

## THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

# Are we nearly there yet? The frustrating journey of end-point assessment in English apprenticeships

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## ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes some of the findings from a review of the current state and future of end-point assessment (EPA) in English apprenticeships. The literature review included academic and grey literature supplemented by interviews with a small sample of stakeholders. The study explored quality measures including the current low rates of completion, and recommends changes to EPA that could make apprenticeships more attractive to potential learners and employers. The findings uncovered many diverse reasons for apprenticeship non-completion. Some of those interviewed criticized the length and complexity of current assessments, suggesting that improving relevance and shortening the duration of assessments and the time between the gateway and EPA could reduce withdrawals. The paper raises fundamental questions about the purpose of apprenticeships, acknowledging that while low completion rates are concerning, some apprentices and employers value the benefits of learning and occupational experience above formal certification.

**Key words:** apprenticeships, assessment, completion, quality

## INTRODUCTION

In 2022-2023, a decade after a major government review of the apprenticeship program in England (Richard, 2012) just 54.3% of apprentices completed their programs, falling far short of the government's target of 67.0% (Halfon, 2023). Conversely, those who continue far enough with their apprenticeship to sit the end-point assessment (EPA) achieve very high pass rates. This may indicate a potential disconnect between learning and assessment outcomes which would benefit from further exploration. The main research question focused on why so many apprentices drop out prior to taking their final assessments and whether changes to EPA could reduce the number of withdrawals and improve apprenticeship completion rates in England.

The Richard Review was critical of the previous

portfolio- and qualification-based apprenticeship programs and proposed new independent and summative assessments to evaluate apprentices' ability to apply skills in real-world situations. The review pointed out the need for a final test that allowed the apprentice to demonstrate their occupational competence (Richard, 2012). The Richard Review was clear that assessment should be a holistic judgment; assessment methods should be valid and it was important that employers value the outcomes of the assessment (Richard, 2012).


The role of employers and other stakeholders in apprenticeship design and assessment has evolved over time and whilst most agree that the goal of EPA is to ensure occupational competence, interviews with a range of stakeholders suggest that no consensus exists on how best to achieve this. This study confirms previous

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findings suggesting that the purposes of apprenticeships and EPA have drifted from the original policy intent and different stakeholders have different interpretations of a successful outcome (Lawes, 2020).

## METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper is based on a review of literature and interviews with a small sample of stakeholders.

### *Literature review*

As apprenticeship reform is a live and political issue much of the literature comprises published and unpublished policy papers and external commentaries rather than peer reviewed academic articles. This presents a challenge for researchers who have to be mindful of the quality of any research and analysis as well as the potential for bias.

### *Interviews*

A total of 14 stakeholders were interviewed in October 2024. Interviews were semi-structured and included some of those most impacted by apprenticeship policy and assessment. Interviews were designed to elicit insights from a range of stakeholders rather than any attempt at statistical validity (Table 1).

## RESULTS

Ofqual, the Qualifications regulator in England undertook a major program of research between 2020 and 2024 to investigate Confirm the Acquisition of Specified Learning Outcomes (CASLO) qualifications (Newton *et al.*, 2024). Ofqual's report describes differences between CASLO and more traditional approaches to assessment and qualification design including those based on tests, exams, and qualifications. Using Ofqual's definition the set of learning outcomes specified for any particular CASLO unit indicates what a successful learner will know, understand, or be able to do whilst the assessment criteria set out what achievement of the learning outcomes looks like in practice.

The English apprenticeship program has undergone several major changes in recent years. Current apprenticeships have elements of the CASLO approach; they set out the knowledge, skills and behaviors expected of a competent worker; what a successful learner will know, understand, or be able to do. They also include assessment criteria but in apprenticeships, this is linked to specific qualifications or assessment methods and assessed by external bodies known as EPA organizations.

The training providers' representatives interviewed

described a broad range of reasons that their apprentices had presented for withdrawal. These included personal reasons such as moving home and work-related reasons such as increased workload reducing time available for learning. One of the apprentices interviewed had lost interest in the apprenticeship following promotion and change of role at work; the apprenticeship she started was no longer relevant. She described herself as having "outgrown" the apprenticeship, having achieved the outcomes she wanted before completing the apprenticeship. One of the employers admitted that he did not see the value of his apprentices completing the EPA as they were now fully trained and his skills needs were met. In this case, the employer had done his own assessment of the learning outcomes and did not see any additional value in the external EPA.

Relating this to Ofqual's analysis of CASLO qualifications, this study identified a disconnect between the use of a formal EPA to confirm that learning outcomes have been met as set out within the apprenticeship and the less formal evidence of the achievement of learning outcomes as recognized by the employer and learner. Apprentices and employers may value the benefits of learning and occupational experience gained during the training phase of the apprenticeship above formal certification. They judged outcomes based on on-the-job performance and progression opportunities rather than credentialization.

The English apprenticeship system is based on nationally recognized assessment and is supported by government funding. Official reports tend to use data such as the cost of the program, number of starts and completion rates as a proxy for quality with little emphasis on how apprentices and their employers assess quality outcomes (Lawes, 2020). These findings reflect persistent tensions between growth, cost, deliverability and quality within the apprenticeship program (Segal, 2014).

Two of the training provider representatives and one assessment organization representative criticized the length and complexity of current assessments. One training provider representative suggested that shortening the duration of some assessments and the time between the gateway (the formal end of the training element) and EPA could help maintain focus and reduce withdrawals. The difficulty of assessing behaviors as part of EPA was raised as well as the need for some assessments to be more relevant and authentic.

## CONCLUSION

The government's efforts to reform the apprenticeship system and increase completion rates are ongoing, but

**Table 1: Interviews with stakeholders**

Type of stakeholder	Number
Training provider representative	3
Assessment organization representative	2
Apprentice	6
Employer representative	3

challenges for assessment policy and delivery remain. EPA is just one of many diverse reasons that apprentices do not complete their apprenticeship. It is, however, something that can be impacted directly by policy changes and so EPA reform is likely to appeal to the current government as part of a strategy to improve the program by increasing apprenticeship completion rates and value for money.

This paper makes the case for more flexible and proportionate assessment methods within the apprenticeship EPA, arguing that the burden of extensive assessments can detract from the primary aim of confirming competence. The conclusion calls for more authentic and occupation-specific assessments that deliver the desired outcomes for all stakeholders, ensuring that the needs of apprentices and employers are considered. Changes could involve formalizing the role of other stakeholders in assessment, for example allowing employers to evaluate behaviors that are difficult to assess within an EPA while maintaining a more proportionate independent final assessment.

## DECLARATIONS

### **Acknowledgement**

None.

### **Author contributions**

Lawes T: Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

### **Source of funding**

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### **Ethical approval**

Not applicable.

### **Informed consent**

Appropriate informed consent was obtained from the participants for publication.

### **Conflict of interest**

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

### **Data availability statement**

Data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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