



Innovate
UK

Talent & Skills Connect Apprenticeship Focus

December 2024



An ecosystem which can be stronger by supporting and empowering all to protect our future talent pipeline

Apprenticeships are a strength within the UK's skills system. Supporting individuals of all ages, in first careers, in upskilling and reskilling, as well as offering an essential mechanism for businesses to create a talent pipeline from which to grow their workforce.

There remains a great deal more the UK can do to create and embed apprentice opportunities, and ensure the UK continues to support individuals through education and careers pathways to excel.

By bringing together organisations who are passionate about this opportunity, the Talent & Skills Connect (T&SC) community aims to stimulate collective action, by exploring how we can be better – sharing knowledge, insights, and ideas.

On 10th December 2024, the T&SC community came together at an Apprenticeship focus event, hosted by Satellite Applications Catapult in Harwell. This was an opportunity to explore how we understand the challenges from the perspective of the apprentice, the business and the provider, and explore the opportunity to be better through increased collaboration.

The event began by exploring what success could look like with a scene-setting talk by Tony Ellender, Fellow of The 5% Club. Tony was followed by three more speakers, Tyler Cowlshaw-Harvey from the Science Apprenticeship Forum, Dr Kate Barclay from the BioIndustry Association, and Ben Rowland, from the Association of Employer and Learning Providers, each offering the audience a provocation.

The provocations offered a way to create conversation, and not only create connection – but support organisations in finding a way

forward. Each supported by an Innovate UK facilitator, took place in cabaret style and to foster the widest range of connections, participants switched tables for each new set of provocations. A lively and consciousness-raising review of the purpose, what works, what doesn't, and what could be possible to ensure the country supports more apprentices realising their ambitions to ensure the UK innovation thrives.





Tyler Cowlshaw-Harvey
Founder of the Science Apprenticeship Forum

No single organisation can be the solution



Tyler Cowlshaw-Harvey, Founder of the Science Apprenticeship Forum, described her apprentice journey and how the route had supported her professional and personal ambitions. Tyler founded the Science Apprenticeship Forum with a variety of aims and was now at the juncture of needing to address fundamental considerations.

Tyler sought the expertise of the T&SC community as she asked two questions:

- How does an apprentice-run organisation become sustainable whilst remaining independent?
- How can the forum find the time to fulfil ambitions?

... and the community responded as expected, with knowledge, expertise and pioneering enthusiasm.

Leaning in

Many delegates were holding inspiration from Tony Ellender's keynote and so a dominant theme was to utilise the organisations which exist with similar ambitions and goals. Seeking mentor support from others was perceived to be key in enabling the success sought.

Shared responsibility

The community also considered the problem statement the Science Apprenticeship Forum

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is seeking to address, and then sought to understand whether the solution should be more than the responsibility of the Forums to respond.

Delegates particularly focused on the responsibility of others to embed apprenticeships and the voice of the apprentice within workforce and policy development. There was a collective call to ensure government is hearing the voice of the apprentice as representative alongside those who have taken other education and career pathways.

Some felt employers could do more to uphold the value apprentices and the apprenticeship pathway brings, ensuring apprentices are given the opportunity to 'pay it forward'. Suggestions



for enabling this ranged from working with Trade Unions and Professional Bodies to recognition of the value of the apprentice/ employer mechanism for workforce and business development. Questions were posed, using the example of The 5% Club as to how employers hear and respond to the voice of apprentices, and whether this could be included in audits such as those of The 5% Club.

Standing on shoulders

In arriving at a solution to support the problem statement, the T&SC community was keen to ensure the Science Apprenticeship Forum could benefit from others, including understanding why others have chosen their organisational set-ups, appreciating what had been articulated by way of maintaining independence.

Signposting was offered by delegates, to organisations which could support and guide, these included the Association of Apprenticeships, St Martin's Group, STEM Learning's STEM Ambassador Network, and the Apprentice Ambassador Network. It was also perceived that exploring with experiences with Catapults, local authorities and other professional networks, such as G4C (Generation for Change).

Some delegates were wary, in holding the value of the voice and experience of the apprentice as key, of pursuing structures which could become burdensome. All understood the need for apprentices to be at the heart of articulating areas of improvement, and ensuring any organisation was able to have this dominance of mission was key in exploring solutions. Some felt to achieve this it would be advantageous to benefit from others to relieve risk of bureaucracy and examples were offered including exploring with the Science Council,

the Institute for Technical Skills Strategy, as well as other professional institutions.

Delegates perceived there was a great deal of value which could be realised through effective delegation, to ensure the mission could be achieved. There was also a consideration in setting up an independent organisation of the likely churn of apprentices, and those who have completed their apprenticeship were to be utilised. Maintaining an underpinning stability through an existing structure was seen as a way of ensuring such opportunities were available for apprentices to then commit to improving the broader skills and workforce landscape.

Playing to strengths

Recognising the achievements of the Science Apprenticeship Forum, it was clear that authenticity underpinned value. Recommendations from participants included using the alumni approach to realise the goals of the Forum through the inherent strengths of those involved. By agreeing a strategy, business plan, and approach to communications it was perceived that this Forum would be able to clearly articulate gaps in expertise and resource to lean on its broader advocates.

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Dr Kate Barclay MBE
Skills Consultant at the Bioindustry Association

Success is only possible with joined-up thinking



In order for businesses to embed apprentices as part of workforce development, there must be alignment with our education and skills system. But whilst making absolute sense theoretically, Dr Kate Barclay MBE, Skills Consultant at the Bioindustry Association, demonstrated the challenges faced by businesses in navigating this space and the limitations which are incurred when our education system fails to advocate for technical pathways.

Kate asked:

- How do we link supply and demand?
- How do we increase demand?

Inherently straightforward, the questions stimulated conversation reflecting the systemic challenges in creating alignment. With appreciation of our existing systems, delegates sought to work within them to the benefit of individuals being able to achieve their ambitions.

Supporting businesses to understand the landscape

For many SMEs, the complexity of apprenticeships and the constantly changing technical education system is cited as a barrier in considering apprenticeships as a solution to workforce development.

Challenges around aligning business and education needs were seen as a key frustration

– accepting that a business must first have a job rather than being able to recruit around the academic calendar was often seen as a barrier to engaging with the further education sector. It was recognised there was a benefit in creating cohorts through annual recruitment and a desire from some for fixed start dates – but reconciling this with a business maintaining their business operation was a challenge.

Further challenges were experienced in finding provision for apprenticeships when often the single employer heard in isolation failed to recognise growing collective local need and potential cohorts through collaboration.

It was perceived that coming together to support businesses was essential in growing apprenticeships, supporting the sourcing of provision, the onboarding process and ensuring effective recruitment and retention.

Creative solutions to align supply and demand

There was a desire to make the process as straightforward as possible for the individual, especially young people who may be encouraged to explore full-time university studies. That there is a single application for all university routes but multiple for apprenticeships makes it challenging to position. One delegate asked whether sector skills bodies could take a co-ordinating role given their employer support.



It was perceived that SMEs have a difficult time when they do recognise the opportunity to offer an apprenticeship, often colleges which could offer training provision do not, due to demand being sporadic and not likely collated to enable cohorts. Learning from training models such as Apprenticeship Training Agencies and Group Training Associations could enable place-based models and better support for SMEs to realise cohorts for SMEs.

Other creative propositions included a variety of match-making opportunities, at a supply and demand level, or by utilising the supply chain of businesses who have the reputation which attracts an over-subscription of applications to apprenticeship placements. The Cell and Gene Therapy Catapult was offered as an example of where facilitators can enable a greater number of apprenticeship placements.

There was perceived to be a key opportunity in the relationship between business, apprentice and provider being promoted within schools, demonstrating to teachers, parents and carers the differentials and benefits of the apprenticeship route.

Recognising and responding to areas for improvement

The challenges businesses have in navigating this space remains a barrier to increasing apprenticeships. Supporting those

organisations who support businesses in broader issues would enable an improved referral service and an easier space to navigate.

It was appreciated that the school's system does not necessarily prioritise promoting the apprenticeship route. Encouraging businesses to be more engaged with schools in curriculum support, careers guidance and offering work experience and placements was considered essential to gaining parent and career support for this route.

There were some more fundamental challenges identified, the requirements associated with maths and English were considered detrimental to supporting the individual. Apprenticeships were perceived to be incorrectly utilised in response to the Apprenticeship Levy. Better educating businesses on when upskilling and reskilling interventions were more beneficial than the apprenticeship route for an individual was considered essential to valuing the apprenticeship route as evident in other countries.

The number of standards and demand for specialisation by businesses was seen as weighing the system down in bureaucracy rather than supporting businesses and encouraging responsibility for continuous development to be maintained between the business and individual.



Ben Rowland
CEO of AELP

We're making progress, but there's still so much we can do



Ben Rowland, CEO of AELP was beamed in to update on the changes being seen in the emergence of Skills England, and explored how we need to ensure we are supporting our workforce. Ben outlined the challenges which are created through the build not buy model which tends to be prevalent in the UK, and the need for greater appreciation of the role of line managers in moving to a culture where we grow our own.

Ben's provocations created the momentum to ensure the strength of the relationship between employer and education provider nurtures the best in the talent we have in the UK.

Build it and they will come

There was appreciation that to attract and retain apprentices we must ensure the culture exists to nurture talent. Delegates explored the role of the line manager and the support they need to coach and develop the individual as well as support the training and learning programme.

It was recognised that line managers should receive greater support and detail about apprenticeship programmes, to enable them to support apprentices at important milestones.

“There was appreciation that to attract and retain apprentices we must ensure the culture exists to nurture talent.”

Accepting what cannot change

The perceived risk of losing individuals once trained underpinned many of the fears cited by businesses in recruiting apprentices. However, delegates recognised the need to be able to promote the broader benefits. Businesses being able to promote that they have a culture of support and development, which is aligned to retention is likely to attract a range of applicants and being able to explore values. One delegate cited a multinational pharmaceuticals company who promote that they retain apprentices longer than other recruits as a positive aspect of their organisation.



Creating the mindset of apprenticeships

There was recognition that not enough is communicated to demonstrate the benefit of apprenticeships and the return on investment. In this exploration, delegates recognised how complicated messaging is, and that retention and outcomes data should be collected comparable to other education and training programmes.

Language was consistently recognised across discussions as often being a barrier to understanding. Whilst appreciating that messaging may be different by stakeholder group, the need for simple, consistent and up-to-date language was needed to ensure parity of understanding.

With many different types of training interventions now being available – including boot camps, foundation apprenticeships, traineeships – the ability to articulate what each has been designed to achieve, how each will support the business and the individual was more necessary than ever, especially with the impending changes to the Apprenticeship Levy.

For the individual, it was felt more could be done to support the understanding of what an apprenticeship is and what the experience entails. Offering workshops to young people on the experience and how to navigate into an apprenticeship was seen as a way of setting up the business and individual to succeed. Whilst this could be delivered by a variety of mechanisms, it was seen that it could be complemented by apprentice-focused work experience.

“Language was consistently recognised across discussions as often being a barrier to understanding.”



We're in it together

As the first Talent & Skills Connect Apprenticeship Focus event came to a close, everyone was given the opportunity to make their own commitment to change.

Starting from within

After a day of sharing knowledge and experience, many of the T&SC community were eager to get back to their organisations to start acting on the discussions had, to boost apprenticeship opportunities within the workforce and within the training provision.

Having the hook offered by The 5% Club was seen as a key opportunity, for some, to join; for others to demonstrate to senior leaders how greater levels of apprentice and graduate talent could make a difference to their business.

Supporting each other

Seeing how essential the relationship between business, educator and the individual is in attracting and retaining talent allowed participants to consider how they maximise success by ensuring closer relationships and improved communications. Improving connections and relationships within the T&SC community was offered as a straightforward way to reach consistency and learn from each other's practice.

It was recognised that many partners can do more to facilitate conversations to boost apprenticeships by promoting stronger relationships between networks of businesses and educators.

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Promoting our strengths

Recognising that not enough young people are aware of the apprentice pathway encouraged delegates to consider the responsibility, which can be taken to promote opportunities, as roles within a sector or supported as an educator. Ensuring that we are successfully communicating to young people the apprenticeship offer was seen as something that could tangibly be achieved. It was recognised that collaboration within the T&SC community could quickly enable greater reach and engagement, with the potential to share successful approaches and strong networks. The strength which could be demonstrated through the T&SC was seen as being able to reach more individuals and more businesses and strengthen the communication between supply and demand by working better together.

A Talent & Skills Connect LinkedIn group is here

T&SC events are just one way of connecting and recognising opportunities for collective action. To build on the progress made, the Talent & Skills Connect team has set up a LinkedIn group, a way of maintaining connection, and sharing challenges and opportunities, which can be supported by the Talent & Skills Connect community.

