

Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy
House of Commons
London
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14 March 2016

Dear Sir or Madam,

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YMCA England response to the Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy's Apprentices Inquiry

Every year YMCA helps 43,000 young people into training and education. We provide a whole range of employment and training programmes including apprenticeships, vocational training, informal education and volunteering opportunities. These help to equip young people with the right skills they need to achieve their full potential and to lead independent lives.

Often the young people who access YMCA services have few qualifications and little or no experience of the workplace. As a result, job opportunities can be limited and a young person can quickly find themselves in a succession of short-term, part time and zero-hour contracts. While the Government's focus and drive for apprenticeships as an alternative option to the traditional academic path for young people is welcomed, the application of this in practice not been as successful.

At the heart of YMCA's beliefs is that young people should always have the opportunity to better themselves. Consequently YMCA welcomes measures to address the quality of apprenticeships and ensure that every young apprentice receives the highest quality education, training and work experience to help them to obtain a long and fulfilling career, and life more generally.

The comments and recommendations laid out within this response are formed from consultations with the young people that access YMCA services and the staff that deliver them across England and Wales.

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

SUPPORT & ADVICE

ACCOMMODATION

FAMILY WORK

HEALTH & WELLBEING

TRAINING & EDUCATION

The target of three million apprentices by 2020, how the Government proposes to achieve this and how this may affect the 'skills gap'.

- 1 YMCA welcomes the Government's commitment to create three million new apprenticeship places by 2020. At YMCA, we know that when people receive the right training and skills, they are more likely to remain in sustained employment.
 - 1.1 However, in addition to increasing the overall number of places, it is imperative that there is also an added commitment to creating a proportion of placements that are ring-fenced for young people.
 - 1.2 During the last Parliament, the greatest numbers of apprenticeships were created for those aged over 25, compared to those aged 16 and 17-years-old and aged 18 to 24-years old.
 - 1.3 For this policy to have the maximum positive impact, young people should be prioritised, in order to help them become more attractive to employers and ultimately gain more meaningful employment.
 - 1.4 In addition to ensuring that young people have access to apprenticeships, it is important that the drive to increase the number of apprenticeships is not done at the expense of quality. High quality apprenticeships provide a real benefit for individuals, employers, and the country as a whole and thus the Government should take a two-pronged approach to ensure a focus is placed on both quantity and quality.
 - 1.5 Quality on and off-the-job training is crucial to the success of an apprenticeship. Employers and training providers must work together to ensure that both streams are complimentary and fully applicable to the apprentice. The cooperation between businesses and training providers will help ensure that apprenticeships are applicable to the job market and help to address the 'skills gap' that currently exists.

The proposal for an apprenticeships levy and how this may be implemented

- 2 Given that the greatest numbers of apprenticeships in the last Parliament were created for those aged over 25, it is important that the Apprenticeships

Levy contains measures to increase the number of employers taking on young people and those with a lower education attainment.

- 2.1 The young people accessing YMCA services are often the most vulnerable, with some having experienced family breakdown, abuse, substance misuse and mental health issues. Individuals such as these, many of whom have few qualifications and may require more support, must not be left behind in the drive to increase the numbers of apprenticeship starts.
- 2.2 Similarly, in the drive to increase apprenticeships, traineeships should not be forgotten. Given the difficult personal circumstances that many of the young people who access YMCA's services experience, many are not ready to take up a full employed apprenticeship.
- 2.3 For these young people traineeships provide a useful stepping-stone, helping to bridge the gap between school and apprenticeships/employment. The combination of education and training, with work experience, helps young people prepare for work, and prove vital for many young people.
- 2.4 Investment in traineeships and measures to increase the number of young and low educationally performing individuals will help to ensure equality across the system, making sure that no one is penalised because of their background, and that young people truly have the opportunity to better themselves.

Take-up of apprenticeships amongst 16 to 19-year-olds and steps that can be taken to make more young people aware of available options

- 3 The take-up of apprenticeships amongst 16 to 19-year olds is often inhibited by the low pay that individuals receive. Many of the young people that YMCA works with come from unstable backgrounds and thus are unable to rely on their family's financial support while they are training. Many, therefore, see participating in an apprenticeship as not financially viable if they are to live without this family support.
 - 3.1 Similarly, many young people find the cost of travel to be a significant barrier to undertaking an apprenticeship. For those on the low wages that many apprenticeships provide, travelling to and from work and training can cost the equivalent to many hours of wages. To help overcome this,

discounted travel should be provided for all young people undertaking an apprenticeship, training or a further education course.

- 3.2 At the heart of YMCA's beliefs is that young people should always have the opportunity to better themselves. However, despite having the opportunities in front of them, for some young people the traditional journey through the education system can be disrupted by having to deal with difficult personal circumstances that prohibit them from progressing.
- 3.3 For these young people, many of whom leave school with few or no qualifications, additional support must be available to help them undertake an apprenticeship.
- 3.4 In Conker Island, Birmingham, Sutton Coldfield YMCA runs a scheme where youth workers accompany young people to the apprenticeship office and support them to try apprenticeships. In areas such as this where there are families who have been unemployed for three generations, apprenticeships are misunderstood and the scheme helps break down these barriers between young people and participation.
- 3.5 For apprenticeships to be successful in the most disadvantaged communities, it is important that schemes such as this are replicated, and young people are provided with support to help them engage with, and continue with apprenticeships.
- 3.6 However, regardless of ability, it is difficult to make the right educational and career choices without being fully informed of the raft of options available. The quality of careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) has traditionally been patchy at best with many schools seeing it as a secondary priority.
- 3.7 A common concern amongst the young people at YMCAs is that they are not adequately informed about the different pathways available and in particular about those alternatives to mainstream education, such as apprenticeships.
- 3.8 To help overcome this, it is important that careers information in schools is provided by trained professionals, who are able to guide young people down the path that best suits them, and gives them the best possible advice, on all the available options, to help them enter into the world of work.

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- 3.9 Many of the young people taking part in our consultations also felt that apprenticeships do not provide the necessary route into employment, with many having completed them and not found a job at the end. Stories such as these are likely to put others off participating in apprenticeships.
- 3.10 To help overcome this, it is important that Government measures to improve the number of apprenticeships available are matched with quality controls that ensure that apprenticeships are fit-for-purpose and meet the needs of young people and the job market more widely so that young people have the best possible chance of securing lasting employment.
- 3.11 In addition, it is important that employers commit to improving the transparency of apprenticeships. The apprentice must be made aware, as far as is possible, to what success looks like in the role and the opportunities for progression within the company. Where there is no chance of a role at the end of the apprenticeship, employers should take all reasonable measures to support the apprentice to find employment elsewhere.
- 3.12 Furthermore, employers should be required to provide destination data for past apprentices, to help enable young people to make informed decisions on which apprenticeship is right for them and what they can hope to achieve from undertaking it. This information will help make young people more aware of the available options and help remove a barrier to participation.

The process of applying for apprenticeships

- 4 In order to improve the ease of applying for apprenticeships it is important that young people are supported through the process by trained professionals. While this should be available in schools through high quality careers advice services, as previously noted, it is also important that this support is available to those who have left school.
- 4.1 This ability to access support and guidance is vital for those who find themselves out of work. However, YMCA's research, '*Safety Net or Springboard?*¹' released in September last year, found that a key frustration that young people felt towards job centres by young people was the lack of support they felt they were getting to gain the skills and qualifications they need to enter into the work place.

¹ YMCA England, '*Safety Net or Springboard?*', September 2015

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- 4.2 It is important that job centre staff are adequately trained to signpost young people to apprenticeships, and support them through the application process, to ensure they are able to gain the skills needed to enter into meaningful employment.
 - 4.3 In addition, staff at YMCAs responding to this consultation reported difficulties in supporting young people to access apprenticeships, due to not knowing the availability of apprenticeship opportunities and the requirements of young people to access them. Accordingly, more should be done to make apprenticeship information clearer and more readily available for those individuals outside of the school setting who are working with hard to reach young people.
 - 4.4 Many of the young people participating in apprenticeships do so because of a good relationship with the provider, and in particular individual staff members who decide to 'invest' time and care in them. While ensuring that the application process is as simple as possible for young people is essential, it is unlikely to help those who traditionally find it difficult to engage with educational services and are fearful of the long-term commitment that an apprenticeship provide.
 - 4.5 To overcome this, more time and resources should be committed to those young people who are traditionally marginalised from mainstream education. This process should start in school where additional funding should be available for those young people less likely to succeed, to help raise their attainment levels and allow them an equal chance of success.
 - 4.6 This additional support should continue for those leaving school, who may require additional guidance in order to progress. Many of the young people that YMCA works with have unstable family backgrounds and thus are unable to rely on the parental advice that many do. These individuals should not be disadvantaged by their difficult personal circumstances and targeted interventions should be utilised.

Routes for progression to higher qualifications for current apprentices

- 5 The experience of learning, which is not schools based, can prove vital for apprentices to then go on to undertake other courses. Many of the students at YMCA George Williams College, our specialist youth work Further and Higher Education College, take this route, moving from a Level 3 diploma

qualification – with or without apprenticeships- to a full professional qualification at degree level

The quality of, and minimum standards for, apprentices, and how standards can be enforced

- 6 As previously mentioned, it is important that apprenticeships are worthwhile for an individual, providing an effective programme that enables them to find meaningful employment. From speaking to young people, YMCA has found that a small minority of employers show little interest in the long-term training needs of apprentices and instead use the schemes as a source of cheap labour. Minimum standards should safeguard against this practice and ensure that all employers pay the Apprenticeship National Minimum Wage.
- 6.1 YMCA's taking part in this consultation identified the current administration of apprenticeships to be very bureaucratic. While it is important to ensure that apprenticeships are of a high value and that apprentices are not exploited, the Government must be cautious about increasing bureaucracy and making apprenticeships less attractive to employers, particularly small and medium sized enterprises and the voluntary sector.
- 6.2 It is crucial, therefore, that there is an active partnership between the employer and the training agency. This should involve a mutual accountability between the two which makes it more likely to ensure good standards. An example of this can be found between the Diocese of London and the YMCA George Williams College on their apprenticeship scheme.

If you require any further information or have any follow-up questions regarding our response, please do not hesitate to get in touch using the contact details included.

Yours faithfully,



Denise Hatton
YMCA England
Chief Executive