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## Abstract

Big changes are underway in the assessment of Apprenticeships in England with employers asked to reconsider what is meant by competence-based assessment by looking at how and when competence should be assessed. One of the most significant changes is the introduction of grading to what has been a binary (competent or not competent) approach to Apprenticeship assessment. A small number of employers and professional associations have been invited to take the lead in the reform of Apprenticeships by becoming Trailblazers. As Trailblazers, employers have been tasked with developing the new assessment approaches, placing new emphasis on synoptic assessment rather than unit-based approaches. This paper explores how the energy and utilities sector, as an Apprenticeship Trailblazer, has responded to these assessment challenges.

The Trailblazer has seized this latest UK government Apprenticeship reform as an opportunity to build on existing industry assessment processes and to redefine good practice in vocational assessment. This paper explores the sector's response to the reforms and to grading competence-based qualifications, looking at how and where valid and meaningful grounds for grading can be found in definitions of occupational competence.

## Background

In England Apprenticeships are undergoing profound change. This latest Apprenticeship reform is qualitatively different from previous attempts at quantitative adjustment and modification. The causal reasons for why Apprenticeships needed to be reformed are not found in the education and skills arena but in the political and economic ones. Firstly, the advent of a coalition government (more correctly, the political outlook for continued coalitions or minority governments, in the medium term at least) has changed how political parties have to relate to each other and to policy construction. Signalling where common ground might exist between different parties (and where business could be done) is becoming as important as the need to identify clear ideological divides.

Political parties have had to look both to their own manifesto's singular aspirations as well as to where negotiated political space can be established. This has allowed political consensus to emerge in the less disputed and less contentious (perhaps less vote worthy) areas. Technical, Vocational Education and Training is a one policy area identified as potentially politically neutral and in scope for potential consensus with a strong employer leadership/ownership vision emerging as the shared political narrative, uncontested across political divides.

The second major causal factor is economic. All recent public policy has been framed by economic austerity and public expenditure restraint. More financially sustainable solutions on reduced public spending output and the need for greater efficiency in all areas of expenditure have helped drive innovation and are woven like golden threads through the tapestry of most policy activity. Apprenticeship funding in the TVET system is an example of this pursuit of greater financial restraint. Here emphasis is now on channelling funding routes away from inefficient, supply-side agents (for example, suppliers of accredited learning and training, and the industry that has grown up around servicing the supply side), to a demand-led model where employers are funded directly and enter the market place as discerning and informed consumers. Employers have also been offered leadership positions in specifying what they are prepared to consume. In Apprenticeship development (the key area for the skills and talent pipeline around the Technician level), employers working collaboratively have been asked to lead the development of standards and assessment. In the past direct responsibility for Apprenticeship development would have indirectly involved employers but would have been driven from the supply-side.

UK employers (particularly those in the energy and utilities sector) have grasped the leadership role firmly, producing a range of responses across the first eight Trailblazer areas. All responses are viewed as inherently valid (this is what the employers want for Apprenticeships) and each varies in their response to how opportunities within the reform have been exploited. With the employer leadership narrative both powerful and uncontested fundamental changes to how Apprenticeships are assessed have passed relatively unchallenged as part of this message. These changes presented as design principles will, along with the employer leadership in content and assessment, make each ‘trail-blazed’ Apprenticeship eligible for public funding in future.

## Introduction

In October 2013, the UK Government published *The Future of Apprenticeships in England: Implementation Plan* codifying much of their employer leadership intentions. This document set out the policy intention to:

- **Increase the quality of Apprenticeships** – by introducing rigorous and synoptic assessment
- **Put employers in the driving seat** – by having employers design Apprenticeship standards directly
- **Simplify the system** by making standards short and easy to understand
- **Give employers greater control over funding** by routing government funding for external training of apprentices via employers

The key intention was to drive up quality and relevance of the Apprenticeship by challenging employers to take greater direct ownership and responsibility for the Apprenticeship provision. The fourth policy intention signals the shift away from a supply-side funding model where training providers and training developers have direct access to funding for learners to a demand-driven approach where employers receive the funding to purchase services directly.

Three straightforward design principles for the new Apprenticeships in England were offered as ‘non-negotiable’ by policy makers. Going forward, funded Apprenticeships must:

- Be assessed largely at the end – with the expectation that in most cases at least two-thirds of the assessment must take place at the end of Apprenticeships
- Have a synoptic element to the end point assessment
- Be graded at Pass, Merit and Distinction

This paper outlines how the Energy and Utilities Trailblazer responded to the new design blueprint for Apprenticeship assessment<sup>1</sup>. The energy and utilities model stands as one of many phase one Trailblazer responses to the new set of assessment requirements for Apprenticeships, and while energy and utilities employers do not view their response as any more worthy than other sector responses, it does represent an example of how the Apprenticeship reform has been embraced fully.

### Moving Apprenticeships from on-programme to end of programme assessment

- **Apprentices will be assessed largely at the end – with the expectation that in most cases at least two-thirds of the assessment must take place at the end of Apprenticeships**
- **There will be a synoptic element to the end point assessment**

*From The Future of Apprenticeships in England, October 2013*

In policy circles, it is hard to engage in any discourse around learning and assessment design without hearing some combination of the trite but nonetheless apposite “don’t let the tail [assessment] wag the dog [learning]”, “let’s not reinvent the wheel” and “we mustn’t throw the baby out with the bath water”. Any second or subsequent meetings then generally involve dogs being wagged by their tails, wheels being duly invented, and gallons of bathwater and their infant bathers being simultaneously dispatched.

Into this colourful and crowded space for assessment axioms, the Energy and Utilities Trailblazer, having decided to work with a recently agreed set of competences in Power Network Engineering as the focus for the Trailblazer Apprenticeship was able to add “it isn’t broke, so let’s not fix it”.

Thus, the challenge was one of repositioning competences by moving away from a unit-based approach to one where a coherent and cohesive, single Apprenticeship journey could be built and then assessed. In doing so, the move away from a unit-based approach was not the only intended consequence in capitalizing on the opportunities offered in the Apprenticeship reform.

Apprenticeships in the England have for some time existed as a collection of achievements, often separately certificated but collected under the Apprenticeship title as a collection of qualifications. Apprenticeships were ‘group awards’.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for details of the Energy and Utilities Trailblazer employer participation.

The typical Apprenticeship would consist of a technical certificate attesting to the apprentice's understanding of the vocational knowledge; a competence-based qualification; some form of mathematics and English qualification; Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills and some form of employer record. This collection starts as learning products packaged by awarding organisations retailing them to Apprenticeship Providers in a competitive market place. Providers then organise the discrete parts into coherent and cohesive programmes of learning. Where these are recognised routes and accredited qualifications, the provider accesses public funding for each learner enrolled on the approved programme.

One significant reward in establishing a single learning and skills development journey for Apprentices is that it brings to an end Apprenticeship as bundles of separate achievements. Previously, Apprenticeships as bundles of different qualifications had been a major obstacle to successfully introducing meaningful synoptic-style assessment approaches. A single learning and skills development journey, with a clear move away from a 'group award' style construction also allows assessment interventions to align more sympathetically to workplace requirements. For example, of primary concern for employers in the Energy and Utilities sector was the need to have apprentices start to make a meaningful (and by meaningful employers meant productive) contributions to the business relatively early in the Apprenticeship.

The new Apprenticeship assessment proposition marks a major step away from unit-based assessment and evidence tracking at a granular level, to one where far greater importance is placed on more comprehensive, summative assessment interventions. The introduction of a significant synoptic assessment also means a re-positioning of assessment against a more demonstrable, macro statement of overall competence (competence in the round) in relation to an occupation.

The focus is more on the apprentice's demonstration of readiness to become a competent worker rather than the apprentice as accumulator of a specific set of occupational competences, demonstrated at points on a learning journey.

Glaser's conceptual characterizing of the way performance of experts is differentiated from that of novices, offers a useful way of understanding the opportunities and potential that exists within these new assessment arrangements. (1990:476) Glaser offers the proposition that as proficiency develops, knowledge becomes increasingly integrated, new forms of cognitive skill emerge, access to knowledge is swift, and the efficiency of the performance is heightened. Increased competence in a domain reflects a knowledge base that becomes increasingly coherent and useful. If an Apprenticeship is constructed and assessed using this developmental approach it is not only possible to capture evidence that reflects a growth in competence, it is also possible to recognise and reward the transition from Apprentice to Productive Apprentice, then after development Productive Apprentice to Competent Worker. The movement from productive (in the business sense) towards fully competent offers an opportunity to move assessment approaches from quantitative accumulation of evidence to a model based on qualitative step changes in how the apprentice relates to the business using transitional assessment built on synoptic assessment. Thus it is developmental in approach but with regard to how the Apprentice relates to the business/occupation.

The development of proficiency can be more meaningfully reinforced and rewarded in the single programme approach to Apprenticeships because assessment can be more readily pinned to transitional stages rather than gradual accumulation along a continuum organised as a procession of units. With summative assessment positioned at qualitative step changes in the nature of the Apprenticeship and their capacity to contribute to the business rather than spread in a more atomistic way across an assessment continuum, more space opens up for learning and skills development and the process is de-cluttered from an overly prescriptive summative assessment operating at an overly granular level.

The positioning of assessment at end of stages, designed around synoptic assessment intentions increases the space for and the importance of formative assessment processes designed to inform learning and skills development.

This ‘single journey’ model with staged assessment interventions at transitional ‘rites of passage’ keeps the assessment requirements directly tied into the workplace requirements, transitioning the apprentice from one stage to the next in a way that will be clear to apprentices and valuable to employers. Everything learned, developed and secured up to that point has direct relevance and within the competence requirements of what is needed to become a productive apprentice everything mastered has a relevance that once secured can be demonstrated and put into productive use.

By clearing away component qualifications with their discrete assessment requirements as the vehicles for Apprenticeships and moving to a singular Apprenticeship programme, it is possible to:

- Align assessment interventions with workplace requirements (the need to be productive then fully competent)
- More easily adopt a more holistic assessment practice aimed at job readiness (using synoptic assessment)
- Introduce actual workplace assessment practice rather than imported qualification requirements (in this case, trade testing and Authorisations)

The single Apprenticeship journey and the strong relationship between learning, assessment and productivity it creates, provides a strong platform for the generation of a grading system capable of discrimination in assessment in ways meaningful for apprentice and employer alike.

### Introducing grading into Apprenticeships

- **All new Apprenticeships will be graded, with apprentices who successfully complete awarded a Pass, Merit or Distinction**

*From The Future of Apprenticeships in England, October 2013*

This design criterion has represented the biggest step away from current Apprenticeship practice. Political motivation to grade is rooted in the desire to create Apprenticeships that begin to perform like academic qualifications, thus allowing better comparison in the hope of establishing greater parity of esteem. The traditional criterion-referenced approach built up around the determination of competence was not designed to discriminate at anything other than a binary level. The assessment decision was centred on establishing whether a task could be done or not. The assessment focus in existing (Apprenticeship) criterion-referenced approaches were not around high discrimination but more around the successful completion of a continuum of tasks. (Gipps, 2004: 83)

The intrinsic value of grading from a learning perspective is known and well-rehearsed in education circles but in the realm of occupational assessment explicit grading constructs are not well established. The use of 'formal' is important because there is widespread use of informal grading frameworks by employers and training providers, usually comfortable about discussing which apprentices are good, better and best. This type of informal grading uses tacit assessment judgements rooted in localised assumptions is very often not transparent to apprentices. Of course, apprentices themselves have 'clear' notions of where they stand in relation to their peers. This is another informal set of grading assumptions. Often, these informal employer grading systems form the basis of decisions that influence where an apprentice is placed within the business and/or who they are placed with. A more transparent, explicit framework for discriminating on the basis of performance would have the benefit of letting good apprentices know what better and best looks like and thus how to improve.

These informal grading systems hold the key to introducing grading into Apprenticeship assessment reform. Very often, these informal grading systems are based on valid grounds for grade discrimination from a business perspective. Recognising the presence of additional or heightened skills sets within an Apprenticeship group helps to determine who might be better placed in areas where there is likely to be increased need for exemplar performance, e.g. customer contact or more hazardous environments/conditions.

Even within a competence (criterion-referenced) approach there is scope for recognition of higher levels of performance in terms of the quality of response to the task, even often at the most granular of levels. However, the real areas where increased levels of performance can be utilised meaningfully in order to introduce grading frameworks are in the attitudes and behaviours that can be demonstrated and which are valued (especially where higher levels of knowledge and skills can be demonstrated). This isn't the list of attitudes and behaviours normally identified in usual employability 'wish lists', for example, team working, problem solving and so on. Rather, these are the behaviours that emerge from the competences themselves and are important for both establishing competence and for discerning higher levels of performance.

These will differ from area to area and (from an employer viewpoint) the ability to demonstrate comparative and superlative performance in these areas drives immediate benefits for the apprentice's employer.

This refocusing on attitudes and behaviours underpinning workplace competences as the source for establishing higher levels of performance produces a different type of ‘wish list’ that now includes:

- Working effectively with people from different trades
- Delivering polite, courteous and professional service
- Care and respect
- Situational awareness
- Attention to detail on tasks
- Personal responsibility for the quality of your work
- Conservative bias in decision taking (risk awareness)

Each in the above list would be considered able to help differentiate between good and better power network engineers (e.g. those that work on overhead lines, underground cables or fit power substations).

Many of these types of qualities are expected to be leaned and developed as a result of experience (as a Competent Worker), so the ability to demonstrate them on programme and within the bounds on an Apprenticeship rightly marks apprentices out as operating over and above expectations.

While there are still operational challenges to overcome around the consistent and comparable assessment of these types of qualities, they already form part of what is used to determine (when applying informal grading frameworks) the good from the better, and the better from the best. They are recognizable to workplace assessors and employers as worthy of potentially more productive roles or form the basis of where best to utilize this improved performance within the business. These qualities (and they will differ from one Apprenticeship area to another) help reconcile informal grading constructs with a need to find and adopt a formal grading solution.

## Conclusions

The Holy Grail for Apprenticeships (and for most TVET) in the UK is the creation of a high quality, high value alternative to the academic progression route. Successive governments have introduced various reforms to try and establish greater parity of esteem between Apprenticeships and A Levels, for example, trying to attract young people into Apprenticeships as a progression route of choice. The extent to which the Apprenticeship reform is the paradigm shift needed to achieve this is not yet known. More certain is that it represents significant change brought about by brokering a solution (born of economic necessity and political possibility). The solution utilizes design agents capable of securing high utility in Apprenticeships (employers) and political agency keen to manoeuvre Apprenticeship assessment towards embracing assessment concepts alien in assessment of competence but familiar in general (academic) education. Another example of this subtle flexing and manoeuvring is the design requirement to link the Pass to professional registration requirements. For example, the Energy and Utilities Apprenticeship (at Pass) will enable the successful apprentice to apply for the appropriate professional association (e.g. the Institute of Engineering and Technology) for professional registration (Engineering Technician ‘Eng.Tech’ status).

This extends the connective tissue now linking known, education-based assessment concepts, employer leadership/ownership of TVET, independent quality benchmarking and what taxpayers should be prepared to pay for via public expenditure.

While the relative freedom to start with a clean sheet of paper and a few straightforward assessment principles when designing Apprenticeships is interesting enough, the extent to which employers have been encouraged to take up the leadership role in the reform and the way that employers have embraced this opportunity is the real story. While it is too early to reflect on the operational success of the Apprenticeship reforms and how scalable the process of employer leadership is, it is important to take a moment to acknowledge the on-going enrichment of how assessment can now be described because ‘the cat is out of the bag’.

### Bibliography

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### Appendix A - Employers forming the Energy and Utilities Trailblazer

The Energy and Utilities Trailblazer Group has had the following active employer participants:

Northern Power Grid | UK Power Networks | National Grid | Scottish Power | NIE | IUS | AMEY | WPD | ENS | Morrison Utility Services | Freedom Group | Grosvenor Power | SSE |

The outputs from this group was scrutinised and reviewed by the Energy Standards and Qualifications Group (ESQG). Employer participation on this group included:

ABB | Alstom | Balfour Beatty | Carillion Utility Services | Enterprise Power Services | E.ON UK | Freedom Group | G4S | Morrison Utility Services | National Grid | Northern Power Grid | SSE | Scottish Power | Siemens | UK Power Networks | Energy & Utility Skills | National Skills Academy for Power |

In addition, the Independent Quality Board (IQB) provided an independent and additional review of the work done. This group is made up off the following employers:

- EDF Energy, Siemens plc, South West Water, Biffa, Alstom and National Grid.
- Prospect (Trade Union) also sits on this Board