

EngineeringUK response to the APPG on Apprenticeships Call for evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on apprenticeships July 2020

About EngineeringUK

[EngineeringUK](#) is a not-for-profit organisation. We work in partnership with the engineering community to inform and inspire young people and grow the number and diversity of tomorrow's engineers. We also produce a range of research reports exploring educational pathways into engineering and barriers to participation. Our aim is to grow the collective impact of work across the sector to help young people understand what engineering is, how to get into it, and be motivated and able to access the educational and training opportunities on the way.

EngineeringUK is a member of E4E (Education for Engineering), which is also putting forward a response to this consultation. We support the submission made on behalf of E4E and our submission should be read in conjunction with the E4E response.

COVID-19 and engineering

The coronavirus pandemic has brought into sharp focus the vital role that engineers play in tackling the big challenges we face as a society. Engineering is a varied, stimulating and valuable career and we need to work harder than ever to ensure that it is accessible for this generation of young people – for their own life chances and so that we have a diverse and insightful workforce that enables the UK to thrive and improve societal and economic resilience as well as environmental sustainability. We need engineers to enable the UK to become the green science superpower that this Government wants to build.

COVID-19 and apprenticeships – Worrying signs

Apprenticeships are an important route into an engineering career. However, despite the government's efforts to promote apprenticeships in recent years, apprenticeship numbers, including engineering apprenticeships, have declined since 2016/2017, and the coronavirus pandemic appears to have exacerbated the issue¹. Research published by the Sutton Trust in May 2020² found that as of early April on average just 39% of apprenticeships were continuing as normal, with 36% having been furloughed and 8% made redundant. They also conclude that the crisis is hitting young apprentices the hardest. Data published recently by the DfE³ on apprenticeship vacancies also suggests a dramatic drop (85%), and while this only provides a snapshot from the government run 'Find an Apprenticeship' online portal, it does suggest a worrying wider picture.

A recent 'temperature check' with some of EngineeringUK's corporate members, a range of major engineering employers, tells a similar story. About half of the respondents said that they would most probably have to reduce the number of new apprentices, delay taking on new ones or not take any apprentices on in September at all. Over half the companies we spoke to had also furloughed at least some of their apprentices. These engineering employers also talked about the very real challenges of home IT and internet access, particularly for disadvantaged students, as well as the practical barriers in finding meaningful engineering work placements due to COVID-19.

Diversity in engineering apprenticeships

Diversity within engineering apprenticeships continues to be a persistent challenge. Our soon to be published *Educational Pathways* report finds that just 7.9% of engineering and manufacturing technologies

¹ EngineeringUK, 'Educational pathways into engineering 2020', (forthcoming)

² Sutton Trust. 'COVID-19 Impacts: Apprenticeships', June 2020.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/apprenticeships-and-traineeships-june-2020>

apprenticeship starts were by women in 2018 to 2019; this is particularly stark when you consider that women accounted for half (50.1%) of overall apprenticeship starts in the same period. A recent report by the Social Mobility Commission also shows the quality of training received is not equal, even within the same sectors. For example, disadvantaged apprentices can expect to receive between 1.5-3 months less training than non-disadvantaged their peers in engineering, they are less likely to complete their training compared to those peers and are clustered in apprenticeships at lower levels.⁴

Considerations for policy makers

As we enter the next stage of the pandemic in the UK, with an economic downturn likely to make accessing jobs for young people difficult, it is vital that the Government invests in developing the skills of young people to ensure we have the highly skilled and diverse engineering workforce that the UK will require to succeed going forward.

- **Turning the ‘opportunity guarantee’ into reality**

We were encouraged to see the Prime Minister respond recently to calls from Youth Employment UK and others for an ‘opportunity guarantee’. At the time of writing this note however, there are no details on how this pledge will be delivered in practice. Given the scale of the challenge COVID-19 poses to apprenticeships across the country, warm words need to be translated into timely action, with enough funding to match the policy ambition. We were interested to see the steps taken by some metro mayors in seeking to cover the salary costs of young apprentices in their regions. We feel ambitious policy steps such as this need to be considered on a national scale to support apprenticeships, with a particular emphasis on young apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Giving employers some greater flexibility as to how they can use the apprenticeship levy should also form part of the thinking of how to turn the opportunity guarantee into reality. This was a pressing issue even before COVID-19 and we believe the current situation warrants some fresh thinking by government on how employers can use the levy to support apprentices, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and whether the levy could be used to incentivise companies to take on more young apprentices during this period, particularly in thriving sectors, leading to greater investment in the future of the next generation. For example, it might be possible for clusters of employers to share apprentices or use levy funds to fund joint mentoring and coaching for disadvantaged young apprentices. Consideration should also be given to the levy could be used for pre-apprenticeship programmes and outreach initiatives targeted particularly at under-represented groups as proposed by the Strategic Transport Apprenticeship Taskforce⁵.

- **Addressing the diversity issue**

We would like to see policy makers working together with young people, the engineering community and the FE sector to develop solutions to increasing diversity in engineering apprenticeships, and the engineering workforce more widely, underpinned by a clearer common understanding of the barriers and blockers. We need a much more diverse engineering workforce to enhance our collective ability to solve some of the largest social and economic challenges facing the UK and enable the engineering sector to thrive and drive the economic recovery post-pandemic.

Among other things, this will require addressing the digital divide that makes learning for certain groups of young people difficult, and which the Covid-19 pandemic has further brought to the fore.

⁴ Social Mobility Commission, ‘Apprenticeships and Social Mobility: Fulfilling potential’, June 2020

⁵ Industrial Strategy Council, ‘Rising to the UK’s Skills Challenges’, June 2020

Kirsty Donnelly (CEO City & Guilds) recently said in evidence to the Education Select Committee that the country was at a 'digital tipping point' as a result of COVID-19, with many apprentices missing out on online learning due to lack of access to laptops or broadband. This wider point is echoed by the Royal Academy of Engineering in their recent report on COVID-19, and by EngineeringUK's corporate members, who identified that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds with limited access to IT equipment have struggled more with their apprenticeship during this pandemic. While the government is rolling out a laptop programme for schools, it is important that apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds are also provided with the devices and access that they need to complete their apprenticeships.

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For more information on our research, go to our website [here](#).