

# Fixing problematic apprentice systems: there is never a clean slate

## Abstract

Due to their sheer size, economic importance and common sense history, national apprenticeship systems are important to many interest groups in advanced market democracies and provide a site where never-ending contests over control are waged. In particular, the constant shifts in the balance of the ‘who benefits-who pays’ equation reflects contemporary views on the relative roles of the state, private enterprise and the individual citizen. By using a modified version of path dependency theory, two vocational training systems are compared and contrasted in order to demonstrate how the public policy responses to a remarkably similar set of problems have produced very different solutions. The results suggest that while neoliberal ideas might be highly mobile, there are historical and political realities that serve to limit their translation into realistic policy options.

## Introduction

As an auxiliary function of the power of the ancient Greek city-states, youth were guided on how to behave, develop, increase knowledge and learn skills by ‘magistrates’ whose job was to “watch over the good education of youth” (Foucault 2007, pp. 138-139). By the sixteenth century, this preoccupation with the conduct of youth remained a primary focus of political leaders seeking to ensure that the next generation would be useful to the city and contribute to social functioning (Foucault 2007, p. 231). Wolf (2015, p. 3) maintains that apprenticeships, a formalised relationship between the young person and an employer, have been an integral part of all known human societies and this master-learner relationship has developed in each nation-state in response to its own unique “interests and coalitions” upon which regulated apprenticeship systems have been founded and progressively sanctioned by governments (Thelen 2004, p. 32). Because the ancient and underlying problem of society’s angst over the future of youth remains unresolved, the operation of apprenticeship systems continually comes under scrutiny in a number of countries; resulting in a diverse range of views about the nature of systemic problems and associated resolutions (Beddie & Curtin 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2014; Wolf 2011).

A brief synopsis of the problems of one country’s contemporary apprenticeship system identifies the following shortcomings:

- a dysfunctional mismatch between what government pays for and what the labour market demands
- a system dominated by major vested interests
- public payments that go directly to providers of training, not employers
- a funding and outcomes model that has resulted in a rapid expansion of easy and cheap courses in areas like retail and business rather than longer, harder trade courses
- a decrease in apprenticeship starts
- a general increase in the age of apprentices, reducing apprenticeship pathways for youth and
- misconceived vocational education system policies resulting in scandals and revelations of poor training outcomes (Wolf 2015).

Australian readers would be forgiven for assuming this list from England describes the Antipodean national apprenticeship system – an arrangement that has left business ‘screaming

for' qualified tradespeople such as plumbers, builders and mechanics as a direct result of the interaction of various government policies, according to the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Ross 2015b). By further way of comparison with English apprenticeships, the Australian system is characterised by:

- a system designed for multiple vested interests and clients including business, governments, parents, providers, students (Balzary 1998, p. 186)
- a 'user choice' funding system at state level that pays training providers, rather than employers, for contracted numbers of outcomes (Australian Government 2015d)
- the most popular training package in 2014 was the generic construction, plumbing and integrated services grouping (19,700 commencements) followed by business services (18,900), community services (18,000), retail services (16,400) and tourism, travel and non-trade hospitality (15,500) (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2015, p. 11); even though no occupations from these final four fashionable packages appear on the National Skills Needs List (Australian Government 2015b)
- compared to 2013 the number apprentices and trainees in training at 31 December 2014 had decreased by 18.3 per cent and commencements had decreased by 21.9 per cent (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2015, p. 5)
- 58 per cent of apprentices and trainees who commenced in 2014 were aged 20 years and older and
- widespread reports of financial rorting, implausibly short course duration and very low completion rates in a poorly regulated training market that has been over stimulated by uncapped public funding of training entitlements in some states, such as Victoria, and the introduction of student loans by the federal government (Dodd 2014, 2015; Ross 2015a, 2015b).

Governments in the advanced market democracies of England and Australia have frequently shared a set of internationally mobile policies and practices to guide vocational education and training (Allais 2010; Chard 1983; Ong 2007; Pietsch 2013). The post-World War Two apprenticeship systems in each country have incorporated many of the same policies and, as demonstrated above, have encountered very similar problems. However, the proposed solution to these mostly unintended complications and drawbacks in each country differs. This paper uses a Foucauldian discourse analysis of key policy responses to suggest how these different responses have come about. Exploring the discourses of a specialist area, such as vocational education and training, exposes how power is exercised as well as the power relationships between the major participants (Foucault 2010, p. 217; Oksala 2007, p. 78).

### **Theoretical considerations**

Thelen (2004, p 32) used an adaptation of path dependency theory in her comparative study of the development of four nations' apprenticeship systems to describe how different accommodations emerged to cater for the various vested interests who were seeking to establish regulations that would produce the most favourable outcome and maximise their group's benefit. While pure path dependence suggests that future options are limited by past knowledge and decisions, some sociologists, for example Bourdieu, argue against absolute determinism in education in favour of dispositions that are only activated by certain social and economic circumstances (Grenfell 2007, p. 57).

The limitations of path dependence theory were addressed by Thelen when she deployed two ancillary factors. *Conversion* offers the capacity "for understanding how institutions created for one set of purposes come, in time, to be turned to wholly new ends" (Thelen 2004, p. 36).

The resulting institutions are “redirected to new goals, functions or purposes” and frequently represent compromises between the different power-seeking groups (Dodds & Kodate 2012, pp. 1-2). The second is “*institutional layering* which involves grafting new elements onto an otherwise stable institutional framework” (Thelen 2004, p. 35). This layering can be used to describe incremental institutional change through processes that renegotiate some elements while leaving others in place; join new elements onto a proven framework; actively amend or revise existing institutions or change behaviours by attaching new rules to existing ones (van der Heijden 2011, pp. 10-11).

In addition, Esping-Andersen (1990, pp. 4-5) believes that modern capitalist countries have developed different styles of social welfare that inevitably interact with commitments to full employment. These various accommodations of the social contract between the state and its citizens have some of the characteristics of path dependency, but again do not display an iron-clad pre-determined outcome in each country. In the United Kingdom, liberal reformers believed market capitalism would be better supported by the provision of public good funding and supporting self-help for individual workers rather than “squeezing the last drop of sweat from the labourer” (Esping-Andersen 1990, p. 63). Government help for individual responsibility was supported by programs of mass education and sponsored equal opportunity underpinned by private social insurance schemes “that did not interfere with work incentives and competitiveness” (Esping-Andersen 1990, pp. 63-64).

The development of the welfare state was most hindered in countries where democracy arrived early and social welfare rights were delayed with Australia being an archetypal example (Esping-Andersen 1990, p. 27). In addition, due to near permanent labour shortages, Australian trade unions were able to deliver social protection via wage negotiations based upon “individual rather than community responsibility for poverty” that privileged employment as the supporting structure for welfare provision (Castles 1985, p. 99). Gaining the skills required in order to access employment was a foundational element of both the state welfare and apprenticeship systems in Australia.

## **Discussion**

### *Britain*

A constellation of interests positioned apprenticeship training as a contest between working class unions and capitalist class employers where English apprentices were often caught up in conflicts between the two (Thelen 2004, pp. 145-146). In the 1940s and 1950s the government provided firms with incentives to invest in training in response to severe skill shortages that had come about due to the incapacity of this unstable system to produce adequately trained journey men. The indenture system was not popular amongst employers who felt they had too little power in a voluntary system. In order to further promote training, the Government imposed a training levy on all firms in 1964 and created tri-partite Industrial Training Boards to allocate the levy’s funds and regulate apprenticeships with the unintended outcome of discouraging direct business investment in training due to increased costs (Thelen 2004, p. 147). Partial exemptions to the training levy were introduced in 1973 which further reduced resources in the sector leading to a virtual national collapse of apprenticeship training in the mid-1970s (Thelen 2004, p. 147). The long tradition of British voluntarist approach to training had resulted in distinct costs disadvantages to firms that trained well, an absence of national policy coordination and low levels of commitment from large sections of business and industry. With the exception of the construction industry, the 27 Industry Training Boards were

progressively disbanded through the 1980s and along with them, the training levy disappeared (Gospel & Casey 2012, p. 19).

What had commenced as a decentralised and unregulated British apprenticeship system has become one in which “everything to do with apprenticeship is decided by central government” with policies and programs that Wolf describes as an exemplar of “how not to run a skills policy” (2015, p. 5). Some of the contemporary results of this transfer of voluntary control over the apprenticeship system from employers and unions to the central government have been described earlier. Wolf (2015, p. 12) identifies two underlying causes of system failure – unrealistic and generic apprenticeship targets being set by politicians and under-funding of the system. Her proposed solution is to return to an apprenticeship fund financed by a universal employer levy, controlled by industry instead of government and repositioning the employer-apprentice contract “as central and defining” (Wolf 2015, p. 12).

In the Summer Budget of July 2015, the United Kingdom Government announced its intention to reintroduce an apprenticeship levy on ‘larger employers’ to address problems of low productivity and related matters of retarded economic growth, wages and living standards (Department for Business 2015, p. 5). This rationalisation envisages that apprentices are to be considered as production units that contribute directly to overall economic prosperity. The levy will be collected through the tax system and used to fund capped-value digital vouchers that employers can spend with any registered provider in order to purchase apprenticeship training for those aged 16 and older – thus supporting an increased marketisation of apprenticeship training. The discussion paper that accompanied this proposal noted skill shortages were still a problem in spite of a traineeship system that relied upon ‘voluntarism’ (emphasis in original) supplemented by significant government subsidies intended to encourage increased private funding (Department for Business 2015, p. 6). In other words, the unregulated brawls over apprenticeships between unions and employers and the increased policy control and funding by central government have both failed to improve the supply of skilled workers. Over the years, the number of apprentices in Britain has varied considerably in response to apprenticeship policies. From 120,000 mostly engineering apprentices in 1970, the system collapsed to only 30,000 in 1983 (Thelen 2004, p. 147). The 440,000 commencements in 2013-14 in more than 200 apprenticeship frameworks represent a vast increase in both the size and scope of the formal training system (Wolf 2015, p. 12 and p. 7).

### *Australia*

While the struggles between labour and employers over control of apprenticeships was no less pronounced in Australia, the contest took place in a much more structured environment than *laissez faire* England. Apprenticeship wages and conditions were subject to decisions made by the various state and federal conciliation and arbitration courts (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, pp. 89-98). These unique, compulsory courts not only dealt with industrial relations but also set the direction of social policy by serving “as an instrument for raising the downtrodden and for improving the stamina and character of the coming generation” (Castles 1985, p. 14). Additional regulation came from state-based apprenticeship authorities which declared vocations subject to apprenticeships and set out related administrative guidelines (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, pp. 18-19). These two types of institutions and their functions remain in place to this day.

The various state governments also provided, at public expense, technical education colleges for off-the-job training (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954,

pp. 99-105). The so-called Wright Committee Review into Apprenticeships in the early 1950s suggested that apprentices should be considered as “educational units” rather than as “production units” thereby removing the capacity to make them subject to payment on the basis of the employer’s assessment of their value (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, p. 52). This national review also found that:

there are four parties to the education of an apprentice, namely, the lad himself, his employer, his parents and the taxpayer in general. While all of these parties benefit from the training given to the apprentice, it cannot be doubted he, in the long run, profits most (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, p. 33).

In 1953, it was roughly estimated that 50,000 apprentices were in training in Australia and all of these were in the masculine manufacturing trades (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, p. 121). This number grew steadily from the early 1960s reaching 129,000 in 1985; with the introduction of contracted traineeships that year there was more or less continual growth in total apprentices and trainees to 518,000 in training in 2012, but with the removal of federal government wage subsidies the number had fallen to 351,000 in 2014 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2013, table one). More than 500 occupations have formal certificate level training in apprenticeships and traineeships that are collectively identified as Australian Apprenticeships (Australian Government 2015a). For two decades since the mid-1990s, employers of apprentices and trainees have been able to avail themselves of quasi-marketised User Choice arrangements in which they can select the registered training provider that is paid directly by the state or territory government for the off-the-job training component (Australian Government 2015d). User Choice allowed for the registration of private training organisations and entry into the market for public funding in direct competition to the state-owned and operated colleges.

The Australian Government made one serious attempt at implementing British-style employer levies through the Training Guarantee that was controversially introduced in 1990, suspended in 1994 and finally repealed in 1996. Its evaluation found that it did increase training effort in a wide range of businesses, but “had little success in changing industry behaviour where there was no established training culture” (Fraser 1996, p. vi). As a result of the public policy success of the introduction of income contingent loans into the higher education sector (Chapman 2013), a similar student loan scheme has progressively introduced into vocational education and training commencing 2007 to meet the full tuition costs of higher level qualifications with VET Fee-Help (Yu & Oliver 2015, p. 15). Income-contingent loans were then extended to Australian Apprenticeships in 2014 to replace cash assistance payments for training related expenses, such as tools and safety gear. The Trade Support Loans of up to \$20,000 per apprentice or trainee are available to those training in specified skills shortage occupations (Australian Government 2015c). By November 2015 some 33,000 of these loans have been taken out in the 64 occupations identified as experiencing skills shortages (Australian Apprenticeships NT 2015). The continued concern for the development of appropriate habits in youth is evident in the justifications used in support of replacing grants with loans. “If you are old enough to have a job you’re old enough to manage a loan and the Government believes this programme will encourage financial responsibility” (Australian Government 2015c).

### *Comparisons*

New Public Management (Hill & Hupe 2002, pp. 110-112) loosely describes a set of contractual arrangements used by governments to deliver services to the public. Conceptually, there are four parties involved in the process – the funder, the purchaser, the provider and the client. Where governments have traditionally paid for the full costs of the off-the-job training component, the minister can be considered the funder, a government department does the purchasing from a registered training provider and the client receives the service. The various changes to the English and Australian apprenticeships systems have been based upon shifting responsibility for each of these roles from one party to another. For example, in the English system the concern with youth means that the role of funder varies with age – government fully pays for apprentices under the age of 19, 50 per cent of training costs for 19-23 year olds and up to 50 per cent for older apprentices, with either employers or the apprentice (i.e. the clients) having to pay for the rest (Mirza-Davies 2015, p. 4). The 1970s apprenticeship levies in England shifted funding from the minister to employers while the Industry Training Boards became purchasers. With the eventual demise of the levy, the minister resumed the funder role, government departments resumed purchasing from both public and private registered providers and the age-appropriate client still received the service. The proposed vouchers under the most recently proposed levy scheme yet again changes the role of employers into that of purchaser as well as funder.

In Australia, the level of qualification determines who serves as the funder rather than age. Most clients seeking diplomas and advanced diplomas can either pay directly or take out a government-backed income contingent loan for the full amount and apprentices also have access to supplementary Trade Support Loans. The cost of training is being shifted away from both employers and government and onto the individual, although the vast bulk of traditional trades apprenticeship funding management still conforms with ministerial funding, department purchasing, a range of providers and marginal costs to the student as enshrined in the User Choice model. Unlike England, Australian employers have been particularly successful in resisting attempts to allocate more of the funder role to their group (Zoellner 2015). In addition, the four beneficiaries of training described in the Wright Report (employers, parents, governments and the lads) have each retained an interest and the gradual introduction of income contingent loans is premised on that report's finding that the individual apprentice gained the most from completing an apprenticeship (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, p. 33).

## **Findings**

### *Path Dependency*

An uncritical application of path dependence theory would find it unremarkable that England has (re)turned to employer levies and Australia has moved towards the provision of income contingent loans to resolve problems in their respective apprenticeship systems. But how did these differing responses to similar problems come about? The British conceptualised apprentices as price sensitive production units in a lightly regulated system where appropriate skill sets were determined in the workplace, often as a result of bitter disputes between craft unions and employers. On the other hand, Australia had a heavily regulated apprenticeship system from the very start and disputes between unions and employers were compulsorily settled through conciliation and arbitration processes. The apprentices were considered to be education units and deserving of government funding to provide public support for employers, parents and those in training.

### *Conversion*

Both systems present clear cases of conversion as a result of an internationally mobile set of neoliberal ideas that promote increased marketisation of training and increasing client choice in the system. From the 1970s onwards the notion of apprenticeship was extended well beyond its traditional gendered manufacturing base to include literally hundreds of occupations in both countries. The institution of apprenticeship was converted to cater for hundreds of thousands of people of all ages and employment status in response to youth unemployment and other labour market policies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2005). Governments in many countries created quasi-markets as a mechanism to break the training monopoly held by state-owned colleges (Robinson & Kenyon 1998). These market-oriented changes gave the systems new goals – in addition to skills production there would also be expectations of promoting the introduction of New Public Management processes. Governments in both nations continually intervened in the training markets with time-limited incentives and subsidies in attempts to produce specified outcomes and these efforts frequently produced unintended outcomes resulting in the problems described in the introduction to this paper. There is little indication that conversion to markets and vastly increased numbers of occupations actually served to differentiate the Australian and English apprenticeship systems, instead it seems to have made them more similar.

### *Institutional Layering*

It is argued that Thelen's second addition to path dependent explanations helps explain how the two systems derived different solutions to similar problem sets. The ubiquity, longevity and sheer common sense of the master-apprentice relationship facilitates the addition of new elements to a relatively stable arrangement – institutional layering. Since World War Two neither nation has been able to resist the temptation to attach new rules to the apprenticeship system in order to change behaviours. This most clearly evident where regulations are used to change the roles of funder, purchaser, provider and client on the basis of trying to assign the costs of apprenticeship training to those who benefit most. The valorisation of the contractual relationship between the employer and the apprentice in England allows the individual apprentice to be thought of as an age-dependent production unit. The employer takes on responsibility for the costs of maintaining this relationship and the layer of levy-financed vouchers to be used by businesses is a logical policy outcome in support of the previously grafting on of a training market. In addition, by tapping into the public's deep concern about the problems of youth, the introduction of age limits allows governments to justify the allocation of scarce public funds to support apprenticeships.

Australia has resorted to a different type of layering related to having two levels of government responsible for apprenticeships. This complexity has only increased since World War Two and has resulted in a situation where policy and incentive funding comes from the federal level while apprenticeship legislation, delivery of training and most of the funding comes from the state level. All of this is further tempered by the Australian penchant for a form of 'colonial socialism' and regulation in which business and the community expect public financial contributions, particularly for education (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, pp. 320-321). The master-apprentice contract exists, but the relationship between governments and citizens is a more crucial determinant of the layers of rules and their amendments that are applied to an apprenticeship system that considers the individual apprentice to be an educational unit. The apprentice in this system is conceptualised as the major benefactor and, in keeping with human capital theory (Becker 1993, p. 16), higher level qualifications lead to even greater personal benefits which justifies greater individual contributions towards the cost of training. Income contingent loans are used to ensure that there is equitable access to education and training while eventually assigning the costs to the individual.

## Conclusion

The addition of different institutional layers to the two path dependent apprenticeship systems has not reduced the amount of government involvement, but it has shifted the role of funder and purchaser of training towards the employer in Britain while in Australia the use of government-sponsored loans is shifting the funder and purchaser roles towards the student. Concerns about the anticipated contribution of young people to economic and social prosperity continues to underpin both government's inability to leave apprenticeships to the labour market, each nation has developed its own responses based upon their unique histories, which in turn, determine which policy options reside in the world of the politically possible.

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