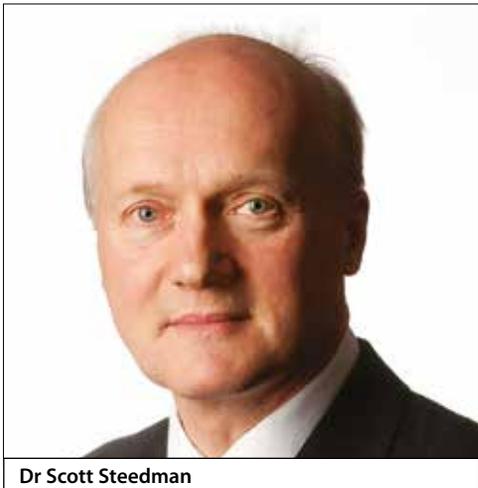


EDITORIAL

PARITY OF ESTEEM IN CAREER PATHWAYS



Dr Scott Steedman

For every profession, bridging the gap between school and employment is fundamental to securing skills for the future. In engineering, for many decades the emphasis has been on academic degrees as the primary route to qualification and a career. Technical pathways into engineering, such as apprenticeships, were widely perceived as less prestigious. Showcase events and the promotion of qualifications for incorporated and technician engineers have had minimal impact on the numbers and diversity of school leavers taking up engineering careers.

Meanwhile, the skills crisis in engineering grows as employer after employer highlights the shortage of recruits as a major risk to future growth. Recent initiatives to increase the number of apprentices across the country try to present an alternative route into employment. A hybrid approach, whereby those in work can pursue academic study through engineering degree apprenticeships, is now offered as a new pathway to achieve the same standard of educational qualification. The possibility of gaining a degree while working, and potentially avoiding a large student loan,

may entice some recruits but it will take a fundamental shift in the public perception of engineering to address the shortfall across the country.

The Spring Budget heralded a further impetus for change when the Chancellor announced the new T-levels, an idea proposed in 2016 by Lord Sainsbury in his independent review of technical education for the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Education, the recommendations of which resulted in the *Post-16 Skills Plan*. T-levels will offer a new form of post-GCSE technical qualification in 15 areas, including engineering and manufacturing, construction and digital skills, and work placements will complement college-based teaching.

So, looking top down, major new developments are in the pipeline. Will they deliver?

Evidence from Greater Manchester and Leeds City Region published this year in an OECD-ILO report, *Engaging Employers in Apprenticeship Opportunities*, highlights the importance of working locally to promote apprenticeships and engage employers. Both studies also highlighted the importance of creating a single, independent central advice service to replace myriad existing national and local initiatives. Salaries and quality of apprenticeships were also seen as critical, as is the potential for career progression.

One finding in the OECD-ILO report from case studies in Germany, which the UK should learn from, is that the involvement of employers in the provision of vocational education is essential to maintaining the quality of apprenticeships. In Germany, this means employers influencing the development of curricula at federal level and working closely with regional and local organisations to ensure that their needs are aligned with young people's expectations.

The attitude of teachers will be critical if they are to persuade students that employers will attach equal prestige to the technical and academic pathways into engineering, called 'parity of esteem'. This is not a new challenge, but one also highlighted by the OECD-ILO report and independently by the Engineering Professors Council (EPC) in its current review of degree apprenticeships, which has highlighted the importance of improved and impartial careers advice and guidance in schools. For engineering careers in particular, where teachers and careers advisors rarely have industry experience of their own to draw upon, it is vital that the profession provides attractive and informative training. STEM Learning, based at the University of York, is one example of an initiative aimed at doing just this through the provision of continuing professional development for teachers and support staff.

Changing public perceptions, and encouraging more young people to take up engineering, is at the core of the Royal Academy of Engineering's purpose and is central to addressing the skills shortage. Employers must get engaged, but so too must the profession through the Academy, the professional engineering institutions (PEIs), the Engineering Council and EngineeringUK. Simple messages, agreed by all and communicated identically, that aim to create parity of esteem are essential to support the efforts of employers and agencies across the country. This needs an holistic, cross-sectoral approach to the promotion of technical and academic educational pathways to employment. With the support of the council and the PEIs, pulling this together with central and local government must be an Academy priority.

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