

Much has been made of the government's recent announcement on "new " apprenticeships, but just how radical are these reforms and, more importantly, will they make any significant difference?

When the Train to Gain gravy train hit the buffers in 2010/11 providers needed an alternative source of revenue. As a College manager put it to me when I asked her how they would cope with the loss of TtG funding "That's simple – we'll just use apprenticeship funding instead." "But these learners aren't apprentices" I lamely replied. She looked at me implying she pitied my naivety.

But what she'd said was right. And so began the chronicle of well reported abuses of the system which, after various inquiries and reports, brought us to the latest government proposals.

The October 2013 Implementation Plan articulates four principles. An apprenticeship:

- Is a job in a skilled occupation
- Requires substantial and sustained training
- Leads to full competency to a standard defined by employers
- Develops transferable skills including English and maths

But describing these as "principles of future Apprenticeships" rather ignores the fact that all of these principles apply now. The problem is that no-one is enforcing them.

The current standards for apprenticeships are laid down in the Specifications for Apprenticeship Standards in England (SASE) which set out the minimum standards for apprenticeship frameworks. Then, in May 2012, in response to John Hayes' and others' widespread concern about sub standard apprenticeships, the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) published its Statement on Apprenticeship Quality. All four of the "new" principles are covered by the standards in these two documents.

The NAS statement says: *The focus of an Apprenticeship is on equipping individuals with the new skills and learning they need for their job roles and future employment and progression. It is appropriate for those moving into a new job or for individuals in an existing job where significant new knowledge and skill will be acquired through the Apprenticeship.* This unambiguous statement should deal with the "let us put your staff through an assessment programme and call it an apprenticeship" scenario that is a hangover from the old Train to Gain days.

But earlier this year I dealt with a large and well known provider who had enrolled over 250 existing and capable employees on to apprenticeships six months after this statement was issued. Nor do I for one moment think this is a rogue provider acting outside the

mainstream – the fact that, over a year after the Statement was published, they barely recognised they were doing anything wrong indicates how lightly this standard is enforced.

Again, when it comes to the second “new” principle, *“Substantial and sustained training, lasting a minimum of twelve months and including off the job training”*, the SASE and the NAS statement are unambiguous. The SASE specifies minimum on the job and off the job Guided Learning Hours and the NAS Statement specifies a twelve month minimum duration. But who is responsible for counting guided learning hours? The same people who check how well the Employment Rights and Responsibilities element has been delivered – i.e. nobody.

These new apprenticeships will have *“an apprenticeship standard defined by employers”* . But isn't this what National Occupational Standards, allegedly drawn up with the full involvement of employer representatives, and on which apprenticeship qualifications are based, are supposed to do? Or are NOS and qualifications not fit for this purpose, in which case why have we been funding Sector Skills Councils for the past ten years?

And with regard to English and maths there is again a standard specified in the NAS statement which is, on the evidence I've seen, widely ignored.

No amount of tinkering with the architecture of apprenticeships will make any difference unless there are rigorous standards, demonstrably enforced. Currently different organisations look at different bits of the apprenticeship – awarding bodies look at consistency of assessment, Ofsted looks at provider quality while the SFA seems mainly concerned with financial aspects and the prevention of fraud.

What no one organisation has is responsibility for making a judgement on the overall quality of apprenticeship delivery and its value to learners, employers and taxpayers. Until such a responsibility is established it is unlikely anything very much will change.