Will companies get a fair piece of the apprenticeship pie?

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WILL COMPANIES GET A FAIR PIECE OF THE APPRENTICESHIP PIE?

PROFESSOR JIM SAKER is director of the Centre for Automotive Management at Loughborough University's Business School and an AM Awards judge. He has been involved in the automotive industry for more than 20 years.

One of my only claims to musical fame is that I was in a Manchester crowd in the 1970s when Don McLean recorded the live version of American Pie. I dutifully sang along as requested and still have the vinyl recording in the office at home. As a result of this experience, any mention of the term (I use it) is automatically linked in my mind to the concept of driving a Chevy to one and finding it dry. (Those under the age of 40 who have no idea what I am talking about should download the song. All will become obvious.)

Of late, the term has encroached into my everyday life with the Government's introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy at the start of April. I am getting regular phone calls from people within the sector asking how the levy, paid by organisations with salary bills of more than £3 million, could best be spent.

The problem, as with many Government schemes, is that they are quick to take the money without ensuring provisions are in place to deliver on the supply side.

One of the interesting issues thrown up by the apprenticeship scheme is the concept of the degree apprenticeship, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Although the degree programmes exist at Loughborough, the Apprenticeship Standard for retail automotive management does not. So, at the moment, companies cannot use their levy on the degree programmes.

We are currently exploring with the IMI the best way of getting standards that work for our sector in place. This should not be problematic, but for the standard to receive Government validation, at least 10 companies must be consulted as part of the development process. If you are interested in being involved, please email me at jmsaker@lboro.ac.uk.

There is a slight irony in the situation that Loughborough has been offering the BSc in Retail Automotive Management for 20 years, targeted at young people currently working in the industry. It is block release, part-time and is shorter than the structure of the Apprenticeship Degrees. This programme has not recruited large numbers, as organisations appear to be reluctant to invest in young people in case they decide to leave. The Apprenticeship Degree will cost a company almost exactly the same as our existing programme, but because the Government will be contributing to it, this type of course now seems to be popular.

Anyone looking from outside would be forgiven for reaching the conclusion that the training and education is actually a by-product of ensuring that, in Don McLean's words, the levy is dry.

"I AM GETTING REGULAR PHONE CALLS FROM PEOPLE WITHIN THE SECTOR ASKING HOW THE APPRENTICESHIP LEVY COULD BEST BE SPENT"