



## Speech

# Sir Michael Wilshaw speech: National Apprenticeship Week 2016

**From:** [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)  
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HM Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw addressed the 2016 FE Week annual apprenticeship conference at the ICC in Birmingham.



The growth of this conference in recent years demonstrates the renewed status of apprenticeships as a route into employment. Coming in the middle of [National Apprenticeship Week](#), this is a fitting time to reflect on recent policy changes and consider the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for all of us.

First of all though, let me be clear that I have long been a champion of apprenticeships in my role as Chief Inspector as well as in my previous role as a head teacher. For too long we've wasted too much talent in our education system because we have not given vocational education and apprenticeships the

priority it deserves. So let me begin by recognising the vital role apprenticeships play and the importance of the work done week in, week out, by everyone in this room.

As you are aware, the theme of this year's National Apprenticeship Week is 'An apprenticeship can take you anywhere'. That's absolutely true. Be it trainee sleuths at GCHQ or chefs at the Hilton; undertakers with the Co-op or engineers with the RAF – an apprenticeship can be an opening into countless different careers.

This is a time of great opportunity for anyone involved in delivering apprenticeships. The government's ambitious commitment to delivering 3 million apprenticeships by 2020; the introduction of degree level apprenticeships and the proposals for an Institute of Apprentices are all stimulating the system. And, of course, the business levy is focusing the minds of employers on what they want to get out of the apprenticeship programme.

You are all in the privileged, and perhaps daunting, position of being at the forefront of making this work. However, I appreciate that it won't necessarily be easy.

So let's consider the challenges ahead. In the UK as a whole there are now 210,000 vacancies as a consequence of skills shortages across the economy – an increase of 43% from 2013. In key sectors, such as manufacturing, construction and utilities, over 30% of vacancies exist because there aren't enough people with the right skills to fill them.

Here in the West Midlands some 89% of manufacturing employers experienced significant recruitment difficulties in 2015, the highest levels reported since 1997. The construction industry locally struggles to recruit skilled trades such as plumbers and electricians to meet labour market demands.

Those are stark figures. So how do we get from the lofty ambitions of the government's programme to effective delivery of the skills the country and economy needs?

## Start with schools

The obvious place to start is school, particularly secondary schools.

As I said in my [Annual Report](#), secondary schools are not doing well enough nationally and particularly not in the Midlands and the North. Too many young people are leaving school without the necessary grades to progress, either to higher education, further education or high quality vocational routes.

Good apprenticeships require young people with good skills. As the manager of the local Birmingham Electrical Training company said on my visit last year: ‘I’m not interested in apprentices who don’t have good literacy and numeracy skills, because so much of what they have to do demands good communication and on the job calculations.’

And it’s not just about English and maths. Too many young people are in schools where behaviour is less than good. That means they are studying in a school that is not preparing them for the world of work. A young person who isn’t expected to show up on time for school is likely to be tardy for work. A young person who hasn’t learned to concentrate at school will struggle to focus at work. And a young person who hasn’t understood the need to respect their teachers and classmates isn’t going to easily respect their colleagues.

So overall standards in secondary schools need to improve. But even where schools are getting that right, we risk letting young people down when it comes to advising them on future options.

Our system is adept at guiding students into higher education. But it is terrible at providing the right advice to would-be apprentices. This is unfair. Prospective undergraduates have the advantage of a clearly defined UCAS system which everyone understands. What do potential apprentices have to help them on their way? [Ofsted’s report on careers guidance](#) in 2013 painted a grim picture of the quality of advice for young people. Vocational training and apprenticeships were rarely promoted effectively, especially in schools with sixth forms. Instead, the A-

Level route remained the 'gold-standard' for young people, their parents and teachers.

No wonder we have such tiny proportions of youngsters going on to apprenticeships – a shocking 5% at last count.

## Quality and relevance of provision

So let's address these barriers so that more young people are both ready for the rigours of an apprenticeship and knowledgeable about the options before them. And then – let's make sure that those delivering, designing and accrediting apprenticeships are ready to step up to the plate.

[Ofsted's report on apprenticeships late last year](#) raised some fundamental challenges for the sector. I know these will be familiar to many of you and I have no doubt you are all doing your utmost to address them within your own spheres. But let me remind you of what they are:

- challenge one: we must make sure all apprenticeships are of the highest quality
- challenge two: apprenticeships have got to address both local and national priorities
- challenge three: we have to train many more young people than we do at the moment
- challenge four: we need structured networks of local employers and training providers working together on the curriculum, assessment and accreditation of apprenticeship programmes

If these challenges aren't addressed then we won't get the apprentices we need to deliver the ambitious programme that the government has set. Too few apprenticeships are delivering the professional, up-to-date skills in the sectors that need them most. And too many are of poor quality.

Inspectors find too many trainees stuck in classrooms, or becoming experts in outdated approaches – like the mechanic who can strip an engine but doesn't know where to start with the

electricians of a modern day car. Or the builder who can competently undertake traditional work but does not learn about new materials, technology and approaches to modern day construction. They may well have the wherewithal to contribute on a domestic building site, but what about the next Olympic stadium, Shard or Grand Central Birmingham?

But, as I've said, this isn't only about quality. How can we ensure the apprenticeships are filling the right skills gaps? I am sure all of you put great efforts into local liaison. But it doesn't happen enough. As a result employers are often unable to recruit locally and many have to turn abroad for recruits.

Most high-quality apprenticeships are found in industries that have long-established traditions of using them: the motor industry, construction and engineering. They are few in number and are largely delivered by long-standing industries and providers.

On the other hand, the ever-increasing numbers of apprenticeships in the care and retail sectors are not consistently reaching the same high standards. Colleges and other providers are often not delivering high enough numbers of apprenticeships overall, and certainly not in the right areas. Taking some local examples, 2 of the biggest colleges in this region have less than 10% of their student population on apprenticeship courses. And these in colleges of nearly 30,000 students.

Are we training the right age group? The number of 16 to 18 year olds being taken on as apprentices has barely changed in a decade. For the 19 to 24 age group there has been an increase, but only of 10% in the last 5 years. The reality is that the bulk of the increase in apprenticeships in recent years has come from the over 25s.

That's good, but even here inspectors found too many apprenticeships that were simply accrediting existing jobs and adding little value to the individual or the company. Inspectors have even found examples of participants who were unaware that they were even on an apprenticeship programme. This is a nonsense and debases the currency of apprenticeships.

Next we need to consider how we get employers more involved. It is vital that employers are directly engaged in the design and delivery of apprenticeships. The future passporting of funding to employers is a golden opportunity to deliver this. But it will only be a success if the local builder, plumber and caterer gets the help they need.

What sort of help am I talking about?

- help with the recruitment process
- help with the administration of the programme, including the finances
- help with the identification of the right training provider
- help with the assessment process
- and finally, but most importantly, help with the mentoring and guidance that will be so necessary to develop the career of their apprentice

So the CBI at a regional level, local chambers and the local enterprise partnerships (LEPS) – whoever – need to rise to this challenge in order to give local employers the confidence that they will need to make this all work.

And what of Ofsted and our role? Inspectors are raising their focus on questions of quality and relevance of apprenticeship programmes. Large colleges will be challenged about the numbers they have on roll, the liaison in place with local business and the appropriateness of the skills on offer.

I hope over the next 2 days you will be able to develop connections and generate solutions to the various challenges I have outlined. Where better to do this than at the largest gathering of apprenticeship providers and policy makers that you are ever likely to find in one place?

I am sure you can step up to the challenges ahead. Let's set our ambitions higher than simply "levelling the playing field" - imagine a world where the apprenticeship was the gold standard first choice for schools, parents and young people alike.

Now is the time to seize the opportunities presented by the government's programme and ensure apprenticeships reach the

highest standards the country, employers and the apprentices themselves deserve.

Thank you.

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