

Apprenticeship Proposals – Where are we now?

Growing the Apprenticeship programme has been a priority target for all governments over the last 20 years. In 2012 it was no surprise to find that the Coalition Government asked a high profile entrepreneur to have another ‘radical’ look at the Apprenticeship programme to see what might be done to increase the Apprenticeship starts and improve the quality.

Since then we have had three further consultations and several government statements about those changes. The government has set out its policy in the Future of Apprenticeships paper and as a result the Trailblazer process is well under way. We are now in the middle of a second consultation on the funding issues but we still do not have any of the essential details to really understand how any new system will work. It is therefore important to go back to the original principles involved.

The debate has been characterised by giving employers the ownership of the programme and especially with funding it is being positioned as a question of decision making being either training providers or employers. This is clearly not the case. The issue is whether government will give up its authority over the scheme to really give employers the choices that they want rather than the ones the government keeps pushing, some would say for dogmatic rather than economic or quality reasons.

Since the Apprenticeship programme was developed in the modern era, employers have been involved in the development of the qualifications and frameworks. However governments of all colours have continued to keep control of the programme and thereby complicated the rules. So for example it was not employers that wanted to create a very complex structure for frameworks called SASE (Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England) AELP was very clear about saying that SASE was too restrictive in its rules and would stop employers getting the training programmes they needed. It is with some irony that only three years later the government is removing SASE from the statute book. If only they had listened to the vocational sector and employers.

So the Trailblazer process is being driven by employers, which is good. It is many of the same employers that have been involved with SSCs in writing and amending the current frameworks. But the difference is that employers will be given the freedom to develop the programmes they need this time. Possibly. The government has specified a number of fundamental elements of the new ‘standards’. Standards have to include a substantial element of end testing, the programme has to be graded and there has to be independent verification. Employers within each sector should be allowed to develop standards and frameworks that meet the needs of all employers and not meet a government driven agenda.

When it comes to funding, most employers and other stakeholders including AELP believe that the system is over complex, changes too frequently and is not transparent enough. AELP has recommended many changes over the years to simplify the system but governments have always wanted to control their expenditure through reductions for large employers and different rates for different ages, locations and types of learners. Employers do want to understand what funding is available but very few want to have direct management of the funding. In

all research papers and surveys, employers do not want the added bureaucracy of managing funding and do not want to take the risk and responsibility for managing government funding due to the risk to their organisations. Yet the government is making this a prerequisite of the changes. AELP continues to promote a system where employers will have real choice. That is if they want to take direct control over funding and meet the criteria they can have a direct contract. However they should also have the option of working with their chosen provider. We do believe that the system can be improved and made more responsive to employers but that will not come from direct funding.

Similarly the government is trying to impose mandatory cash contributions. Employers already make significant contributions to the programme including employing the apprentices and supporting the training. Over 30% also contribute cash payments but making these contributions mandatory will create a barrier for many employers and is clearly not being demanded by the employers we are trying to engage. By forcing some employers to contribute cash, the government will reduce the numbers of employers recruiting apprentices and will also reduce the non cash contributions that are so important to maintain their involvement.

AELP has published a paper (AELP Briefing Paper No.6) on the evidence that is available in the sector and we believe that we should use this evidence to give employers the choices they really want in terms of funding routes, more flexibility in Apprenticeship standards development and a much simpler system they can understand.



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