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Setting the bar high

At the Skills Show in November, I had the pleasure of meeting ten college lecturers and trainers. Our discussion about apprenticeships is written up in this edition, pp28-29. One controversial topic was whether vehicle repair apprenticeships should require a pass in GCSE English and maths, as all other level 3 qualifications do. There was some concern that this may be beyond the abilities of some apprentices. (It's an issue shared by many other sectors, including even publishing: the 'junior journalist' apprenticeship is also level 3.) Some of the participants also expressed sympathy with apprentices who asked, 'When will I use this when I go back to my job?'

But it doesn't matter how they feel; the government has made up its mind. Last month, schools inspector Ofsted published a consultation about its plans. In its press release about the consultation, it said it will crack down on colleges where "useful maths and English [is] not being taught to support students' vocational training".

In any case, those students who can't handle those subjects aren't necessarily barred from a technical career. There is one workshop apprenticeship at a lower level at least, 'Autocare Technician', to cater for a semi-skilled workforce at fast-fit auto garages.

And there are sources of support to help motivated young people - and others - with their qualifications. For example, my local adult education college, whose new prospectus came out as this was being written, offers evening/weekend tuition in GCSE English and maths; the courses are free of charge for those who achieved a grade below C. Doubtless, this is replicated elsewhere.

Or they could come back in a few years. Several of the colleges say that one of the biggest changes they've seen in apprenticeships since the levy came in is the age of applicants. Because the rules have relaxed age limits, many of the new apprentice starters are in their 20s. (This is a theme that we will return to in a bus operator profile next month.) Sometimes, the accumulated effects of age, experience and maybe a young family do wonders for an apprentice's focus and engagement.

So, while the level 3 requirements may put off a few apprentices, the fact that the standard cuts across many industries means that newly qualified vehicle technicians will not only be prepared for the real world, but will also keep up with working standards in other UK industries.

Will Dalrymple
Editor