

# Through the looking

**A roundtable event held in November gathered vehicle technician training providers to discuss the issues that they encounter in the age of the apprenticeship levy. Will Dalrymple chaired the session**

**S**chool represents the first opportunity for the vehicle repair industry to reach young people, to educate not only them, but their parents, too, about career opportunities. Colleges often look to recruit from schools, say representatives of colleges who gathered for a friendly roundtable discussion on 16 November at the NEC's Skills Show. One of them - Cardiff and Wales College - even approaches primary schools, as it faces resistance from some secondaries keen on filling A-level places, according to Marc Tuthill: "They see us as poaching the business."

Many participants complained about the poor state of careers advice guiding students toward vocational apprenticeships in particular. Some blamed the poor reputation of engineering in society generally. "We've got to make this industry more attractive," said Trevor Minto. "The career advice I had was, 'You're too thick to be anything but a mechanic.' If we don't get it right at the start, we're going to lose out." At the roundtable, Minto was speaking as commercial growth manager, Newcastle College Automotive Academy; but since then he has moved to industry, at Snap-on Tools.

Another participant advised that, if industry is keen on recruiting girls, it should focus its efforts on a social media campaign on platforms popular with teenagers, such as Instagram. "Having a

credible personal recognition creates an endorsement. If you have a high-profile female engineer in that particular space, that's where you can gain traction," contended Paul Coates, employability skills consultant at Birmingham Metropolitan College.

For that particular cause, at least one speaker found that potential employers also need some work: "There are those that think that females are not for engineering apprenticeships; they throw up a whole host of excuses, such as 'we haven't got the facilities for a female in this garage,'" stated Hugh Bishop, automotive assessment team manager, GTG Training. However, he reported that a few years of persuasion is starting to pay off; its 2018 intake has placed more females on light vehicle and bus and coach apprenticeships than ever before.

## THE GLUE

The connection between training provider and employer, it would appear, has never been more important. Bob Linwood, CEO of vehicle repair industry recruitment charity AutoRaise, argued: "We recognise that going forward our main role is to be the glue between the training provider, the learner, the employer and probably the parent as well. If the starting point is that you accept that the employers are rubbish at that, and then find a way of working with it, then there's a solution."

Government wants this as well.



Last month, training regulator Ofsted launched a consultation on a new practical inspection framework emphasising the importance of interaction between employers and training providers and colleges, and on curriculum design as well, according to Richard Belton, deputy chief executive and training and education director, S&B Automotive Academy.

Training providers can offer employers extra help with apprentices. Bishop added: "Independent employers [often] don't have time for handling the apprenticeship management paperwork, such as filling out an electronic logbook."

They might even be able to take on the required role of workplace mentor, according to Nigel English, engineering lecturer, Stephenson College. He recalled a conversation with IMI (Institute

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of the Motor Industry) about the new standards. He said: "I raised the point, could you have an independent mentor, someone who doesn't work for the garage, but goes in every month, just like an assessor does now? The answer was, 'Yes!'"

### SETTING THE BAR

The high level of vehicle repair apprenticeship standards - generally at level 3, equivalent to A-level school exams - was one of the most controversial issues in the discussion. The trailblazer approach requires apprenticeships to be set to the level of roles required by industry. In this case, they are set to meet MOT vehicle inspector qualifications, contended Ian Perrin, skills trainer at Newcastle College Automotive Academy.

What is at stake is the risk that not all

of the apprentices taken on will be able to successfully complete the course. One of the participants admitted: "We're scared to do an initial assessment, because we know that 90% will probably fail. So we take them on, but I'm afraid that there will be a high dropout rate when we do the end-point assessments."

Belton agreed: "At one of the bus and coach trailblazer meetings 12 months ago, one of the large bus companies said that 70% of their technicians were only qualified to level 2, but at the moment there is only a level 3 standard for bus and coach. So they were asking, 'Why do we need to train - and pay - people to level 3 standards, when the majority are needed at level 2?'"

In response, Perrin argued in favour of a stepping-stone approach, in which the end of each successfully completed year of an apprenticeship results in a mini-qualification. However, Belton pointed out that this would break trailblazer rules for industry relevance - and that he is unaware of any plans to develop any new apprenticeships under level 3 for truck or bus and coach. (The only existing level 2 apprenticeship in vehicle engineering is 'Autocare Technician', which was set up by fast-fit car garages.)

At this point, the SOE's Tony Robinson observed that the irtec competence scheme for technicians could be seen as a modular qualification, as each of its four levels draws on different competencies.

A particular difficulty with the level 3 qualification has been its English and maths requirement. Apprentices must have obtained level 2 (GCSE equivalent) by the end-point assessment to successfully complete their course.

Although participants generally accepted that technicians who are diagnosing vehicle faults need to be able to read, write and speak technically, and to a good standard, several of them argued that this can be a big challenge for apprentices whose natural aptitude tends more toward hands-on skills.

And if apprentices start without the necessary GCSE grades, catching up can be difficult for them, as well as colleges and employers, argued Coates from Birmingham. He said that apprentices must complete an additional functional skills qualification, which may not sit well with the course, and that sometimes the employer won't offer them the additional time needed to complete that work.

A dissenting view came from James Bennett, head of engineering and automotive, Cardiff and Vale College. He stated: "I think it's about the way that you embed those skills in the delivery." Separating the technical content from the English and maths work can make the latter seem irrelevant - but in reality, the majority of those skills will be covered during the apprenticeship anyway, he explained.

Even the heights of a level 3 qualification mark only the start of a lifetime of learning, agreed the participants. Continued Bennett: "Government expects that an apprentice goes into the standard and comes out as a fully fledged engineer. It's never going to happen. In reality, you don't really start learning until after your apprenticeship."

Tony Robinson agreed: "It goes on until you're 70. It's not only about a qualification when you're 20, because the world is always changing." 