

# Young Apprenticeships Programme

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## Key Features of the Young Apprenticeships Programme

**Operation Date:** 2004-2012

**Target Population:** 14-16-year old's

**Purpose:** Vocational learning programme for Key Stage 4 which included vocational, academic and work-based learning

## Introduction

The Young Apprenticeships (YA) programme, introduced in 2004, enabled 14–16-year olds to access vocational education and training alongside their core curriculum in school. The programme included up to 50 days of workplace training over the two years of study, offering 14-16-year olds a significant opportunity to develop vocational and employability skills. As a descendant of the Manpower Services Commission TVEI (1983), the Young Apprenticeships programme was one conduit to realising a vision for “the creation of a small scale, high quality route at Key Stage 4 that offers able and well-motivated pupils the option to pursue general or industry specific vocational programmes outside school, in partnership with employers and involving extended periods of work placement” (Institute for Employment Studies, 2006, p.2). The aim of this review is to examine the Young Apprenticeship policy and understand the relevance of this initiative to the current education and labour market context in particular the challenge presented by the falling number of apprenticeship starts, for the 16-19 age group, which has been severely exacerbated by the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> This is an opportune moment to (re)consider a policy initiative that may have relevance in the post-Covid educational landscape.

<sup>1</sup>Intermediate apprenticeship starts for under 19s fell by 83% between May 2019 and May 2020. At Intermediate and Advanced level under 19s apprenticeship starts saw the highest decline during this period at -79% compared to -52% in the 25+ age group (House of Commons Library, 2020, p.7)

## Context

The Young Apprenticeships programme was introduced as part of the 'Increased Flexibility Programme' (IFP) which, from 2002, saw the expansion of opportunities for young people in Key Stage 4 to access vocational education and training (VET). The IFP and YA formed a key strand of the New Labour government's drive to increase post-16 participation and the YA was intended to provide a progression route to Modern Apprenticeships. In addition, the Young Apprenticeships programme was seen as an opportunity to address traditionally high levels of gender stratification in VET and "had underpinning links to the drive to address occupational segregation through encouraging young people to consider non-traditional options" (IES, 2006, p. IX). The emphasis on partnerships between schools, further education, training providers, employers and local authorities demonstrated a commitment to collaboration to achieve educational and social change. The emphasis on collaborative working fostered a holistic approach to child welfare, education and labour market access which was mirrored in the policy values evident in other New Labour flagship policies such as 'Every Child Matters' (2003). The YA was also a policy which reflects the government's commitment to deregulation which enabled greater flexibility in school curriculum and collaboration but also led localised availability of pathways and opportunities for young people.

The Young Apprenticeships programme was defined by the DfES as a pathway which "enables motivated students of average and above average ability in Key Stage 4 to study for nationally recognised vocational qualifications" (Ofsted, 2007, p.4). What set the YA apart from other IFP provision, with the exception of the Diploma introduced in 2008, was that YAs also had a significant work placement of 50 days over the two years of study. The YA and Diploma differed from other IFP offerings in aiming to attract more academically able students. Students enrolled to a YA continued their core learning in school for 3 days per week (GCSE English, maths and science) and attended a college or independent training provider for 2 days per week to study vocational qualifications. Thirteen occupational sectors were available for the YA including construction, hairdressing, business administration and hospitality. Young people were expected to achieve an industry specific qualification at Level 2, with the opportunity to achieve a Level 1 usually in their first year of study.

The Learning and Skills Council provided the funding and approval for YA partnerships and the contracts for delivery of the YA programme were held by the lead partner. IFP delivery had provided a model for partnership which "became the basis for the subsequent delivery of the YA programme" (IES, 2006, p.3). The partnerships nationally varied in their composition, not all schools were involved, local authorities and employer's took different approaches to facilitation and leadership. Targets were set for the partnerships in relation to recruitment, attendance, achievement, student and employer satisfaction, and rates of progression. In addition to the measurable targets partnerships with other providers were also able to include related qualifications such as employability and personal development to their YA programmes. The delivery partnership had a degree of flexibility in the design of the overall programme. However, expectations included initial advice and guidance standards pre-recruitment and ongoing throughout the programme and "gaining an improved understanding of business through enterprise ... and participating in wider enrichment activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award" (YPLA, 2010, p.4). The Young Apprenticeships were complex to deliver, not least because of the limitations for 14–16-year-olds in the workplace as a result of health and safety concerns. Partnerships were required to develop systems which monitored and tracked the progress and whereabouts of students and overcome long-held assumptions and cultural differences between partner institutions to develop positive collaborations.

By 2010, the YA programme had been taken by 43,000 young people (Fuller & Unwin, 2011, p.201). The introduction of the 14-19 Diplomas in 2008 following significant resource, planning and a high-profile launch overshadowed the YA. "The scheme is now facing competition from the Diplomas scheme and funding is being diverted from it" (Engineering UK, 2011, p.120). The Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) evaluation of the programme (2010) and subsequently, the Wolf Report (2011) raised concerns about the cost effectiveness of the YA and the impact on core academic achievements in GCSE. The Wolf Report indicated that vocational education for 14–16-year-olds had value but "the overwhelming majority of respondents to the Review were in agreement that there should be no substantial degree of specialisation before the end of KS4" (DfE, 2011, p.107). Cohort 7 (2010-12) was the final time Young Apprenticeships were offered to KS4 students.

## Evaluation

The aims of the YA programme to raise attainment were only partially realized. While there is evidence that young people succeeded in their vocational qualification and in their core GCSEs, outcomes in core GCSEs were lower for young apprentices (YPLA, 2010). Progression rates to further study post-16 were positive and fulfilled the government's ambition to raise participation in further education and training. However, the progression to apprenticeships post-16 remained significantly below the target of 50% (YPLA, 2010). Progression rates to post-16 apprenticeships were, however, a persistent issue related to the availability of apprenticeships and compounded by the effects of the recession from 2008. Although the Young Apprenticeship started as a relatively small cohort, numbers increased across the years. It was also, in some sectors, well regarded: "employers and young people, however, are keen on the YA programme because of the clear progression it provides to post-16 apprenticeships" (Engineering UK, 2011, p. 120). The key unmet ambition related to YAs was the ambition to tackle gender occupational segregation. "In over half the partnerships, policies and strategies to tackle gender stereotyping were either non-existent or had limited success" (Ofsted, 2007, p. 5).

The Young Apprenticeships were evaluated by Ofsted (2007), the YPLA (2010), and with a focus on equal opportunities the IES (2006, 2007). Ofsted's evaluation of the YA programme, based on the inspection of 14 partnerships, notes that improvements were evident in following their first inspections 2004/05. Employer and student attitudes to the programme were also positive, however, development of key skills and communication across all partners remained issues for some providers leading to inconsistent progress monitoring. The YPLA evaluation focused on outcomes for learners both in qualifications and progression. It demonstrates poorer outcomes for YA participants at GCSE and lower achievement rates on the YA programme for young people with free school meal entitlement undermining the aims of the policy which focused on developing parity of opportunity. Both the IES and Ofsted evaluations (2007) emphasise the lack of progress in reducing occupational gender segregation through YA recruitment. The IES report (2007) makes recommendations which cover information advice and guidance (IAG) but also the need for proactive intervention by partnerships to challenge gender stereotypes and engage parents and staff. In the 2006 report, the IES also recognise the importance of support for those who make gender atypical career choices and developing a 'critical mass' of gender atypical entrants (p.54).

IFP including the YA could be viewed as a reinforcement of class based educational inequalities (Tomlinson, 2001). Presented through the 2001 White Paper as facilitating 'autonomy', 'choice' and 'flexibility', detractors have identified the IFP as a means to exclude 'disaffected' students and a tool for social engineering which perpetuated middle class advantage. The contested nature of 14-16 curriculum led to an emphasis on 'individualisation' and flexibility aimed at "bridging the divide between education and training" (DfES, 2000, p.7). The key aims of the policy were undermined by inconsistencies in approach to partnership and student recruitment at a local level. Despite government commitment to raising the esteem of vocational pathways the availability of YA programmes was location dependent.

The selection of students for the YA programme was also a matter for individual schools so information and guidance on the programme could be broadly shared with students or targeted to certain groups in which case the drive for esteem is undermined and progress on promotion of non-stereotypical routes is limited (IES, 2006, p.XII). The government's 'deregulation drive' while enabling localized decision-making and flexibility also resulted in inconsistencies which were not always advantageous for young people (DFES, 2000). The Wolf Report (2011) identifies issues with pre-16 engagement in vocational specialisms but also demonstrates that funding and performance mechanisms provided incentives for vocational education to be utilised to satisfy performance targets (DfE, 2011).

## Conclusion

There were significant barriers to collaborative work in safeguarding, the division of income and differences in organisational and pedagogic culture. It is clear from the evaluations that partnerships varied in their approach to implementing the YA programme and that both administrative and educational standards were diverse. However, where partnerships succeeded in negotiating these issues the results provided occupational experience and progression opportunities "young apprentices would join the labour market with desirable skills and an understanding of the different aspects of the vocational area" (Ofsted, 2007, p.13).

The Young Apprenticeship programme demonstrates the ability of key stakeholders to achieve a unified programme of study which develops academic, vocational and employment skills. However, the cost, complexity and scale of the delivery is problematic. Flexibility can only be achieved with economies of scale. A national pre-16 study programme which includes academic and vocational learning would require long-term commitment, and as the YA demonstrates strong partnerships and a requirement for national rather than localized, optional coverage. After the 2010 election the Coalition government remained committed to choice in Key Stage 4 but focused implementation on UTCs which it was hoped would offer pre-16 options in technical specialisms such as engineering and construction. UTCs, however, face many of the same issues as the YA in terms of cost, recruitment and outcomes for learners which may only be overcome through political conviction and longevity.

The Young Apprenticeship was an ambitious policy initiative which provided significant opportunities for young people to specialise in a vocational area and experience work in the chosen occupation. Once the complexities of facilitating and establishing the programme were overcome the organisational framework for further collaborative development in 14-16 education was in place. These embryonic partnerships between employers, educational and governmental organisations, and local government, formed during the early 2000s, could by now be flourishing. The YA had challenges but no critical flaws and provided the framework for more ambitious and robust collaborative work which engaged employers and started to address the issue of pre-16 vocational stigma. The importance of developing esteem for vocational qualifications is pervasive in the political and academic discourse but achieving this requires systemic change and better strategic planning. A key lesson from the YA programme might be to retain those elements which facilitate change such as collaborative working and harness it for other purposes and projects. The YA had the potential to provide meaningful career opportunities for 14–16-year olds and challenge established thinking about vocational education which “has been persistently undervalued as a route to success and policies have tended to reflect the structures that exist, not the needs of individual young people” (DfES, 2001, p.31).

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