are often not fully conversant with the reforms. They are thus dependent on others to operate as '*mediators*' of national policy. Those with knowledge of the public sector also pointed out that the apprenticeship targets set for these organisations are at odds with decreasing public funds resulting from austerity measures. This makes it unclear how public sector bodies will respond.

Overall, given these developments and uncertainties for employers and providers alike, participants felt that in the near future there could be shrinkage of the apprenticeship base, particularly among the SMEs and micro-businesses.

Theme 3. Quality assurance

Participants questioned a central assumption of the new apprenticeship model that it would intrinsically assure high quality because it was being driven by larger employers and focused primarily on Levels 4 and 5. The overall concern was about the lack of

comprehensive thinking regarding quality assurance that could have a negative impact on the apprenticeship brand.

There is already a strong perception that industry standards produced by different companies will be highly variable and questions were raised about how quality would be controlled and assured and how consistency of levels and quality across different occupational areas would be maintained. Concerns were also expressed about where the voice of the learner would be heard in terms of quality, what public accountability there would be for provision purchased through the levy, and who would quality assure the End Point Assessment (EPA) organisations.

Participants also commented that competition between apprenticeship providers at a time of scarce resources might lead to *'bidding down the contract'* and *'a race to the bottom'*, with a consequent reduction in quality. Moreover, and in this context, it was not clear to participants what the respective and specific roles would be of the IfA, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Theme 4. Young people, standards, qualifications and mobility

Another underlying assumption is that young people will be well served by authentic occupational standards offered at high levels in large companies. However, participants raised a range of issues about how the new apprenticeship model could impact on young people.

They queried how transferable apprenticeships, based on standards designed by a small group of employers and without a national qualification outcome, would be for young people who wished to move company or job role, particularly if the apprenticeship was served within a lesser-known company. Moreover, they were concerned that apprenticeship standards, which had been developed and led by a particular company and tailored to meet its own needs, would not be sufficiently broad to develop the competences required more generally in that occupation. They

also questioned the mechanisms in place to ensure that apprenticeship standards looked to the future as well as meeting current skill demands.

If, as appears to be the case, apprenticeship standards are not being developed at all levels, where, participants asked, are the necessary progression ladders for young people and how do they relate to the achievement of technical or applied general qualifications? Participants were also worried about what safety nets there were for apprentices who fail their EPA, do not complete an apprenticeship or find themselves with an employer or provider that goes out of business.

The movement away from frameworks, comprising qualifications, towards new apprenticeship standards with EPAs was perceived to be so different from that experienced under the previous apprenticeship framework and qualification practice, that yet another layer of complexity and uncertainty is being built into the system. The whole concept of EPAs was questioned - whether one summative assessment could capture the full range of competence in all vocational activities; why grading was necessary; how it was compatible with a system based on competences and how consistency across the different standards will be achieved. There were also questions over whether sufficient specialist EPA organisations could be secured to meet the needs of all standards at all levels for all apprenticeships.

Theme 5. Providers, economic viability, capacity and expertise

Many of the participants, particularly the ITPs, consider themselves '*market makers*' because their role has been to respond to learner as well as employer demand, to '*sell*' apprenticeships and to engage both potential apprentices and employers. There was considerable uncertainty as to exactly how this new market would work and the cost/benefits involved.

Concern was expressed about how SMEs and providers would secure and pay for apprenticeships and whether they would lose out to the large employers paying the levy. Both SMEs and small ITPs were worried about managing cash flows. There was a recognition that education and training providers would need to remodel their

workforce to operate with the new system because of the different skillsets required, including expertise in costing, pricing and building bespoke training programmes, with less emphasis on assessment.

More broadly, the accumulations of unknowns within the new system may well lead to '*planning blight*' and the downscaling of activity. One participant reported that many employers and provider partners were still '*planning to plan*'. The overall concern, therefore, was of a dip or even a collapse in the apprenticeship market.

Theme 6. Participant reflections on the previous framework model

Given the emergence of a new paradigm for apprenticeships and the inevitable issues arising from its novelty, discussions led to reflections on the limitations and strengths of the previous framework approach. Participants recognized that there were issues with the previous model, describing it as cumbersome, inflexible, with gaps between levels, and funding rates that did not reflect the costs of delivery. There was a lack of standardisation across the sectors with some very poor provision and even '*scams*' that led to a questioning of the apprenticeship brand. At the same time, however, participants also felt that the framework model had significant strengths as a programme of learning, had been improving in quality, had high satisfaction ratings, particularly from learners, and rising completion rates, with transferable qualifications being achieved. While there was a recognition that some frameworks had got '*stale*' and needed refreshing, this was not the case for all. Some were working well.

The balance of responses led to a questioning by some as to whether an entirely new apprenticeship model was needed; a concern that '*the baby was being thrown out with the bathwater*' and whether there could have been a more gradual reform of the framework model. It was suggested that now might be the time to pause, to evaluate and to reflect on the lessons from the Trailblazers and then to move forward in a more considered manner.

Theme 7. Enabling factors in apprenticeship reform

During the final round of hub meetings, participants were asked to identify what they perceived to be the enabling factors of apprenticeship development and standards implementation. These could be seen as highlighting participants' thinking about the necessary future trajectory for apprenticeships and for the education and training system more broadly.

Partnership working and apprenticeship sharing arrangements - participants stressed that the existing partnerships between employers and apprenticeship providers potentially offer a strong base on which to build the skills and knowledge to meet the requirements of a reformed system. Where it exists, effective and trusted local and regional communication is seen as a very positive enabler.

Employer networks - professional associations and employer networks, especially those with local or regional arms, were seen as central players in building capacity and high quality apprenticeships containing EPAs designed to meet the needs of licences to practice and professional membership.

Authentic occupational standards – there was support for key elements of the new model to encourage greater employer participation and to raise the status of the apprenticeship brand that might also bring higher education institutions more fully into the picture. If employers are convinced about the quality of the new apprenticeship model, then their championship of it will carry considerable weight.

The apprenticeship levy – participants thought that the levy, despite concerns articulated earlier, could enable more money to be brought into the apprenticeship system and therefore could be beneficial for all.

Clear career pathways – participants wanted to see progression pathways or routes showing employers and learners where an apprentice can start their career and what this can lead to, particularly if these pathways are linked to the outcomes of the Sainsbury Review of technical and professional education routes 4.

Area-based reviews – if the area-based reviews of FE colleges lead to more resilient, employer focused institutions which are more willing to collaborate with local stakeholders, participants thought this would support the local development of apprenticeships and help to develop progression routes and vocational specialisation across or within regions and sub-regions.

These perceived enabling factors suggest that participants wanted to see more connective and whole-system thinking - combining national frameworks and the increased use of local and regional networks and linking the new model to the rest of the VET system.

The mediation and governance of the new apprenticeship model – a conceptual framework

In this final section we construct a conceptual model in order to elaborate the concept of 'mediation' within the neoliberal economy and the 'modern expanded state' (Jessop, 2013); to locate the voices of the participants characterised as 'mediators'; to interpret their perspectives on the new apprenticeship model; and to briefly explore possible directions of travel for the new model from the point of view of these important local actors.

The neoliberal economy and the modern expanded state

In England, over the past 30 years or so, there has been constant involvement of government in work-based learning due to the need to remediate the underlying weaknesses of employer engagement in skills formation. This problem is rooted in the nature of the neoliberal British economy (Hutton, 2015) with key features affecting education and training - the financialisation of the economy and the decline of 'youth jobs'; low numbers of high quality British industrial companies; the increased role of foreign-owned global corporations that can place a cap on the recruitment of young people; a preponderance of SMEs and micro companies; and periodic economic crises in which training is often the first casualty (Allen and Ainley, 2013). Added to this, is a

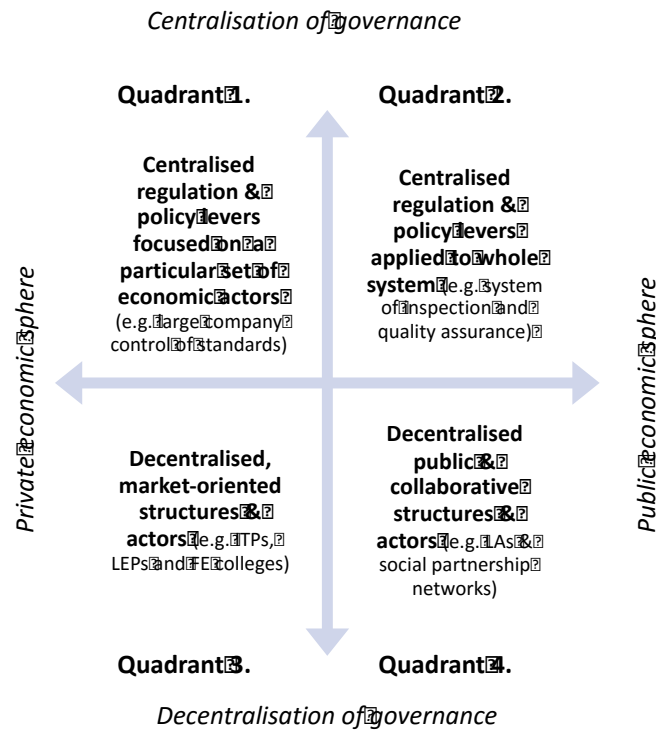
political imperative that has seen the major political parties trying to win the allegiance of certain key social groups (e.g. blue collar voters) who historically have idealised apprenticeships as a viable route for their young people.

Over the past 150 years, due to the expansion of democracy and the growth of political contestation, the British State has moved from a 'nightwatchman' (Gramsci, 1971 translation) to a 'modern expanded state' (Jessop, 2013). Expansion has been reflected in the diversification of the agencies of national government, the establishment of the welfare state following the Second World War, together with the increased role of local government and growth of civil society organisations. Over the past three decades, however, the modern British state has also become more centralised with greater use of national policy steers and a declining role for local government (Newman, 2001). Nevertheless, the pendulum may now be swinging against centralisation, fuelled by democratic devolution across the UK and now with the emergence of 'devolution deals' within England that place greater powers over skills development in combined local authorities (NAO, 2016). While the authenticity of the English devolution process is questioned (e.g. Keep, 2015; 2016), nevertheless it creates more complex political situations with greater opportunities for contestation of different ideas and strategies at and between the national, regional and local levels.

Conceptualising the forces and factors of mediation

Previous work on the concept of 'mediation' in education has stressed the complex processes by which national policy is translated locally and institutionally by education professionals who interpret 'policy steers' in order to affect the impact of national policy at its points of implementation in ways not always intended by national policy-makers (e.g. Bowe *et al.* 1992; Wallace and Hoyle, 2005; Coffield *et al.*, 2008). Here we seek to broaden the concept of mediation to include relationships between national (centralised) and local (decentralised) levels and between private and public economic spheres in the modern expanded state (see Figure 1. below).

Figure 1. Mediating forces and factors in the modern expanded state



between the poles of this axis resulting from the struggle between forces for centralisation or decentralisation, with the centralising tendency having been more dominant over the past 35 years despite rhetoric from successive governments that they wish to devolve powers to the local level (Hodgson and Spours, 2012; Keep, 2015; 2016). The private/public axis is an economic continuum that represents a variety of economic relations. As with the political axis, there has been a shift over the past three decades, this time to a more marketised and less public economic life (Keep, 2016).

The four quadrants of the model

The two intersecting continua give rise to four quadrants, used here to represent different areas of state or civil society action and mediation. Quadrants 1 and 2 reflect the activities of centralised government and Quadrants 3 and 4, more decentralised and civil society approaches. Quadrant 1 contains centralised and marketised policy actions which, in terms of the new apprenticeship model, are focused on one particular economic force – large companies (e.g. their leading role in the creation of occupational standards) - rather than across the economy as a whole. This quadrant

could be seen to represent an adaptive neo-liberal form of governance. Quadrant 2 – contains centralised regulatory policies (e.g. funding, assessment regulation, inspection and quality assurance functions) applied to the whole new system and a range of groups. This second quadrant could be seen to represent a more classical Keynesian or bureaucratic form of governance. Quadrant 3 – comprises market-oriented structures and actors, such as LEPs, FE colleges and ITPs, translating, mediating and enacting national policy at the local level. The third quadrant could be seen to represent the ideal of a devolved market. Quadrant 4 involves decentralised public governance structures and actors including bodies such as local authorities and trade unions and could also contain more collaborative public/private formations such as sector-based and area-based networks. Quadrant 4 could be seen to represent the ideal of devolved social partnership.

While each quadrant could be seen to represent a different model of governance, in reality, any state or its sub-elements exists in a complex, hybridised form where one or more quadrants may be dominant at any one time. Hybridisation depends on the political complexion of the central government and its overall ideological mission, as well as the actions of the layers below this level. Moreover, even within one policy, particularly one as multifaceted as that associated with the new model apprenticeship, elements of one or more quadrants may be present at the different stages of policy enactment as policy texts and ideology collide with the real world of implementation and practice.

Who were the mediating forces involved in the research?

The national policy-makers who constructed the new apprenticeship model, reflecting the wider ideology of the Conservative Government, envisaged an apprenticeship world with minimal mediation. The use of ‘mediators’ was associated with the previous Labour Government (e.g. Sector Skills Councils and ‘brokers’ in the Train to Gain Programme) and stands accused of taking apprenticeships away from authentic occupational standards, even allowing corrupt practices to prevail (Pullen and Clifton, 2016). Instead the new model, ideologically at least, is based on the control of occupational standards by large employers, committed and incentivised companies

and the informed apprentice applicant without the need for the mediation structures and actors associated with Quadrants 4, 3 and even Quadrant 2.

However, the participants involved in this research - ITPs, FE colleges, network coordinators, local government and LEP representatives – argued that they will remain an important part of the new apprenticeship model if SMEs and other training providers are to be engaged and if the assessment outcomes of the new model are to be achieved. These forces, that see themselves translating government policy in order to support a functioning apprenticeship market at the local level, can be located in Quadrant 3 and, to a lesser extent in Quadrant 4. They thus lie at the devolved end of the range of mediating actions of the state.

Politically inspired expansion or restriction for quality: is there another way for the new apprenticeship model?

Published research on the new model (e.g. Lanning, 2016; Fuller and Unwin, 2016; Pullen and Clifton, 2016), while appreciating the need to address deep-seated historical problems, questions whether the Government's policies can reverse the long-term decline in work-based training. Fuller and Unwin emphasize the role of apprenticeship as a distinctive model of skills formation; the importance of company policy and practice in relation to the ways in which work and training are organized in order to provide space for 'expansive' skills formation to take place; the facilitating role of national regulatory frameworks in expansive practices (e.g. 2003, 2008); and the building of a 'relational approach' that focuses employers and providers on the development of expansive conditions for high quality apprenticeships. From the expansive learning at work perspective (2016), the new apprenticeship model and accompanying policies do not provide a conducive environment. This is due to the effects of the three million target, which will inevitably involve employers who are less committed to a quality apprenticeship as well as a particular focus on higher skill levels that cut off progression routes from the lower levels, affecting young women in particular. Other researchers have also questioned the ways in which certain employers will 'chase' the levy (Pullen and Clifton, 2016; Keep and Relly, 2016),

although some are optimistic that it will draw more money into the system (e.g. Wilson, 2016 and the participants in this study). The implications of both the Fuller and Unwin analysis and the most recent Pullen and Clifton report suggest a smaller work-based apprenticeship system restricted to particular sectors and types of companies as the necessary price to be paid for the protection of a high quality brand. The Government, on the other hand, and in keeping with previous Administrations, is committed for political reasons to the rapid growth of apprenticeships.

The mediators involved in this research may be suggesting a third approach – neither restriction nor politically inspired expansion, but the ‘organic growth’ of apprenticeships that includes some of the relational strategies argued for by Fuller and Unwin (2016). To achieve this, as we have seen in the report of findings from the nine regional hub events, the participants were arguing for a movement of policy and strategies away from Quadrant 1 towards Quadrants 2, 3 and 4.

A more comprehensive regulatory approach aimed at a range of social partners

While appreciating that the key features of the new model – a focus on authentic, industry-based standards at the higher skill levels with the involvement of large companies - could improve the image of apprenticeship, participants thought that the model was being too narrowly and ideologically conceived. Instead they wanted to see a more balanced and broader regulatory approach with a greater focus on portable qualification outcomes for the apprentice and a significant oversight role for the IfA and Ofsted to underpin quality. There was also discussion of ‘licence to practise’, which was seen as a broader approach to labour market regulation and high quality training, rather than simply a dependence on a single policy lever (e.g. the apprenticeship levy) and large employer control of occupational standards. Participants did not believe that the intrinsic logic of the new model would in itself produce high quality. These participant perspectives suggest a desired movement towards Quadrant 2.

Broadening the employer base with funding support

While there was support for the idea of a levy and the transfer of some costs to employers, there was concern about the effects of this sudden change and the impact it would have on employer participation. There is some justification for this concern. In a recent survey of employers (CBI/Pearson, 2016), 39 per cent of respondents indicated that as a result of the levy they would be decreasing their level of investment in non-apprenticeship training, restricting wage growth and reducing the number of graduates they would take on. The levy is also applied to the size of an employer, regardless of sector, with a subsequent loss of potential sectoral ownership as in other and previous levy schemes ⁶. As we have seen, large employers and the public sector may not become involved in the way envisaged and the financing of the model and the ways in which standards are being arrived at could lead to disincentives for SME participation. Recent government policy adjustments should be seen in the light of this critique and, in terms of the quadrants, represent once again a suggested movement from Quadrant 1 to 2 as the funding base is broadened.

Less policy haste and insularity and more policy connectiveness

There was extensive criticism of both policy haste and policy insularity. The speed of policy development and rollout was leading to lack of time for forward planning and evaluation and reflections on lessons learnt from the Trailblazers. Furthermore, at the time of the consultation, the new model was being introduced without reference to other parts of the technical and vocational education system, notably area-based reviews and the Post-16 Skills Plan (DfE, 2016). Moreover, the approach appeared to be nationally insular, with no reference to other apprenticeship systems across the UK or to internationally developed quality benchmarks (see e.g. Syndicat European Trade Union/Unionlearn, 2016). It thus does not address the issue of intra-UK transferability, an issue raised by the mediators and reiterated by employers in the CBI/Pearson survey (2016). This criticism can be interpreted as pointing to the need for further movements from Quadrant 1, again towards Quadrant 2, 3 and 4; the latter being seen as representing devolved and slower deliberative policy activity.

Towards a devolved and collaborative social partnership approach?

How do we respond to long-term structural changes in the UK economy?

While appreciating the logic and relevance of the Fuller and Unwin and Pullen and Clifton positions regarding the quality of apprenticeships and reflecting on the views of the participants, we think there is an additional argument to be made concerning the position of SMEs and those sectors, such as the cultural industries, that reflect deeper structural changes in the British economy (Guile, forthcoming). A key question is how these parts of the economy participate in apprenticeships and support VET more broadly. Future work needs to consider more closely the role of mediation at both the local and national levels in relation to the changing nature of both the economy and the state.

Local and regional networks and developing ‘high skill ecosystems’

Unsurprisingly, the mediators involved in this research sought to continue their role in apprenticeship development; for some this was a source of income (ITPs and FE colleges), for others it was part of their organizational remit (LEPs and local authorities). But participants’ views could be seen as representing more than just self-interest. By the third hub meeting they were increasingly focusing on a much stronger role for collaborative local and regional networks and structures acting within a more facilitating national policy framework that linked apprenticeships more closely to progression routes and the VET system more broadly.

These local and regional networks could be formed of employers (and their organisations such as chambers of commerce and professional associations), together with ITPs, FE colleges, HEIs (and their networks), LEPs and local government. Conceptualized as an organizational formation capable of building regional ‘high skills ecosystems’ (e.g. Finegold, 1999; Buchanan, 2006; Hall and Lansbury, 2006; Payne, 2007; Hodgson and Spours, 2016a), skills development networks could perform an important role in maintaining and growing the number of apprenticeships as part the wider development of VET provision for adults and young people. Literatures on employer-based and territorial clusters (e.g. Malmberg and Power, 2005; James *et al.*, 2011; James, 2012) also suggest that certain forms of employer participation and the quality of knowledge exchanges are critical in terms of creating opportunities for

‘learning as innovation’ and not simply the increased supply of skills and qualifications, important though these are.

Democratic devolution and integrative local leadership

The development of local networks and partnerships will depend on a far more consistent and supportive response from LEAs and from national and local government, recognizing that the future of apprenticeships will be secured not by increased competition, but by much closer collaboration. Research on the area-based review in London (Spours *et al.*, forthcoming) suggests that local authorities, and particularly the emerging combined authorities result from the devolution process, are seeking to play an integrative role in creating stronger local VET systems that not only grow apprenticeships, but link these to other forms of vocational, technical and professional education. However, a question remains as to just how much power will be devolved to the local level in order to have effective control over the development of skills in a national system in which localism still looks top-down (Hodgson and Spours, 2012; Keep, 2015; 2016).

A more evolutionary and reflective policy process

Governments in England always appear to be in a hurry and more likely to take risks, while employers and education and training providers know that some important strategic developments should not and cannot be rushed. This constant change is not the case across the UK as a whole; in the other three countries slower and more deliberative policy processes pertain (Hodgson and Spours, 2016b). If policy history and policy learning teach us anything it is that effective implementation and partnership building take time. This suggests that policy steers, such as funding, inspection and performance measures, would need to reflect and underpin a collaborative approach. All the evidence here points towards the importance of considering apprenticeships alongside reforms in qualifications and curriculum so that both horizontal and vertical progression pathways are made more transparent for young people and those advising them. The ‘Independent Panel on Technical Education’ (2016) has opened up a space to begin these discussions.

Conclusion

Currently the centre of gravity of the new apprenticeship model lies in Quadrant 1; favouring large employers over the range of other social partners. Participants recognised the important role of large employers, but were arguing not only for their own role as 'mediators' with SMEs, but also pointing towards the development of a more devolved social partnership model, closer to Quadrant 4. This would link the new apprenticeships to the wider VET system that places far greater emphasis on the apprentices, their learning experience at work and their progression. Nor did these participants accept as inevitable that the apprenticeship system had to shrink in order to produce high quality; rather they argued that it could be expanded organically by a marked shift towards collaborative relations at the local level underpinned by a comprehensive national regulatory environment – a new balance based more closely on a relationship between the forces and factors in Quadrants 2 and 4.

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¹ *Insight* was published by the Employment Department primarily to publicise government policy and to disseminate good practice – see article by Hunt, 1994: 5-7.

² The recent Sainsbury Review of Technical and Professional Education has recommended that the new IfA expands its remit to encompass all of technical education at levels 2 to 5 (Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016:17).

³ East, South West, North West, East Midlands, London, West Midlands, South East, North East, Yorkshire & Humberside.

⁴ For more detail on this review of technical and professional education and the Post-16 skills plan see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education>.

⁵ For more detail on this reform affecting the organization and structure of further education colleges see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-education-and-training-institutions-area-based-reviews>.

⁶ Frequently cited is that of the CITB, for details see <http://www.citb.co.uk/levy-grant/how-levy-and-grants-work/>.