

Apprenticeships: time for a new definition?

While the growing interest in apprenticeships is welcome, are they providing young people with the right skills and experience for careers in industry? Steve Brambley, deputy director of Gambica*, suggests that we need to broaden our definition of the term.

apprentice
/əˈprentɪs/

noun

- someone who works for a skilled or qualified person in order to learn a trade or profession, esp for a recognized period
- any beginner or novice

verb

- (transitive) to take, place, or bind as an apprentice

Derived Forms

apprenticeship, noun

Source: www.dictionary.com

An apprenticeship is a long-established way of combining employment, training and study to acquire job-specific skills in a given profession. It continues to play a vital role in preparing the next generation to be fully effective in the workforce, yet it is not being applied across the full spectrum of young people at the start of their working life.

The concept of apprenticeships for many is that of an alternative to higher education, aimed at craft and technician careers. Indeed the UK government has defined three levels of apprenticeships, equivalent to 5 GCSEs, 2 A levels or a foundation degree. As such, this is great for school-leavers on entry into a profession, but is not helping industry to develop rounded degree-level students,

ready to enter their first jobs. A common complaint is that those leaving education are not prepared with all the skills needed to work in industry, and this is where an investment in apprenticeships pays off. While literacy and numeracy are taught in schools, there are a wealth of things that are best learned through experience and practice in the professional environment. It is necessary, for example, to grasp how business processes work, to hone communication skills, to get to grips with time management, and to function within a wider team.

Whether a craft apprentice learning to master a lathe or a degree apprentice learning how to develop a prototype test programme, all novices will need time in the workplace before gaining competence. A college or university course combined with practical experience in the form of a "sandwich course" offers the opportunity to apply theory to practice and to develop the necessary work-related skills at the same time. This combination of academic and practical experience is the key to producing rounded individuals and it would seem applicable and just as necessary at all levels of education.

This is reflected well in the origins of the word "apprentice", coming from the 13th century French word *aprentis* meaning "someone learning", itself with a Latin root from the verb *apprehendere* – "to understand". And so, in modern French, an *apprenti* is someone learning an activity through experience, under the supervision of an instructor.

In that respect it would be good to broaden the understanding of the word "apprentice" in English, to encompass all levels of experienced-based learning. We could perhaps better define an apprentice as a person who is undertaking structured training while working, specifically aimed at a

profession or career. It would certainly be good to no longer see it as something purely for manual trades or an alternative to other forms of education.

Gambica, as part of Esco (the Electronic Systems Community), is consulting with government to encourage apprenticeships across all levels of training and learning, including at degree level. We think that apprenticeships should apply to the preparation of any person for a profession or industry and to include those who also study at a vocational or academic level. This can only be of benefit to both the employer and the apprentice, leading to more effective businesses and industries.

As part of this initiative, we are seeking input from industry to write the apprenticeship standards for relevant career paths. If you wish to get involved, please contact me at the email address below. ■

We think that apprenticeships should apply to the preparation of any person for a profession or industry and to include those who also study at a vocational or academic level.



* Gambica is the trade association for the automation, control, instrumentation and laboratory technology sectors in the UK. For more information, please contact the deputy director, Steve Brambley, on 020 7642 8090 or via sbrambley@gambica.org.uk www.gambica.org.uk