

## **Apprenticeships – Revenge of the Bureaucrat?**

Successive Skills Ministers have emphasised that the success of the Apprenticeship Reforms will be based on employer leadership. *‘A fully employer-led system’* - Anne Milton MP, *‘the whole purpose of the reforms ... put employers in the driving seat’* - Robert Halfon MP and *‘no one better understands the skills employers need than employers themselves’* – Nick Boles MP

UVAC has always supported this approach. And employer leadership is certainly showing signs of paying big dividends. Employers have shifted the focus of Apprenticeship to the occupations and skills they need to increase the productivity and performance of their organisations. Accordingly employers, have through the Trailblazer process, developed the standards they need and levy paying employers are focused on using such standards. A key development has been the development of Degree Apprenticeships in very significant occupational areas – although the number of starts remain low. Police Forces have developed the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship, local authorities, Social Worker Degree Apprenticeship and in the NHS a range of new high skill Apprenticeships of which the Registered Nurse is an excellent example. In the private sector Degree Apprenticeships have been developed for organisations from Capgemini to Uniserve. Meanwhile there has been a decline in level 2 Apprenticeships that dominated the old intermediary and provider led Apprenticeship system, particularly in questionable occupational areas such as business administration, customer service and retail. Sure the Trailblazer process is still too bureaucratic, but employers have been empowered to develop the Apprenticeship standards their organisation need. And levy paying employers are spending on the higher level and higher value Apprenticeships their organisations need.

So employers are focusing on higher level skills and using Apprenticeship to raise productivity and performance – great news? Well not for some key organisations in the Apprenticeship system. DfE officials are increasingly talking about getting the right balance of Apprenticeship provision – whatever this means? Ofsted, seemingly rejecting the whole concept of Apprenticeship as an employer led programme, have gone further and called for a prioritisation of levy funding for young people without a full level two qualification. Presumably Ofsted expects, as examples, Police Forces not to spend on police constable degree apprenticeships and NHS trusts not to spend on Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeships, IT specialists and managers but instead focus on level 2 programmes they don’t really need? Of course there is a need to support the third of young people who after 11 years of compulsory education don’t achieve a full level 2, but isn’t the answer for Ofsted to raise school standards? And for young people without a full level 2 aren’t there better alternatives than the low level Apprenticeships of the past, Traineeships or potentially T levels for example?

The Education and Skills Funding Agency also seems to struggle with the concept of an employer led Apprenticeship system. Employers want to increasingly use Degree Apprenticeship. Yet the ESFA procurement for funds to deliver Apprenticeship to non-levy paying employers resulted in a postcode lottery in the availability of Degree Apprenticeship provision. Is it acceptable, for example, that no university in England's second City, Birmingham, has ESFA funding to deliver digital, construction or engineering Degree Apprenticeships to non-levy paying employers? Is it acceptable that ESFA have taken no action to rectify the gaps in provision and is simply rolling over contracts for existing providers to April 2020 due to the failure to transfer non-levy paying employers to the Apprenticeship Service by April 2019? This despite the fact of evidence of gaps in degree apprenticeship provided by UVAC, the HE regulator the Office for Students and most recently the Higher Education Commission. Employers have the right to expect better. Another worrying development are ESFA proposals for a Provider Earnings Limit (PEL). This proposal has been presented as a way of controlling provider growth and preventing providers growing too fast then failing. If so, with caveats, fine. Unfortunately there's a suspicion that the ESFA PEL could intentionally or unintentionally restrict the growth of certain types of provider or certain types of provision and in effect become a form of rationing. This is of particular concern for new types of provision. ESFA needs as a matter of urgency to confirm the PEL will not restrict NHS Trusts, Police Forces, Local Authorities from spending on Registered Nurse, Police Constable or Social Worker degree apprenticeships with the university of their choice. The ESFA must also guarantee that the PEL must not restrict employer choice – unless there is a real risk of the provider the employer wants to use failing.

Even this week's National Audit Office report on the Apprenticeship Programme suggests the NAO may be falling into the trap of assuming the bureaucrat knows best. It's third recommendation suggests DfE and ESFA should assess whether certain types of Apprenticeship should be prioritised. This could well sit very uneasily with the employer led Apprenticeship system championed by Ministers. If prioritisation is based on supporting employers focus and spend on the Apprenticeships their organisations need then fine. But is this what the NAO are suggesting?

So in National Apprenticeship Week can I suggest we celebrate the emerging success of the Apprenticeship Reforms and ask that Ministers emphasise the positive effects of employer leadership. Let's not waste the potential of the Apprenticeship Reforms to raise UK productivity through the meddling of well-intentioned bureaucrats. And perhaps Ministers can remind Ofsted and ESFA of the policy commitment to develop an employer led Apprenticeship system.

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