

# Amanda Spielman at the Annual Apprenticeship Conference 2022

Good afternoon everyone, it's great to be here to speak to you, especially as we're in Birmingham, a city that has had such a big impact in shaping some of the most significant British industries we have today, and a place where so many apprentices have been trained over the years.

Like many of you, I want to spend today looking forward, but equally we can't ignore how significant the past two years have been for education. And for me, one of the many things COVID-19 has taught us is how important our industries and services are. We used our collective skill base to respond quickly to the pandemic. We adapted at pace to create life-saving equipment and medicine, whilst also re-routing the way we work to mitigate the challenges that lockdowns presented us with. And now, it is our innovation and industry that is leading the economic recovery.

This is why showcasing apprenticeships at conferences like this is so important. Apprentices play a critical role in having a skilled workforce delivering for Britain now and in the future.

And we, like you, want apprenticeships to be as good as they can be. That hasn't and won't change. But we acknowledge how challenging the past two years have been for all areas of the education sector, and apprenticeships haven't been immune. We know that you had to adapt and make rapid changes to the way you work. We also know some sectors were affected more significantly than others with some able to adapt more easily to working, learning and training remotely.

Many apprentices saw their training centre doors close and work activity curtailed. Not every apprentice could work from home, so we saw many furloughed or put on breaks in learning. Many students on courses with a work placement or work experience element couldn't do that part of their programme. Much teaching and training happened remotely, often online if you had a suitable device, broadband connection and place to study – but this was definitely not the case for everyone. In fact, at the other extreme, some apprentices understandably had to work incredibly long hours on the day job.

I'm sure you can all think of examples where your own apprentices could not do what they needed to do. And it's here that I am hugely impressed and grateful for the extraordinary effort that you and your employers made to support learners and apprentices. You deserve a lot of credit for this.

We are also very aware of some of the other challenges you have faced. We know there have been challenges around apprentices sitting functional skills tests or completing their end point assessments. Both these things prevented them from finishing their programmes when they should.

We know that, helpfully, IFATE approved a series of flexibilities to a number

of end-point assessments so they could be done remotely: online or through alternative methods of assessment – but still some apprentices could not complete them.

The combination of these factors has meant that more apprentices than usual are beyond their planned end date or even out of funding. It's understandable that many of you are concerned about the impact of this on your achievement rates and how this might affect inspection judgements.

Achievement rates are important. Apprentices want to pass their qualification as it is often a passport to their next steps, and that's a good thing. But please be assured, the framework does not require inspectors to use achievement rates to make judgement.

We will not be making judgements of 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' just because your achievement rates have declined during the pandemic. What we will want to hear about, and see evidence of, is how your teams of mentors, coaches and trainers are working with apprentices and employers to reorganise training. It's this that will keep current apprentices making good progress and get the apprentices who are past their planned end date, or out of funding, through their end point assessment.

It could mean additional or refresher training, or some reorganisation of responsibilities at work. The outcome that we will be looking for is apprentices who have the skills and knowledge to achieve their qualification.

Similarly, if achievement rates were poor before the pandemic, perhaps as a result of a poorly planned and taught curriculum, we will want to know what it is you are doing to improve the curriculum and how you know this is working.

But as I said, I want to use this time with you to look forward especially now inspections are back in full swing, having re-started almost a year ago.

At the end of the 2021 academic year there were just over 2,000 publicly funded FE and skills providers. That's nearly 10% more than at the same point the previous year.

In fact, about 1600 providers offer apprenticeships and this includes over 1,200 independent providers; as well as colleges, higher education institutions, adult and community learning providers and independent specialist colleges.

We know the apprenticeship reforms have encouraged a big influx of new providers offering apprenticeships.

This has also presented the sector with a variety of challenges and caused some turbulence. And, alongside this growth, a number of Grade 3 and Grade 4 providers have closed.

But, it is still encouraging that the overall profile of inspection judgements has increased slightly.

On top of this, we know a lot of new providers haven't yet had a full inspection. These providers will have had a new provider monitoring visit, or will be due one shortly. Through these visits we have identified providers who have made a promising start with their apprenticeship training as well as a small number who have not. Their next visit will be a full inspection, so when we make comparisons at the end of the next two years, our statistics will cover a much larger proportion of providers.

I am very encouraged by the recently released national statistics which show that apprenticeship starts increased by more than 40% in the first quarter of this academic year, compared to the same quarter last year. A clear sign that the economy is gaining some momentum towards recovery.

We've also seen an increase in new apprentices aged under 19. Some 30% of apprenticeship starts in quarter one were in this age group. It's an age group that we were particularly concerned about before the pandemic as starts were declining.

And, even though there is still a long way to go, it is good to see an increase in new apprentices at levels 2 and 3. Getting skills and qualifications at levels two and three remains an essential route into employment for many people, young and older, who may need to retrain or who haven't had a positive experience at school. These people have the potential to achieve great things and vocational and technical education are essential for the levelling-up agenda.

It is good to see that this has not been at the expense of growth in other levels. When I last spoke here in person in 2020, I expressed concern about the decline in starts at these levels against a background of an increase in starts at levels five, six and seven. Now we're seeing growth at all levels. Some of these standards have integrated degrees and some do not. But at all levels, it is essential that this training genuinely provides new knowledge and skills. It is disappointing when training is just rebadging what is already available.

Participation rates in apprenticeships are also up nearly 9%. However, achievements are down by nearly 13% – which is not something any of us want. But we have seen some huge efforts by both you and apprentices to reverse this trend. I sincerely hope that if I am talking to you next year, we will all be able to see these efforts translate into results.

Despite some of these successes, we know the pandemic has affected the mental health of a number of young people. Not being able to go to work, college or training, attend social events or meet with friends affected us all, but the effect on younger people seems to have been greater.

This is something you should be considering when taking on new apprentices. You should think about the support and guidance you offer. We will be keen to hear what work you have done to help apprentices be successful and overcome some of the challenges they experienced as a legacy of the various lockdowns. For example, will your approach be different for those apprentices who have just completed school or college compared to older apprentices?

So what does the weaker end of the sector look like? The proportion of providers receiving at least one insufficient progress judgement at a new provider visit has stayed about the same, but it is still about a quarter. Like you, we would be very keen to see that proportion decrease, and ideally disappear. But it is good to see that the majority of new providers do receive at least reasonable progress judgements across all three themes.

Now, as I am sure you know, Ofsted took on the inspection of apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7 about a year ago. It's good that we're already seeing some real positives here. For example, there's a lot of careful analysis of apprentices' previous skills and experience and then good planning and sequencing between employer and provider. There's a good balance being made between theory and practical components. And there's some really high-quality teaching.

If this is a topic you are interested in, may I take this opportunity to plug a workshop we are running tomorrow afternoon at this conference about our work on level 6 and 7 apprenticeships. It will have more of our initial findings, so please do go to that if you're interested.

Looking ahead, you probably know we have been asked to inspect all apprenticeship providers by August 2025, and we're working our way through this.

What's encouraging is that on many of the inspections we have already completed we have seen some great examples of apprenticeship training.

The elements that make for good apprenticeship training have not changed, and I wanted to share a few examples of these with you.

The first is of a recent inspection of a specialist hairdressing provider. Here we found a highly effective and ambitious curriculum being taught. What made it so effective was the way employers were involved at the planning stage and right the way through the training. Because the training staff worked so closely with employers, these employers knew very specifically what their apprentices were learning off-the-job at the training centre. This meant they could line up opportunities for apprentices to practise their new skills, and so became skilled very rapidly.

The provider also adapted the training to meet the needs of the smaller employers. For example, when those salons needed apprentices to learn about customer services and customer care skills earlier in the apprenticeship training programme.

The second is an example from a specialist aviation engineering provider. The providers' staff took a great deal of time and trouble to accurately assess apprentices' skills and knowledge at the start of their training. For example, they specifically identified the changes to training plans needed for apprentices with a learning difficulty or disability.

And they were also able to adapt the training according to the types of aircraft they were working on. Apprentices working on both helicopters and

fixed-wing aircraft were able to learn the skills and knowledge needed for both. Because of these changes, all apprentices could make the progress they needed towards becoming fully qualified aviation engineers.

And finally, in a recent inspection of a large, national provider, offering apprenticeships mainly in business, management and ICT, we found a very clear rationale for the apprenticeships they offer. They had clear progression routes for apprentices to move on to the next level once they had completed their current qualification.

Tutors at this provider used assessment skilfully to evaluate what apprentices had learned and what they needed further training and support with. From this work they prepared apprentices well for their end-point assessments.

As a result they were meeting the needs of both large, national, public and private organisations, as well as smaller employers.

Over the past few years, government has placed great weight on apprenticeships as an integral part of providing the skills the country needs. We continue to help government and other organisations to help shape and improve the apprenticeship landscape.

And as I mentioned earlier, I believe apprenticeships have never been more important both for pandemic recovery and for future economic growth and prosperity.

We will continue to play our part in this goal: by inspecting without fear or favour; by highlighting and celebrating where we find the best provision; and by reporting honestly on providers that aren't giving apprentices and employers the training they deserve.

To summarise this, the fact that we have judged apprenticeships to be outstanding in 10 cases since inspections restarted shows us that you have continued to meet your high expectations; you've seized opportunities and been ambitious; and you've worked well with employers, making them an integral part of the training process.

This is a huge positive for our country and we want to see that continue.

With that in mind, it is worth me mentioning that doing these inspections does need a highly skilled and capable inspector workforce. We continue to recruit inspectors, full time and contracted and we are always looking for good people to join our team. So, if you'll allow me another quick plug before I go – then please do go to our workshop here tomorrow afternoon on the role of an inspector. I know the team would be happy to talk to you.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to me today – I hope it's given you an insight into our work and priorities. Before I go, I just want to take a quick moment to congratulate in advance everyone who has been nominated and who wins an award tomorrow evening. The fact there are over 20 categories of awards is a really positive reflection on the quality of providers and employers of apprentices.

I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference and come away with plenty of ideas for the future.