

POLICY RESPONSE

MillionPlus response to the draft strategic guidance to the Institute of Apprenticeships

Alan Palmer, Head of Policy and Research

31 January 2017

INTRODUCTION

The Institute for Apprenticeships, operating within the strategic guidance published by the Secretary of State, will play an important role in ensuring the success of the government's apprenticeship reform programme.

In addition to the specific roles outlined in the guidance, the Institute should also be expected to play a role in raising the status and esteem of apprenticeships, and improving awareness of higher and degree apprenticeships delivered by universities – especially modern universities – working in partnership with employers.

Modern universities have long-standing traditions of providing professional, technical and vocational education up to and including degree level, and as such are well-qualified to lead the way on many apprenticeships courses. The recent funding announcement from the Higher Education Funding Council for England of £4.5m to support the creation of 5,000 new apprenticeship starts by September 2017 is testament to this. At modern universities across the country there are apprentices enrolled on courses to get the very best out of both learning through work and through study. As such, these modern universities have a key role to play in filling the skills gap in technical education

As well as raising the status of technical education and apprenticeships, the Institute will need to be mindful of how employers and providers will promote the opportunities effectively to young people. As noted by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) State of the Nation report in November 2016, almost all 19-24 year old students start an apprenticeship that is at the same level as a qualification they already hold (e.g. a school leaver with GCSEs starting an apprenticeship at level 2). It is vital that opportunities are about progression to increase an individual's qualification and skill levels.¹

The proportion of young people completing apprenticeships has been in decline since 2010, and recent expansion has been by students aged 24 and over. The SMC identified that often this expansion has been driven by employers rebadging current training programmes as apprenticeships.

Many apprenticeships are in predominantly lower-pay, lower-skill sectors. The ten most popular apprenticeships in 2014/15 were disproportionately in low-skill industries such as health and social care, catering, retail and customer service. These sectors were singled out in the government's Apprenticeship Pay Survey as offering least pay progression during the training period and have been identified in SMC research as having endemic poor pay.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2016>

OPERATING WITHIN A BROADER CONTEXT

The government has an aim of delivering three million apprenticeship starts by 2020. While this is clearly an important target for the government, and one which will guide the work of Institute for Apprenticeships, it is equally important to pay close attention to progression and completion. Starting an apprenticeship is only one measure of success; for an individual to benefit fully, they should be supported to progress through the course to be successful in the end point assessment of the standard, and achieve any associated qualification.

This aspect of completion is particularly important with regard to higher and degree apprenticeships that will be delivered by universities working with employers. These universities have significant expertise and experience in providing support to students learning in a diverse range of contexts to ensure that they are successful in their courses. Apprenticeship completion (and where relevant, degree qualifications) is an important part of the broader context, and should not be ignored in favour of a focus on apprenticeship starts.

The Institute is being asked to work with government to bring all technical education under its remit. This is with the aim of building a single, fully integrated system “to ensure technical education works for employers.” Although there is good reason to focus on employers and their needs, it is important that the Institute is also expected to work with providers that deliver this technical education, including universities, so that they are able to advise and offer further guidance on how to ensure the new single system is effective and able to provide the right learning opportunities to students. Higher and degree apprenticeships are an important part of the overall apprenticeship policy, and are often different to other types of technical education in terms of the skills and attributes an individual develops during their course. The processes and systems that quality assure HE courses delivered within apprenticeships will also be very different to FE and private providers’ Ofsted regulation and quality assurance.

CORE PRINCIPLES

The Institute is being asked to operate within a number of core principles. These principles should ensure that apprenticeships are effective, meet skills needs, provide individuals with opportunities and are credible to employers. However, although the principles include the importance of an apprenticeship leading to full competency and capability, and being assessed through a single point assessment, there is no mention of completion or progression. Both of these are important principles in any education environment and, as noted above, a key part of any qualification pathway. Employers and providers should be tasked, through oversight by the Institute, with ensuring individuals complete their qualifications and are equipped with the skills and attributes to progress to the next level, at an appropriate point in their career. Without completion and progression being considered core principles, there is a risk that individuals are not given opportunities that enable them to fulfill their full potential over the course of their working lives. Additionally, there is a potential issue with the gap between the end of learning (and completion of the qualification) and the end-point assessment. There is a risk that apprentices may not want to complete the apprenticeship if they have achieved their degree and this may impact on completion rates.

STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT AND APPROVAL

In overseeing the development and approval of standards, the Institute should aim for close and constructive engagement with providers and provider representatives. Although the development of new standards will be employer-led, it is important that providers (whether they are registered as training organisations, assessors, or both) are involved from an early stage and throughout the process. This will ensure that providers, such as modern universities, are able to fully understand the needs of employers and can use their

expertise to design training programmes and assessments that are fit for purpose. Including universities at an early stage where possible is particularly important when considering higher and degree apprenticeships. The development and approval process should be as transparent as possible to ensure that employers are able to choose from a wide range of providers to find the one that best meets their needs.

ASSESSMENT

The implementation of higher and degree apprenticeships, and the importance placed on them by government, means that universities – particularly modern universities with extensive experience in technical and employer-led provision – are a fundamental part of a successful apprenticeship policy. With this in mind, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) should be named as an organisation offering external quality assurance. The QAA, and its partner bodies in Scotland and Wales, have extensive experience in assuring the quality processes of universities, and as such would be the most suitable organisation for universities to work with when it comes to ensure the quality of their apprenticeships and their assessment processes.

SUMMARY

The strategic guidance to the Institute for Apprenticeships from the Secretary of State should include reference to:

- The need to place technical education and apprenticeships in the wider education context
- The role and experience of providers, especially modern universities, in delivering provision and assessments that meets the need of employers
- A focus on completion and progression to ensure that these aspects of apprenticeships are considered to be of equal importance as the number of starts achieved
- The need to understand the different types of technical education, particularly higher and degree apprenticeships delivered by universities
- The role of the Quality Assurance Agency as the most appropriate organisation to assess the quality of apprenticeships delivered by universities

For more information, please contact Alan Palmer, Head of Policy and Research at alanpalmer@millionplus.ac.uk, or call 0207 717 1651