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Can consistent apprenticeship experience be achieved to drive performance excellence?



Professor Sa'ad Medhat
CEng FRSA FIKE

Professor Medhat is the founder & CEO of NEF with an established reputation for driving forward initiatives from policy through to implementation.

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

The Heseltine Report¹ made it clear: we need to achieve the highest standards in education to raise our game on socio-economic prosperity. The message from the Richard Review² is that apprenticeships are no exception to this. They need to set higher standards so that they are held in high esteem by employers, apprentices and society at large. Major reforms have followed from the Richard's Review. However, the issue that remains is that of consistency in the quality of the apprentice's experience. Theoretically, it should make no difference as to whether the apprentice has gone to a large or small company. The apprenticeship programme should be designed in such a way as to provide an experience that is consistent and impactful, irrespective of employer size or industry sector. In practice, the quality of the apprentice's experience is highly variable, and consequently may have a negative impact on the individual apprentice, and also on the sector and the economy as a whole. In addition, if the intention is to create

a robust educational alternative through a workplace route, then the apprenticeship standards should enable progression to first degree or postgraduate level that have parity of esteem with their academic counterparts.

WHAT IS NEEDED?

Beyond what the apprenticeship frameworks prescribe at different levels, there is no instrument to benchmark the consistency in the quality of the apprentice's experience. Research³ has demonstrated that the economies of the future will need workforces that offer higher functioning capabilities – digital, logic, design and interactions together with dexterity and sensory skills; ability to operate in different sectors; adaptable to technological change and possessing entrepreneurial mind-sets. By having these capabilities, employers will achieve greater productivity and increased innovation. There are many excellent apprenticeship programmes that go a long way to meet these qualities. However, to ensure a strong foundation for the future economy, these exemplars need to become the norm and not the exception. The only way to achieve this successfully is through providing a structured, coherent and consistent learning experience for the apprentice benchmarked to the highest standards globally.

THE APPRENTICE ASSURED

Building on NEF's extensive experience in developing quality standards and conducting assurance in multiple sectors (eg education, nuclear, construction, engineering, defence, energy, life sciences), NEF has designed a unique, new standard that assures the consistent quality of the Apprentice's experience – the Apprentice Assured.

The Apprentice Assured uses a six-category Framework to assess the apprenticeship quality. The Award is for the employer. The focus of the Framework is on the learner experience: how far is the apprenticeship geared to qualifying the apprentice to be of real value to an employer? Is the apprentice of value not just to the employer but to the wider industry? This is a chance to avoid apprenticeships that are an exercise in certifying – by box-ticking, taking the 'route one' approach to obtaining funding and hitting targets at least cost.

The Apprentice Assured Framework categories are identified in Figure 1:

A sample of the type of questions that the Apprentice Assured Standard tests for include:

- Is the Apprenticeship designed to deliver the impacts?
- Does the Apprenticeship programme plan the experience so as to maximise learning?
- Is the purpose of the Apprenticeship clear to the learner?
- Does the training provider and the employer understand their roles and act on these?
- Are learning experiences structured to provide a coherent curriculum of a consistent high standard?

- Do apprentices understand the demands of their industry and customer needs?
- Do apprentices develop high-value transferable and cross-sector skills?
- Does the apprenticeship encourage innovation, creative problem solving and design?
- Does the apprenticeship encourage commitment to professional recognition?
- Are the intended impacts achievable, add value and improve performance?

The development of the Apprentice Assured Standard is supported by the members of the Innovation Council of over 40 chief officers from different industry sectors of the economy. They act as members of the independent validation panel as part of the assurance process to enable not only objectivity in the assessment, but also to encourage the transfer of sector-to-sector best practice.

References:

- 1 No Stone Unturned in pursuit of growth Oct 2012.
- 2 The future of apprenticeships, Nov2014.
- 3 Workforce 2020, Building a strategic workforce for the future, Oxford Economics 2014; Global Human Capital Trends 2014, Deloitte 2014; Inventing the Future: Transforming STEM Economies, NEF 2014.

