

Labour Conference 2021: The future of skills and apprenticeships: How the defence industry plays its part

28 September 2021, 17:30

BAE Systems & PoliticsHome

Panel:

- Laura Hutchinson, head of UK political intelligence, Dods Group (chair)
- Michelle Knott, manager of submarines academy for skills and knowledge, BAE Systems
- John Healey, Shadow Secretary of State for Defence
- Rhys McCarthy, national officer for aerospace and shipbuilding, Unite the Union
- Dr Neil Bentley-Gockmann, chief executive, WorldSkills UK

Michelle Knott outlined the work of the skills academy, which she said was essential in equipping people with skills for the current and future needs in the sector, particularly as submarine manufacturing developed.

She noted that their apprenticeships had a significant and growing rate of female participation, and that they had bucked the national trend, having seen an increase in apprenticeship starts this year.

Dr Neil Bentley-Gockmann said it was important to have high-quality skills in manufacturing in the UK to meet with global industry standards, being led by the likes of South Korea at the moment. This was partly because we were competing for international investment, and inward investors considered quality and skills a major aspect of deciding to do so.

He also drew attention to the need to build prestige around vocational and technical education, to create a parity with university, which would have an overall positive effect on quality and standards of skills.

Rhys McCarthy affirmed it was of national importance to drive up skills across the board and across sectors. He spoke of the need to "re-kickstart" social mobility within society, which quality skills provision would do. He suggested an approach similar to the one taken in Germany, whereby companies trained more apprentices than they needed, to either spread across the supply chain, or send out into the workforce.

John Healey agreed with the speakers before him that not enough had been done for apprenticeships and skills over the last few years – however, he went further to say that the Government were in fact doing damage. He reflected on his time as education minister, when he established the Union Learning Fund, and expressed dismay that it was now being removed.

He argued that the capacity to respond to the challenges faced in skills – not just in defence, but across the board – had now been damaged through cuts to education funding over the last decade. He also argued there was a "looming crisis" for the defence sector, when we looked at the age of the workforce and the fact an overall strategy for how to handle this.

He advocated for skills provision to be Government-led and Government-funded, but with clear input from employers and employees.

Laura Hutchinson asked what Labour and industry could be doing to ensure the defence sector had the skills required for the next century.

Knott noted that BAE Systems had a rolling workforce strategy, which was updated regularly. She added that, while hard skills played a key part, soft skills were also an essential aspect of equipping young people for the future. This could be started now, ready for the future, she said. Agile careers would also be a future factor, as well as what companies could offer their employees.

Dr Bentley-Gockmann argued there was a case for joining up skills development, economic development and industrial strategy, particularly to create an attractive environment for international investors looking at the UK. He said there was also an opportunity to focus on workforce development and workforce standards.

Rhys noted that, while the apprenticeship levy was well-intentioned, it was also extremely inflexible and needed reform. He also suggested that all businesses and communities could benefit from apprenticeships being extended through the supply chain.

Healey suggested that, when assessing the 'social value' of defence contracts, the Government should consider apprenticeship uptake as part of this. He also queried why the apprenticeship levy hadn't produced greater investment or more placements, despite amassing £1.3bn for the Treasury.

In terms of a plan from Labour, he said there wasn't yet a blueprint for skills but that Anneliese Dodds and Kate Green were working on forming that policy.

Jansev Jamal, head of research at NCFE, was in the audience and asked what BAE System were doing to buck the trend on apprenticeship starts. Knott told the session that they worked on a national level with colleges and schools, while spending a large amount of money on promotion – but crucially, the relationships held at the local level, as well as the amount of standards they offer, had been key to the success. Knott also added that gender equality within the sector, and in their programs in particular, were a key focus for her.

Dr Bentley-Gockmann noted the importance of peer-to-peer role modelling for increasing equality within apprenticeships and in the sector, adding that "you can't be what you can't see".

Ian Waddell, general secretary of the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (CSEU) was also in the audience and suggested using the £1.3bn held by the Treasury could be used to create a UCAS-style system for apprenticeships, and also that Labour should make skills a priority across all briefs in the shadow cabinet, in order to really put pressure on the Government.

Healey agreed with the latter point, adding that he didn't believe the apprenticeships and skills policy of the party should be devised solely within the shadow education team, and that he was happy to be at this event today for that exact reason. He also advocated for greater engagement and promotion of apprenticeships and the FE system from an earlier age.