

## **The rhetoric and the reality of apprenticeship: A comparative study of the English, Finnish and French apprenticeship systems for 16-18 year olds**

### **Abstract**

The policy rhetoric around apprenticeships doesn't always translate into reality. In England, politicians have put apprenticeships forward as a solution to a number of different policy problems, such as youth unemployment and improving intermediate technician level skills. Furthermore, the role of employers in apprenticeship has been portrayed as pivotal, and recent discussions have centred on the role of employers as drivers of the funding system. This paper reports findings from a study of the English, Finnish and French systems of apprenticeship for 16-18 year olds to provide a comparative perspective to the discussion of the role of employers in England. Rather than focusing on the often-studied German model of apprenticeship, this study examines three different European systems where apprenticeship for 16-18 year olds remains a pathway for the minority. It compares the role or roles employers have been prescribed in the policy rhetoric, and the kind of employer engagement is suggested by the reality, as evidenced by academic research and data on the take-up of apprenticeship. The paper begins with an overview of the apprenticeship system in the three countries and compares the scale and the breadth of the training programmes. The paper then examines the roles of employers within the apprenticeship systems with respect to the financial and legal responsibilities set out in the official frameworks, and the opportunities afforded to employers to shape the system. The paper concludes that there is a disjoint between the official government policy rhetoric and the reality of apprenticeship for 16-18 year olds in all of the study countries, although the disjoint appears to be more significant in England and in France. The role of the state in the respective apprenticeship systems remains strong, and is as much about incentivising, encouraging or cajoling employers as it is about directing, legislating, regulating or funding the system. The paper argues that in England and France, the multiplicity of policy aims set for apprenticeship in the policy rhetoric is diluting the meaning of apprenticeship within the respective country contexts and discouraging meaningful employer engagement both at the programme operational level, as well at the level of influencing policy. The paper proposes that more streamlined policy aims, arising from a shared understanding of the meaning of apprenticeship for 16-18 year olds, developed with the key institutional stakeholders, including employers would enable

more successful apprenticeship policies to be implemented in England in the medium and long-term.

## **Introduction**

The policy rhetoric around apprenticeships doesn't always translate into reality. In English policy rhetoric for example apprenticeships have been presented as a solution to different policy problems, such as reducing youth unemployment and improving the stock of intermediate technician level skills in the future workforce. In reality, apprenticeship remains a marginal education and training pathway amongst 16-18 year olds. Less than 10% of 16-18 year olds are engaged in a formal apprenticeship programme (Data Service, 2012 and Office for National Statistics, 2012). This is in considerable contrast with, for example Germany where almost two-thirds of a similar cohort is engaged in apprenticeship training (Steedman, 2011).

The apprenticeship policy rhetoric has also been intertwined with the rhetoric of a demand-led funding system, that is a system of funding training that is directed by demand from employers. The extent to which policy developments over the last decade have produced a demand-led funding system for vocational education and training has already been questioned (inter alia Wolf, 2007). This paper focuses on the case of apprenticeship for 16-18 year olds and draws on a comparative perspective from Finland and France to shed light on the role of employers that is referred to in the policy rhetoric and how this can be achieved in practice through the apprenticeship policies that are implemented.

Instead of the often-studied German model of apprenticeship, the study that this paper is based examined three different European systems where apprenticeship for 16-18 year olds remains a pathway for the minority. A comparison with other countries where apprenticeship is a marginal education and training pathway can strengthen our understanding of how the role of employers in apprenticeship is contextualised within the respective wider education and training systems and labour markets. Data for the study was gathered through systematic literature reviews in English, Finnish and French, complemented by expert interviews in the three countries. The study employed the following CEDEFOP definition of apprenticeship as the starting point for the comparison:

Apprenticeship = systematic, long-term training alternating periods at the workplace and in an educational institution or training centre. The

apprentice is contractually linked to the employer and receives remuneration (wage or allowance). The employer assumes responsibility for providing the trainee with training leading to a specific occupation (CEDEFOP, 2009, p.29)

This definition captures the emphasis on practical work-based or work-linked training, but also distinguishes apprenticeship from other forms of learning incorporating practical work experience through the reference to the contractual nature of the apprenticeship. In the course of the study, this overarching definition was however found to be too broad and it was supplemented by the country-specific definitions of learner eligibility for state funded apprenticeship programmes, as these by default indicate what the respective states see as constituting the core of an apprenticeship programme.

The paper begins with an overview of the apprenticeship system in the three countries and compares the scale and the breadth of the training programmes. The paper then examines the policy rhetoric of employer leadership and contrasts this with the role of employers within the English apprenticeship system with respect to the financial and legal responsibilities set out in the official frameworks, and the opportunities afforded to employers to shape the system. This is reflected against the comparative perspective of the role of employers in the respective apprenticeship systems in Finland and France. It should be noted that the discussion of the role of employers here explores official policy rhetoric, policy implementation plans, research and analysis of apprenticeship policy. Analysis of the views and experiences of employers themselves was outside the scope of the study that rather focused on examining the structures and the conditions that brought into relief certain kinds of roles of employers and constrained other types of roles.

### **Overview of the three apprenticeship programmes for 16-18 year olds**

Table 1 overleaf outlines key features of the respective apprenticeship programmes in terms of the age range for eligibility for programme funding, the principles of funding, compensation and subsidies, the educational content and level of qualifications. It should be noted that the concept of educational content used in the table is here defined as the general education subject content, such as maths, English, languages, science and social science subjects in contrast with the vocationally specific subjects within apprenticeship frameworks.

Table 1. Key features of the state-funded apprenticeship programmes for 16-18 year olds in England, Finland and France, 2013

	<b>England</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>France</b>
<b>Overall age range</b>	Aged 16+ (minimum school leaving age 16, extended to 17 in 2013)	Aged 15+ (compulsory schooling of 9 years usually completed by 16 <sup>th</sup> birthday)	Aged 16-25 (minimum school leaving age 16)
<b>Funding for 16-18 year olds</b>	Fully funded by the state	Fully funded by the state	Co-funded by the state and employers through apprenticeship tax
<b>Employer compensation/ Subsidy</b>	Grants available to small employers (less than 1,000 employees) new to employing apprentices (introduced in 2012)	Compensation for costs of workplace training	Regional subsidy, lower rates of apprenticeship tax and social security payments for employers taking on apprentices
<b>Apprentice compensation/ Subsidy</b>	Limited recourse to benefits e.g. for childcare	Training allowance for theory training days attendance, travel and accommodation expenses	Apprenticeship salary exempt from income tax and social security payments
<b>Vocational/ technical content</b>	Competence-based element (over the study period mainly National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) that have now been replaced or assigned values within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)) and Knowledge-based element as set out in the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE)	Vocational qualification	Vocational qualification
<b>Minimum general education content</b>	Functional skills (practical skills in English and maths)	Finnish, maths, languages, science and social science	French, maths, science and social science

<b>The level of qualifications (UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education 1997 (ISCED levels))</b>	Intermediate (Level 2), Advanced (Level 3) and Higher (Level 4)	Basic (Level 2), Vocational qualification (Level 3) and Specialised vocational qualification (Level 4)	At Level 2: Professional aptitude certificate and Certificate of vocational proficiency; At Level 3: Professional baccalaureate and Professional certificate; At Level 4+: Higher Technician's Certificate and University Diploma in Technology
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Adapted from Ryan (2000). Additional sources: Kivinen and Peltomäki (1999); Opetushallitus (2012); Porcher and Malicot, 2007, Portail National de L'Apprentissage et de formation en Alternance (2012)

Table 1 above shows that apprenticeship can in theory be commenced at any age 16 and above in England; at any age 15 and above in Finland, whilst in France apprenticeship is officially defined as a type of training for people aged 16-25. In France 15 year olds can also enrol on a preparatory year leading to apprenticeship. The minimum school leaving age in the three countries is 16.

In England, the state fully funds apprenticeships for 16-18 year olds. Grants to small employers (with less than 1,000 employees) new to employing apprentices were introduced in 2012 in an attempt to increase the number of employers engaging in apprenticeship, whilst apprentices have limited recourse to benefits, such as support for childcare. The apprenticeship frameworks for the different occupational sectors are made up of competence-based elements, which over the study period (1996-2011) tended to be NVQs, knowledge-based elements and functional skills. To fit within the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) that has been introduced in England, NVQs are now being either replaced with new qualifications or assigned values within the QCF depending on the needs of the industrial sector that are set out in the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE). Functional skills are practical skills in English and maths that are relatively narrow in their scope (Fuller and Unwin, 2011). Some apprenticeship frameworks also include Information and Communications Technology as a mandatory component of functional skills. Apprenticeships can be undertaken at ISCED levels 2 (Intermediate Apprenticeship); 3 (Advanced Apprenticeship); and 4 (Higher Apprenticeship). Apprenticeship training is delivered by a range of private and public sector organisations including Further Education (FE) Colleges, private training providers and a number of large private sector companies, such as Rolls Royce, that are publicly funded to deliver training for their own apprentices.

In Finland, the state fully funds apprenticeships with an annual quota for the number of apprentices trained agreed for each level of apprenticeship. The state provides compensation to employers for the costs of workplace training. It also provides a training allowance for the apprentice to attend theory training and compensation for any travel and accommodation expenses that are incurred. These compensatory payments are made via the training providers who deliver or organise the apprenticeship training. The apprenticeship framework includes a relevant vocational qualification and a minimum general education content of Finnish, maths, languages, science and social science. This is reflective of the national core curriculum for all 16-18 year olds in both academic and vocational education

pathways. The level of qualifications range from basic education level (equivalent of level 2 in England) to vocational qualification level (equivalent of level 3 in England) and specialised vocational qualification level (equivalent of level 4 in England). Municipalities own the majority of training providers that deliver apprenticeship training, but there are also private sector and charitable organisations delivering apprenticeship training.

In France, apprenticeship is funded partly by the state and partly through the apprenticeship tax. The apprenticeship tax is 0.5% of the total salary bill and it is payable for all businesses with more than 10 employees. Employers who take on apprentices are eligible for lower rates of apprenticeship tax and for lower levels of social security payments. There are also significant regional subsidies to employers that vary from region to region in their level. Apprenticeship contract salaries are exempt from income tax and social security payments to make apprenticeship more attractive to young people. Apprenticeships include a relevant vocational qualification and a minimum general education content of French, maths, science and social science. There is a complex range of different types and levels of qualifications that the apprentices can work towards through day-release from work. All of these qualifications are the same as those that can be pursued through full-time study in school-based settings, or in higher education settings in the case of the qualifications at level III. The majority of training is delivered in apprenticeship training centres that are jointly funded by the regions and business contributions from the apprenticeship tax. The state employs most teachers in the education sector, including teachers at apprenticeship training centres.

### *Comparison of the scale of the schemes*

Official data collected and published on apprenticeships in the three countries is not easily comparable. For example, most of the French statistics on apprentices incorporate all 16-25 year olds, befitting the French definition of apprenticeship as a scheme for 16-25 year olds. Furthermore, whilst the Finnish and French statistics are based on all current apprentices, the English data is reported by apprentice starts and achievements. This makes it difficult to compare the scale and scope of apprenticeship as taken up by 16-18 year olds and it has been necessary to rely on nationally published statistical data from each of the countries, and to draw on the most comparable elements of the data from the Data Service and the Office for National Statistics for England, Statistics Finland for Finland and the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies and the French Ministry of Education for

France. Based on the researcher's own calculations using these data sources for the 2010/11 academic year, it is evident that the share of apprentices of all 16-18 year olds is low or very low in each of the three countries. In England 6.6% of all 16-18 year olds were apprentices, compared with 8% in France and only 0.4% in Finland.

Whilst only few 16-18 year olds are apprentices in the three countries, there are considerable differences in the make-up of the overall apprentice population. In the 2010/11 academic year 16-18 year olds made up only 1% of all apprentice learners in Finland. This was in comparison with 29% in England and 45% in France. This reflects the different definitions of apprenticeship with France setting an upper age limit of 25 to the scheme, England limiting the availability of funding for learners aged 19-24 and older than 24, and Finland pursuing a scheme with no age limitations that has been particularly popular with learners above the age of 24 (in 2010/11, 86% of all apprentices were aged 25 or older, Statistics Finland, 2012). This has had implications in terms of the positioning of apprenticeship within education policy in Finland so that apprenticeship is in practice predominantly linked with continuing vocational education. In England and France apprenticeship has been predominantly seen as part of initial vocational education policy. Recent growth in apprenticeships in England has, however, been concentrated in the older age groups. For example, in the previous academic year (2009/10), 16-18 year olds still made up 42% of all apprenticeship starts in England, compared to 29% in 2010/11 (Data Service, 2012).

The greatest share of apprenticeships by 16-18 year olds are pursued at the lower levels of qualifications (74% in England, 97% in Finland and 45% in France). Qualifications at ISCED level 3 constitute 26% of apprenticeships in England, 3% in Finland and 29% in France. The remaining 26% of French apprenticeship enrolments are for qualifications at higher levels (ISCED qualification levels 4 and 5). Whilst the French figures are skewed towards the higher level qualifications by the inclusion of data on 19-25 year old apprentices, the overall figures suggest that in England, and particularly in Finland, apprenticeship education for 16-18 year olds is dominated by study at the lowest level (ISCED level 2), whilst there is more variability in the level of study undertaken by the French apprentices. The number of 16-18 year olds starting a Higher Apprenticeship (ISCED level 4) in England has, however been slightly rising with 200 under 19 year olds commencing an apprenticeship at this level in the 2010/11 academic year (Data Service, 2012).

**Employer leadership: rhetoric vs practice**

Assigning respective roles for employers and the state in education and training systems is a task wrought with tension. There is potential for tension between the state and employers in all education systems, as employers tend to push for education solutions that effectively transfer the costs of necessary training to the public sector rather than funding it themselves (Gleeson and Keep, 2004). This potential for tension is made particularly challenging in apprenticeship systems, as apprentices are also employees, and much of the success of their apprenticeship learning depends on their employer. The employer decides who they want to take on as an apprentice, or which existing employee they want to support through an apprenticeship. The employers themselves ultimately decide how much of their working time they want their employees to be spending on training in the workplace and the amount and quality of the support, for example in terms of mentoring and support they are given. The employers themselves assign meaning to apprenticeship within their own organisation, deciding for example whether the completion of an apprenticeship is linked to further opportunities through internal promotion.

Recent research suggests that employer investment in training as a proportion of labour costs in England is below the European Union average, and that there is a downward trend in the levels of job-related training (CEDEFOP, 2010; Dent and Wiseman, 2008; Mason and Bishop, 2010). The levels of employer investment continue to be perceived as holding back UK ambitions in the global marketplace (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010). One of the key solutions to have been put forward to this perceived problem is the development of a demand-led or an employer-led system of funding training. The logic is that an employer-led system will deliver the kind of training outcomes that employers demand, and this is consequently expected to increase the level of employer investment in training and to bring forth greater levels of employer engagement in the system.

The new apprenticeship trailblazer projects announced by the Government in October 2013 also draw on this rhetoric of 'employer design' and 'placing employers in the driving seat' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013). The realities of the vocational education and training system that is in place in England however fall short of enabling the logic of an employer-led system to be followed through (inter alia Keep, 2007; Brockmann et al, 2010; Mazenod, 2013). Time will tell the extent to which the new apprenticeship trailblazer projects manage to deliver

against the rhetoric of giving employers a key role. The official apprenticeship programme's track record to date is not, however encouraging

There appear to be a number of considerable barriers to employers being in the driving seat in terms of the apprenticeship system as a whole. First, vocational education funding and management systems are labyrinthine and incomprehensible for employers (Wolf et al, 2010). Given the speed of change in the programme eligibility criteria over the recent decade, the funding and management systems can also seem labyrinthine for the training providers charged with delivery of the programme on the ground. The state has also been expanding its role to more practical aspects of the programme for example, through setting up the National Apprenticeship Service's vacancy matching service, which matches potential apprentices to employers with appropriate vacancies. Whilst seemingly beneficial for employers and potential apprentices, the service has, however only added to the number of public sector bodies involved in apprenticeships in England. As such it can be argued that the governance and operation of the system has become even more incomprehensible for employers.

Second, the prescriptive nature of the rules and regulations related to the delivery of the programme also tip the balance of power away from the employers and the training providers to the state. Drawing on a study examining the processes involved in apprentices learning to become a chef, James and Hayward (2004) and James (2008) point to the real tension between the aims of the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) and the notion of competency they promote faced with the more prevalent notion of competency at the workplace as having a certain amount of experience in the industry. Findings from such research suggest that it is competency rather than the vocational qualification that matters in workplaces, but the funding of the programmes clearly continue to favour qualifications rather than competency as a successful outcome. This is still the case with the QCF framework that has replaced the NVQ framework, as it promotes a similar relatively narrow outcome-focused approach to vocational education.

Third, it seems that the multiplicity of apprenticeship policy aims derives from the conceptualisation of apprenticeship as an instrument of government education and training policy (Fuller and Unwin, 2009). As an instrument of government education and training policy the state retains its role in implementing apprenticeship policies that are aimed at solving perceived policy problems, such as the high number of

young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The extent to which such policies can be driven by employers is questionable.

### **The comparative perspective**

Many of the various changes to the English apprenticeship system discussed in the research literature can be seen to attempt to arrive at a better institutional framework in terms of employers' involvement. The system however remains voluntarist. The system is not bound by occupational licences to practice, and there are no 'sticks' for employers not taking on apprentices. This is in contrast with, for example the French apprenticeship taxes that part-fund the system and whereby employers taking on apprentices are exempted from the tax. Furthermore, the institutional framework is dominated by the legal framework consisting of, for example the 1987 Seguin law, which raised the upper limit of the age eligibility criteria to 25, and expanded the scope of qualifications that could be studied through the apprenticeship route to include higher education level qualifications. The compulsion to contribute financially and the legal framework for the state-funded apprenticeship programme and for occupational standards more widely provide a relatively clearer set of ground-rules for employers' role than in England.

Whilst there is employer and trade union representation in the French apprenticeship system, the state is nevertheless the key player. Fukuyama's (1995, p.114) analysis of the French economy and society more widely suggests that the state is constantly intervening because "the French private sector has never been dynamic, innovative, or entrepreneurial." Whilst the private sector may have displayed more dynamism than Fukuyama credits it over the last two decades, the research literature reviewed in this study do, however, suggest that French employers have historically been content to play their minor role within the apprenticeship system as guided and directed by the legal framework.

The apprenticeship tax aside, the relatively minor role assigned to French employers in vocational education more broadly is now being increasingly questioned with some employers themselves expressing doubts about the capability and efficiency of the initial vocational education system in educating and training a productive workforce. How these concerns are mediated through the institutional framework for apprenticeship is complicated by imbalance in the regional and local level roles and authority in the operation and funding of apprenticeship and by the significant

variation in the different occupational sectors' approaches to educating and training their workforce.

The French expert interviewee for example concluded that it is too simplistic to think of employers as a homogenous group of stakeholders within the apprenticeship system. Rather than this homogenous group called 'employers', it should be viewed as a multitude of occupational sectors that have organised education and training in their sector differently. Occupational sectors of metallurgy and vehicle maintenance and repair, for example have particularly invested in the establishment of industry awarded 'certificates of professional qualifications' (Fr. *Certificats de qualification professionnelle - CQP*) that operate outside of the state's monopoly of qualifications in their sectors. As *CQPs* are often completed under 'professionalisation contracts', the occupational sectors that have prioritised *CQPs* over qualifications within the state system tend to provide very limited opportunities for apprenticeships and qualifications that enable further progression outside of narrow confines of the industry specific *CQPs*. The nature of apprenticeships and its relevance as a form of initial vocational education consequently depends on the occupational sector.

In contrast, in the Finnish research literature there appears to be a greater acceptance of the role of the state as the key stakeholder in apprenticeship for 16-18 year olds. This is suggested, for example, by the lack of research publications questioning the funding spent on vocational education or apprenticeships. Finnish research literature on apprenticeships and vocational education tends to state almost as a matter of fact the significance of the role of the public sector, without necessarily critiquing it. Whilst there is employer and trade union representation within the institutional framework of apprenticeship, it seems that in the Finnish context the state does play the key role in apprenticeship, and that this is not contested.

The findings relating to the Finnish apprenticeship system also suggest that employers are reluctant to take on 16-18 year old apprentices and that employer representatives have been content to leave the responsibility for vocational training to the state (Metsä-Tokela, Tulkki and Tuominen, 1998). The state and the trade unions seem not to challenge this reluctance to take on young apprentices, and vocational high schools seen as the clearly preferential pathway for initial vocational education. This relative absence of interest by employers is illustrated by the Finnish expert interviewee's comment that:

Our apprenticeship [models], they don't originate from the trade unions or the employers, it's not a central theme there, they originate from the public sector, and then depending on the socio-economic situation, the public sector has looked for different solutions in apprenticeship (*translation from original interview transcript in Finnish*)

Consequently there seems to be a consensus amongst employers and the state that apprenticeships are and should remain a relatively marginal education and training pathways for 16-18 year olds. This consensus is set against high rates of young people participating in education (93.6% in 2010, Eurostats, 2012). Despite its marginality apprenticeship is nevertheless still seen as a part of the overall education system for the 16-18 cohort as demonstrated by the relatively high educational content of the apprenticeship programmes.

## **Conclusion**

The continuing importance of the nation-state and the nationally specific institutional frameworks in maintaining distinct national education systems is in no doubt (*inter alia* Brown et al, 2001; Thelen, 2004; Bosch and Charest, 2010). This is also the case for apprenticeship systems for 16-18 year olds. A comparison of the English, Finnish and French systems for this age cohort has revealed differences in the funding and conceptualisation of state-sponsored apprenticeship. The role of the state in these three apprenticeship systems remains strong, and is as much about incentivising, encouraging or cajoling employers as it is about directing, legislating, regulating or funding the system. In England there is clearly a stronger policy rhetoric and drive to give employers a more central role in the operation of the system. The complexity of the funding and management systems, and the prescriptive approach of the state in specifying detailed rules and regulations mean however that in practice the state continues to hold the balance of power with employers who wish to take on state-funded apprentices having to follow rather than being in a position of leadership. Furthermore, the multiplicity of policy aims and the conceptualisation of apprenticeship as an instrument of government education and training policy don't lend credibility or realism to the rhetoric to employer leadership.

In contrast, particularly the Finnish system of apprenticeship for 16-18 year olds is characterised by an evident consensus about the central role of the state in leading the system and the singularity of the aim of apprenticeship as supporting marginalised young people. The French system has also been characterised by acceptance of the leading role of the state. Whilst in France policy rhetoric about the

importance of apprenticeship has been gathering pace, there has been no parallel policy rhetoric about employer leadership. There is, however increasingly a debate about the relevance of learning vocational skills in a classroom. Furthermore, a discourse about the workplace being potentially a better place to learn has emerged alongside the expansion of the qualification levels and the types of qualifications that can be studied through an apprenticeship route.

The findings from the study raise questions about the effectiveness of the policy rhetoric of employer leadership in apprenticeship that is unrealisable in practice. An alarming lack of legacy from public investment in for example, workplace training has been recently reported by Wolf et al (2010). The continuing gap between the policy rhetoric and the reality of apprenticeships suggests that the potential for developing a legacy from public investment in apprenticeship is limited. The comparative perspective to the English picture suggests that arriving at a consensus about the meaning and policy of apprenticeship for 16-18 year olds in the long-term could make for a more effective platform for apprenticeship policy and practice. These findings echo those of Finlay (1998, p.13) who asserts that 'developing a shared vision, a common set of values and a common understanding of the basic terms' are crucial to consensual and participatory vocational education policy-making. This would mean reconsidering the rhetoric of employer leadership given the configuration of the apprenticeship funding and management system and the voluntarist basis of employer engagement, which has been consistently underwhelming. If the rhetoric of employer leadership is to be more than rhetoric then a complete overhaul of the apprenticeship system and the conceptualisation of apprenticeship is needed. This would be a considerable undertaking and unlikely to be delivered by the ongoing government reviews on apprenticeship.

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