



all party parliamentary group on
apprenticeships

APPG on Apprenticeships - Lessons from abroad, sharing best practice (AGM) – Minutes – Tuesday 22 October

Chair – Gillian Keegan MP

Speakers: Dr Neil Bentley-Gockmann OBE, CEO, World Skills UK; Simon Field, Skills Policy Expert and Author of ‘Taking Training Seriously: Lessons from an International Comparison of Off-The-Job Training for Apprenticeships in England’

Chair, Gillian Keegan opened the AGM and announced that herself and Karin Smyth MP would be the co-chairs of the APPG for the coming year. The motion was seconded and passed before the following officers were announced for the coming year:

- Andrew Jones MP
- Vince Cable MP
- Jim McMahon MP
- Catherine McKinnell MP
- Lord Aberdare
- Baroness Garden of Frognal
- Lord Fox
- Lord Young of Norwood Green

Gillian also thanked the sponsors for their ongoing support and welcomed Amazon and the Open University to the sponsor list this year, which is as follows:

- Amazon
- BAE Systems
- Battersea Power Station
- Heathrow
- KPMG
- London South Bank University
- Microsoft
- Open University
- WMG at the University of Warwick

Gillian Keegan introduced herself to the group citing her experience as a degree apprentice. She noted that internationally Germany is often considered the ‘best in class’ at apprenticeships and speculated that this was possibly due to the heavy focus on manufacturing in Germany. She emphasised the need to look at the practical steps to ensure that the UK becomes best in the world.

First to speak was CEO of World Skills UK, Dr Neil Bentley-Gockmann OBE. He told the group about the work of World Skills Partnership which holds regular global skills competitions including a biannual global Skills Olympics. Team UK is built up of apprentices and college students who compete in several heats at the local, region and national levels before the top 100 people are trained by someone from World Skills to reach their ‘excellence standard’. Competitors specialise in a whole host of subjects ranging from Hair and Beauty to cybersecurity. He emphasised that the UK performs very well but at the most recent Skills Olympics in Russia, Team UK fell out of the top 10, with China, Russia, Brazil and Switzerland outperforming it.

He went on to discuss research which World Skills had commissioned in partnership with RSA and Oxford University. The research illustrated that these other countries use their apprenticeships and skills training more strategically than the UK. Expanding on this, he said that as global standards are consistently rising, the quality of the training of apprentices in the UK must also rise. He said that those trainers get students and apprentices to world class level for the Skills Olympics but rarely apply this to their day job within colleges and so the standard of teaching and therefore the level of skills gained is not mainstreamed.

He then highlighted what he saw as some solutions which could result in improving the skills standards of the UK. These included better engagement from the Department for Education to leverage learning and participation in apprenticeships but also to push forward the desire to be the best in the world. He also cited the possibility of establishing a UK centre of excellence in order to drive up standards nationally.

The other speaker for the session was Simon Field who is a policy expert in Skills. He explained his background briefly, drawing on his experience in assessing apprenticeship and vocational systems all over the world. He emphasised that though the quality of apprenticeships is not standardised, the best apprenticeships in the UK, really are the best in the world. He explained that in order to make all apprenticeship programmes in the UK as good as the best in the country, he believes there are three 'quick wins' which can be implemented with relative ease and one longer term cultural and policy change which should be explored and implemented.

The first 'quick win' he discussed was to reduce the number of apprenticeship qualifications available in the UK. He explained that the UK has over 600 approved qualifications or standards which can be quite narrow in remit, compared to other countries who have no more than 400. He said that apprenticeships would probably be of a higher standard if they were broader and more sector wide in their programme style, allowing for better standardisation and more transferrable skills and qualifications.

He then moved on to discuss the second 'quick win' which would be to allow more experienced workers, who lack only the qualification, more flexibility in the modules they take. He explained that some people will not benefit from a full course as they know the majority of the content, however they would far better benefit from a 'top up' module focusing on refreshing their technical skills before sitting the final assessment in order to give them a full apprenticeship qualification.

The third 'quick win' he talked about was better enforcement of the rules and regulations surrounding apprenticeships. He said due to the diversity of UK apprenticeships, there were a number that are of a poor quality and operate outside of the rules which should govern them. He evidenced this by stating that one in five apprenticeship schemes in the UK pay less than the minimum wage. He stated that addressing this starts with better enforcement of standards to be adhered to across all apprenticeship schemes in the UK.

He explained that the longer-term goal should be for a cultural shift to occur which would ensure employers to take more control over the training of the apprentice. Given that the majority of apprenticeships now outsource training to schools, colleges and training institutions, apprentices are missing out on learning practical skills from the best provider, their employer. He argued that apprentices should develop practical skills at work alongside building a knowledge of theory within the classroom. He exemplified this practice in Germany which is frequently hailed as the 'best in class' and stated this should become the norm in the UK.