

## **Impact of GCSE Entry Requirements on Early Years Educator Apprenticeships**

### **1. Introduction**

There has been much written following the policy announcement last year to impose an entry requirement for a Level 3 Early Years Educator Apprenticeship of a GCSE in English and maths. Much of what has been written was warning of the negative impact that these entry requirements will have on recruitment and the knock on effect that will have on the availability and cost of childcare places across England. There were letters sent to ministers from providers, employers representative groups including AELP and learners themselves, all saying essentially the same thing - that this single policy decision was a mistake and should be reversed to avoid a whole range of negative impacts. Unfortunately it seems that many of these warnings, that were largely ignored, are coming to pass. This latest business briefing from AELP looks at the introduction of this controversial policy, its ramifications and the actions AELP have taken to lobby for the interests of the industry.

### **2. Background**

When the National College for Teaching and Leadership at the Department for Education announced that functional skills would not be accepted as equivalent to GCSE and that GCSEs were to become the entry requirement for the Early Years Educator apprenticeship in February 2014, the policy came under strong criticism from across the sector. At the time Stewart Segal, chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), said: "Our view is that this is completely wrong. It will exclude many people that have been failed by the system and we should set qualification requirements by the end not beginning. This will not raise standards but exclude some excellent educators who will be excluded for the wrong reasons."

Similar strong criticism was voiced by AoC, City & Guilds and also the Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education, who all stated that the new requirements would drive down the numbers taking the new EYE and especially put older learners at a disadvantage.

Following strong lobbying from AELP and especially providers and employers, the government announced a temporary change in August 2014 with a statement from the National College of Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) that GCSE would be a completion requirement from September until the new apprenticeship standard comes into effect in early 2015. Despite further lobbying the government have been firm in their view that the previously announced policy will "raise the overall quality of literacy and numeracy skills of those entering the workforce".

### **3. Impact**

Evidence now coming in from AELP members is that following the introduction of GCSE entry requirements, numbers of people starting this essential qualification are dramatically down year-on year, in some cases by as much as over 60%, with some providers already closing down provision as a result. The lower levels of newly qualified staff in childcare provision is already beginning to cause recruitment problems for employers – ratios of staff-children have been reduced, meaning less places are available. This reduced supply of suitably qualified new staff will inevitably translate into a push upwards on wages, meaning that there is not just less availability of childcare provision, but a higher cost for the places that exist. This means that working parents are suffering at a time when provision of affordable childcare is a key priority for government in its attempt to reinvigorate the economy by increasing employment opportunities. All of these things were predicted and all are happening.

So what is the reaction from government? The policy was pushed through by former DfE minister Elizabeth Truss who, despite having the issues and potential impact clearly pointed out to her, decided to hold her line on the policy. Sam Gyimah, her replacement, also ignored the views of employers, providers and the education sector and maintained the policy. Now that we are in purdah we can stake stock of what the reaction to the many challenges to this have been. Nick Clegg has said that the impact was an “uncontroversial expectation” and the “quality does require that we are a bit more exacting about the qualifications people bring to the sector”. The policy view is then that by aligning this area of support to teaching, quality will be driven up around English and maths and that it may be quite painful until we get there.

Everyone is keen to support an improvement in quality, but it is difficult to see what the difference would be in learners achieving the GCSEs at the end of their apprenticeship rather than having it as an entry requirement. They would be qualified to exactly the same level upon their entry to the labour market and this would mitigate some of the challenges with recruitment, especially amongst older learners. This is the way that virtually every other apprenticeship is working even under the Trailblazers.

The argument against this insistence of GCSEs as an entry requirement is stronger when one includes the employer led Trailblazer apprenticeship that is being developed, where the employers don't want to have an entry requirement and the latest government Trailblazer guidance<sup>1</sup> states that any qualification required must show: ‘Evidence of a significant proportion of job vacancy advertisements in the relevant occupation requiring the qualification as an entry requirement or letters from employers, in line with Tech Levels and Skills Funding Agency business rules, stating that the qualification would give a learner an advantage when applying for related jobs’. That evidence is not available from employers. So the employer led trailblazer is not employer led after all.

### **4. The AELP view**

AELP is clear that Functional Skills should be available as a direct replacement for a GCSE. If that was the case here, then providers would be able to work much more effectively with this policy and the disastrously low recruitment would be addressed. Employers and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-apprenticeships-in-england-guidance-for-trailblazers>

learners like the Functional Skills qualifications, which are relevant to the workplace, unlike the GCSE.

AELP is also clear as shown in point 5 of our manifesto<sup>2</sup> that all apprenticeships should meet common standards and we should be increasing the number of people on apprenticeship programmes. By having the requirement for the Level 3 early years educator to achieve a level 2 English and maths on exit would make much more sense and maintain the drive for improved quality. That is in line with the Trailblazer guidance that states 'for apprentices that have not yet achieved level 2 English and maths, as a minimum they must:

- For level 2 apprenticeships, achieve level 1 English and maths and take the test for level 2.
- For level 3 to 7 apprenticeships, achieve level 2 English and maths.

This is a clear example of what may have been based on good intentions having a negative impact when put into place. Despite being warned by AELP and others well in advance, learners and employers are suffering. It is not too late to change the policy as suggested by AELP and we will continue to lobby to achieve that.



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<sup>2</sup> <file:///C:/Users/mikec/Downloads/AELP%20SummaryManifesto2013.pdf>