

Speech

Amanda Spielman at the 2021 Annual Apprenticeship Conference

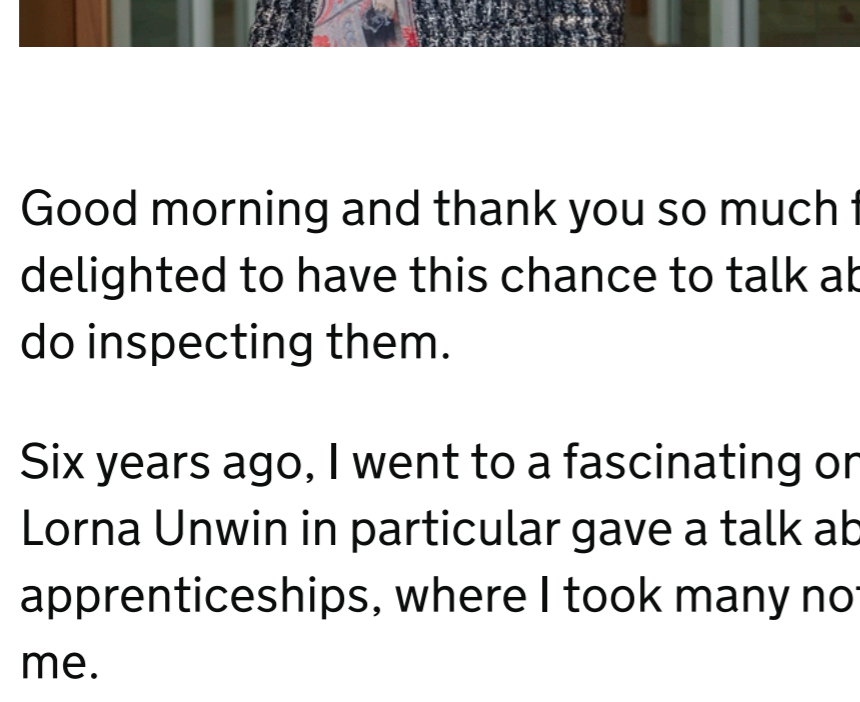
HM Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman discussed the impact of COVID-19 and Ofsted's work at the annual Annual Apprenticeship Conference.

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Good morning and thank you so much for inviting me to be here. I'm delighted to have this chance to talk about apprenticeships and the work we do inspecting them.

Six years ago, I went to a fascinating one-day seminar on apprenticeships. Lorna Unwin in particular gave a talk about the history and characteristics of apprenticeships, where I took many notes. Three points really stood out for me.

First, that an apprenticeship is a universally understood model of learning – apprenticeships are so much more than an administrative category or a branded product.

Second, that the best workplaces instinctively generate so much that matters for good vocational education: the sharing of knowledge, people learning from each other, repetition and practice, and building a culture in which mistakes and failure are permissible but to be learned from.

And the third point is about the sophistication of the education-work relationship in apprenticeships at their best. This relationship provides and recognises individual occupational development; it joins different expertise (such as from small and medium enterprises and colleges) in shared endeavour; it has an intergenerational dimension where older workers take responsibility for the development of the young; it provides a local context for people to work together for the benefit of communities.

While we negotiate the technicalities and complexities of standards and frameworks, end-point assessments, funding and levies, not to mention monitoring visits and inspections, it is good to lift our eyes to these enduring sources of individual and collective value.

The impact of COVID-19

It would be impossible for me to make this speech without first touching on the pandemic, which has clearly had a profound effect on apprentices, on training providers and on businesses.

We know through our interim visits and engagement with the sector that a so many apprentices had their training disrupted, and some have been furloughed and, in the worst cases, lost their jobs. For some, on-the-job training has ground to a halt as places of work have closed and industries have suffered. For others, off-the-job training has declined, especially in subjects where remote training just isn't feasible.

But I do want to thank the large proportion of providers who have worked incredibly hard to provide remote or online training opportunities for their apprentices, where it is possible, and those who have worked with employers to make apprenticeships secure and successful.

I've been really impressed by the resilience of many apprentices, and the innovative changes made by providers to make sure that apprentices don't fall behind any further than is absolutely unavoidable in the circumstances.

We've also seen good practice from providers that have built efficiencies, particularly in their methods of assessment. And as we reflect on how the sector has coped, there is a chance to identify the most useful innovations; to adapt them; and to implement them in a post-COVID, face-to-face context.

Though we should be clear: remote apprenticeships are very much the second-best option, reserved for crises such as a pandemic. Face-to-face training for apprentices is still the gold-standard for most industries, which we absolutely must get back to as quickly as possible.

The economic impact of the pandemic of course has harmed many businesses significantly, and this has thrown the ecosystem of apprenticeships off kilter. We know that many providers have faced financial difficulty, including funding uncertainties. Likewise, providers have been worried about when they're getting their apprentices back and how they will make up for lost learning time.

Everyone knows the impact of the pandemic hasn't been the same across the board. Different apprentices have had different experiences, and some industries have struggled more than others.

We know that retail, hair and beauty, travel and tourism and hospitality and catering have been hit particularly hard. Some of the more practical elements of learning are just impossible to provide remotely. And where business premises have been closed, opportunities for on-the-job training have been scant.

Leisure and tourism is still facing a fairly uncertain future. Foreign holidays stay off the table for now. And even as we see a successful vaccination campaign drive down serious infections here, international travel will hinge on other countries' travel restrictions, which are out of the industry's control.

Of course, not all apprenticeships have dried up during the pandemic. Some have been going full-speed ahead, such as those in health and social care, where demand has been incredibly high. The challenges for many of these apprentices have been the opposite of those whose workplaces have shut – apprentice nurses and care assistants have had a real baptism of fire when it comes to on-the-job training. Many have reported long working hours and the kind of stress you might expect from working in a care home or a hospital during a pandemic.

These apprentices have had an accelerated workplace experience, but still haven't had the same opportunities for the theoretical, off-the-job learning that they also need to become well-rounded professionals in their field. Other industries have been busy too. The closure of high street shops saw a boom in online retail, and in local and central government which have had to rethink the way in which they operate. All of this will have kept apprentices in these sectors incredibly busy.

Our work now

Clearly it's a tough time for many, and some of the issues that providers are struggling with are simply beyond their control. We're well aware of this and we're sympathetic to these external challenges.

You know that since September 2019, we have been applying the EIF – the education inspection framework – in our inspections of apprenticeships.

Our focus has been away from a reliance on data and statistics, looking in greater depth at the substance of learning going on – about curriculum and how well apprentices are equipped with the knowledge and skills to progress. Our EIF inspections have been well received by providers and we're keen to return to our routine inspection schedule as soon as possible.

But it was right for us to suspend our programme during the worst of the pandemic. It was right for us to do what we could to provide support for the sector and give assurance, although limited, for employers, apprentices and the government. Our remote visits in the autumn and our progress monitoring visits in the spring gave valuable insight into how providers were coping with remote or online delivery – and in how effectively apprentices were being supported. But just like apprenticeship training, inspection is best done face to face, so we're pleased to be restarting our work in a safe, sensitive and proportionate way.

In mid-March, we restarted new provider monitoring visits, on site, and we've completed almost 100 so far. It's a concern that about a third of providers we've visited had at least one 'insufficient progress' judgement. It's also disappointing that only a relatively small number of providers were making significant progress.

And let's be frank, this can't be blamed on COVID. This is the same pattern we were seeing before the pandemic. To have such a high proportion of insufficient progress judgments is troubling. The quality of apprenticeship training does need to improve.

And we know what can be achieved. We've been piloting our return to EIF inspections and we've seen some really impressive work. We've seen providers building ambitious curriculums and then planning training programmes collaboratively with employers and with apprentices – so apprentices learn the right things at the right pace.

We have seen some trainers develop apprentices' English and maths beyond what's required simply to pass qualifications, but rather to help them apply these skills in the workplace.

We recently visited a specialist gas-engineering training provider. Its curriculum includes lots of maths, such as calculating ventilation requirements and heating inputs. Apprentices are taught to do these things without the use of a calculator, so they can sense check their answers in future. In that industry, getting calculations wrong could be life-threatening.

Some of the better programmes we have inspected have had great cooperation between employers and providers. This has helped apprentices to link their on- and off-the-job training and to apply their theoretical learning to practical situations. I'm encouraged that the FE White Paper referenced the importance of employers playing a central role in curriculum development. And I do believe that this is the way forward, but of course, in partnership with expert teachers and trainers.

Providers who understand their local jobs market deserve a lot of credit. A firm understanding of local and regional labour markets allows providers to plan programmes that meet local skills needs. This bolsters the odds of apprentices moving onto the next stage in their careers quickly and serves the needs of local employers and the community.

Of course, not every apprenticeship programme we inspect is perfect, and there are some common issues that are tripping up providers.

In the same way that those who build ambitious curriculums tend to do well, those that are overly reliant on standard training programmes don't always serve their apprentices as well as they could. Apprentices then don't get the opportunity to develop their wider knowledge and interests beyond the standard or framework. And replicating standard programmes without working with employers and taking local context into account can produce cohorts of apprentices who don't have the knowledge or skills required in their local job market.

A linked problem we see is a lack of high-quality careers guidance. Without this, apprentices don't understand their career options post-apprenticeship, either in their organisation or the wider industry.

Providers need to go beyond just getting apprentices through their training programme – they need to work with employers and their own apprentices to make sure they truly do gain the right knowledge, skills and behaviours to make their next steps successfully, and to thrive in a professional environment.

We'll be continuing with our programme of new provider monitoring visits throughout the summer. We are prioritising providers that haven't had a visit before, because it's important that apprentices and businesses know that the training they are getting is good enough. Similarly, we also plan to resume our EIF inspections to apprenticeship providers who have not yet received their first inspection following a new provider monitoring visit.

I'm pleased with the work that we do with the Institute, with Department for Education and Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) to enhance the quality of apprenticeship provision and to protect the reputation of apprenticeships. We welcome the changes that the ESFA have made to the requirements to be accepted on to the register, but we know there is still much to do to get the quality of apprenticeship training to where we all want it to be.

Although it does take some work, a higher bar for entry onto the register is in everyone's interest. Initially, some providers were just not good enough to make the grade and so it's right to refresh the register and not make the same mistakes again.

And it's in all of our interests for the quality of training to be high – irrespective of the subject you're training for, the training provider you're working with, or the level of your apprenticeship.

And that leads me onto level 6 and 7 apprenticeships. This month, we assumed responsibility for the inspection of level 6 and 7 apprenticeships. For the first time, this means that all apprenticeship activity, irrespective of level or the type of provider responsible, will be evaluated through EIF inspection.

This will mean more inspections taking place in the HE sector, as well as with independent learning providers; but really it's just an extension of the work that we have been doing for a long time at levels 2 to 5. Our ambition is simply to make sure that all apprenticeship providers are held to the same quality standards. Whether it's a level 2 in hairdressing or a chartered manager degree apprenticeship, we want employers, providers and apprentices to be confident that they are being fairly held to the same high standards across the board.

We will carry on monitoring and evaluating all our work and sharing our findings with the sector. And, of course, we will carry on working with sector bodies, such as the Institute for Apprenticeships, the Office for Students and The Association of Employment and Learning Providers to improve quality.

Looking ahead

For many in the sector, we are now in a period of recovery: recovery in the sense of filling apprentices' learning gaps, but also wider economic recovery, which powers the sector.

There's still some uncertainty; we're not out of the COVID woods yet; but I think there is plenty of scope for optimism. For the vast majority of apprentices, their experience this week will have been much closer to 'normal' than it was last April. I very much hope we won't see another wave of redundancies, furloughing or training breaks.

The latest DfE data shows that the number of apprenticeships starts is gradually recovering, moving towards pre-pandemic levels. We're not quite there yet – understandably – but the sector is moving in the right direction.

I started this speech by talking about the significant value in apprenticeships and that's never been truer than today. As we navigate the economic fallout of the pandemic, on top of the skill and labour shortages we expect from Brexit, never have we been more reliant on a generation of apprentices to fill in the gaps and reinvigorate our economy.

Increasingly, I think employers see apprenticeships as a valuable approach to recruitment. Particularly when working with a good provider, employers can develop their own staff, impart their professional culture and values, and future-proof their workforce. And by the way, we have our own apprenticeship programme at Ofsted, of which I am very proud.

Thank you once again for inviting me to speak today. I am happy to now take questions, but I did also want to highlight that my colleagues, Richard Pemble and Kate Hill, are running several workshops throughout this week – please do join for those valuable sessions if you can. Thank you.

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