Dear Ms Hillier,

I am writing on behalf of both the National Union of Students (NUS) and the National Society of Apprentices (NSoA) to raise our concerns over the current status of Learndirect, the impact this is having on learners, and the wider implications for all apprenticeship providers.

NUS is a confederation of close to 600 students’ unions, representing more than 95 per cent of all higher education and further education unions in the UK. Over half of the 7 million students we represent are in further education, and we established the National Society of Apprentices (NSoA) in 2014, which now represents over 150,000 apprentices from all sectors and industries in the UK.

As you will know, Learndirect, the largest training provider in the UK, has recently been rated inadequate by Ofsted, with the report revealing that around a third of learners were not receiving their entitlement to off-the-job training and gaining sufficient skills. We are highly concerned that thousands of learners are being failed by their provider, and are now left facing high levels of uncertainty over the provision of the remainder of their apprenticeships.

Furthermore, we are concerned to hear that Learndirect has received preferential treatment by the Education and Skills Funding Agency, meaning they are able to go on recruiting new learners for courses up to July 2018 despite their inadequate provision.

We welcome the Public Accounts Committee’s referral of Learndirect to the National Audit Office, along with the recent announcement that the National Audit Office is investigating Learndirect and the Department for Education.

However, the issue extends beyond the failings of one provider, and we are concerned generally about how decisions on apprenticeship provider funding are managed. Significant amounts of public money may continue to be awarded to private providers with similar problems to Learndirect, or who are considered “too big to fail”, with little public knowledge of any safeguards in place for apprentices.

NUS will continue to keep a close eye on apprenticeship provision, and we will greatly appreciate your continued efforts to do the same.

Please don’t hesitate to get in touch with Millie Harris, Public Affairs Assistant, at camilla.harris@nus.org.uk.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Shakira Martin
President
National Union of Students