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Speech

Amanda Spielman at the Annual Apprenticeship Conference 2020

HM Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman speaks at the Annual Apprenticeship Conference at the ICC in Birmingham.

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Good afternoon. It's good to be here in Birmingham. It's an apt choice given Birmingham's rich history of manufacturing. It used to be known as the 'city of a thousand trades'. I'm here today to talk about some of those trades – or at least the routes into them.

I have lots of positive things to say about the current apprenticeship landscape. I want to thank you for the work you've done to embrace recent changes and to improve the quality of apprenticeship provision even further. I'm pleased that apprentices can now move up the ladder, as they learn, from one level to the next and that apprentices can move on to take higher and degree level programmes. Apprenticeships should be a key driver of economic momentum and help create a pool of talent for employers with the skills they need.

The levy has been a huge change. It's helping to create a system that is meeting the needs of large employers. I do question whether it is yet doing the same for smaller businesses. We need all businesses to be able to invest, not only in their futures, but in the futures of workers. It's one of the best investment opportunities they have. In turn, this benefits the whole country, helping the economy to flourish.

The Government's 'Fire it Up' campaign is showing us young people who are passionate about their chosen path. For some parents, spotting an ember of interest in their child makes them want to blow it into a fire. 'Fire it Up!' indeed! Many children have ballet lessons or play football on a Sunday morning. Hardly any of them become professional dancers or footballers. Does that matter? Of course not. But when that interest is in something that could lead to a future career, it's a bit of a waste of money, talent and enthusiasm if that training doesn't take.

Young people need to make sustained effort, be self-disciplined and build soft skills in their careers, so it's great to have this programme to help create the right foundations for better vocational education.

More funding has raised the profile of apprenticeships and put them on the radar of many young people – and many employers. New standards have opened the door to many who wouldn't previously have thought an apprenticeship was for them. Of course we need to be careful not to call all things apprenticeships. We must keep other pathways too: A-levels,

other technical and vocational courses, including T-levels, as well as university, all provide opportunities for meaningful learning – it is about finding the right path for individual students.

We're seeing some encouraging things on inspection. We've seen providers and employers working well together to plan and deliver training. Inspectors have observed trainers and workplace mentors combine regular assessment and oral feedback to keep apprentices well informed about the progress they are making. This helps apprentices to grasp new concepts and skills quickly and well. These have led to some of the good and outstanding judgements we've made recently.

The new education inspection framework that we started using in September is helping us look at the content of apprentices' programmes. We are looking at the training on offer and asking, how is the design and content of learning programmes structured and sequenced? Is it logical? Does it let apprentices master the basics, and then build on that to acquire the skills and knowledge that they will need in the workplace, to make decisions and carry out tasks on their own? Are teachers and trainers adding value to apprentices' employment prospects?

On some inspections, we've also seen logical planning of on- and off-the-job training. For example, we've seen health care associates, in the same group and working towards the same standard, learning together about health and safety at work, but also receiving training relevant to the ward they're working on. They all get the same training by the end of the apprenticeship, but they get it in a logical order that suits their working pattern.

Of course, Inspectors ask whether apprentices will be able to draw on their recent practical experiences when they're in the classroom, and apply them to what they're learning? Is there a virtuous circle of learning something in theory, trying it out, refining it, getting good at it and then going back to work on the next steps? Often new knowledge needs to be applied to practical challenges before it really sticks.

Some young people feel a bit nervous about asking a question that seems too obvious. They might not have the confidence to tell a manager that they haven't understood something, especially if the workplace is a new environment for them. We have seen effective use of workplace mentors to help apprentices with their on-the-job training. Sometimes these mentors help apprentices develop the confidence to make the most of their opportunities.

The new framework has made us less reliant on internal data. We are not at all concerned about evaluating spreadsheets. But we are interested in how you make good use of the information that you collect

from initial assessments and from the work that apprentices do. We also look at how you use progress reviews to make sure that apprentices are acquiring the skills and knowledge they need. Here I mean soft skills and hands-on practical skills.

I've also been encouraged by the high-quality careers guidance offered to many apprentices. In some cases, this means a high proportion of apprentices getting and keeping a permanent job in their intended career. However, careers advice in schools is still patchy. It's still only around 4% of school-leavers who join apprenticeship programmes. I met an apprentice yesterday in her second year who said the careers advisor in her secondary school was evangelical about apprenticeships. Advisers need to talk to school leavers about the kinds of skills that have value in most or all occupations including social and work place skills. There's more work to do in schools to understand and promote apprenticeships.

Inspectors ask, 'What are we enabling young people to do? How are we thinking about the next steps for young people with special educational needs and disabilities?' There is some good work going on around supported apprenticeships – but I'd like to see more.

In fact, there's a lot to celebrate.

But for all the good work that we see, we also know there's much more still to do.

I mentioned the ladder of opportunity earlier on. But for some people, this ladder is broken; in fact, some of the lower rungs are missing. There's been a decline in take up at level 2 and 3. We need apprenticeships at these levels. Partly, because they are a vital part of the progression pipeline, but also because they let learners develop the skills that will help them progress. For so many young people, this is their entry level into the workplace. Getting the basics right is vital. Going into some occupations at level 4 without a grounding in the basics can set some people up to fail.

The progression pipeline relies on level 2 and 3 apprentices as a way for people to improve their skills from entry-level and work their way up, to a career that will continue to challenge them and provide interesting opportunities. Young people's achievement at school doesn't necessarily match their potential to develop a long way. Someone who comes in as a trainee bricklayer could end up leading a team. Some young people starting at level 2 and 3 could develop a very long way into management and senior leadership. We need the flexibility here in those basic skills. Basic skills really matter. As Alison Woolf has said, English and maths are the most important vocational skills of all.

Some 16-18-year olds even at level 3, still need to improve their English and maths. I want to mention here that providers should look at how this

happens. At the moment, in some places, it's like a game of Jenga. The tower of knowledge is being built – up and up – but holes in that knowledge are making it wobble. Don't assume that a lightning whip through all of GCSE maths will enable them to understand what they did not understand at school. Check where your students are secure and start from there. See what your students don't know and fill those gaps. Don't expect them to be interested in a curriculum that is a re-run of all the basics they've already covered so that by the time they arrive at the knowledge they do need, they're disaffected and demotivated.

Imagine being 16 or 17 again and eager to enter the world of work. Passing these qualifications shouldn't feel like doing time. After 11 or more years of schooling, of course these young people feel tantalisingly close to taking the reins of their own lives. I've seen really good post 16 teaching in English and maths where young people are saying they're finally understanding and seeing the point of what they are being taught. This doesn't necessarily come from upping the pace. It is making the pace right for them. Some providers are doing this very well!

When I spoke at the Association of Colleges over a year ago, I was criticised for suggesting that some level 2 qualifications aren't as helpful as they could be for the young people who take them. Encouraging young people to take a qualification they are interested in, but that may not help them into a career isn't helping them as much as it could.

Qualifications might lead to a young person developing confidence, self-belief and creativity. That's not a waste! Those are useful skills in many careers. What we must be clear about, though, is that it might not lead to a career, and it might leave the young person short of other skills that they do need for their next steps. There's a difficult balance to be struck in meeting the needs of the labour market here. Some qualifications are attractive to young people but don't give them as much of a start. Good, honest careers advice is essential making sure that students make good choices that open doors and lead to fulfilling futures.

I'm concerned about level 2 apprenticeships more broadly. There are some worrying statistics about them. In 2018/19, more than 140,000 people started a level 2 apprenticeship. So, that was 45% down on 2016/17.

On the other hand, higher level apprenticeships are up – massively up – and they have doubled from 16/17 to 18/19, admittedly from a low base. We're concerned that this many new apprenticeships at level 4 or higher is partly why those at level 2 and 3 aren't coming through. It's certainly the case that apprenticeship programmes now have an older demographic.

It's important we increase the numbers of level 2 and 3, as well as increasing the number of young apprentices, as this helps with levelling

the playing field. The higher-level apprenticeships are overwhelmingly in the fields of business administration. We are concerned about the trend in big, levy-contributing organisations to offer apprenticeships to existing staff, many of whom will have worked there for a while. This effectively turns apprenticeships into a staff development programme. They may well be mitigating skill gaps in management and team leadership, and this may be an initial response to spending the levy, but I would hope that this doesn't become the norm. If the levy develops mainly to help those who are already in work, it doesn't help those at the bottom of the ladder.

We know that relabelling existing programmes as apprenticeships to allow them to be paid for by the levy fund is a practice that is sucking money into one place at the expense of another. We've seen very different funding allocations for different sectors. I am concerned that in some instances levy funding is not being used as the policy designers expected. We've heard from some participants who didn't even realise they were on an apprenticeship. Our inspectors have found apprentices training for jobs that they had already been doing for years.

Last year, nearly 35,000 higher and degree level apprentices started in the fields of business administration and law. However, there were just over 2,000 in engineering and manufacturing. There were nearly 5,500 in information technology. These figures are out of step with the industrial strategy which is relying on the UK's home-grown skills to exploit the opportunities in massive growth in green industries, in infrastructure to transform cities, and digital skills to meet the challenges of artificial intelligence and the changes that 5G will bring. We need to ask if our apprenticeships programmes are providing the right balance to meet the skills needs of the next decade.

We're seeing more independent learning providers entering the sector, but it is concerning that the proportion of outstanding and good ILPs is falling, and nearly one in five new providers are not making enough progress in some of the measures we look at in our initial monitoring visits. We will, of course, continue to monitor this trend and report it widely.

At Ofsted, we gather a lot of information through doing our work and I want to make sure it helps inform policy making to shape solutions. We do need to continue to strengthen the links between employers, government, providers and education.

In this transition year, we need to make sure that our planning is taking us in the right direction. We need to grow more of our own talent.

We see that good apprenticeship programmes involve employers early in the planning process. There is a delicate balance to be struck here between apprenticeship programmes meeting the needs of larger

organisations, with infrastructure in place and some flexibility within their large staff numbers and the needs of much smaller employers with their fixed drivers of costs, time and staff availability.

Let's take an example. If you're a traditional garage owner who wants to hire a single apprentice, you'll want to know there is a light vehicle standard right for this apprentice. You'll hope that whoever has developed it has had your needs in mind. Is it right that, for instance, the big motor companies have worked on a standard that's right for them but will be in use for our garage apprentice? This garage apprentice may have a different career path ahead of them – still in the automotive industry, but with a much greater focus on customer service, managing costs, and small-business skills, too. Providers and employers will need to think carefully about what else the curriculum should include, over and above the standard to make sure this apprentice gets all they need to learn and to be effective in their workplace.

We need to continue a wider discussion on joining up the agendas here. It's important that larger apprentice providers give people constructive career paths and life skills, but I think there is a willingness within the sector to also think about the longer term. We need high-level skills and learning that will generate and contribute to new industries and attract investments. We don't want you to train people to just work for large established employers.

When it comes to off the job training, it's difficult to balance the needs of different organisations with a funding and regulatory framework and there will always be rough edges that need smoothing off. Dedicated time away from the day-to-day job to learn is a good thing but doesn't fit easily with all sectors.

There's an issue here of being led by the employer rather than the needs of the apprentice. There is, I believe, a balance to be struck between time spent learning theory and developing new skills, and time spent applying new knowledge and skills in the workplace. Apprentices are, by definition, employees who need training and support to develop their competency. They are not yet contributing fully to improved productivity.

So, you all know what a successful apprenticeship looks like.

As any construction apprentice will tell you, it starts with the foundations. It has a robust initial assessment of the apprentices' prior knowledge, skills, experience and expertise. With a good relationship and collaboration between the employer and the provider.

There will be a well-designed curriculum that meets the needs of the employer and coordinates on and off the job training.

On the job training will be planned to help the apprentice as they develop

knowledge and skills. The off the job training means every apprentice is taught the full range of what is included in the standard so that they can then apply those skills on the job. It's a mechanism that makes sure everyone gets the whole experience as we know there is a level of variability about work experience. Mentoring and coaching will help to make sure that apprentices don't come adrift from their programmes and is vital if the investment in all of this isn't to be wasted. And finally, there are frequent opportunities to practise, review, repeat and reflect on performance to consolidate learning and develop competence and confidence over time. We've placed a lot of emphasis in the new framework about the importance of long-term memory and how learning can be embedded.

When learning is embedded, we see apprentices become problem solvers. We've probably all had a gas engineer call to the house to repair the boiler. We've all heard that sharp intake of breath as they tell you that they haven't seen a boiler as old as this before. But they draw on what they know and usually they sort the problem out.

An inspection is judging how well providers and employers prepare apprentices for their next stage. We want to know that young people who begin an apprenticeship will finish it and go on to secure a permanent job in their industry.

We don't inspect or regulate end-point assessment, that is for others. We are concerned with how well learners are prepared for the assessment. But I want to flag that we do know of some issues with the sufficiency and timeliness of these assessments.

The industrial strategy has at its heart an ambition for a technical education system which is one of the best in the world. This won't work well if apprenticeships aren't playing their part. We all need to work towards the aims of the strategy.

I want to thank you for listening to me today. I'm optimistic that the aims of apprenticeship policy and investment can be realised. No system can ever be perfect – what's important is that we all try to improve it. For the country, for providers and – most importantly – for the apprentices to who we owe the best opportunities we can provide.

I am now going to be joined by Paul Joyce and Chris Jones for the question and answer session as I know from experience that you like to ask very technical and detailed questions about operational issues.

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