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Expanding Apprenticeships in the public sector – research findings

Executive summary
October 2008

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Study objectives and method

1. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) commissioned Ipsos MORI and Cambridge Policy Consultants (CPC) to conduct research into how the Apprenticeships programme in England can be expanded across the public sector.
2. The primary aim of the research is to provide an understanding of the constraints and barriers facing the public sector in its use of Apprenticeships and to identify ways to overcome these.
3. Preliminary interviews with sector skills councils, employer representative organisations, public sector employers and training providers were carried out to inform the design of the survey questionnaire. Some 750 public sector organisations were then interviewed by telephone during August and September 2008, and 20 case studies were selected to illustrate how Apprenticeships had been used successfully across a range of sub-sectors. A small number of union learning representatives were also interviewed to explore their role in promoting Apprenticeships within the workplace.

Why do public sector organisations participate?

4. What emerges from the results of this research is that there is a significant interest in participating in Apprenticeships among public sector organisations but that this does not often result in substantial numbers of places on the programme. Current participation by public sector organisations is indeed narrow – two-fifths of participants currently offer a single framework and, on average, organisations participate in just two frameworks. This is low, given that respondents on average employed around 3,800 employees across a large range of business areas.
5. Local government, educational and health organisations are more likely to participate, with lower participation from public protection and central government departments. The health sector's use of administration and professional frameworks is substantially higher than its use of health and social care frameworks.
6. Most public sector employers have a strong business rationale for getting involved in the Apprenticeships programme: difficulties in recruiting staff and the ability to 'grow their own', responding to an ageing workforce and future workforce planning.
7. Some parts of the public services, particularly local government organisations and the Armed Forces, also report a social rationale for participation; that is, to provide young people with skills or a recognised qualification and to put something back into the local economy where the public sector organisation is often the largest employer in the area. Within local government in particular, this rationale is often linked to policy targets; for example, it is related to worklessness, social inclusion or reducing the number of young people not in employment, education or training.
8. A small number of organisations, mostly in central government, reported a policy rationale – senior management had decided to participate in

Apprenticeships to meet government policy priorities. However, internal support for the programme at more junior levels was low, as many remain unconvinced that Apprenticeships are relevant to their operations.

9. There has been an upwards trend in participation – four times as many organisations have increased the number of Apprenticeship places they offer in the past three years as have reduced it. There is also some evidence of constrained demand among existing participants, as more than two-thirds would like to offer more places but are currently unable to do so. A lack of funding was reported as the main constraint but difficulties in sourcing appropriate provision and the ability to offer apprentices employment once they complete their Apprenticeship were also mentioned.

Awareness and perceptions of Apprenticeships

10. Among non-participants, awareness of Apprenticeships appears to be less of an issue for the public sector than for the private sector. Just 6 per cent of non-participating public sector employers had never heard of the programme, compared with almost a third of non-participating private sector employers. However, a limited understanding of what Apprenticeships currently have to offer perpetuates more traditional perceptions of the programme.
 - Apprenticeships are frequently associated with traditional, blue-collar occupations and less than two-fifths of non-participants were aware of Apprenticeships in administration and professional areas.



- Apprenticeships are often associated with the recruitment of young people from schools and colleges, and awareness of Adult Apprenticeships is limited.
 - In some cases, a perception in some central government departments that Apprenticeships were 'not for us' was driven by a narrow appreciation of professional staff roles and did not appear to consider the administrative or customer-facing occupations within the organisation.
11. Just under two-fifths of non-participants thought it was very or fairly likely that they would get involved if a training provider contacted them with a bespoke offer. However, just over a third of non-participants stated that they would not know where to go for advice if they were interested in participating.

12. Increased awareness of the range of available frameworks is leading the majority of participants to forecast an increase in the number of Apprenticeships they expect to offer over the next two years. However, case study interviews highlighted that extensive experience in delivering Apprenticeships in one framework area does not necessarily translate easily into other framework areas – the frameworks need to be assessed against specific job roles, training providers need to be sourced, funding needs to be secured and so on.

Barriers to participation

13. Just under half of non-participants thought that they would be very or fairly likely to consider involvement in frameworks that are specific to their sector in the future.
14. Just under half of non-participants had considered using Apprenticeships in the past. These organisations identified a number of barriers to participation. The main reason for deciding not to participate was that the Apprenticeship framework was not felt to meet the needs of the business. Case study organisations echoed this concern, pointing to:

- the difficulties in getting new frameworks introduced and existing frameworks adapted to their specific needs;
- staff perceptions that Apprenticeships were for young people just starting out in work and not relevant to experienced employees; and



- limitations in relation to the number of trainees that they could recruit – over the past year, almost one in ten organisations had not recruited anyone aged under 24. In some cases, there were concerns over targeting young people due to age discrimination legislation.

15. Lack of funding is cited by many organisations that no longer offer Apprenticeships, but it appeared to be a particular issue in the health sector and linked to trainee pay bands introduced under Agenda for Change. Other reasons included the relevance of the Apprenticeship framework to job roles in their organisation, the availability of supervisors/mentors, and limited ability to recruit apprentices once they had completed their Apprenticeship.

Overcoming barriers – case study experience

16. Getting involved with Apprenticeships is not straightforward. Getting hold of information about Apprenticeships was a particular issue for some organisations while getting a timely and consistent response to queries was an issue for others.

- Clarification was needed on what funding was on offer from the LSC, whether any match funding could be sourced, and whether such funding was available over an extended period (for example, in order to plan provision over a three-year programme).
- Help and advice in sourcing a recommended training provider was a common difficulty, especially where organisations did not have the

economies of scale required to secure more flexible, more tailored or cost-effective provision.

- It was also difficult to obtain more practical advice on how to recruit apprentices and ensure that the Apprenticeship framework fits with the organisation's job roles, appropriate employment terms and conditions for Apprenticeships, etc. These are often highly organisation-specific; for example, one organisation had no pay scale below Level 3 so it was not equipped to pay apprentices on a Level 2 framework.
- For those organisations that had used NVQs in the past, there was a lack of clarity on the advantages of the Apprenticeship model compared with NVQ-only training.

17. This process demands significant resources and all of the case study organisations had appointed staff to take forward their participation in Apprenticeships. These individuals operated as internal champions, interpreting Apprenticeships for their organisation and taking on the administration.

18. Even so, senior buy-in to the process was also essential to help drive the process forward, especially when cross-departmental issues arose. HR and legal departments were sometimes at the vanguard of the process but were also sometimes part of the problem in getting Apprenticeships established in organisations.

Conclusions

19. Public sector organisations have a strong interest in participating in Apprenticeships centred on a business case for the organisation or for social objectives.

- Most organisations would do more if possible and there is considerable interest from a significant minority of non-participants.
- However, take-up of Apprenticeships is patchy between different areas of the public sector, across different departments within the same organisation and between equivalent organisations in different parts of the country.
- The cost of offering Apprenticeship places and making a relevant business case are key barriers.

What could the LSC do to promote take-up?

20. Given these barriers, a number of practical suggestions were made to help support increased take-up across the public sector, including:

- improving awareness of Apprenticeships in such a way that organisations have more than a passing knowledge of the programme as it currently operates. High-level marketing will help engage interest but employers want to talk to an informed source of advice;

- the provision of clearer advice and guidance on how to set up an Apprenticeship programme from a contact that has specific and detailed knowledge about Apprenticeships. Train to Gain skills brokers currently appear inadequately equipped and focused to meet this need;
- building on the existing knowledge base within public sector organisations by, for example, providing greater support for the establishment and facilitation of employer networks to share information about the use of, and business case for, Apprenticeships in similar organisations;
- providing additional support to organisations in sourcing appropriate training provision;
- considering funding Apprenticeship co-ordinators to work within public sector organisations and support the implementation of the programme;
- setting standards for customer service at the LSC, for example the setting of a reasonable timeframe for responding to enquiries; and
- simplifying the Apprenticeship framework approvals process in line with government proposals, by enabling the recognition of existing training run by employers.

21. **The LSC is using the research to inform its strategy to increase the number of apprentices working within the public sector. The full report will be available on the LSC website later in the year**

www.apprenticeships.org.uk

