

EducationGuardian

minimal impact. But in a smaller outfit, you can easily see how a couple of hours with travel time could easily turn into a day, which could impact on the business."

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has now clarified what it means by guided learning as "traditional classroom learning; e-learning; distance learning; coaching; mentoring; feedback; collaborative/networked learning with peers; guided study; planning and review". This must offer access "as and when required" for the learner either to a tutor, mentor, supervisor or manager.

A BIS spokesperson says: "The new specification of apprenticeship standards will enshrine and enhance the quality of the apprenticeships programme, guaranteeing a minimum allocation of 280 hours of guided learning to equip every apprentice with the specific skills employers need."

But Paul Warner, director of delivery at the Association of Learning Providers, feels there is still potential for confusion. "If an electrician goes out on a job with his boss which throws up the opportunity to try out a new technique or concept, can this be called guided learning?" While supportive of the government's attempt to introduce a quality benchmark, he believes a minimum number of guided learning hours could simply be introducing an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy.

Traditionally, sector skills councils (employer-led organisations responsible for developing skills and standards in different sectors) have set the minimum number of hours necessary to complete a particular

apprenticeship (many of which exceed 280 hours anyway), which are used by awarding bodies when they design qualifications.

If colleges and training providers also have to provide evidence they have met the standards, it could mean doubling up on paperwork, says Warner. "Providers may well end up spending extra money on administration - money that could be better directed at the learner." He highlights another potential sticking point. Under the new rules, guided learning hours have to be completed within contracted working hours, which could be particularly problematic for apprentices in customer-facing sectors. The trainee chef who gets to work early to practise a new technique, or the hairdressing apprentice who wants to take part in a training session when the salon is closed to the public, may find their efforts cannot be counted as guided learning.

The new standards have been introduced in response to the Apprenticeships, Skills, Learning and Children Act, which was set in motion by the previous Labour government but came into force last September. Despite the 18-month build-up, getting through red tape means many sector skills councils and awarding bodies do not yet have everything in place for April, when the new standards are introduced.

Terry Watts, chief executive of Proskills, the sector skills council for process manufacturing, says many employers feel as if the changes have been rushed through at the last minute without any real consideration of "how things might work on the shop-floor".

Charlie Mullins, director of Pimlico Plumbers, agrees: "On paper it's a positive move back to the way things used to be; the way they should be if we're going to tackle the UK's skills shortage. The problem we face, of course, is that it's great to fund all these 'new apprenticeships', but each and every one of them requires a job so the apprentice can put in their hours while they're training and that's where things come unstuck."

Many employers feel the changes have been rushed through without any real consideration of 'how things might work on the shop-floor'

Great idea: let's put education out of reach of those who need it most



Comment
Nick Linford

People across education have been making their voices heard. The proposed rise in tuition fees and cuts to the education maintenance allowance, lecturers' pensions and benefits, and funding for Esol (English for speakers of other languages) have fuelled anger and prompted people to take their protests to the streets.

But lurking in the shadows are more casualties of the cuts. Their voices aren't being heard. There's no Facebook page for this group, no Twitter campaign, but college principals know who they are.

From August, the skills funding agency is to stop fully funding people on "inactive benefits" - that is those on low incomes who rely on government help in the form of income support and working tax, pension and housing credits. It is a move that will actually make education and training inaccessible to those who need it most. In addition, although it has yet to be announced, it is likely that asylum seekers will also lose out.

Take working tax credit, which was designed to help support those on low incomes and their families, as an example. If a single person works 30 hours a week on minimum wage, their income is just £9,050 a year. How many would be

able to pay further education and training fees on this kind of salary?

But these are exactly the people who would benefit. It could help them to boost their earnings, progress their careers, and provide better lives for themselves and their families. The benefits would be felt across society.

From August, colleges and training providers, in the main, will receive only half the cost of courses for these kinds of learners. Colleges, already trying to absorb rate and budget cuts, will be expected to stump up the rest (approximately £1,400 for a full-time student), or extract it from the learner. These learners are unlikely to be able to pay, so how exactly are colleges and training providers expected to make up the shortfall?

The government's reasoning doesn't stack up. It believes that employers should and will contribute to the cost of educating the least well-off in society. But government policy has never supported this ambition, and it has never been easy to get employers to foot the bill for education and training. What makes the government think things will be different this time round?

Colleges have been told they have the freedom to waive fees for vulnerable learners, but with many already being asked to deliver more for less, will they

have the resources to do that? Freedom is a great thing, but it will not protect them from financial failure and job losses further down the line.

Only now, as colleges plan their courses for the next academic year, are they realising the full impact of this policy on their resources and learners.

I recently sent all further education colleges some software to help them calculate the size of the problem; the data was published last week as part of an Lsect adult funding conference. The results were painful. The data, for example, shows that three medium-sized colleges, chosen from the north and the south-east, currently receive specific funding worth around £14m attached to learners on "inactive benefits".

I'm estimating that around 25% of adult provision, or 300,000 adults, will be affected. Having said that, it is impossible for the government to know what the real impact of this policy will be because of the way colleges' data is collected. There are serious accuracy limitations. When learners enrol they only tick one box to indicate income, and yet learners' income is often more complex.

From my discussions with principals I know they have been expecting a government U-turn, but that's now looking unlikely. It is yet another example of the coalition government's lazy "act now, think later" approach to policy-making.

Further education is about improving life chances, raising skills levels and helping people to move on in their lives. If any sector could fully embrace Cameron's "big society", FE could.

Education has always been a way out of the poverty trap. It still is ... if you can afford it.

Nick Linford is managing director at Lsect, a company specialising in post-16 funding, performance and data, and author of *The Hands-on Guide to Post 16 Funding*

“It is another example of the government's lazy 'act now, think later' approach to policy-making”

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