

## **Why level 2 apprenticeships are vital to our economy**

It was back in 2011 that the idea of changing the format of apprenticeships took shape.

Many of the frameworks were inflexible and tied down with specific rules and regulations. It was a common cry from employers that it was possible for an apprentice to achieve their qualifications, but still be far from competent in their job. Change was definitely needed, the coalition government of the time embarked upon a fairly radical reform of the whole apprenticeship system and standards were born.

Whatever you think of the reforms to apprenticeships, it is hard to argue against the fact that the new standards are much more employer friendly and job focussed.

At the time of writing this piece, we have 296 standards approved, with a further 280 or so in the development pipeline.

At the same time, the make-up of the apprenticeship portfolio has changed. Over 40% of the new standards approved so far are level 4 or above. This is a far higher percentage than was the case with frameworks, where only around 15% were level 4 or level 5.

There are a number of reasons for this, including the introduction of degree apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7. A different type of demand has also been created by the apprenticeship levy, as employers look to spend some of their funding on existing staff. As a result, we have seen a more than 500% increase in the take up of 'management' apprenticeships.

I personally welcome a wide portfolio of apprenticeships, and also welcome the introduction of higher level standards. To my mind the introduction of degree apprenticeships is one of the most innovative developments in vocational education for many decades. I have no doubt that it will help us on the journey to achieve a more level playing field in the academic vs vocational education debate.

However, I am concerned about what is a growing perception in the sector that the IfA is less keen on Level 2 apprenticeships. Whilst a number of the new standards are at level 2, there is resistance to the development of some others at this level. A good example is in Business Administration, which was a very popular framework until the funding was cut dramatically. There have been at least two aborted attempts to develop a new standard, but they have met with resistance from the IfA. A third attempt to produce a new standard in this area is underway, but it too is meeting with considerable resistance from the IfA.

I believe that this is wrong, and I have four reasons why level 2 apprenticeships are important.

- Entry level 2 is vital if we are going to seriously see apprenticeships as an alternative to an academic route. Without level 2 apprenticeships how do you bridge the gap for those with less than 5 GCSE's and a level 3?
- Despite what some 'experts' would like us to believe, we still have many level 2 jobs in the economy. Many past warnings about the demise of level 2 jobs have simply failed to take into account of unforeseen jobs that arise, especially in the service sector. (Remember the Foster report in 2006)
- Apprenticeships are about a job...not an academic qualification. Some people forget that. For as long as there are L2 jobs in the economy, we will need people to do them, and we will need level 2 apprenticeships.
- Level 2 apprenticeships are vital in encouraging young people to come into work at 16 and even 18. We do want everyone to go to university, and post Brexit having a properly trained indigenous workforce at level 2 will be even more important.

So, I have a simple message to the IfA. Be the means and not the architects! If employers want it, then there is a need. It is not your role to prevent the development of a standard.

**Tony Allen**

Chair, Skillsfirst Awards, June 2018.