



Specification of
Apprenticeship
Standards for England
(SASE)

TUC Response to the Government Consultation

Introduction

1.1 The TUC is very supportive of the Government's aim of expanding high quality Apprenticeships, including the ambition to double the number by 2020. In addition, the TUC believes that the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill will do much to support this ambition by establishing a statutory framework for Apprenticeships and also creating a right to an Apprenticeship for suitably qualified 16-18 year olds.

1.2 More clearly defining the Apprenticeship experience is potentially an important step towards building quality and the provisions in the Bill, including the development of a Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE), will do much to support this policy aim. However, there are a number of major policy challenges not addressed in this consultation on the new Apprenticeship framework which are key to driving up quality, especially the following: minimum pay rates; equality and diversity; employment status; and the trade union role.

1.3 The TUC has set out its view on these and other aspects of Apprenticeships policy in a response to the World Class Apprenticeships strategy and also in a response to the draft Apprenticeships Bill.¹ In the latter submission, the TUC also made the following points about the development of new standards for the Apprenticeship framework:

1.4 'It is important that clarity is achieved in identifying the required learning that forms an Apprenticeship framework. In addition to requiring a knowledge based element, competency based element, key skills and employment rights and responsibilities, the TUC believes that clear progression routes and a reasonable minimum time for off-workstation learning time should also be included.'

1.5 In April the TUC convened a meeting of trade union officials to discuss the SASE consultation and this meeting was also attended by a senior official from the Learning and Skills Council. The TUC response to the SASE consultation draws on the discussion at this meeting as well as the previous TUC submissions referred to above.

Qualifications

2.1 As the consultation document highlights, Apprenticeships have traditionally consisted of both skills and knowledge elements. For the majority of existing Apprenticeship frameworks this involves a competency-based qualification (usually a NVQ) and a knowledge-based qualification (usually a technical certificate). The proposed new standards will require a continuation of this approach and the TUC supports this, especially as it is of some concern that a number of existing Apprenticeship frameworks no longer include a technical certificate on the basis that the knowledge-based element has been embedded within the NVQ.

2.2 However, the TUC also has some concerns with indications in the consultation document that the implementation of the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) will allow for these two elements of the Apprenticeship framework to be

¹ *Apprenticeships Strategy: TUC Response to the World Class Apprenticeships consultation*, March 2008. *TUC Comments on the Draft Apprenticeship Bill*, October 2008 (both these documents are available at: www.tuc.org.uk/skills)

incorporated into ‘a single accredited qualification spanning both elements.’ The development of a new hybrid qualification along these lines suggests that the existing NVQ system will no longer be the underpinning element of the competency-based qualification.

2.3 A number of trade unions have expressed concerns to the TUC about the wider implications of this development, namely that the implementation of the QCF could be inadvertently endangering the long-term viability of NVQs. Through this consultation the TUC would like to highlight this wider concern. However, it is important to note that the TUC has consistently supported the development of the QCF and especially its aim of supporting the accreditation of ‘bite-sized’ learning and enabling employees to acquire credits towards full qualifications from training undertaken in different jobs.

2.4 As regards the new standards for the Apprenticeship framework, the TUC believes that it is important that the competency-based and knowledge-based elements of the framework are separately identified and assessed and that the overall standard should continue to be at least Level 2 for an Apprenticeship and Level 3 for an Advanced Apprenticeship. In order to ensure uniform standards and consistency of quality across all sectors, it is also essential that the Government specifies a minimum number of credits for an Apprenticeship framework.

2.5 Giving employers and sector bodies too much flexibility in this area has the potential for undermining quality. The TUC strongly endorses the concern in the consultation document that undue flexibility ‘may result in different sectors, or even sub-sectors, having significantly and demonstrably different expectations for the amount of learning to be undertaken by apprentices, something inspectors have drawn attention to in the past.’

Functional Skills

3.1 Whilst the TUC believes that it is important that all Apprenticeship frameworks include functional skills requirements, we also recognise that there may need to be a differentiated approach between young apprentices and adult apprentices. It is welcome that existing key skills and their proxies will continue for a transitional period until 2016 and that the Government recognises that any change to the functional skills element requires careful handling to prevent ‘excluding a number of people from being able to complete an Apprenticeship.’

3.2 In principle the TUC supports the proposal that young people (i.e. 16-24 year-olds) entering Apprenticeships should be expected to reach a Level 2 standard in functional skills in mathematics and English, especially in line with the overall aim of improving progression routes to Higher Apprenticeships and higher education (HE). On the other hand careful consideration needs to be given to those sectors without a tradition of requiring Level 2 attainment in functional skills to ensure that certain groups of young people are not suddenly barred from entering and completing an Apprenticeship. One option could be to give these particular sectors a longer transitional period to meeting the requirement that all apprentices achieve Level 2 attainment in functional skills.

3.3 As regards adult apprentices, there may be a need for a more flexible approach to ensure that older employees, many of whom who will have acquired wide-ranging skills

during their working lives, are not barred from accessing and completing an Apprenticeship. Many of these employees will not be acquainted with the ‘world of functional skills’ and it may be that a more tailored approach is considered for them, with a focus on initial assessment rather than tests in the early stages. In addition, in their case it might be useful to explore the potential of an approach based on the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) model to examine whether there are any suitable proxies from their workplace experience to date that might cover aspects of the functional skills requirements.

3.4 The TUC would be concerned if any Apprenticeship framework did not include some minimal level of attainment in ICT and we are therefore receptive to the proposal that all frameworks should require at least Entry Level 1 in functional ICT. While there may be some occupations that do not currently require any use of ICT on a daily basis, future trends suggest that all jobs will ultimately require some form of basic ICT skills and this should be reflected in the Apprenticeship framework. Of course many occupations will require much higher attainment levels in ICT skills than this and this should be reflected in the approach taken by SSCs when developing frameworks.

Employee Rights and Responsibilities

4.1 It is important that employment rights and responsibilities (ERR) are strengthened within the new Apprenticeship framework and that the role of trade unions, including how to join one, is covered in more detail. The current framework requires equality of opportunity and health and safety to be covered but does not specify how this should happen nor is it formally assessed. The TUC therefore supports the recommendation to require formal assessment of ERR through its inclusion in a qualification and also that measures should be put in place to ensure that SSCs are not able to dilute this element of the framework. One means of tackling the latter issue would be to consider developing a separately accredited ERR element with some core parts that SSCs and employers could add to.

4.2 Given the role of Apprenticeships in preparing learners for the world of work, there should be a more inclusive approach to employment rights and responsibilities than at present (e.g. by making inclusion of basic employment rights mandatory, including the right to join a trade union). The TUC produces materials in these areas, including ‘A Better Way to Work’, which include information on employment rights and responsibilities designed for those on Young Apprenticeships and work experience placements. Serious consideration should also be given to incorporating issues relating to sustainable development in the workplace in this element of the Apprenticeship framework, as this will increasingly become an important aspect of working life.

Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTSS)

5.1 The TUC agrees with the recommendation that all six PLTSS (often referred to as ‘soft skills’) should be included in the new Apprenticeship framework. The skills are: independent enquiry, creative thinking, reflective learning, team working, self-management, and effective participation. These skills are important in ensuring that all apprentices develop generic transferable employability skills that will support their long-term career development and labour market mobility. Whilst it is recognised that SSCs should have some flexibility to contextualise these skills to the sector in question, it will

also be important to put in place measures to ensure that this element of the new framework cannot be significantly diluted.

Minimum Off-Workstation Training

6.1 The TUC has been concerned that the amount of off-the-job training can vary significantly between existing Apprenticeship frameworks and that it is imperative that all apprentices are given the opportunity to have adequate time ‘off the job’ to engage in necessary study and training activities. The TUC therefore supports the recommendation in the consultation that the Government should set ‘a national minimum [for off-workstation learning time] in order to guarantee that all apprentices can benefit from dedicated time for acquiring knowledge, receiving instruction and reflecting on their performance’.

6.2 The consultation recommends a minimum threshold of 250 guided learning hours for the duration of the Apprenticeship but emphasises that ‘this would be an absolute minimum’ and that it would expect SSCs ‘to go beyond this minimum.’ On this basis there is an expectation that most SSCs should set a higher minimum and the TUC believes that the Government should consequently raise the bar in this area, especially as we are talking about a minimum for the duration of the whole Apprenticeship. In light of the wider range of study and training involved in the new Apprenticeship framework, it would seem sensible to set the absolute minimum threshold at no less than 300 hours so that all apprentices would be empowered to achieve the wide range of learning and development set out on page 14 of the consultation document.

6.3 The Government also has to be careful that the new minimum does not send coded messages to employers and SSCs that this offers an opportunity to generally reduce the duration of off-the-job training in those frameworks with a tradition of extensive learning and development opportunities. In most cases, existing high-quality Apprenticeships offer durations of off-the-job training well in excess of 250 hours and the new minimum must not endanger highly reputable Apprenticeships that currently fall into this category.

6.4 The TUC generally agrees with the proposed definition of ‘off-workstation training’ in the consultation document but the practical application of this definition in the workplace may well throw up unforeseen anomalies. It is therefore recommended that in the future the Government closely monitors how ‘off-workstation training’ is operating in the new frameworks to ensure that employers are complying with this in good faith and that apprentices are genuinely spending their off-workstation time to engage in ‘a period of instruction or supervised study, conducted at a separate physical location from that in which an apprentice normally works.’

6.5 The TUC does not agree that in setting the minimum, account should be taken of off-workstation time that an individual previously received for a relevant qualification. This could complicate the application of the new minimum enormously by triggering complex assessments of previous entitlements to off-the-job training. Keeping to a clear minimum that all apprentices are eligible to receive will minimise bureaucracy and also make the entitlement simple and easy to apply.

6.6 The TUC also recommends that the Government gives further thought to the recommendation that the same minimum should apply equally to Apprenticeships and

Advanced Apprenticeships. If achievement of an Advanced Apprenticeship demands more off-the-job learning and development than an Apprenticeship, this should be reflected in the minimum 'off-workstation training time' that is set by Government.

Minimum Entry Requirements and Progression Routes

7.1 It is welcome that the proposed framework clarifies clear entry routes from other qualifications as this may be helpful in ensuring that apprentices are entering programmes at the most appropriate level. However, as highlighted in our responses to the earlier questions on functional skills, there are some concerns that an over-prescriptive approach to defining entry routes may act as a barrier to some adults wishing to pursue an Apprenticeship. It is therefore important that any entry requirement system is adapted to meet the needs of adult learners, including enabling people to demonstrate practical abilities and also taking account of mechanisms to recognise prior learning. The TUC would urge that careful consideration is given to how the proposals to establish minimum entry requirements are put into practice in order not to disadvantage some potential apprentices.

7.2 The TUC agrees that there should be clear progression routes into Apprenticeships and closer linkages between Apprenticeships and Advanced Apprenticeships. This could be facilitated by stipulating that apprentices who undertake Advanced Apprenticeships are recognised for attaining the milestone of completing an Apprenticeship at level 2. This would be particularly important in instances where the apprentices were unable to complete the full Advanced Apprenticeship.

7.3 There should also be clearly defined routes from Apprenticeships to higher education - including Foundation Degrees and other degrees - and we welcome the commitment for all qualifications in Advanced and Higher Apprenticeships to be assigned a tariff rating from UCAS. In order to embed the principle of progression, this should be a standard feature of the Apprenticeship frameworks for Levels 3 and 4, and there therefore appears to be little justification in making a case for exemptions from this ruling. However, it is also important to recognise that some individuals will aim to achieve an Apprenticeship at Level 2 or 3 in order to progress within their chosen occupation, without wishing to take up the option of accessing training or further education at Level 4.

Bureaucracy and Timing of Implementation

8.1 There may be a temptation on the part of Government to grant flexibilities to employers regarding the design and content of Apprenticeship frameworks on the mistaken assumption that this will reduce bureaucracy. However, there is a strong case that setting minimum standards in a number of important areas (e.g. the minimum number of credits and hours of off-the-job training) will lead to a simplified framework, which will result in limited bureaucracy and high quality outcomes for apprentice and employer alike.

8.2 The TUC agrees that the proposed timetable for implementation is reasonable but with the caveat that this is highly dependent on the QCF being implemented successfully in September 2010.

