



Response to the Technical and Professional Education Reforms

1. Introduction

NFEC is a corporate membership (approximately 110) organisation that has been operating since 1993 helping to steer thinking on key issues relating to quality, content, structure and funding of training and education in Engineering on behalf of colleges of further education, private providers and companies with their own training functions such as Rolls Royce, Babcock and Toyota Manufacturing UK. This happens at both national level through our annual national conference and at regional level, through two Regional Seminars a year that take place in each of five regions around the country.

After consultation with some members, in broad terms, NFEC applauds any initiative that will help raise the quality and effectiveness of vocational education and training and in this respect, is pleased to support this initiative. However, from the vast experience of our members, we hope the following observations will prove helpful in ensuring the development leads to a coherent range of programmes, reflecting best practice in terms of structure, delivery and assessment, that can be shared and applied across all vocational areas. It will also vital that these programmes have the same standing as equivalent “academic” routes.

2. Initial General Observations

Some Background - There is a view that we keep going round this loop many times and in many cases, the resulting changes are still short of the mark, yet the FE Sector still has to try to make any current changes work. It would therefore be helpful if any future changes, whilst placing “ownership” with employers and helped by Awarding Organisations, also allowed providers too, the opportunity to share their vast experience in the design and particularly the delivery of any new programmes of training and education. This will also help ensure the most efficient delivery processes through rationalisation of programmes where at all possible.

Experience from NFEC members indicates that there is nothing particularly complicated or hard to understand about the current vocational pathways. When presenting to parents or employers a single page chart showing vocational progression pathways from Level 1 to HE covering both full time, part time and apprenticeships options, a 5-minute talk through the options leaves everyone clear about the options available. It is vital that any changes ensure a clarity that both employers and parents can easily understand.

Ownership - The word “ownership” too must be clearly defined so that all stakeholders involved with this initiative have a definite understanding of their respective terms of reference within the bigger picture. It is quite clear from the experience of the Trailblazer initiative, that this has not been the case, leading to misunderstandings and, importantly, significant extra cost in the development of the new apprenticeships.

Comparison with what has gone before - There is a feeling that the "design principles" set out in the Professional and Technical Education Reform Paper are describing more or less exactly what we have now (and have had for a very long time, with the occasional tweak) – i.e. existing vocational qualifications (BTEC's C&G, EAL etc., all of which are based on the same occupational standards that we are in the process of ditching), nested within Study Programmes. The only difference between this and what is being proposed seems to be a greater emphasis on work experience.

Work Experience - Regarding work experience, there appears to be a great assumption that the supply of high quality placements in industry for a period of work experience is bottomless. The experience of NFEC members clearly shows (and this is by no means a criticism of employers who are very hard-pressed to deliver against sometimes tight deadlines) that the vast majority of employers have little or no resources that would allow them to provide meaningful work experience placements for students and because of this, interest levels are low. Employers like the idea but don't have the capacity to become involved. This problem is particularly acute in the engineering and construction sectors.

NFEC has representation on two Trailblazer groups – Automotive and Aerospace and many of the employers represented are concerned about not being able to respond as positively as they would like, to the volume of requests from both the schools and FE Sector for high quality work experience. The Automotive group suggested that it was a misnomer to refer to such experiences as true work experience and another name should be considered that more closely reflected what more than likely happens, which might be more along the lines of observation and reflection, particularly within the Engineering Sector where health and safety has an extremely high profile.

To help overcome this constraint and without losing high quality placements where they can be found, it would be helpful to create full-time programmes of training and education that includes the option of either high quality work experience or work experience within the providers premises that included aspects expected in industry such as the broad range of behavioural aspects within an apprenticeship. A learner would gain far more from a well-designed period of work experience delivered by a provider, set up with the help of local employers, than to be placed in industry and experience a poorly designed work experience programme.

There is a perception that providers do not have the facilities to deliver such an experience and this is even borne out by language in the consultation paper, such as the term

“classroom-based track”. This implies a totally theoretical approach to delivery which in Engineering and Construction is very far from the case. There appears to be little appreciation of the physical resources that colleges and private providers have that is used to deliver very effective programmes of training and education that include significant amounts of practical work. The need to continue updating these resources is vital and if the meaning of “ownership” includes support from employers in this respect, it is to be applauded.

HE Options - It is disappointing that preparation for a university degree falls outside the remit of these proposals because it again implies a divide between the so-called “academic” and “vocational” options. Given the Higher and Degree Apprenticeships available and being planned, both of which will include HE elements, this surely cannot be ignored.

Relationship to Trailblazer Under-Pinning Technical Certificates - The full-time options should be developed with a view to ensuring that as close a fit as possible can be obtained between the content of these programmes and the under-pinning Technical Certificates within any Trailblazer apprenticeship in any given vocational area. With careful design, it should be possible to ensure any gap is such that accreditation of prior experience and learning (APEL) is kept to a minimum. This in turn will reduce the input to an apprenticeship and in turn, costs of delivery associated with it.

Design Principles - It will be important to ensure any one of these programmes is not too specialised otherwise costs of delivery will be relatively high with providers having to deliver small niche groups which in the climate of budget cuts, would not be possible. Far better that a best-fit principle is adopted to a range of Technical Certificates within apprenticeships in any given vocational area.

It will also help efficiency of delivery if the range of qualifications developed can where applicable, allow for “nesting” one within another. For instance, a Diploma supporting a given discipline could include all or most of the units from a related Certificate in that same discipline. This also allows for a learner who may be experiencing difficulty with the breadth offered in a Diploma but would be able to achieve a Certificate.

It will help if care is taken to build a range and brand of qualifications that are absolutely sound, have longevity and will be robust enough to withstand any transition of governments, so the FE Sector (both colleges and private providers) can move away from the merry-go-round of structural reform and semantic blind alleys that have been experienced in the past and address the issues that will really make a difference to the attractiveness and effectiveness of vocational education such as:

- The removal of the cultural academic bias embedded in schools, universities and the media
- The proper resourcing of a professional and independent schools career advisory service with mandatory participation for all school age pupils.
- The proper resourcing of further vocational education that includes allowing for equipment that will support effectively delivery of qualifications that can also reflect the rapid changes in technological development.

- Attracting and retaining quality people from industry into teaching within schools and the FE Sector that include on-going and effective CPD, supported by employers. This approach will help future-proof this initiative – and indeed that of Trailblazer Apprenticeships.

Involvement of Private Providers (including large companies with their own Training Functions) and GTAs - Included among NFEC membership are large companies with their own training functions for apprenticeships and private providers who currently are not able to receive government financial support from the SFA for the delivery of main-stream full-time qualifications and given their strong links with industry (particularly if they are a Group Training Association (GTA)), they will be in a strong position help create opportunities for high quality work experience and should therefore be included in the funding received by FE colleges from the SFA for such programmes.

Response to Questions

Responses to the five questions posed reflect the comments above and are from the viewpoint of NFEC members.

Q1. We would applaud the involvement of employers but the level at which they can be involved will depend on the demands required. The SME sector will not have the resources to become involved and some kind of representative body would need to be involved to address this long-unsolved problem. The points raised in the second paragraph of Section 1 above are important and those raised in Section 2, paragraph 4.

Q2. From the many Trailblazer meetings, it is clear employers require the core skills of mathematics, English and IT as the foundation for building competence and knowledge in any branch of engineering. However, these skills would apply on a much wider front.

Q3. Our views have been outlined in the seventh and eighth paragraphs in Section 2 above. From our experience and within the context of Engineering and other industries, if high quality work experience is available in a locality, this should be used but where this is not so, carefully designed (with the help of employers) and managed experience using a providers facilities would be far better than a placement with a poorly motivated employer.

Q4. This is extremely difficult. Unless there are some very good reasons, the SME sector particularly do not have the resources and therefore willingness, ability and capacity to become involved. They would need to comply with a rigorous vetting process to ensure they were able to provide effective support to learners and should a placement require assessment, they would need to become familiar with the internal and external verification systems that would involve their staff at various points in the assessment process.

However, some NFEC members are trying to overcome this by suggesting employers use a work placement as part of an extended recruitment process.

Q5. The role of employers will be essential in ensuring the development and on-going relevance and therefore credibility of these new qualifications is maintained. However, the right balance of involvement has to be struck given the huge pressures on them to succeed

in their respective core businesses. Given the proposed involvement of employers in the new Institute of Apprenticeships and how important it will be to ensure the qualifications developed under this initiative relate as much as possible to apprenticeships or groups of apprenticeships within a given industry, the work of developing and approving these could fall to the Institute, working in partnership with provider representatives and Awarding Organisations.

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