

Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) Introducing and assessing employability skills in apprenticeships: a clash of agendas

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1. Foreword

Writing papers for IAEA conferences starts with the birth of an idea in February; not just any idea, but an idea so powerful that it has to be shared internationally. This same idea, in abstract form, is sent into the ether to seek the approval of the IAEA panel with all the excitement and trepidation of a learner waiting for their exam results. Then, in May, when notification arrives that this is an idea whose time has in fact come, it somehow seems to have lost its lustre or to be the product of an over indulgent thought process. The thought of shipping the idea across the world to Brisbane, Australia now seems a bit presumptuous. You begin to feel that it has trouble passing the domestic ‘Who cares?’ challenge never mind standing up to international scrutiny. So, in a brave and perhaps foolhardy attempt to move it from the ‘Who cares?’ pile to the ‘For what it is worth’ pile, here goes.

In a funny sort of way, I have to thank God for this paper. This sounds like an overly pious acknowledgement more fitting of an Oscar or Grammy acceptance speech. However, were it not the good people of the Isle of Harris on the Outer Hebrides in Scotland observing his/her Sabbath, and effectively shutting down the island, and were it not for the usual, Highlands July drizzle keeping me holed up in my hotel room instead of wandering in what is God’s own countryside, much of this paper would never have been written. For that is the other challenge to overcome when preparing IAEA papers. Having set aside any fears about your paper’s relevance, there is the struggle to ensure that the labour required to despatch the more fully worked up idea is not overtaken by the toil of the day job. However, this is something else that the Highland Sabbath has taken care of, for writing this is more pleasure than work and that is allowed, even on the Isle of Harris.

2. Introduction

This paper gives a practical account of some of the issues surrounding the introduction of Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) in to the UK apprenticeship framework. In doing so it explores the competing agendas of national policy makers who are striving towards employability and transferability of skills, and apprenticeship stakeholders who seek to hold onto a more narrowly defined remit.

The ideas and illustrations used in this paper are drawn from consultation and policy development work done for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)¹ in England in the winter 2008/spring 2009 period. QCA, with key partners for apprenticeship reform, developed an outline plan for incorporating PLTS into apprenticeships. One key activity in this work was a consultation phase with awarding organisations (AOs), Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and employers, where each was asked to comment on the proposals and options set out before them. It was while carrying out this consultation work that it became clear that there were a number of issues about assessment layered behind not just the mechanics of the apprenticeship but also in the inclusion of PLTS in apprenticeships.

The PLTS framework is a set of six generic skills designed to help create Creative thinkers; Reflective learners; Team workers; Active participators; Self-managers and Independent

¹ The QCA, now QCDA, is a close to government, non-departmental public body (NDPB) with a remit to develop the curriculum, improve and deliver assessments, and review and reform qualifications.

enquirers (see appendix). This framework is now embedded across the secondary curriculum and beyond.

3. Talking up a storm

“This country has a long and proud tradition of apprenticeships stretching back over centuries. For millions of young adults, they have provided a prized pathway to valued skills and a good job. For businesses, they provide a premium route for unlocking talent and for commercial growth.”²

The faint humming of *Jerusalem* is almost audible as you read this opening statement from the recent government white paper on apprenticeships. Apprenticeships in England are not the almost exclusively Level 3 high-quality, employer based route that they are in other European countries³. Central government has viewed apprenticeships as a key instrument in economic recovery and future prosperity by turning them into target driven programmes mainly at Level 2. Apprenticeships are perceived as the panacea for the low skills workforce that is seen as the current fault line running through the UK’s bid for future economic prosperity. They have in the main, evolved a particular meaning and form in English vocational education and training. They no longer represent the protracted period of learning and hard toil at the side of a highly competent master; they have become mass market and, among other things, have taken on a social inclusion dimension in the bid to extend provision of a universal entitlement. This point is underlined by the creation of:

- Pre-apprenticeships, made available to young people not yet ready to take on an apprenticeship or other types of formal training at Level 2,
- Young apprenticeships, designed for young people aged 14-16 and offering pupils at Key Stage 4 in school (14-16 year olds) the opportunity to spend two days a week in the workplace of a local employer whilst still studying at school, and
- Apprenticeships for adults, which are open to anyone over the age of 25.

Interestingly, vocational qualifications like apprenticeships, and other government led qualification reforms, are never really left un-tinkered with for long enough to assemble any real data about the economic benefits to the learners of having these types of qualifications. The wage advantage to successful holders of lower level vocational qualifications is practically indiscernible. The recent Nuffield Foundation funded review of 14-19 education and training shows that for such qualifications which have been around for a sufficient period of time (e.g. NVQs) the apparent wage advantage of possessing these types of awards is surprisingly low.⁴ This type of position critically undermines any attempts to establish a parity of esteem across qualification types.

Apprenticeships are essentially a particular set of approved of qualifications combined in a way that has been deemed suitable by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) as capable of meeting the needs of employers. They also include some additional government introduced requirements. SSCs are employer led but are publicly sponsored bodies tasked with representing the views and meeting the training needs of employers in the various industry sectors. However, the sector

² World-class Apprenticeships: Unlocking talent, Building Skills for All; The Government’s strategy for the future of Apprenticeships in England, extract taken from Foreword by John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills and Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, School and Families

³ See Education for all: The future of education and training for 14-19 year olds, Richard Pring et al, Routledge 2009.

⁴ Ibid:144

qualifications are the sugar lump for the learner and each apprenticeship must contain the national medicine, designed to cure wider systemic workforce ills. The composition of each new apprenticeship certificate will typically contain⁵:

- Competence outcomes (and the relevant qualifications(s) and/or unit(s))
- Knowledge/theory outcomes (and the relevant qualifications(s) and/or unit(s))
- Functional skills English and functional skills mathematics
- Personal Learning and Thinking Skills that learners must demonstrate, and
- Completion of an Employer Rights and Responsibilities (ERR) module.

Each of these five components will have different styles and levels of assessment demand. Some will be qualifications, like the knowledge-based, competence-based and functional skills components, and some will be requirements that need to be met but not formally assessed.

The level of choice within apprenticeship frameworks can be substantial and apprenticeships within the same framework can be dramatically different. Apprenticeships made up of the same component choices also vary greatly because of the amount of choice within qualifications.

Example of potential variety of choice possible in choosing an advanced apprenticeship

Requirements	Component choices	Example of potential choice
Competence-based component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NVQ Level 3 in Retail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edexcel NVQ in Retail (2 mandatory – 6 optional units in three recognised variants from 21 optional units in all)
Key Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications, L2 • Number, L2 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 awarding organisations to choose from
Knowledge-based component (One from):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EDI Certificate in Retail Operations • C&G Certificate in Retailing • Edexcel BTEC Certificate in Retailing • Edexcel BTEC Certificate in Retail Beauty Consultancy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ABC Awards for Visual Merchandising (2 mandatory plus one from 3 optional units)
Employer requirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food Safety Certificate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CIEH Food Safety for Retail

4. What of assessment?

There are key assessment issues that emerge when you look closely at a composite award like an apprenticeship programme. First, there is the issue of the sum of the whole being greater than the sum of the individual assessment parts. Then there is the issue of how well the various parts work together and the extent to which they form a coherent whole.

⁵ As suggested in Annex 1 of the *Consultation on the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE)*, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, February 2009

4.1 The extent of the overall assessment demand

The assessment demand of the total programme being greater than the sum of the demand of the individual parts is a problem inherent in many vocational awards, especially those which are centrally created. Achievement must be demonstrated by jumping through a series of assessment hoops, usually without the benefit of any compensatory mechanism, in order to achieve certification.

When you have composite awards offering unique ingredients, each vital in flavouring the overall mix (or each put there for a reason), there is little opportunity or merit in having an aggregation system that allows for component level compensation in determining the overall pass, i.e. there is little worth in allowing the pass if a learner under-performs in the competency-based part but over-achieves in the knowledge-based component. This seems sensible. However, when each component is criterion-referenced and non-compensatory in itself the overall package becomes altogether more challenging and punitive in that failure at the smallest of assessment requirements at component or sub-component level means failure overall.

Policy makers endeavouring to ensure parity of esteem between vocational and academic programmes invariably over do it by making the total demand of vocational qualifications more difficult or challenging than their academic counterparts. This continues to happen and is a ticking bomb in the new flagship Diplomas, where the total set of requirements when assembled as a single qualification challenge is daunting. While the creation of disproportionately challenging vocational qualifications may play well to those concerned about creating this parity of esteem, it is based on a misplaced belief that somehow scarcity (brought about by degree of difficulty) drives value. While this may drive an academic system based on feeding higher education selection processes, it has little worth as a notion when creating alternate routes to learning and employment. It also impacts on the social inclusion agenda that vocational education has been asked to pick up. Here vocational programmes are used to extend entitlement and serve as a social inclusion function, or second chance to learn function, re-enfranchising those that have drifted away from the academic or general, subject driven secondary school curriculum. It is hard to drive a parity of esteem agenda with such cohorts needing to access this form of learning. It seems that in an effort to take this agenda and merge it with one that seeks to establish parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications, we over compensate and create vocational education and training systems or third way qualifications⁶ that are more exacting in their requirements than academic alternates.

While pass rates are improving with the overall completions of apprenticeships up now to 63% (an all time high) and much improved from the 24% in 2001/02,⁷ the extent to which this is due to the growth in the variety of apprenticeship forms and, in particular, the solely college based programme-based apprenticeships is unclear.

4.2 Something for everyone or a muddled offering?

But what of these competing agendas? We have a framework (but let's call it a composite award) that is made up of several parts; some qualifications, some not. The qualifications fall

⁶ In England there is a search for the holy grail of qualification types that sits between the academic route (GCE A Levels) and the occupational route (Apprenticeships) that promises alternative access to higher education for those less well suited for the academic path. This, in itself, contains notions of learner types, learning and assessment that are problematic.

⁷ Taken from official press release 'Government doubles apprenticeships commitment', 27th October 2008 found at www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/displaypn.cgi?pn_id+2008_0441

into three camps but serve two purposes. The first purpose is the vocational one with the competence-based qualification ensuring job readiness and the knowledge-based component ensuring that the underpinning technical knowledge is in place also. These are the first two qualification types, both criterion referenced, both normally driven by internal assessment with a measure of external verification. The narrowly defined purpose pulls assessment towards models that ensure high validity. The lack of importance placed on comparability means that reliability issues are much less of an issue. This is a situation that largely suits the employer need. There are still issues about the burden of assessment but these are more related to the bureaucracy of the assessment recording process. The fact that assessors work with relatively small numbers of trainees at any given time and in relative isolation from each other, with the obvious knock on effects on standards is also not a central concern. From a national perspective this type of approach makes any parity of esteem agenda with other more reliably assessed qualification routes less of an issue.

From a trainee point of view, their enthusiasm for these qualifications (and this approach) will be high because this is what they want to do.

The second type of qualification deviates from this pattern. The transferable skills (Functional English and mathematics) are constructs designed to test whether the learner is *functional* in their use of English and mathematics. These qualifications are locked into a wider strategy linked more to ensuring learners' employability, rather than having any specific remit to improve their suitability for a particular job.

These types of qualifications, available to a much wider population than just apprentices, but compulsory for apprenticeship and Diploma learners, have the ability to deliver national guarantees, e.g. numbers of learners with Level 2 literacy or numeracy, and provide a level of confidence or at least make reassuring noises about the state of the nation. English education has been driven by the target driven, performance management culture in recent years and Public Sector Agreement (PSA) targets have been set in areas like literacy and numeracy. However, it would seem that these types of qualifications hold less immediate importance for employers (or learners, for that matter). They are often also the part of the apprenticeship that stalls any attempts to increase completion rates.

What of PLTS? Like English and mathematics these are designed to be transferable skills seen as key features of general employability. Unlike the other transferable, employability related skills, these are not as yet framed as formal qualifications. It is interesting to see the government pitch for these skills, and an SSC reaction, which was not atypical:

*The [PLTS] framework comprises six groups of skills that, together with functional skills of English, mathematics and ICT, are essential to success in learning, life and work.*⁸

*The aims of the curriculum are that young people should become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens. The development of PLTS is an essential part of meeting these aims.*⁹

And the employers:

⁸ From A framework of personal, learning and thinking skills, QCA found at: www.qcda.gov.uk/libraryAssets/media/PLTS_framework.pdf

⁹ From Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills: *Supporting successful learners, confident learners and responsible citizens*, QCA, found at http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/uploads/Personal,%20learning%20and%20thinking%20skills%20leaflet_tcm8-12831.pdf

*We agree that it is important for learners to develop generic employability skills but are not convinced that the plans to integrate ‘personal learning and thinking skills (PLTS)’ into the [apprenticeship] programme is the way to do this. Firstly, we do not believe that employers should be responsible for developing skills that should be the responsibility of schools ... Secondly, Skillsmart Retail has worked closely with retailers, awarding bodies and training providers to integrate as closely as possible the various components of the retail apprenticeship into a holistic programme and one that can be aligned to employers own training programme. The integration of PLTS into the programme could create problems if it is seen as an extra burden for employers...*¹⁰

The two agendas here are nicely juxtaposed. What weakens the position of the PLTS is the way that it is to have a compulsory presence within apprenticeships without having any real formal assessment requirement. This undermines establishing any innate sense of value or worth for the learner, suggests a lip service approach from the policy makers and allows employers to point to the initiative as just one more fetter added to the apprenticeship. If assessment is seen as having a backwash on learning, what is the backwash when there is a learning requirement without assessment?¹¹ Here is where the Diploma has got into difficulties. To avoid additional assessment burdens, emphasis is on establishing the pre-conditions for learning, e.g. establishing a 60 guided learning hour entitlement for PLTS learning and development, establishing approval to offer Diplomas based on PLTS implementation plans and then asking for evidence of recording PLTS taking place. At no point is there formal explicit assessment of PLTS attainment.

So, different stakeholders value different parts of the same apprenticeship differently. The transferable skills components are often counter-intuitive to employers, but crucial to government plans.

As discussed, part of the innate value of transferable skills related qualifications is their implementation across a range of user groups and because of this, these transferable skills are a common thread through a number of key 14-19 reforms, helping bring a level of coherence to the qualification provision. However, learners across this age range and in a range of different learning contexts exert different pressures on assessment. Pre-16 there is a pressure to use assessments that are readily understood and accessible to learners with limited life experiences, i.e. maths questions using real life examples and contexts are difficult for younger learners, but present older learners with realistic assessment questions that show a high validity and adult or older learners are more motivated by and find questions based on relevant or real life contexts more accessible. This puts pressure on the need to offer variation in assessment methods/models which in turn causes issues about variation in standards.

The other issue concerns how to assess transferable skills best. The problem of construct under-representation in assessment is a perennial problem when assessing English¹² but there are also issues related to some of the more process driven transferable skills. Something like PLTS is best done alongside learning and knowledge-based components. These types of qualifications contain learning activities that can become purposeful vehicles for PLTS learning and skills

¹⁰ In Skillsmart Retail's response to World-class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All, March 2008

¹¹ See G. Stobart on assessment's backwash on learning in *Testing Times*, Routledge, 2008, p.108

¹² Stobart, *Ibid* page 132

development. However, in a heavily skills oriented environment with competence-driven approaches like NVQ, where emphasis is on individual demonstration of skills acquisition the lack any sizeable learning component makes it much harder to integrate PLTS type activity.

There are some discernable trends or patterns across apprenticeships when looking to determine their propensity to generate PLTS style learning and evidence:

- There are more opportunities for PLTS development and PLTS related activity present in apprenticeship learning than there are chances for explicit recognition of PLTS achievement within the existing evidence requirements
- The presence of large, knowledge-based components makes a significant difference in the extent to which the apprenticeship covers PLTS, but may have little impact on the amount of activity that is explicitly recognised under existing evidence requirements
- The extent of coverage of PLTS in apprenticeships is often dependent on delivery methods especially when it comes to Reflective Learners, Creative Thinkers and Independent Enquirers.

Very often, how the knowledge-based components are delivered in the apprenticeship exercises a major influence on the ease with which PLTS can be introduced. Many of the opportunities to develop PLTS exist in learning approaches often situated in learning environments. This means that the time spent away from the workstation plays a key role in determining how straightforward it will be to manage the inclusion of PLTS. There will often be plenty of opportunities to demonstrate achievement of at least half the PLTS framework (Team Workers, Self-managers and Effective Participators) but little opportunity to have these directly assessed or recognised.

5. The nostrum of criticism is a better alternative

Currently, apprenticeships are asked to serve what can be conflicting agendas that try to finesse economic prosperity, social inclusion and provide high quality, alternative routes to employment or higher education. They are asked to equip trainees for one particular job and to part equip them for any job. They are available in on the job, on and off the job and off the job forms and they come in varieties to suit school pupils, school leavers and adults. There are major concerns about the existing burden of assessment and the levels of administration surrounding the awards. They are complex and not well understood and they are prone to constant tinkering. If PLTS is to be the next addition then there are a few simple rules that need to be adhered to:

1. There is little impact made in just ensuring exposure to PLTS opportunities because there is a potentially unreceptive learner and training population to deal with
2. There is little value in building the input around recording how, when and where PLTS activity took place and the appropriateness of the level of time and commitment shown to PLTS, as in the Diploma, because this records the pre-requisites of achievement not achievement itself
3. Assessment that is positive, as unobtrusive and as manageable as possible, creating a positive and PLTS enhancing backwash has to be the goal.

There also has to be transparency and honesty in the approach that justifies any inclusion in the learning by recognising that inclusion and acknowledging its achievement formally. The assessment burden can also be lessened through the provision of appropriate resources to support the inclusion. The more common approach of implementation of government initiatives by a gentle introduction around the edges of qualifications is unlikely to have the desired impact.

One solution to the PLTS dilemma is to create a vehicle for the explicit assessment of PLTS where no other method exists. Creating a PLTS vehicle to operate as a discrete apprenticeship component that would capture, record and present for certification all the PLTS activity and achievement taking place in the apprenticeship or wider employer training programme would resolve the problem. The most straightforward way to do this would be to create a PLTS QCF unit¹³ that requires a holistic approach to be taken to the development and evidencing of PLTS. At the risk of having the idea weakened by the quality of the potential example, this unit could look something like this (at Level 2):

Potential PLTS QCF unit designed to allow explicit recording and recognition of PLTS achievement.

Title	Recognising Personal Learning and Thinking Skills Achievement
Level	2
Credit value	6
Learning outcomes	Assessment criteria
1. Be able to create a record of PLTS development.	<p>1.1 Keep a record of Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills development and achievement that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Clear b. Current c. Addresses all six PLTS areas, and d. Is their own work. <p>1.2 Use the record or other suitable way to demonstrate their ability to reflect on the progress made in developing PLTS, showing they can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Monitor their own performance and progress b. Invite feedback from others, and c. Adapt their plans to improve their performance.
2. Be able to build a portfolio of PLTS achievements drawn from a major programme of study or training.	<p>2.1 Create a body of evidence that demonstrates their ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Work confidently with others and form effective, collaborative relationships. b. Organise and manage themselves effectively, taking responsibility, and showing initiative, creativity and enterprise. c. Actively engage with and participate in the workplace. <p>2.2 Create a body of evidence that demonstrates their ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Show a degree of autonomy when planning, processing and evaluating investigations. b. Take informed and well-reasoned decisions. c. Apply creative thinking to problem solving and working with others. <p>2.3 Ensure that the evidence is sufficient, shows own achievement clearly and is based on recent work done.</p>

This represents perhaps the most unequivocal solution to the issue of integrating PLTS into apprenticeships in a way that ensures external quality assurance. The way that the unit is written also allows the young person/trainee to bring forward naturally occurring evidence from their competence-based component and/or their knowledge-based component, or other workplace programmes like their induction or in-house schemes.

This unit does not have to be imposed on all apprenticeships but could be used in those where there is no existing vehicle for recognising PLTS achievement.

¹³ The Qualifications and Credit Framework introduced in England to replace the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), moving the emphasis from qualifications to credits.

Appendix: The PLTS framework

Independent enquirers

Focus:

Young people process and evaluate information in their investigations, planning what to do and how to go about it. They take informed and well-reasoned decisions, recognising that others have different beliefs and attitudes.

Young people:

- identify questions to answer and problems to resolve
- plan and carry out research, appreciating the consequences of decisions
- explore issues, events or problems from different perspectives
- analyse and evaluate information, judging its relevance and value
- consider the influence of circumstances, beliefs and feelings on decisions and events
- support conclusions, using reasoned arguments and evidence.

Creative thinkers

Focus:

Young people think creatively by generating and exploring ideas, making original connections. They try different ways to tackle a problem, working with others to find imaginative solutions and outcomes that are of value.

Young people:

- generate ideas and explore possibilities
- ask questions to extend their thinking
- connect their own and others' ideas and experiences in inventive ways
- question their own and others' assumptions
- try out alternatives or new solutions and follow ideas through
- adapt ideas as circumstances change.

Reflective learners

Focus:

Young people evaluate their strengths and limitations, setting themselves realistic goals with criteria for success. They monitor their own performance and progress, inviting feedback from others and making changes to further their learning.

Young people:

- assess themselves and others, identifying opportunities and achievements
- set goals with success criteria for their development and work
- review progress, acting on the outcomes
- invite feedback and deal positively with praise, setbacks and criticism
- evaluate experiences and learning to inform future progress
- communicate their learning in relevant ways for different audiences.

Team workers

Focus:

Young people work confidently with others, adapting to different contexts and taking responsibility for their own part. They listen to and take account of different views. They form collaborative relationships, resolving issues to reach agreed outcomes.

Young people:

- collaborate with others to work towards common goals
- reach agreements, managing discussions to achieve results
- adapt behaviour to suit different roles and situations, including leadership roles
- show fairness and consideration to others
- take responsibility, showing confidence in themselves and their contribution
- provide constructive support and feedback to others.

Self-managers

Focus:

Young people organise themselves, showing personal responsibility, initiative, creativity and enterprise with a commitment to learning and self-improvement. They actively embrace change, responding positively to new priorities, coping with challenges and looking for opportunities.

Young people:

- seek out challenges or new responsibilities and show flexibility when priorities change
- work towards goals, showing initiative, commitment and perseverance
- organise time and resources, prioritising actions
- anticipate, take and manage risks
- deal with competing pressures, including personal and work-related demands
- respond positively to change, seeking advice and support when needed
- manage their emotions, and build and maintain relationships.

Effective participators

Focus:

Young people actively engage with issues that affect them and those around them. They play a full part in the life of their school, college, workplace or wider community by taking responsible action to bring improvements for others as well as themselves.

Young people:

- discuss issues of concern, seeking resolution where needed
- present a persuasive case for action
- propose practical ways forward, breaking these down into manageable steps
- identify improvements that would benefit others as well as themselves
- try to influence others, negotiating and balancing diverse views to reach workable solutions
- act as an advocate for views and beliefs that may differ from their own.