

Amanda Spielman at the AELP National Conference 2022

It's great to be here, speaking at such an interesting time for the sector.

I really do want to recognise your work, and to acknowledge the importance of independent learning providers (ILPs) in the wider world of further education and skills.

Of course, I fully appreciate that the AELP is not just about ILPs. It has many other members, including colleges, employers and HEIs.

We also understand that AELP and ILPs aren't just about apprenticeships, although ILPs do teach most of the apprenticeship provision in the sector. ILPs are contributing to increasing the breadth of specialist study programmes for 16 to 18-year-olds. And you are doing this for a great many adult learning programmes as well, including traineeships and skills boot-camps. And so it is good to see a thriving ILP sector providing more choice for learners and for employers.

I want to say here that the ILP sector has performed reasonably well at inspection, with around 80% of providers judged good or better. But I do want to sound a note of caution. We are now seeing that some new ILPs aren't doing so well at inspection. And this is starting to reduce the proportion of ILPs that are judged good or outstanding.

But on a happier note, I am very pleased to see some great recent inspection outcomes this year, where several ILPs have been judged as outstanding. Well done to them! And there are many strengths in this sector. But while I am congratulating you, I must also talk about the fact that there are some serious issues in system quality.

I'll come on to that later, as first I want to highlight some of those strengths.

You have a valuable common set of goals, such as wanting high-quality courses and good outcomes for your learners. You want your learners to enjoy their courses and to go into jobs that are right for them.

We saw a really good example of this in a recent inspection in the East Midlands. Inspectors found an adult training provider had developed an ambitious curriculum that benefited most learners. It had introduced additional qualifications and activities to improve learners' readiness for work and to encourage them to study further.

For example, learners were working through a useful set of teacher-devised materials, which gave them a grounding in areas that would make them more employable, such as interview skills, managing their finances and setting up their own business. These were offered along with options to prepare learners for their first steps in the world of work. Many learners return to the

provider to study further or at a higher level, always a sign of satisfaction. This is really a great example of a provider going the extra mile to plan its curriculum carefully to meet learners needs.

We know that the very best providers are doing an amazingly good job. But that isn't the full picture. There are still too many who don't have the reliable data collection, the information sharing with employers, and the joined-up working practices to ensure that apprentices get full benefit from their training.

And we are aware of some system difficulties that also affect both providers and learners. Take apprenticeships for example. Some achievement rates are very low, on one apprenticeship standard as low as 16%. We often find that the apprentices who finish the course and take their end-point assessment do very well. But too often, too many leave before the end of their training.

But why is this? It could be down to money, because in the current labour market, you may not need an apprenticeship to earn more. But it could be because of pressures at work that mean apprentices do not get enough learning opportunities. Or it could be because of poor quality provision.

Now, more than ever, the answer to this 'why' question is so important. Are apprentices going into better-paid roles in entirely different sectors? Are they getting new roles, thanks to their learning, for better pay, but ending their apprenticeships early? These may be great outcomes for apprentices, but what about the wider picture? There is a real danger that poor retention rates, low achievement rates and a lack of information to demonstrate the value of training programmes will undermine the value of apprenticeships and diminish the prestige of the brand.

We are all aware of the pressures of the current economic climate, post-COVID, post-Brexit and with rising prices and inflation. It's important that policy makers know how factors like these are affecting retention rates and opportunities for young people, especially now when there are plenty of well paid, low-skilled jobs on offer.

We know from our own series of reports on COVID that many young people have struggled in the past couple of years. Some with loneliness; some with having less peer support; some with worries that their next steps won't give them the future they want. And of course, worries about money, and about having to study at home, where conditions may be far from ideal.

They've had to get used to their journey to the world of work not being what they'd expected it to be. Many young people are only just taking their first external exams. Many didn't have the framework of support and the milestones that older cohorts took for granted. Providers need to be mindful of the needs of learners, who might currently need a bit of extra help.

When we inspect an individual provider, we're making a judgement about how it's performing at a point in time, and report that publicly. But that isn't all we do. We also aggregate our inspection evidence to produce in-year and end of year reports, drawing on that detail collected by inspectors. We

inform the sector and government via thematic reports and data publications. These have information that can show you how you are performing relative to others and about how the system is performing. And the wealth of information in these reports may well help you bring about more rapid and greater improvements, and apprenticeship achievement rates at system level certainly do need to improve.

I now want to talk a little more about system quality, and to acknowledge that there is a lot going on in the sector. We hear a lot about the levy in many conversations. For instance, in a recent episode of our podcast – it's called Ofsted Talks, please have a listen if you haven't already! – we heard from an ILP CEO who believed the levy had given them great opportunities and was very valuable. Ian Bamford from Paragon Skills talks in the episode about working with the southern apprenticeship hub to expand Paragon's programme with levy funding.

But we also hear of providers and employers wanting change. We've heard from some employers that want more freedom for their levy spending. Some providers are unhappy with aspects of the apprenticeship system. And frustratingly, we are still finding evidence that the levy is warping parts of the system, and that this may be one reason for poor-quality training.

We hear about how it's enabling some organisations to take the cash with little substantial learning or training in return. And we're also aware that in some cases, apprentices are on a course that is too easy for them, perhaps accrediting what they can mostly do already.

And despite recent hopeful figures, there's still a concern about the range of training and whether it's right for the skills needs of the economy. We are crying out for staff in the higher skilled service industries, construction and many other areas. Have we got the right training in the right places? There's no clearly signposted overview of what apprenticeships can lead to. And they need better careers advice and guidance; apprenticeships are not a second-class route to success.

It is right that policy makers consider whether the levy system is meeting the needs of apprentices, employers and the economy. But it is equally important they consider what the effect of any change will be to avoid any unintended consequences.

And now I want to say something about what we are seeing on inspection and during our monitoring visits to new providers. Of significant concern are the staffing difficulties that many of you are having, especially in relation to recruiting and retaining specialist teachers and trainers, including in subjects like English and maths. We are also seeing fewer learners achieving revised functional skills qualifications.

These and other matters are absorbing leaders' time and drawing their attention and focus away from thinking longer term about the learner experience.

We're watching with interest the introduction of Ofqual recognition for end

point assessment organisations. We think that confidence in the system will grow with this change, though there could be some short-term instability. In the medium and longer term, Ofqual recognition should lead to higher confidence in the end point assessments on offer.

And now onto new provider monitoring visits: it does concern me that around a quarter of new providers are still not making sufficient progress in a least one theme.

The best practice we see is from providers who perhaps focus on one or two areas, have a clear intent, employ and retain expert staff, provide high quality off-the-job training and have strong relationships with a small number of employers.

Providers like this make a real difference to learners' lives and provide the training that employers and the economy need. There's so much in this sector that's valuable and we will continue to support your good work. It's making a great difference to the lives of many, many people.

And apprenticeships are a multi-layered system. I've talked about the economic need for higher skilled workers. But apprenticeships are also a way in, especially for young people who didn't do particularly well at school, people who need to retrain, and others who are furthest from joining the workforce for many different reasons.

Good literacy skills are essential here. If you can't read and write, you can't read the job ad, fill in the form or study on your own. So you won't get the most from the opportunities on offer. In some cases, you won't be able to access them at all.

And having mentioned the complexity of the apprenticeships landscape, I want to end by talking briefly about [our new 5-year strategy](#), which we published in April. There are several commitments that relate to FE and skills. Perhaps the most interesting of these for this audience is a commitment to review the inspection methodology in further education and skills providers – not an easy task, given the complexity and diversity in the sector.

We will review how we gather the evidence on inspection, how we deploy our inspection teams, how many inspectors we allocate for different sizes and types of provider, and what we write about in reports. But what we are not proposing is changes to the education inspection framework (EIF) itself. We know it works well – it's a strong, quality-focused framework, using data and metrics to inform judgements but not to determine them. I want to reassure you that we will continue to inspect through EIF.

Within the strategy, we have a commitment to inspect all of you with a full rather than a short inspection by summer 2025. We know it's helpful for you when we express our views and concerns to ministers, policy colleagues at the Department for Education, IfATE, ESFA and employers' representative bodies.

We understand the challenges you face. We will continue to do our job and inspect and report on what we find, without fear or favour. The strong and

productive working relationship that we've built with you helps us do this important work every day. Please, let's keep the dialogue going!

And thank you again for everything that you do.