

A new era of apprenticeships

COVER
STORY

In this month's Training and Education feature, we examine the industry's reaction to the Government's apprenticeships reforms and look at how the sector is preparing for Brexit.

Planning ahead under the Brexit shadow

Head of Department of Food Science and Agri-Food Supply Chain Management at Harper Adams University, Professor Ralph Early, discusses the challenges that the training and education sector is facing in the wake of Brexit.

The British food industry has been committed to an extended period of Brexit-related uncertainty, as a consequence of David Cameron's attempt to quell dissent and unite his own political party.

The meat industry, like other sectors of the food industry, is now forced to navigate uncharted territory as Great Britain PLC makes the transition from a familiar and manageable business environment to one that is entirely unfamiliar, indeed as yet unknown.

Even though Theresa May asserted that 'Brexit means Brexit', what it really means in terms of effects on the economy and ability to trade with Europe - let alone evolve new global trading partnerships - will only be revealed when exit negotiations with the EU are complete.

In the meantime, how should meat businesses – the abattoirs, meat processors and product manufacturers that enrich our country's food marketplace and the diet of the people – prepare for an uncertain future, perhaps dominated by WTO rules and competition from countries that seek to put our own farmers and meat companies out of business?

It is a common feature of difficult trading times when businesses are forced to cut costs that investments in training and education are the first sacrifice.

Even though Brexit will probably manifest a very difficult, even recessionary environment for the British food industry, this is not the time to make savings by shaving staff development budgets. In fact, it is the time to invest in training and education. Research invariably shows that companies which invest in staff development when times get tough, survive better and gain competitive advantage when economies ease.

So meat businesses would be well advised to make and develop links with colleges and universities to plan strategic staff development, in order to help survive our Brexit future; and of

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course, for some businesses these links will create opportunities for the recovery of apprenticeship levy payments.

One university that has worked consistently with and for the good of the country's meat industry is Harper Adams University, in Shropshire. For many years it has turned out graduates that create excellent careers in the meat industry, and for the last five years it has run a postgraduate programme in Meat Business Management, designed specifically to cater for the educational needs of supervisory and management staff.

Almost 70 employees from British meat businesses have undertaken the PgC element of the programme and two part-time students graduated with an MSc in Meat Business Management in 2016.

The PgC course covers topics of direct relevance to the day-to-day operation of meat businesses – meat production and science, operations management, leadership and people management, and supply chain management – and some meat businesses are now establishing it within their graduate programmes.

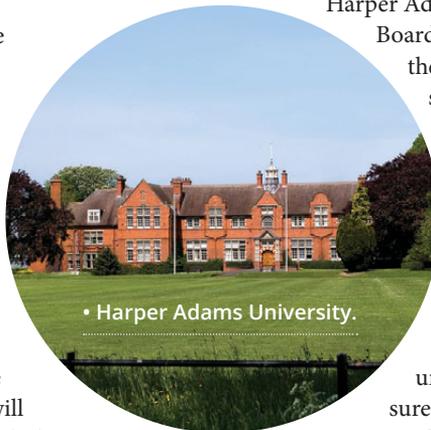
In addition to supporting the meat industry through education, Harper Adams has created a Meat Industry Advisory Board to bring together academia, businesses from the red and poultry meat sectors and industry specialist organisations, such as AHDB Beef and Lamb and the Food & Drink Training & Education Council.

The intention is to understand and evaluate the training and educational needs of the two meat sectors, in order to establish long-term strategies for staff development based on purpose-designed courses. Given the uncertainties that Brexit will bring, we can be sure that by enabling meat businesses to collaborate more effectively in resolving common training and education problems, their ability to defend against threats from abroad will be improved, their competitiveness and profitability will be enhanced and their capacity to serve the needs of British consumers will be safeguarded.

So, not only does Harper Adams University support Britain's meat industry through its education and research activities, from meat animal production to meat-related training and education, it is increasingly becoming an integral part of the wider industry. Something of which the university's staff are very proud.

www.harper-adams.ac.uk ▶

• Professor Ralph Early.



◀ Apprenticeships - the way forward for the meat industry

Chairman of the Institute of Meat and chief executive of the Food & Drink Training & Education Council, Bill Jermey, discusses the impact of the Government's new quality standards.



From this month the Apprenticeship Levy will be payable, and this is going to have a major impact on the way that businesses - large and small - run or start their training schemes. For businesses with a less than £3 million wage bill, there are better-funded apprenticeships to utilise, while levy-paying businesses will see 0.5% of their wage bill being deducted by HMRC every month.

For companies with a £3 million annual wage bill, the levy amounts to £12,500 per month and in order for them to get that cash back, they will need to employ apprentices on an SFA (and soon IfA) approved apprenticeship.

Many young people have already demonstrated that leaving school to work in craft areas such as butchery can lead to better, more secure jobs, without huge debts hanging over them.

Ever since Tony Blair announced the target of 50% of school leavers going to university, we have seen a monumental growth in degree courses that have not always produced the type of graduates that were needed in our economy. With increasing tuition fees and student debts, some might say we are now seeing the results of Blair's failed policy.

The recent Sainsbury Review highlighted that we were headed, in 2020, to be 28th out of 33 OECD countries in respect of having an appropriately skilled workforce. So Blair's other policy of replacing National Training Organisations with Sector Skills Councils has also proved to be a failure.

The reform of apprenticeships promises a far rosier outcome. At last, there is the promise of a credible and respected alternative to university for young people; and many are taking that choice. Many young people have already demonstrated that leaving school to work in craft areas such as butchery can lead to better, more secure jobs, without huge debts hanging over them.

The new apprenticeships are certainly not the 'soft option' either. In addition to holding down their day job, apprentices are required to study for their End Point Assessments (EPAs). EPAs are how quality is assured in the apprenticeship system.

They replace the previous model of continuous assessment leading to qualification. Apprentices now have to prove they have developed the skills, knowledge and behaviours required by the new Apprenticeship Standards. It's true that there's still much debate in the wider food industry about them, but our meat industry has largely embraced the concept. The opportunity is there to showcase the level of skill a professional butcher must have, and in fact, this month we will see our first apprentices on the Level 2 Butchery Standard taking their EPAs.

The Trailblazer scheme has given the meat industry the opportunity to develop more rounded, better-funded apprenticeships, which have the potential to provide the industry with a strong core of people who really understand their raw material and can develop the qualities needed to take businesses forward.

We have developed the schemes with the passionate engagement of butchers and meat companies.

We have fed into this our experience with other augmented apprenticeship programmes. We have had input from the professional body of the meat industry, the Institute of Meat (IoM), who even prior to National Vocational Qualifications ran wonderful programmes; with IoM qualifications being the 'holy grail' of the butchery profession, we are "back to the future"!

The Butchery Apprenticeship, Advanced Butchery Apprenticeship, and the forthcoming Abattoir Apprenticeship are all seen by the industry as fit for purpose, and will deliver what the trailblazer scheme set out to achieve. Sadly, some employers are taking a more short-sighted approach, by attempting to force-fit their existing training programmes into becoming new 'apprenticeships'. Aimed more at recovering their levy than providing meaningful training and career progression for their employees, time will tell if they will succeed.

www.foodtraining.org.uk
www.instituteofmeat.org



◀ The Government's reforms to apprenticeships - in a nutshell

In a bid to deliver the Government's wider reforms to make apprenticeships more rigorous, the Department for Education and the Skills Funding Agency have published a new register of apprenticeship training providers.

In what has been described as a "crucial milestone" in the shake-up of apprenticeships, all providers on the register will have gone through a "rigorous assessment process to make sure they meet apprenticeship quality expectations." In addition, levy-paying employers will be able to choose their apprenticeship training delivery from the provider base for all apprentices starting their schemes from May 2017.

Apprenticeships and Skills Minister Robert Halfon noted: "Giving employers control over their apprenticeships needs and funding is an essential feature of our plan to create an apprenticeships and skill nation. Our new register of apprenticeship providers will mean that only organisations that have passed our quality assurance can deliver apprenticeships."

The Government's wider reforms regarding apprenticeships include the introduction of the apprenticeship levy from 6th April, which requires employers with a wage bill of over £3 million a year to pay 0.5% of their wage bill to invest in apprenticeships.



New standards for butchery apprentices at Reaseheath College

Cheshire-based Reaseheath College has redeveloped its Level 2 and Level 3 Butchery Apprenticeships to new standards, forming part of the Government's recently-launched 150 revamped training programmes.

The new apprenticeships have been redesigned by a group of employers supported by specialist awarding organisation for the food and drink industry, Food and Drink Qualifications (FDQ), which tested the programmes for quality assurance.

According to the Government's new standards, the butchery apprentices will now have to prove their knowledge, practical knife skills and their ability to relate to and advise customers, along with completing a portfolio of work.

FDQ chief executive Terry Fennell said: "These new apprenticeships have restored many of the traditional 'craft and mastery' skills that have been long associated with butchery."

www.reaseheath.ac.uk



• Apprentices and butchery employers at Reaseheath College.