A
pprenticeships are undergoing their biggest reform in decades. Ministers have set an ambitious target of three million Apprenticeships by 2020, with many providers and employers starting in May next year.

The reforms aim to simplify funding, engage employers in the development of standards, offer more flexibility and engagement with providers, increase quality, and include the introduction of an Apprenticeship Levy for businesses with a wage bill larger than £3 million.

While prepared are providers and employers to meet the timescale – and what do they think of the changes?

A joint report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), – Providing for the Future: Providers’ views on Apprenticeship reform – examined the views of 15 Apprenticeship providers to find out. Twelve were independent training providers (ITPs), one was a further education college, and two were other types of providers providing Apprenticeships.

The research took place before more recent announcements on the future of Apprenticeships were made, including a new package of support for disadvantaged areas. These included an additional £60 million of support for disadvantaged areas, a 20 per cent increase in levels of funding for standards for 16 to 18-year-olds, and the introduction of a large-scale scheme to increase the capacity to deliver independent end-point assessment (EPA) in Apprenticeships.

On the question of how well-informed providers were, the 15 interviewees said their organisations were as ready as they could be given the information available. One provider put it particularly succinctly: I am as well-informed as anyone but I don’t know what the reform is going on.

Providers said they accepted that the reforms placed employers at the centre of the new Apprenticeship system and had taken it upon themselves to educate employers about the changes. However, planning was proving difficult because the rate of release of information from the government was slow, which in turn made engagement with employers “slower and more time-consuming”.

Despite this, many were being proactive and holding discussions and events to raise awareness. One provider, who worked with 40 companies, said: “It is amazing how many don’t see this coming down the line – I do not know (reform) is coming”.

Perceptions of the Apprenticeship Levy, meanwhile, were mixed. Providers noted that many employers had not engaged in the details of the Levy and what it would mean for them. Some observed that employers considered it “a tax”, while others thought it complicated the system and hoped providers would “deal with the bureaucracy” for them.

On the other hand, several providers viewed the Levy as an opportunity because it could result in some of their larger clients having an increased budget. Another provider said: “I do feel a lot of them who have previously not employed apprentices at all might now engage with Apprenticeships.

On the question of the fact that many standards have not yet been developed, some providers said they were concerned about the lack of qualifications in many standards, and the lack of skills portability and transferrability for individual apprentices. These had often been valued more highly by employers and learners than Apprenticeships achievement itself.

“Providers were particularly concerned about the lack of information and understanding of the EPAs, or how this would work, how much it would cost and whether quality would be monitored.”

“We’re happy with the standard but the assessment is not available yet and the funding has not been confirmed which is disappointing, not having all the component parts. This means we can’t talk to employers in a meaningful way,” one interviewee told researchers.

Some wanted that the strong emphasis on EPA would lead to “training to the test”. Interviewees said broad standards, poor quality assurance of EPAs and negotiated pricing could all drive down quality – a key point when the EPA is the final decision on whether or not an Apprenticeship has been completed successfully.

The balance between supply and demand of suitable Apprenticeships was another concern for providers, though the report found that young people and their parents were becoming increasingly aware of Apprenticeships, and schools were increasingly mentioning them as a viable option for school-leavers.

However, some employers continued to be reluctant to engage in discussion about Apprenticeships, partly due to the lack of information. Providers warned this could lead to reduced opportunities for young people at a time when demand was rising, and a lack of funding meant that 16 to 18-year-olds might not have access to the Apprenticeships they wanted.

But despite the challenges, there was acknowledgement that awareness of Apprenticeships had increased and that employers could select which providers to use, which added to transparency.

Other benefits mentioned included increased funding for maths, English and STEM subjects, the acknowledgement that awareness of Apprenticeships, and schools were increasingly mentioning them as a viable option for school-leavers.

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