

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Consultation on the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE)

Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

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ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL policy

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools and colleges are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

ATL response

ATL welcomes the concept of the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards in England (SASE) ensuring the delivery of 'comprehensive programmes of vocational and academic training of the highest quality'. We believe that a strong set of specifications will go some way to making Apprenticeships valuable for all and providing a high quality, aspirational route for young people who have the ambition to enter the workplace.

That the SASE aims to be 'delivering high quality Apprenticeship programmes, that provide individuals and employers with the skills for future success' is good though ATL argues that the aims of the SASE should also be concerned with benefitting society whilst ensuring individual value to apprentices. Educational provision – in which

Apprenticeship programmes are included – although important to, is not just about, UK plc.

ATL has a genuine commitment to helping offer the best possible programmes which will fully develop the knowledge, skills and capacities of young people and adults who select the Apprenticeship pathway. Consequently, ATL believes that there should be a greater recognition in finalising the SASE as to how the specifications feel to (potential) apprentices and how the teaching workforce will develop the top-rate provision that is required.

Implications for students / apprentices

ATL fully supports the development of a high quality, sustainable and modern apprenticeship programme that meets the needs of learners and employers. We recognise the underpinning aims of the government to widen participation and increase engagement and we understand the positive desire to stimulate economic prosperity. However, ATL questions whether the SASE does enough to ensure apprenticeship programmes will benefit young people and their communities and deliver a wide range of other social benefits.

It is ATL's view that the SASE does not do enough to counter the government's wider approach to apprenticeships that emphasises the benefit to business and the economy. ATL believes that the public funding of apprenticeships requires the balance between societal, individual and business benefits to be more equal and that the SASE could be clearer that it seeks to ensure apprenticeships are meeting educational standards. ATL asks who the SASE is aimed at: whether it is a guarantee for potential apprentices of the standards of provision across programmes; or whether it seeks to leave as much flexibility as possible for employers to design the apprenticeship programme they need. Of course, Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) have an important role to play, but apprenticeships should not be distinct from the government's education goals and an individual's right to benefit personally.

Given the historically low level of completion of the various incarnations of apprenticeships, ATL is concerned that the SASE doesn't go far enough to ensure the vast majority of apprenticeship programmes are completed. If the SASE does not result in tight frameworks that deliver throughout the apprenticeship then the chance of a negative effect on completion rates increases. The standards stipulated must ensure not just that employers get a high quality of candidates but also that the apprenticeship is of sufficiently high quality to retain students. The lack of clarity from the government at this time on the minimum wage exemption for apprenticeships is problematic and ATL encourages the SASE to take on board the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission's review of this policy and stipulate minimum wage standards for apprentices. We would strongly recommend that these are consistent with the current age-related minimum wage rates. This would be fairer in itself but would likely have a positive impact on completion rates and on tackling gender inequality in apprenticeships, not just in terms of pay but the relationship of pay to gender stereotyping and occupational segregation.

ATL believes the SASE would benefit from stipulation on the suitability and stability of employers that offer apprenticeships. Whilst this is important in a general sense, the current economic climate highlights the importance of ensuring that it is firms on sure footing that take on apprentices. Whilst it could be argued that the recession may have a positive effect on take-up, due to the part-vocational, part-study structure, equally there are less risky education paths for young people than newly constructed apprenticeships, particularly if the uncertainty and instability of employers taking part also seems to add risk. Similarly, it is ATL's view that the government should consider that its funding of more apprenticeship places than employers have jobs could also impact upon take-up.

The transferability of apprenticeships appears to be an under-developed area. Though the SASE may not be required to deal with the transfer of apprentices from one programme to another at a midway stage, the strength of the specifications themselves should ensure this is possible on the occasions it is deemed suitable by the apprentice. It is also relevant to highlight the likely frequency of apprentices' needs to be able to have their apprenticeship with one employer in a sector recognised by another. In other words, the apprenticeship should be a ladder to the job market and not simply a mechanism for the provider to select their own staff – this is particularly the case with big business providers of apprentices where it may suit an individual to join a local SME. ATL believes that apprenticeships should carry license to practice in the occupational sector.

Implications for learning

Whether in the workplace or in college, it is essential that apprenticeships have a high educational quality and ATL believes that the SASE would benefit from an explicit statement of this aim. Society, individuals, business and the economy stand to benefit from high quality, sustainable and rigorous apprenticeship programmes that improve social mobility, lessen social inequalities and increase social equity. Apprenticeships should not just be about the skills for a job, but skills for life, and about developing well-rounded citizens who can participate successfully in the workplace and in society.

ATL would like to raise doubts over the government's strong focus on big business in apprenticeship provision: the interaction of big business and education can not be assumed to be wholly good. ATL believes that education should be sustainable and believes in educating for sustainability. We have concerns over the marketisation of education policy-making in the UK. We are also advocates for localism and the benefit of utilising teachers and lecturers' professional capabilities in designing curricula. It is the view of ATL that apprenticeships would be strengthened by the inclusion in the SASE of a requirement for frameworks to include learning about globalisation and localism and the impact upon local economies, both positive and negative. It is worth clarifying that ATL maintains its support for a national set of standards with local flexibility to innovate, and that where there is a need for local adaptations – as ascribed by the SSCs – these do not contradict the underlying principles of the SASE.

ATL believes that the centrality of ICT to modern life clearly requires the ICT Functional Skill to be mandatory in all apprenticeship frameworks and

not just those where it is deemed most relevant. It is no longer questionable whether ICT is important even when day-to-day use in a workplace may be minimal and it is inconceivable that a student could complete a modern qualification without benefiting from some degree of ICT education or practice.

As a trade union, it is the very firm belief of ATL that the SASE's stipulation of what must be included in the instruction of employee rights and responsibilities (ERR) should include trade union membership and the role of unions in the workplace. ATL's members believe that contemporary trade unionism should be included within all relevant curriculum areas and apprenticeships are a perfect example of a highly relevant area of education. The rationale behind the consultation document's debate over formal assessment for ERR is false. It is imperative that this aspect of the apprenticeship is taught very early on even if assessment as part of a qualification is later. If such assessment is deemed necessary, its presence later in the apprenticeship increases the likelihood of the issues taught staying with the apprentice throughout their time in the workplace rather than simply learnt for a test at the beginning and subsequently forgotten.

Implications for educational workforce

Whilst employers may prefer fewer off-workstation hours built into the apprenticeship, ATL's members would argue the case for the benefit of off-workstation learning. The SASE must be stronger in its statement of minimum off-workstation guided learning hours so that the business influence on programme design does not take the framework's minimum to be either a recommendation or a potential maximum number of GLH. The SASE should encourage local flexibility with professional expertise from educators as well as those working in the industry plus the needs of the student taken into account. Such a dialogue would consider the balance of an apprentices' time and whether off-workstation teaching may best take place in big chunks, for example, a six week block of full-time attendance at college, or in small bites of one day a week over the whole period, and how much takes place in the employer's classroom, and how much at an educational (or other) institution.

Though, ATL welcomes the integrity the SASE demands in removing vested interests from competence assessment, it is clear that the 'independent methods' used should not diminish professionalism by expecting those teaching on a programme also to be assessors.

ATL believes that the SASE should make greater demands of frameworks in offering information, advice and guidance (IAG) both into and out of apprenticeships. Frameworks should be required to stipulate both common and possible routes, current employment advice in the sector and with the employer offering a programme, as well as offering access to IAG at the educational partner that would allow potential and current apprentices to receive greater clarity on how the apprenticeship links with diplomas, other educational qualifications and joining the workforce. Such provision is a crucial aspect of ensuring that apprenticeships do not become, or are not seen as, lower class qualifications that are aimed at low attainment students – this in turn, is critical to the success of apprenticeships.

Conclusion

ATL believes that the public funding of apprenticeships requires the balance between societal, individual and business benefits to be more equal and that the SASE should be more explicit in seeking to ensure apprenticeships are of high educational quality.

We believe that a strong set of specifications will go some way to making Apprenticeships valuable for all and providing a first class, aspirational route for young people who have the ambition to enter the workplace.

Apprenticeships should not just be about the skills for a job, but skills for life, and about developing well-rounded citizens who can participate successfully in the workplace and in a society that benefits from their presence.