Apprenticeships

learning and skills development agency

improving employer engagement in the delivery of Apprenticeships

making work-based learning work

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Further information

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Introduction

This study is one of a suite of three work packages[1] within the Making Apprenticeships Work project conducted by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) during 2003–04 under the overall theme of 'Making work-based learning work'.
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Work Package 1: Increasing flexibility in Modern Apprenticeships[2]

Aim:
- To investigate how access to and incremental achievement across Modern Apprenticeships (particularly Foundation Modern Apprenticeships) might be facilitated through a more flexible approach

Work Package 2: Improving employer engagement in Modern Apprenticeships

Aim:
- To investigate the current 'buy-in' by employers to Modern Apprenticeships and identify ways in which this can be increased

Work Package 3: Identifying effective practice in the delivery of Modern Apprenticeships

Aim:
- To review current practice in the delivery of Modern Apprenticeships with a view to determining the characteristics of good practice and producing guidance on these for practitioners and Learning and Skills Councils (LSC)

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[1] 'Work package' is used to denote a separate project within a suite of research with an overall theme, in this case the continuous improvement of the apprenticeship system.
[2] This project was undertaken prior to the apprenticeship reforms in May 2004 – hence the reference to Apprenticeships under the previous terminology of Modern Apprenticeships.

Executive summary

Background

This LSDA project investigated the extent to which employers are engaged in Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) and identified ways in which their involvement could be increased.

Six occupational sectors were selected for study: construction; engineering, technology and manufacturing; business administration, management and professional; retailing, customer service and transportation; hairdressing and beauty therapy; and health and social care. A total of 33 employers were interviewed, representing a range of companies engaged in Apprenticeships from these sectors.

Key findings

Rationale for employers' involvement and engagement in apprenticeships

Reasons for initial and continuing involvement
Many of the employers consulted during this study had a long-standing involvement with government-supported apprenticeship schemes. Their continuing engagement owes much to the currency that a national qualification brings.

For a significant proportion of the employers from across all sectors the reason for their initial involvement with MAs was to improve their company's training performance.

The extent of employer engagement appears to be related to two key factors: the size of the company and its relationship with the training provider.

Organisation of the Modern Apprenticeship programme

Recruitment and pre-recruitment
There was much evidence that employers and training providers were seeking to improve retention and achievement by adopting more rigorous approaches to recruitment. A considerable number of employers, particularly within hairdressing and beauty therapy, construction and engineering, were using 'tasters' or work experience as a probationary period prior to taking on apprentices.[3]

Advice and guidance
Many employers thought that the potential of the Connexions service to support recruitment to work-based learning could be further exploited.

Entry and induction
An integrated induction process improves all parties' understanding of the framework – employers', providers' and learners'.

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[3] Since this research was conducted, the end-to-end review of apprenticeships recommended a formal commitment by both the employer and the trainee to an eight-week probationary period. This recommendation is being taken forward by the LSC.

Resources for training
The size of the company was a major determinant in terms of the quality of the training and levels of resourcing provided by the employer. Many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) struggle to provide the levels of support necessary for a successful programme.

Capability of company staff to train
Few employers provided opportunities for their staff who were involved with delivering the apprenticeship, either through training, supervising or mentoring etc, to develop their teaching and coaching skills. The exception to this was within the hairdressing and beauty therapy sector, where providers that were interviewed encouraged their staff to develop coaching skills using industry-based schemes.

Retention and achievement
For most employers interviewed non-achievement of the framework did not necessarily result in termination of a trainee's employment.

Key skills were the most frequently quoted reason by employers for non-completion of the framework.

Referral and progression
Many employers from all the occupational sectors represented were unclear about available progression routes from Advanced Modern Apprenticeships (AMAs). Only employers in construction and engineering mentioned foundation degrees as a possible progression route.

Quality issues

Overall management and organisation of the framework
Views on the suitability of various components of the framework varied between sectors, although there was considerable consensus on their frustration with the key skills component.

The most positive response to the framework came from employer–providers that delivered all components of the framework as an integrated package in the workplace.

Many of the employers consulted considered that local LSCs were distant from them, and the majority were not aware of the existence of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) or of their function.

Quality of provision
Many of the employers interviewed thought that the quality of the MA scheme had improved in recent years.

Some employers thought that the administration associated with keeping learner records was still too complex.

Context and methodology

Background

LSDA has been examining critical issues concerning the development of MAs, in light of the Department for Education and Skills' (DfES') Skills Strategy.[4] This strategy set out proposals to raise the quality and effectiveness of MAs as the primary vocational option for young people and to lift the age limit so that more adults can benefit from these 'earn and learn' opportunities.

Employer engagement in MAs is crucial to the qualifications' success. However, while some companies have embraced MAs as the main method of training for their young recruits, the take-up of MAs across the employment base is inconsistent. There are concerns about the way in which employers perceive MAs and how they are recruited. There is also lack of clarity regarding employers' expected contribution to the MA process, both financially and to the learning process.

This project therefore investigated:

- the current take-up of MAs by sector and size of company
- ways in which employers are recruited to MAs
- the nature of employers' involvement
- the perceptions of employers participating in MAs on the reasons for their initial and continuing involvement and what, in their view, would constitute effective employer engagement.

Methodology

Interviews were held with 33 employers that had trainees participating in MAs. The majority of interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes; the remaining were conducted face to face. The interviews were based around a challenge framework devised for the purpose of this research.[5]

The employer sample was chosen to provide as wide a range of employer experience as possible within the scope of the project. The following factors were taken into account:

- occupational sector

- company size

- geographical location

- type of provider organisation managing the MA scheme.

Details of the employer sample are shown in Appendix 1. The employer codes used in the table are referred to throughout this document.

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[4] DfES (2003). *21st century skills – realising our potential*. Department for Education and Skills.
[5] The challenge framework is less prescriptive than a questionnaire, and was used as a guide for the scope and focus of the employer interviews.

The investigation focused on six occupational sectors from the 14 identified by the LSC (see Appendix 2). The sectors were chosen in order to provide a variety of employer experiences. Between four and 10 employers from each sector were interviewed. The number of employer interviews relating to these sectors is shown in brackets. Five of the employers interviewed had trainees in two sector areas.

- Construction   (6)

- Engineering, technology and manufacturing   (10)

- Business administration, management and professional   (6)

- Retailing, customer service and transportation   (6)

- Hairdressing and beauty therapy   (4)

- Health and social care   (6)

The employers interviewed were all working with work-based learning providers that were managing the apprenticeship programmes. The LSC identifies 16 categories of provider (see Appendix 3) and the employer sample for this study included five of these provider types as shown. The number of employers working with each type of provider is shown in brackets.

- Employer–provider   (11)

- Other private sector organisation   (9)

- Voluntary organisation   (1)

- FE college   (10)

- Tertiary college   (2)

In addition, a range of relationships between the employer and the provider was identified in terms of the delivery of the training and the assessment of each of the components of the MA framework – NVQs, key skills and the Technical Certificate:

- all training and assessment carried out on the job usually by an employer–provider

- key skills and/or Technical Certificates delivered and assessed entirely on provider premises

- key skills and/or Technical Certificates delivered and/or assessed partly on employer premises and partly on provider premises

- training provider subcontracts part or all of the off-the-job training and assessment to another provider, often an FE college

- a managing agent subcontracts all or part of the framework to one or more training providers.

The challenge framework

The challenge framework[6] investigated three broad themes:

- the employers' rationale for involvement and engagement in the MA programme

- organisation of the MA programme

- quality issues.

Prior to the interview, each employer interviewee was asked to provide background information on their company as follows:

- company details including size, location, occupational sector

- history of the company's involvement with MAs including:

- programmes offered – Foundation Modern Apprenticeships (FMAs), AMAs, others

- provider organisation managing the programme

- length of involvement with MAs in years

- number of trainees on current MA programmes

- an indication of whether the company has had an increasing or decreasing involvement with MAs over the previous five years.

Following the conclusion of the fieldwork, an expert seminar was held with a cross-section of representatives from work-based learning including employers, providers, the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the LSC. The purpose of the seminar was to explore the emerging findings and to extrapolate ways of taking recommendations forward. This enabled key findings to be tested and verified and further examples of practice to be collected.

A final draft of the report was also circulated to all employers that participated in the research to ensure accurate representation of the findings and gather any additional viewpoints.

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[6] Appendix 4 contains a copy of the challenge framework used in the interviews.

Research findings

Rationale for employers' involvement and engagement in apprenticeships

Initial and continuing involvement

For a significant proportion of the employers in all sectors, the reason for their initial involvement with MAs was to improve their company's training performance. Some also thought that the MA provided a quality framework that produced a nationally recognised qualification and, therefore, had currency for both the company and the learners. Many of the employers interviewed had a long-standing involvement with government-supported apprenticeship schemes or their equivalent.

Funding was of relatively low importance. In most cases, except for employer–providers, the LSC funding was managed entirely by the training provider. The only concern of most of those interviewed was that they did not have to fund any of the off-the-job elements for their trainees. However, one employer stressed that some of the funding should be used to support on-the-job training, in recognition of the company's commitment.

Most employers thought that their involvement with MAs had been successful, although those in the health and social care and business sectors were less sure. With only two exceptions, both very small companies in the construction and engineering sectors, employers indicated that they would continue to use the MA scheme. In part this was because there was no other funded alternative

Awareness of the framework

Knowledge and understanding of the framework varied. In general it was more clearly understood by the employer–providers and the larger companies with a more structured and responsive approach to training. However, even in these companies there seemed to be little awareness outside the team immediately responsible for managing the training. A significant number of the SMEs lacked knowledge of the off-site components of the MA, and a small number had 'an out of sight, out of mind' attitude to these. In two cases the employers described the framework only in terms of the NVQs and mentioned the off-the-job elements only after prompting. Nevertheless, one of these said that the company was very happy with the training using the framework.

A link was apparent between the level of employer and provider communication and employers' understanding and awareness of the framework. High levels of contact and effective communication between the employer and provider led to a better understanding of the whole framework. Similarly, companies had a better understanding of the framework when they employed their own assessors.

> *E29, a hairdressing company, has a good relationship with the training provider (FE), but recently transferred all training to the salon. It integrated key skills and the Technical Certificate into NVQ training with the training provider supplying the assessors. The employer thought that the pace of learning encouraged by the training provider in a college environment could be too fast and that training in a salon was much more effective and realistic.*

One employer suggested that it would be very helpful for company training staff to have their own induction to MAs with periodic refresher sessions to keep them up to date.

The extent to which employers valued the independent knowledge, as provided by the Technical Certificate, varied enormously. Employers were also unconvinced that the Technical Certificate added value to the NVQ. Many employers were concerned about the amount of time learners were spending away from the workplace, which out of necessity increased due to the Technical Certificate.

There were differences in levels of awareness and knowledge of National Training Organisations (NTOs) and SSCs between sectors. Construction and engineering companies were generally aware of their SSCs – ConstructionSkills (formerly CITB) and SEMTA – but not always very complimentary about them. It was thought that the SSCs and NTOs listened to the larger companies but not to the SMEs. Hairdressing organisations were also more aware of their sector body (HABIA) than perhaps some other sectors not already mentioned, but again employers were critical on the grounds that the SSC was not consistent enough in its advice. In retailing and business there was a marked lack of any knowledge of SSCs and what their function was in relation to these sectors.

Organisation of the Modern Apprenticeship programme

Recruitment and pre-recruitment

Employers described a variety of sources and methods used in recruiting trainees. Schools, training providers, the Connexions service and personal recommendation were most commonly mentioned. In most cases, employers recruited specifically to the MA, but these jobs were rarely advertised as MA opportunities.

Schools remain the first port of call for recruits into MA programmes. Larger employers in particular are aware that they can develop a positive relationship with schools by offering work experience and becoming involved with work-related learning projects such as industry days and 14–16 vocational programmes, for example. However, there was great concern that schools continue to see work-based learning as a lesser option for their pupils, further exacerbated by the increased staying-on rate as learners are encouraged to continue in full-time education.

Employers are responding to this in a number of ways. Many are focusing their recruitment efforts on older groups – 17 plus, 18 plus and 20 plus were all mentioned. The reasons given for this were the shrinking 'pool' of potential recruits at 16 plus and the greater motivation of older recruits. Larger companies in particular are building closer relationships

with their local schools, while others are targeting specialist schools related to their sectors. For example, a number of engineering companies have targeted technology schools.

> *E13, a large engineering company, has found difficulty in recruiting the calibre of entrant that it needs. It is addressing this by building links with a local school specialising in technology.*

SMEs do not have the same involvement with schools, preferring to recruit through personal recommendation or with the help of their training provider. Although the Connexions service was mentioned by a number of employers, the perceptions of the service were generally negative. Connexions personal advisers were thought to have little understanding of the MA framework or of the sector involved. A number of employers also commented on inappropriate referrals of potential trainees. This related to when learners were referred to apprenticeship frameworks that were above their current learning capacity and for whom the Entry to Employment (E2E) route may have been more suitable.

A range of approaches was used for recruitment and this to some degree depended on the sector. It should also be noted that GCSEs were not necessarily seen as the best indicator of a potential recruit's appropriateness for MA training. A significant number of employers said that they saw their own tests as a more reliable indicator. These tests were variously described as aptitude tests, diagnostic tests and basic skills tests.

Engineering employers in particular saw achievement at GCSE as the first hurdle for would-be recruits – a requirement of grade C or better in mathematics, science and English was the usual minimum standard. However, some employers admitted that they frequently had to accept recruits with less than this – 'beggars can't be choosers' (engineering employer).

For employers in the health and social care, and hairdressing and beauty therapy sectors, interviews tended to be the preferred recruitment method. Interviews, they thought, helped them to identify personal qualities and communication skills more effectively.

A considerable number of employers from across all sectors, but particularly in hairdressing and beauty therapy, construction and engineering, were using 'tasters' or work experience as a probationary period prior to taking on MA recruits. These introductory programmes varied in length from as little as one day to as much as three months. In some schemes, the provider was involved in the recruitment process as well as testing for basic skills competence.

> *E23, a local authority housing trust, runs a two-week work experience programme for up to 30 young people during the school summer holidays. The programme, organised in collaboration with the training provider, forms the basis for recruitment into an MA programme.*

> *E5, a large construction employer–provider, offers local schools a two-days-a-week vocational programme for 14 to 16 year olds as an introduction to the industry. This also includes accreditation at Level 1.*

Entry and induction

Organisation of the induction process depended on the size of the company and its relationship with the training provider. Smaller companies tended to provide a standard, half-day induction package for all new employees covering areas such as health and safety, conditions of service, company structure and company philosophy. Induction into the MA programme was left almost entirely to the training provider, together with analysing basic skills needs and developing an individual learner action plan.

Where a closer relationship between the employer and the provider existed there was greater collaboration over the induction process and the learner action plan, although it still tended to break down into the responsibilities described. Larger companies were generally better at integrating these two parts of the induction process but it was only the employer–providers that organised it as one process.

Where employers had introduced a 'taster' or probationary period into their selection process, this also provided an induction during which basic skills needs were identified and individual learner action plans were developed, usually in collaboration with the training provider. Employers also saw 'taster' or probationary periods as an effective way of improving retention.

Identification of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) learner needs did not feature in any of the interviews, because either the employer had not identified any ESOL needs or the company was located in an area with a low ethnic population.

On the question of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) most employers indicated that they attempted to take previous experience and qualifications into account when negotiating learner action plans and that on-the-job training was, whenever possible, appropriately individualised. They were less sure about whether this was the case for the off-the-job training, particularly when it was delivered by FE colleges.

Support and funding for training

Most employers considered that they had more than adequate resources to support their on-the-job training. However, SMEs in particular saw the shop floor as the only learning environment required. Some of the larger companies, especially employer–providers, had training rooms and dedicated IT facilities on site. Most SMEs thought that such facilities were adequately provided by the training provider.

Regarding existing learning materials that support the delivery of the Technical Certificates, comments tended to be made only when the materials were considered to be inappropriate or inadequate, and these comments stretched to include the content of the Technical Certificates themselves. A number of engineering companies thought that Technical Certificates did not cover the increasingly sophisticated technology adequately enough. Others commented on the fact that Technical Certificates covered the same ground as NVQs.

A range of views was expressed on the quality and effectiveness of the support provided by training providers for on-the-job training. The support was rated most highly by the employer–providers, but was also rated highly when providers maintained regular contact with the employer. This appeared to be most likely to happen when the provider was also assessing the on-the-job learning.

Employers had little knowledge of the funding support provided by the LSC because, in most cases, it was managed entirely by the provider. However, most assumed that it was adequate.

Capability of company staff to train

The majority of employers interpreted their staff members' capability to train in terms of their occupational competence and rated them very highly. They saw training as 'experienced craftspeople passing on their skills'. Very few thought that teaching or coaching skills were required to be an effective trainer. In some cases there was confusion about the distinction between teaching and assessment skills, with many employers describing the D awards as the key element in their 'training the trainers' strategy. Another employer explained that its staff had come through the apprenticeship route themselves and were, therefore, competent to train. This indicates that employers value many forms of learning, including that gained through formal training and through experience.

A small number of employer–providers ensured that their staff had the opportunity to develop their coaching skills. Where trainers had been recruited from the FE sector, companies tended to use the City & Guilds 730 Award to develop and accredit training skills. A number of other employers commented on the lack of industry-based teaching awards available.

The exception to this was in the hairdressing and beauty therapy sector, where all the employers interviewed encouraged their training staff to develop coaching skills using industry-based schemes provided by the larger companies (eg Toni&Guy and Wella). There were a number of employers in the sample opting to use their own award schemes, which in at least one case were approved by the SSC. These schemes were usually used if a company had specialist needs that the standard MA framework did not meet. The most frequent reason given was that the NVQ/Technical Certificate was too broad and generic and did not meet the specific needs of the company. Examples include:

Business – a law firm, which needs employees to have specialist legal knowledge when they progress to the AMA, uses Institute of Legal Executives' law exams alongside the AMA.

An insurance broker, for whom the NVQ is too broad, increasingly uses sector-based assessment provided by bodies such as the General Insurance Standards Council and the Financial Services Authority. This company has seen a marked decline in the use of NVQ/MA over recent years.

Engineering – a large motor outlet uses the manufacturer's (Ford) own mechanics qualification as a substitute for the Technical Certificate.

Care – two NHS Trusts, in different parts of the country, plan and deliver alternative/enrichment training through regional workforce development confederations that include upskilling, life skills etc.

> *E32, a medium-sized hairdressing business, takes advantage of an industry-based scheme to give its training staff more effective coaching skills.*

When prompted, the majority of employers from across all sectors in the sample indicated that staff development was a company priority and that the MA scheme was integral to this policy.

Retention and achievement

Many of the employers linked high retention rates to effective selection; 'taster' or probationary periods were seen as being particularly valuable in the selection process.

Achievement in itself was not seen as a major factor in retention. Only one company in the sample said that failure to complete the framework would lead directly to the dismissal of the trainee. Most employers said they would provide further support and encouragement for learners to help them complete the framework, or at the very least the NVQ component, usually with the company funding the extension to the programme. One employer noted 'our best engineer did not complete the framework'. However, when non-achievement was linked to factors like poor attitude or absenteeism it was treated as a disciplinary matter and the trainee could be dismissed.

> *E25, a large electrical contracting company, uses Employer Link to provide a consistent assessment process from initial assessment right through to the completion of the programme. This provides a quality framework for the whole programme.*

Key skills were a significant factor in learners' failure to complete the framework in some sectors, for example engineering and construction. This appeared to be more likely when the key skills were delivered off the job, especially by FE colleges. When delivered on the job, and particularly when they were integrated into NVQ training, they did not appear to provide the same barrier to achievement.

In hairdressing and beauty therapy most of the dropout occurred during the first three months of training. Employers thought the reason for this was that the trainees had unrealistic expectations of the work that they would be doing in the early stages of their training.

Referral and progression

For most companies and sectors, progression from the FMA to the AMA was encouraged, although it was not necessarily seen as an automatic progression route for all. In construction and engineering some employers considered that a gap of as much as two to three years between completing the FMA and starting the AMA was advisable for many trainees, a period which would allow the trainees to practise their new skills in the workplace. Two sectors had specific problems with progression from the FMA to the AMA. In business administration it was difficult for trainees to progress to the AMA because of the requirement for supervisory experience. One employer suggested that this could be resolved by offering an AMA in another related area of learning such as customer service. In the health and social care sector the problem related to the legislation that prohibits 16 to 18 year olds from handling patients or clients without supervision.

A summary of the progression patterns described in the interviews is shown in the table below.

Sector	Progression from FMA to AMA	Progression beyond AMA
Business	Low proportion progressing – difficulty providing supervisory experience	No mention of foundation degree route. Reference to HNC/HND and specialist qualifications
Construction	100% encouragement to progress when ready	Little mention of progression beyond AMA apart from into supervisory roles
Engineering	50% of sample encouraged learners to progress, mainly in transportation. 50% recruited at AMA level	Some interest in foundation degrees – thought to be too theoretical or company could not meet aspirations. Many examples of further company schemes and development
Hair and beauty therapy	100% encouragement to progress	Progression into specialist industry schemes, which include coaching skills and assessor qualifications
Health and social care	100% encouragement to progress	No mention of foundation degree route. Progression from elderly care and childcare into management positions, if appropriate, or into particular NHS specialisms
Retailing	75% encouragement to progress	Small proportion encouraged to progress into supervisory roles

Progression beyond the AMA was far less clear in almost all sectors. There was a general lack of awareness of and knowledge about foundation degrees, and only employers in construction and engineering mentioned the qualification as a possible progression route. One engineering employer said that the company would encourage progression into foundation degrees but not full degrees because it could not provide the incentives of either pay or responsibility that such achievement would merit. For many employers further progression was based on company or sector-specific qualifications, for example engineering and hairdressing qualifications. In business administration, NVQ Level 4 and HNC/HND were favoured routes. Both health and social care and retailing employers thought that for the great majority there was no requirement for further progression and qualification beyond the AMA.

Few employers provided incentives in the form of pay or additional responsibility linked directly to achievement of the framework, although in some sectors, notably construction, incentives were linked to NVQ achievement. In most cases pay was linked to age, particularly at 18, or to specific stages in the programme. Some employers offered rewards in the form of vouchers or one-off cash payments for achievement linked to the framework.

Quality issues

Overall management and organisation of the framework

The relationship between the employer and the provider is crucial to the employer's awareness of the MA framework. It has an equally significant impact on how the employer views the success of the framework as a training package for the company. The more effective the communication and trust between employer and provider, the more successful the programme is seen to be.

> *E19, an elderly care home, points to an excellent relationship with a local training provider as the reason for a successful MA programme. The main factors are good communication, accessibility and a professional approach developed over five years of working together.*

> *E15, a large plant maintenance company, has an excellent relationship with its FE training provider, which is prepared to be flexible in the way it organises the college training. For example, the training provider will timetable the underpinning knowledge so that it matches on-the-job experiences.*

Views about the individual components of the framework differed considerably. The main factors influencing this were the mode of delivery and sector-related needs. Less dissatisfaction with the key skills and Technical Certificate components was evident when they were delivered as an integrated package on the job. There appeared to be frequent frustration from both learners and employers when these components were delivered off site by the provider. For many trainees and employers the prime objective was to develop the necessary craft skills, and key skills were seen as an unnecessary distraction. Also, failure to achieve the key skills tests leads to non-completion of the framework. Application of Number was a particular stumbling block.

Employers also raised the issue of the inflexibility in determining when off-the-job learning takes place, pointing out that trainees have to be released when the college wants them, with little consideration for employer needs. This was most frequently referred to by the construction industry. One employer also raised the issue of 'block' release for periods of up to four weeks as 'disruptive for the company and made worse by a tendency for trainees to revert back to schoolboy behaviour'.

> *E16, a large, national, specialist electronic company, delivers all its key skills training during four residential sessions. Key skills are not seen by trainees or the company as a barrier to achievement of the framework.*

Sector-related opinions about the framework varied considerably[7].

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[7] Appendix 5 summarises sector opinions about framework components and flexibility.

Business – For most employers, the Business Administration NVQs were appropriate and flexible enough to cater for company needs, but some specialist companies (eg a legal firm) described them as being too broad and generic to fit their needs. An insurance company had difficulty finding providers able to deliver the training. A number of employers also thought that the Technical Certificate duplicated what was already covered by the NVQ. There was some frustration concerning key skills, with many employers viewing them as unnecessary. This was due to the fact that many of their trainees were taking the key skills components not because they did not have the skills but because the 'currency' of their GCSEs, which could have been carried forward, exempting them from the requirements, had expired.

Construction – Both the NVQs and the Technical Certificates had general approval, but lack of flexibility in the framework was noted. This related to the need for multi-skilling of the workforce by a number of companies, particularly those involved in buildings maintenance. There was again general frustration with the key skills component, seen as preventing many trainees whose previous academic record had been poor from completing the framework.

Engineering – In this sector, more than any other, there was a range of opinions expressed about the appropriateness of the framework to the needs of the company. This was caused, in the main, by the varying needs of the different branches of the industry: electrical, manufacturing, motor vehicle etc. Many employers thought that the NVQ was too broad and generic and that it tested skills that were not relevant to the company. This was mentioned particularly by electrical and motor vehicle engineering employers. Similar comments were made about the Technical Certificate, although one manufacturing–engineering company thought that the Technical Certificate matched company needs very well. While responses to key skills were generally negative, with queries about the relevance of certain aspects, a number of employers recognised the value of the ICT component. A further issue, mentioned by electrical maintenance employers, was the difficulty of assessing trainees whose jobs required them to be 'on the road' for much of their time. Testing in this context was both time-consuming and expensive but not taken into account either by the LSC funding mechanisms or by the time restrictions of the framework.

Hairdressing and beauty therapy – There was general approval of the NVQ in this sector. Employers noted that it matched the needs of the industry and was also sufficiently flexible. The Technical Certificate is only just being introduced so comment on this was limited. Employers saw the relevance of key skills but comments were more positive where they had been integrated into the other components of the framework and delivered and assessed in a salon. Key skills delivered in an FE college environment were seen to be of little relevance.

Health and social care – Employers in both care of the elderly and childcare thought that the NVQ was appropriate as well as flexible. However, an employer providing support for mental-health patients saw many elements in the NVQ as inappropriate for the company's needs. In particular the NVQ and Technical Certificate did not sufficiently distinguish between care and support. For example, trainees had to demonstrate lifting and handling skills, which were neither needed nor appropriate to their job. Key skills were seen by most as unnecessary because they were not directly relevant to the job. Emphasis was instead placed on the occupational elements of the framework.

Retailing and customer service – NVQs in this area, particularly in customer service, were considered to be broad enough to meet needs and flexible enough to allow the training to be tailored when necessary. Technical Certificates were seen as too similar to the NVQ to add any value. Key skills were not popular. Similarly to the construction and engineering sectors, employers considered that they were an obstacle rather than an enhancement to the

training. A further issue raised was that of part-time staff working less than 16 hours per week. Because the LSC only funds training for staff in full-time employment, these employees had been disadvantaged. However, it was recognised that new legislation would prevent this type of discrimination. Many of the employees recruited in the retailing and customer service sector are over 24 years of age and a number of employers wondered why the LSC could not fund MAs for this age group. This is an area that has been addressed within the apprenticeship reforms, which propose that people over the age of 25 will become eligible for apprenticeships.

> *E10, a medium-sized security company, has difficulty delivering some units of the NVQ but overcomes this by sharing delivery with other companies that are in a better position to provide the skills training needed.*

Most employers interviewed thought that they had little influence over the design and delivery of the framework except, as in one case, where they were represented on an MA sector steering group. Some thought that a close relationship with their provider meant that they could tailor the framework more closely to specific company needs at a local level. There was little awareness of the SSCs, with the occasional exception in construction, engineering and hairdressing. However, very few thought that the SSCs had any influence on the design and delivery of the framework.

Perceptions about LSC support were generally negative, although there were exceptions. Many thought that a local network of employers engaged in the delivery of MAs would be valuable but also recognised, particularly in the case of SMEs, that attendance was unlikely to be a priority.

> *E8, a large NHS Trust, is a member of a sector-based employer group that shares experiences and good practice relating to MAs. This makes a significant contribution to the delivery of effective programmes.*

Quality of provision

A general view was held that the quality of MA provision had improved over the last two years, with a number of employers pointing to the influence of ALI and the more consistent inspection framework. Some, however, thought that the ALI inspections were over bureaucratic and concentrated on 'ticking boxes' rather than on judging the quality of training. One employer commented: 'Our organisation is there to run nurseries not to fill in forms.' Many employers also thought that the framework was still not flexible enough to ensure the quality of training to which they aspired. A number referred to other quality frameworks seen as a better measure for improving the quality of their training such as Investors in People or sector-specific schemes, particularly in engineering.

Conclusions and issues

Brand loyalty

Many of the employers consulted during this study had a long-standing involvement with government-supported apprenticeship schemes. Their continuing engagement in the MA scheme owed much to the national currency of the qualification.

For a significant proportion of the employers in all the sectors represented, the reason for their initial involvement with MAs was to improve their company's training performance. This emphasises how the MA brand can be seen as a useful support system for companies.

The clear loyalty of some employers to the MA brand could be further exploited in the promotion of Apprenticeships. It also demonstrates the potential strength of an apprenticeship system when it is highly valued by employers.

Mutual trust and understanding

Employers' knowledge and understanding of the MA framework appeared to be very closely related to the size of the company and its relationship with the training provider. SMEs tended to have less knowledge than the larger companies with more sophisticated approaches to training and particularly when they were employer–providers. However, this could be compensated for to a considerable degree through a close professional relationship between provider and employer, based on mutual trust. There was frequent comment by employers about lack of understanding about their business on the part of people advising on apprenticeship programmes.

The relationship between the employer and the provider is vital to the success of the MA scheme. Consideration needs to be given to how this can be improved, particularly for SMEs. Provider advisers are crucial to this relationship. It works best for the employer when the relationship is based on good communication and trust. This is achieved most effectively when the training provider has a clear and agreed focus that is responsive to the employer's business needs but is also flexible and immediate.

Better selection processes

There was considerable evidence that employers were being more rigorous in their recruitment of new trainees. A variety of methods were employed but a significant number of employers used an introductory 'taster' or probationary period to assess the appropriateness of potential recruits. There was considerable variety in the way these were organised, particularly in terms of duration and the extent of provider involvement. Most employers considered that this approach was having a positive effect on both retention and achievement.

Examples of good practice in the organisation of 'taster' or probationary periods need to be explored further. In addition, apprenticeship models that are appropriate for use by SMEs need to be developed. Such models would need to take practicality and cost into consideration.

Poor advice

There was general dissatisfaction with the standard of information, advice and guidance. Many employers thought that careers and Connexions personal advisers had a poor understanding of the MA programme and that referrals were often inappropriate. Many of the interviewees thought that the Connexions service was not adequate for employers.

It is important that Connexions personal advisers regularly review and update their information and knowledge about MAs and consult with employers on their recruitment requirements.

Integrated programmes

With many companies, particularly SMEs, the company induction process was not linked to the induction organised by the provider. Invariably the same procedure was used with all new employees. The provider was usually left to develop the individual action plan with the trainee. The general understanding of the interlinked parts of an MA was greatly improved for all participants – learners, employers and providers – when an integrated provider–employer induction process was in place.

A partnership approach to induction would make a significant contribution to the positive perception of the scheme.

Company size and levels of resources

The size of the company was a major determinant in terms of the levels of learning resources provided by the employer. SMEs generally thought that the shop floor was the only learning environment required. The larger companies and particularly employer–providers often had more sophisticated resources including training rooms and dedicated IT facilities. SMEs tended to think that these were available to the learner through the provider.

Few employers provided opportunities for their training staff to develop their teaching and coaching skills. Many employers thought that experienced craftspeople passing on their work-based skills to their trainees was the only measure of an effective training scheme. Only in the hairdressing and beauty therapy sector was there an industry-based scheme to develop the teaching and coaching skills of training staff.

It would be useful to have examples of industry-based and other CPD training schemes and to advertise the potential advantages of these schemes to employers.

Perceptions of purpose

In many instances employers interpreted the purpose of the MA as being solely about preparation for work. Other outcomes, including maturation of the young person, securing progression, or broader agendas such as encouraging 'lifelong' learning, were not considered.

Retention has improved considerably in recent years. Many employers attributed this to more effective recruitment processes, together with more support for the individual learner. In some sectors there was a recognisable pattern to non-completion – for example, in hairdressing within the first three months of employment. This was almost certainly because of the unrealistic and therefore unfulfilled expectations of the trainee.

Greater attention during recruitment and induction to the trainees' perception of the programme outcomes may support more appropriate placements.

Supportive employers

The majority of the employers interviewed were very supportive of all their trainees, often at a cost to the company. Non-achievement of the framework was rarely a factor in the termination of employment. Where the trainee's attitude was positive, employers were often prepared to extend the time necessary for some individuals to complete the framework, or at the very least the NVQ component, at the company's own expense. While pay was rarely linked directly to achievement of the framework, some companies were prepared to offer one-off payments or vouchers as an incentive.

Varying views on progression

Progression from the FMA to the AMA was seen by most as a natural route for trainees to take, although many employers did not see it as an automatic route for all learners. In some sectors it was also thought that the trainees benefited by having a gap between the FMA and the AMA – a period in which to embed the skills that they had already learned. Progression beyond the AMA was not so clear and there was considerable disagreement about the best options, even within the same sector.

Progression into and out of the different levels of the framework was an issue. Progression from E2E to Level 2 programmes for some learners was seen as problematic, possibly requiring a 'phased' approach with learners taking time between NVQ Levels 1 and 2 to consolidate their knowledge and gain experience. Even more unclear was the progression beyond the AMA into foundation degrees. It appeared from the interviews conducted that a system of progression had evolved rather than developed and it was very much sector and company oriented. At the very least, and for all concerned, these progression possibilities need to be more explicit.

Views on the apprenticeship framework

Views on the different components of the framework varied considerably. For the majority of sectors, except engineering, the NVQs were seen as meeting most of their needs. However, a number of specialist areas within the sectors thought that NVQs were too broad and generic for their specific needs. A similar pattern was also evident from employers' comments on the Technical Certificates.

Key skills were the most frequently quoted reason for non-completion of the framework. With a handful of exceptions, employers from across all six sectors mentioned key skills as the major source of discontent. Key skills appeared to be an effective component only when they were integrated and delivered in the workplace.

The most positive response to the framework came from those employers who delivered all its components as an integrated package in the workplace. Some employers considered that it would be useful to 'mix and match' elements from different NVQs in order to meet specific sector needs. Such flexibility would be beneficial, but it was also recognised that it is important to preserve the rigour and therefore the credibility of the qualification.

Supporting agencies

The relevant SSC, in conjunction with developments at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), has a considerable role to play in the further development of the component parts of the MA framework to ensure that they meet sector-specific needs.

The LSC was generally seen to be distant from the employer. There seemed to be little dialogue about specific employer needs. The great majority of employers were unaware of the existence of SSCs and of their function.

Supporting agencies could make a more positive contribution, for example by encouraging and facilitating employer networking and developing employer trainers' coaching and teaching skills.

In the opinion of many employers the quality of the MA scheme had improved, particularly over the last two or three years. Others, however, thought that there was still far too much bureaucracy in the system.

Recommendations

Building relationships

Effective provider–employer relationships underpin effective programmes. Resources for the development of these relationships should be secured, especially for work with SMEs. Providers should review the capability of SMEs to provide adequate learning resources on site and take compensatory action when they are not available. Additional funding for this may be required.

The extent to which the demands placed on employers, in terms of their engagement in apprenticeships, are realistic should be re-evaluated. For example, information on learners should be collected for a clear purpose. Employers need to understand why the data is required and that it needs to be collected simply and efficiently.

Developing the framework

The role of the SSCs is critical for developing the framework to meet SME needs, for implementation and for engaging employers.

The flexibility and appropriateness of certain NVQs and Technical Certificates that do not meet specific sector needs should be re-evaluated. The SSCs have a role to play in this to ensure that apprenticeship frameworks meet employer needs.

Providers also need to be more active in securing employers' full understanding of and commitment to the frameworks, particularly when they are SMEs.

Consideration should be given to the extent to which key skills could be integrated into the other components of the framework.

Improving recruitment and selection

Consideration should be given to ways in which Connexions staff can systematically update their knowledge and information on MAs, keeping pace with developments across the sector.

Selection processes need to be improved to secure a better match between learner aspirations and employer demands. This should, in turn, improve retention and achievement.

Consideration should be given to the introduction of a national 'welcome' pack for all new recruits and employers to the MA programmes.

To promote increased levels of employer engagement and subsequent learner retention and achievement, a system of joint rewards to providers, employers and learners should be considered.

Coordinating delivery

Better coordination of the on- and off-the-job components of the apprenticeship programmes would improve the quality of the experience. Consideration should be given to partnership approaches to the design and delivery of the apprenticeship between providers and employers.

Mutual understanding between providers and employers needs to be developed. For example, work-based learning providers could undertake regular placements within the companies in order to give them a better understanding of the business.

NVQ assessments and integration of on- and off-the-job learning present a number of professional challenges for those not familiar with a taught programme of learning in apprenticeships. CPD for staff fulfilling the roles of teachers and coaches 'on site' should be encouraged and possibly delivered by work-based learning providers.

The availability of resources within SMEs for the provision of dedicated support for learning needs to be acknowledged and additional resources provided.

Information on learners should be collected for a clear purpose. Employers need to understand why the data associated with the MA framework are needed.

Progression routes

Progression routes both into and out of MAs need to be clarified and made more explicit for employers.

Appendix 1. The employer sample

Code	Sector	Provider type	Number of FMAs	Number of AMAs	Region*
E1	Engineering	FE college	118		YH
E2	Business	Private	2		NE
E3	Health and social care	FE college	2		L
E4	Business, and health and social care	Employer–provider	39 business 4 health and social care	36 business 1 health and social care	YH
E5	Construction	Employer–provider	75		NW
E6	Retailing	Private	234	86	M
E7	Engineering	FE college	6	2	SE
E8	Health and social care	FE college	10	50	NW
E9	Engineering	Employer–provider		138	SE
E10	Engineering	Private		3	NW
E11	Engineering	Private	2	1	NW
E12	Health and social care	Employer–provider		60	M
E13	Business and engineering	Employer–provider	18	20	NW
E14	Construction	Employer–provider		100	SE
E15	Engineering and retailing	FE college	75	3	M
E16	Engineering	Employer–provider		59	NW
E17	Business and retailing	Employer–provider	36 business 12 retailing	2 business 10 retailing	M
E18	Business	Private	23	2	NW
E19	Health and social care	Voluntary organisation	2	2	SW
E20	Health and social care	Employer–provider	5		SW
E21	Business and retailing	Employer–provider	2	4	NW
E22	Engineering	FE college		3	SE

E23	Construction	FE college	5		NW
E24	Engineering	Tertiary college	3	3	SW
E25	Construction	FE college		30	M
E26	Construction	Tertiary college	2		SW
E27	Retailing	Private	2		M
E28	Retailing	Private		4	M
E29	Hairdressing and beauty therapy	Private	1	1	M
E30	Hairdressing and beauty therapy	FE college	2	2	E
E31	Hairdressing and beauty therapy	Employer–provider	20	10	NW
E32	Hairdressing and beauty therapy	FE college		9	NW
E33	Construction	Private	5		NW

*Regional codes

E = East
L = London
M = Midlands
NE = North East
NW = North West
SE = South East
SW = South West
YH = Yorkshire and Humberside

Appendix 2. Sectors or areas of learning

Code	Sectors or areas of learning
1	Science and mathematics
2	Land-based provision
3	Construction
4	Engineering, technology and manufacturing
5	Business administration, management and professional
6	Information and communication technology
7	Retailing, customer service and transportation
8	Hospitality, sports, leisure and travel
9	Hairdressing and beauty therapy
10	Health, social care and public services
11	Visual and performing arts, and media
12	Humanities
13	English, languages and communication
14	Foundation programmes

Appendix 3. LSC provider type categories

Code	Provider types
1	Employer–provider
2	Chamber of Commerce
3	Other private sector organisation
4	Local authority (excluding FE colleges)
5	National Training Partnership
6	Public sector other than local authority
7	Voluntary organisation
8	FE college
9	Tertiary college
10	Specialist college
11	Sixth form college
12	Dance/drama establishment
13	Independent college
14	External institution
15	Designated college
16	Prison or young offenders' institution

Appendix 4. The challenge framework

Challenge framework for conducting structured interviews – employers

Rationale for involvement and engagement

1. Reasons for initial and continuing involvement, including views on the value of work-based learning

2. Awareness and knowledge of the framework

Organisation of the Modern Apprenticeship programme

3. Issues affecting recruitment and pre-recruitment of learners

4. Processes for inducting recruits onto the programme

5. Resources for learning, including equipment and accommodation

6. Ability of company staff to deliver the programme

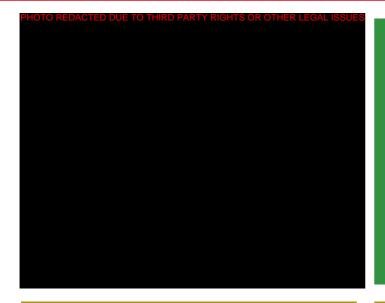7. Retention and achievement

8. Referral and progression processes

Quality issues

9. Views on the overall organisation and management of the programme

10. Views on the quality of provision

11. Any other comments

Appendix 5. Some sector opinions about the framework components

Sector	NVQ	Technical Certificate	Key skills	Framework flexibility
Business	Most employers thought that NVQs were appropriate for their needs. Some specialist companies (eg a legal firm) thought that NVQs were too broad and generic.	Some employers thought that the Technical Certificate duplicated what was in the NVQ.	Generally, employers responded negatively to key skills for the reason that the qualifications are often taken due to 'expiration' of trainees' GCSE currency rather than to meet developmental needs.	Some employers thought that the AMA framework needed to be more flexible to cater for the difficulty of providing supervisory experience. Some employers saw the timescale as an obstacle.
Care	Employers in elderly and childcare services thought that NVQs were appropriate for their needs. Employers involved in the provision of mental-health support thought that NVQs included too many inappropriate skills.	Mental-health support employers thought that the Technical Certificate failed to recognise the difference between care and support.	Most employers thought that key skills were unnecessary because they are not relevant to the care sector.	Most employers thought the framework was flexible.
Construction	There was general approval of the NVQ from employers.	There was general approval of the Technical Certificate from employers.	Employers saw key skills as an obstacle rather than enhancing training and as a hindrance to completion of the framework.	Employers felt that there was not enough flexibility in the framework, particularly in relation to multi-skilling.
Engineering	Many employers thought that too many aspects of the NVQ were not appropriate to their needs, eg electrical and motor vehicle.	Many employers thought that parts of the Technical Certificate were not appropriate to company needs. However, one employer in the manufacturing sector felt that the	The relevance of certain aspects of key skills was questioned but some employers thought that ICT was important.	Employers thought that the framework needed to be more flexible to cater for trainees' on 'the road'.

		Technical Certificate 'matched' company needs very well.		
Hair and beauty therapy	There was general approval of the NVQ from employers.	The Technical Certificate was only just being introduced for this sector, so comment was not possible.	Key skills were seen to be important and well received when delivered in context.	Most employers thought that the framework was flexible.
Retailing	Employers thought that NVQs, particularly in Customer Service, were broad enough to meet industry needs.	Employers thought that the Technical Certificate was too similar to NVQs to add any real value.	Employers felt that key skills prevented trainees with previously poor academic records from progressing through the framework.	Employers' main concerns were around the inability to use the framework with part-time staff (staff working less than 16 hours a week) and older recruits (those over 24).

Employer engagement in Apprenticeships is crucial to the qualifications' success. However, while some companies have embraced Apprenticeships as the main method of training for their young recruits, the take-up of Apprenticeships across the employment base is inconsistent. There are concerns about the way in which employers perceive Apprenticeships and how they are recruited. This study investigated the current 'buy-in' by employers to Apprenticeships and suggested ways in which this could be increased.

making work-based learning work

The other books in this series are:

- Effective entry to work-based learning
- Identifying effective practice in the delivery of Apprenticeships
- Improving the grade in work-based learning
- Increasing flexibility in the delivery of Apprenticeships