

Business Administration Level 2 Apprenticeship: impact of cessation

1. Impact of the phasing out of the Level 2 Business Administration framework

- Only 20% of the new Apprenticeship standards are available at Level 2. In contrast, more than 40% of the old-style frameworks were previously available at this level. This will have a significant impact on opportunities for new entrants, particularly young people, progression opportunities within the workplace, and on social mobility overall.
- 'The bottom rung of the apprenticeship ladder is broken' (Paul Joyce, Ofsted, February 2020). Since August 2019, Level 2 apprenticeships are down by 55%, and consequently 16-18s participating in apprenticeships is down by 21%, and 19-24s are down by 19%.
- The loss Business Admin Level 2 (BAL2) will impact young people disproportionately. In recent years, approx. 30,000 apprentices p.a. undertook a BAL2, and 83% of these were under 19.
- There is a lack of understanding and empathy for the multiple barriers that face learners needing to undertake a Level 2 qualification. 40% of students currently leave school each year without a Grade 4/ C in English and Maths. This cohort of students are unable to access the Level 3 apprenticeship, and there is no viable alternative provision at scale to support this transition.
- Removal of the Level 2 framework will have an impact on in-work progression for existing staff. For example, the NHS has numerous examples of auxiliary staff moving into administration roles through the BAL2, and they are unable to access learning at Level 3 or evidence the requirements through their role.
- 91% of learners on BAL2 in 2016/17 (most recent FOI data) progressed on to further learning or employment, showing the impact and success for those on the programme.

2. Background and rationale

One of the key fundamentals of the Apprenticeship Reforms is that new apprenticeship 'standards' should be 'employer led' and 'meet the skills needs of employers'.

Over the last year, more than 100 employers nationally have registered their support for the need to retain a Business Administration Level 2 Apprenticeship, as well as Health Education England and NHS Employers representing 263 NHS Trusts and 5000 SME GP Practices and Pharmacies. These employers vary in size and represent a range of industry sectors (including public and private), and together they set out the case to illustrate how this Level 2 Apprenticeship strongly supports the key objectives of the Apprenticeship Reform Programme:

- To meet the skills needs of employers
- To create progression for apprentices
- To widen participation and social mobility in apprenticeships
- To create more quality apprenticeships

Moreover, employers outlined why the Level 2 Business Admin is imperative for their organisation:

- Positive impact on staff recruitment, retention and progression. In particular, it encourages new entrants, including young people, in to the workforce and progression opportunities to a wide variety of roles, not just in Business Administration.
- The Level 3 Business Administrator Apprenticeship is too advanced/ not fit for purpose for many existing staff and new entrants, with requirements within the standard that a new entrant would not be able to achieve in their role.
- Apprenticeships can play a key role in improving the life chances for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, providing solid lines of progression into sustainable employment, as evidenced in a number of case studies from the employers involved.

3. Progress to date

In May 2019, a Trail blazer group of over 40 public and private sector employers, chaired by East Sussex County Council, submitted a joint proposal to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) for a Level 2 Business Support Assistant Apprenticeship. Employers on the group vary in size from micro to multi-national, and include a number of public sector councils, police, as well Health Education England and NHS Employers group, representing the NHS as the largest employer in the UK.

In June 2019, the IfATE responded to say that their Route Panel did not agree to the proposed standard because it did not meet two of the criteria, as follows:

- a) *Broad, deep and skilled* – the Institute concluded that the duties set out in the proposal were not stretching enough to require 12 months employment and training, including 20% off the job training.
- b) *Stand alone* – the Institute concluded that the duties set out in the proposal were insufficiently distinct from other occupations already covered by standards, in particular the L3 Business Administrator standard.

The Trail blazer group consider the IfATE's responses to be unjustified. Representatives on behalf of the employer group met with the IfATE's chief operating officer, Robert Nitsch, in August 2019 to request that the Institute reconsider their position. The group fed back to the Institute:

- The process did not feel employer-led, with such a large number and variety of businesses involved, and that the assessment process did not feel transparent.
- Concerns that lack of Level 2 provision will not only have a significant impact on new entrants into the workforce and social mobility, but also on existing staff who are unable to attain at Level 3 or who are unable to evidence what is required at Level 3 in their role.
- Whilst the Institute may believe the proposal does not provide the breadth and depth to meet their criteria, the Trailblazer firmly believes that it does. It is also their belief that the Route Panel did not fully understand the barriers facing many Level 2 apprentices, which often include prior academic achievement, experience, workplace behaviours and confidence, and therefore the breadth and depth included within the proposal was appropriate for someone working at this level.
- Concerns amongst many of the employers on the group, and stakeholders involved that there was a hidden, potentially financial, reason to the Institute's decision, due to the volume of Level 2 standards required.
- Employers are shoe-horning apprentices undertaking business administrative roles in to Level 2 Customer Service in an effort to try and offer them apprenticeship training, with negative consequences, such as learners unable to achieve the requirements for the End Point Assessment due to lack of exposure to customers and complaints.
- A number of those involved in developing the Level 3 Business Administrator standard (including members who joined the Level 2 Trail blazer group) had assumed that a Level 2 would be developed subsequently.
- The knowledge and competencies in the Level 3 Business Administrator standard will never be achievable in many job roles. Many people do not have coaching, mentoring or management responsibility, let alone the responsibility for managing projects and proposing and implementing change within their organisation as outlined in the Level 3. Employers are unlikely to create entrant roles in their organisations with these responsibilities attached to the role, particularly for the most disadvantaged. This will also impact existing staff who are unable to evidence the requirements of the Level 3 qualification in their role.

The IfATE suggested that the next steps for the Trail blazer group were to meet with the Department for Education to look at Traineeships as a replacement for the BAL2. The group met with the DfE on 12th February 2020. It was clear from the meeting that Traineeships will not meet the gap for learners leaving education without GCSEs in English and Maths, and needing to make the subsequent jump to Level 3; and that Traineeships do not provide a solution for existing staff who are only able to achieve a qualification at Level 2. The DfE agreed that there is a lack of understanding of who a Level 2 learner is, the length of time it takes them to achieve a qualification at Level 2, and what they are able to attain by End Point Assessment. The issue of employers and providers shoe-horning apprentices working in administration roles on to the Level 2 Customer Service was raised, and a number of cases cited of learners failing because they were unable to meet the requirements in their role for the End Point Assessment. It was clear from the meeting that there is no appropriate alternative programme for this large cohort of learners.

Since the meeting with the DfE, it has been announced that the Traineeship budget will be more than halved, and therefore there is no way that this programme can meet the needs of this large cohort of Level 2 learners.

The Trail blazer group were invited to meet with the IfATE's new Chief Executive, Jennifer Coupland, on 27th February 2020. Representatives from the group started the meeting with a short film of 2 young people speaking about how important the Level 2 Apprenticeship has been as a stepping stone in to employment, enabling them to learn the skills, behaviours and duties of the role. Both have since progressed on to Level 3 qualifications. <https://youtu.be/tme5ZPbtASQ>.

The Trail blazer group set out the arguments (bulleted above) for the Level 2 apprenticeship standard; and requested the opportunity to resubmit a proposal for a Level 2 Business Support Assistant Apprenticeship, taking in to consideration the feedback on ensuring that the apprenticeship has the breadth, depth, skills, and is stand-alone from the Level 3. Specifically they were seeking to strengthen the proposal with further digital requirements and a module on understanding relevant sector regulation, rules and expectations.

The IfATE have stated that they will not accept any further debate on resubmission of the Level 2 qualification, and that they do not feel that any Level 2 qualification will meet the minimum thresholds for an apprenticeship.

If this is the case, then the IfATE have set the threshold for apprenticeships too high if they mean to exclude over 30,000 young people and existing staff seeking progression in the workplace through a Level 2 apprenticeship qualification. There is a clear lack of understanding and empathy at the IfATE for the barriers facing thousands of learners, whether it is prior academic achievement, workplace experience or confidence, and therefore the need for a qualification at this level. This decision will have a significant impact on social mobility and access to employment for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It will not contribute to the government's agenda to level up opportunities and achieve greater productivity and economic inclusion in the workplace.

Coincidentally, the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, wrote to the IfATE's Jennifer Coupland on the same day as the meeting with the Trail blazer group to express concern at the IfATE's funding of Level 7 MBA apprenticeships for Senior Leaders, stating that levy funds should be used:

'to support the people that can benefit most from an apprenticeship, such as those starting out in their careers or helping more people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get ahead'.

The IfATE's stance on Level 2 apprenticeships seems to be in direct contravention of this aim.

4. Next steps

The Trailblazer group have been invited to report to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Employment on the impact that the loss of Level 2 apprenticeships (both in Business Admin and in other sectors) will have on opportunities for young people entering and progressing in the workplace.

In the meantime, we ask stakeholders representing the needs and aspirations of all young people and adults from disadvantaged groups, MPs, Local Enterprise Partnerships, Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses to lobby on this issue. Please send your concerns to:

- Jennifer Coupland, Chief Executive at the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education
- Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education
- Gillian Keegan, Apprenticeships and Skills Minister

If Gavin Williamson is seeking a formal review of the Level 7 MBA Apprenticeship standard, we ask that a review is undertaken to ensure that those disadvantaged by the current Apprenticeship standards are able to access the first rung of the apprenticeship ladder through Level 2 standards.