Executive summary

Across many countries, apprenticeship is now experiencing a revival, in the light of a wide range of evidence demonstrating its effectiveness as a means of transitioning young people into work, and serving the economy. But few countries can match the energy and range of reforms currently being pursued in England.

Key findings

England has launched a series of reforms that champion the historically neglected institution of apprenticeship, and address some previous weaknesses, by encouraging more substantive apprenticeship programmes and a stronger funding framework. Alongside wider reforms in the qualifications system, they replace a proliferation of competing and overlapping qualifications with apprenticeship standards developed with employers for each occupation. They are backed by high-quality analysis, and increasingly rich data sources. Collectively this involves a concerted and serious attempt to develop a high-quality apprenticeship system in England. Despite these strengths, there is still some way to go to establish an apprenticeship system in England to match those of the strongest countries. International comparison suggests several ways in which reforms might be adapted to achieve higher quality and better outcomes.

Key messages

**Promoting and strengthening youth apprenticeship**

While England faces major challenges in transitioning young people from school to work, youth apprenticeship currently makes a limited contribution to this task, as most recent growth has been in adult apprentices. The government should seek an expansion of quality youth apprenticeships, as in other countries, where such apprenticeships play a major role. Youth apprenticeships should provide more general education, including for apprentices that already have Level 2 English and maths qualifications. This would help all apprentices to develop the study skills necessary for further learning and successful careers. The eligibility of apprentices aged 16-19 for social benefits should also be re-appraised, recognising that the attractiveness of apprenticeship needs to be sustained.

**Engaging employers in work-based learning**

In England, the historic responsibility of employers to deliver work-based learning to apprentices has been largely eclipsed by a focus on training delivered by a third-party training provider. This is unfortunate, as the key advantage of apprenticeship over other forms of vocational training is work-based learning, delivered by experienced workplace practitioners. Employer engagement should be encouraged by introducing clear standards for work-based learning, and investing in the training capacity of employers. Regulations and standards should also ensure that apprentices are not used solely as unskilled labour, recognising that in England nearly one in five apprentices is paid below the legal minimum.
Ensuring funding through the levy

While the introduction of the apprenticeship levy may encourage larger levy-paying employers to meet more of their skills needs through apprenticeships, meeting levy requirements in this way may not always make the best contribution to skills development. The strongest possible quality assurance measures will be needed to ensure that the replacement of other training by fundable apprenticeships genuinely adds value. An effective apprenticeship system involves various elements such as the development of the apprentice in the workplace by the employer and the broader education of young apprentices. While it may not be appropriate to fund all these activities through the levy, they do need to be supported, funded where necessary and their quality assured.

Quality in apprentice qualifications and assessment

While some strong principles are now in place, implementing an effective apprentice qualification system poses significant challenge. First, apprentice qualifications need to be clearly articulated with associated T-levels, so that apprentices can see what programmes of study are needed to enter target careers. Second, apprenticeship qualifications need to be sufficiently broad, and therefore few in number. This means keeping the total number of apprenticeship standards well under one thousand, in common with the approach of other countries. Third, it means developing clear arrangements to allow informally acquired skills to be certified through the end-point assessments associated with apprenticeships. Fourth, it means reviewing current plans for competition in the assessment market, as such competition will make it very difficult to realise consistency in assessment standards.

Equity and social mobility

New apprenticeship standards are, rightly, intended to be more demanding, but low-skilled school leavers will need preparation and support if they are to succeed in this more demanding environment, recognising that dropout is already a challenge, and by international standards, teenagers in England have relatively weak basic skills. Traineeships are promising, but are still relatively small-scale. The reformed apprenticeship system will need to include and engage those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those who leave school with few skills. Building on the experience of traineeships, England should further explore, in the light of evidence and experience, pre-apprenticeship and alternative apprenticeship programmes that effectively prepare young people to undertake a full apprenticeship, equip them with basic and employability skills, and grant them workplace experience and career advice.

Special types of apprenticeship

Different economic sectors and different types of apprenticeship present special challenges. Degree apprenticeships are likely to grow rapidly as they allow those involved to avoid student loans and subsequent debt. This will be a positive development, but only if it restructures university degrees into quality apprenticeships with a substantial element of work-based learning, rather than just a part-time degree plus a job. Small employers play a big role in apprenticeship provision, and may need special support, including advice on how to make most effective use of apprenticeship, and local networks of co-operation. The rationale for the new apprentice target for public-sector employers is questionable, given that the public-sector workforce is already relatively skilled in comparison with the private sector.