

MARKET INSIGHT REPORT

RAIL APPRENTICESHIPS

INTRODUCTION

NSAR conducts a market insight activity early in the external quality assurance engagement process. We do this to identify the opportunities and needs arising from the early experiences (and preparations) of end-point assessment as end-point assessment organisations (EPAOs) get ready to deliver or deliver end-point assessment (EPA). This insight is then used to inform how EQA should be approached and to identify which areas need the most urgent attention.

This research tends to represent the first documented insight into how EPA is progressing within each sector and as such is a useful early ‘temperature check’ on how the apprenticeship reform is progressing.

Glossary of Acronyms/Terms	
EPA	End-point assessment
EPAO	End-point assessment organisation
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
EQA	External Quality Assurance
EQAO	External Quality Assurance Organisation
Gateway	Stage prior to end-point assessment where apprentice’s readiness for end-point assessment is established.
IFATE	Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education
IQA	Internal quality assurance
PEI	Professional Engineering Institution

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used was a mixed method approach involving a semi-structured interview schedule and quantitative analysis of data from ESFA and IfATE. The interview schedule was adapted to suit each EPAO’s specific assessment profile, i.e. how they appear on the Register of End-Point Assessment Organisations) and was sent in advance of the telephone interview. All research activity was conducted in March and April 2019.

All participants were asked to validate the recorded responses, had prior sight of the draft report and six end-point assessment representatives from City & Guilds, EAL, IRO and IET attended a workshop on 2nd May 2019 at NSAR to further discuss, develop and refine the content of this report.

The population for the market insight work was made up of all EPAOs on the Register of End-Point Assessment Organisations (RoEPAO) for the apprenticeship standards falling within the NSAR EQA remit.

The apprenticeship standards are:

- Rail Engineering Operative, Level 2
- Rail Engineering Technician, Level 3
- Rail Engineering Advanced Technician, Level 4
- Train Driver, Level 3
- Rail & Rail Systems Engineer, Level 5

The Train Driver apprenticeship is newly published having been available for delivery from June 2018. There is some uptake and interest in this apprenticeship with two organisations on the Register of End-Point Assessment Organisations able to offer end-point assessment for it (Institution of Railway Operators and Rail Professional Development). At the time of this research, there were no starts or EPAOs on the Register for Rail & Rail Systems Engineer, Level 5.

The coverage of the apprenticeship standards by EPAO is as follows:

	Babcock Engineering Assessments Ltd	City & Guilds	EAL	Institute of Mechanical Engineers	IRSE Ltd	The Institute of Engineering and Technology	Institution of Railway Operators	Rail Professional Development
Rail Engineering Operative (L2)		X	X					
Rail Engineering Technician (L3)	X		X	X	X	X		
Rail Engineering Advanced Technician (L4)			X	X		X		
Train Driver (L3)							X	X
Rail & Rail Systems Engineer (L5)								

Key considerations in reviewing the content of this report have to be:

- the relatively small number of operational EPAOs, the small volumes of apprentices coming through on each standard to date, and
- the relative inexperience in delivering EPA for these standards of most of the EPAOs involved.

SECTION 1: CURRENT NUMBERS

Whilst changes in the apprenticeship structure across the rail industry rule out a like for like comparison between the frameworks and standards, the comparison figures do provide an indication of industry engagement with the apprenticeships and levels of adoption of the new standards.

To undertake this analysis, we started by reviewing the start data across framework apprenticeships from 2014/15 to 2018/19. We then did the same for the standards and looked to see if any conclusions could be made.

We are reliant on management information available in the public domain, and the figures for 2018/19 are not fully available, the start data for this year is based on the actual start data from the first two quarters.

Standards where no starts have been recorded are excluded from the table below.

START DATA FOR TARGET STANDARDS-BASED APPRENTICESHIPS AND EQUIVALENT FRAMEWORK APPRENTICESHIPS

Framework	14/15 Starts	15/16 Starts	16/17 Starts	17/18 Starts	18/19 Forecast
Rail Engineering Overhead Line Construction	20	-	20	-	-
Rail Infrastructure Engineering	1,070	1,030	1,020	80	-
Rail Services	270	220	140	180	30
Rail Traction and Rolling Stock Engineering	20	90	30	10	-
Rail Transport Engineering	1,280	720	10	-	-
Totals	2,660	2,060	1,220	270	30

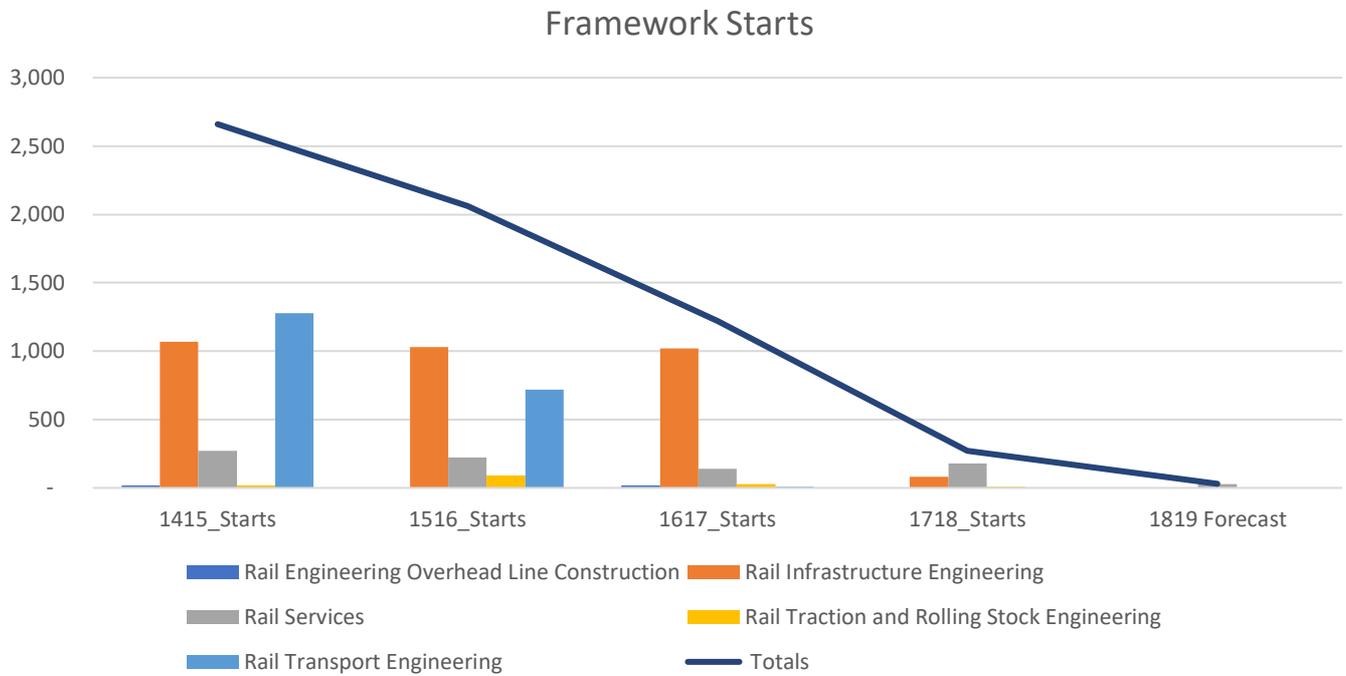
Standard	14/15 Starts	15/16 Starts	16/17 Starts	17/18 Starts	18/19 Forecast
Rail Engineering Advanced Technician	-	-	-	10	30
Rail Engineering Operative	-	-	70	400	60
Rail Engineering Technician	-	-	260	600	660
Train Driver	-	-	-	10	210
Passenger Transport Onboard and Station Team Member	-	-	-	60	80
Totals	-	-	330	1,080	1,040

Combined Total	2,660	2,060	1,550	1,350	1,070
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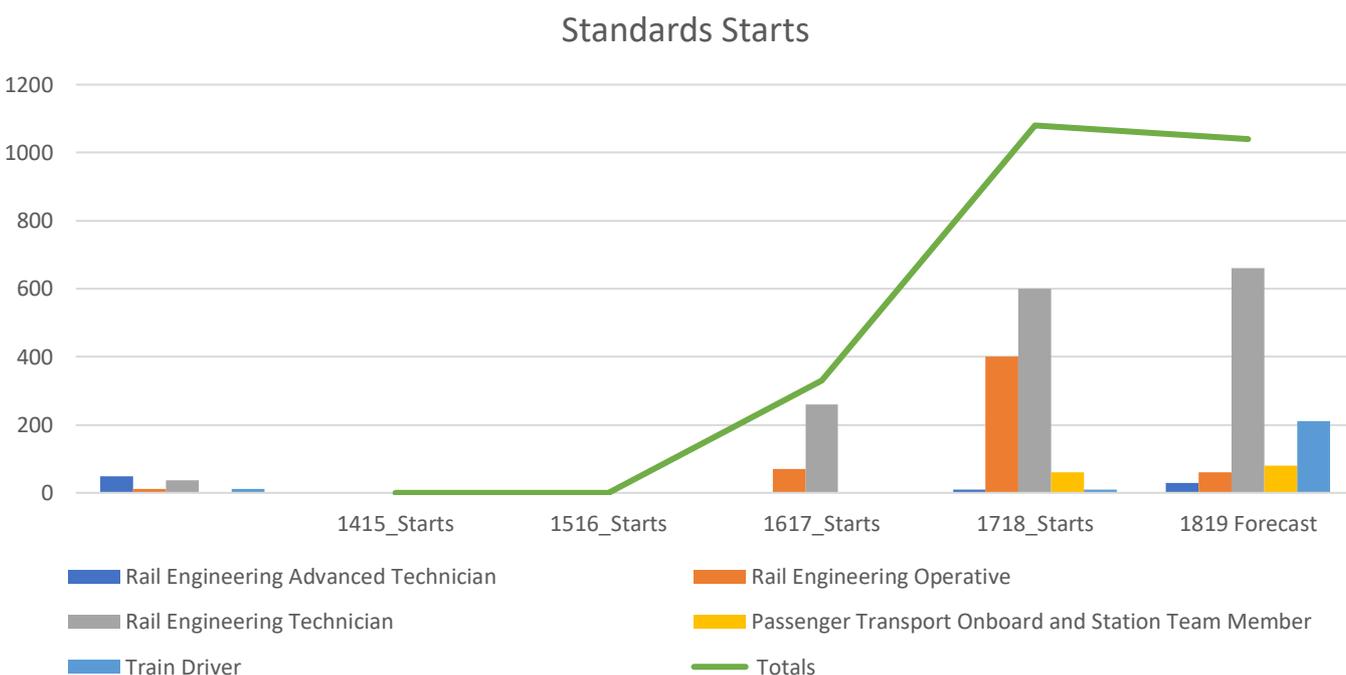
Table 3: Standards-based & Framework Apprenticeships Start Data



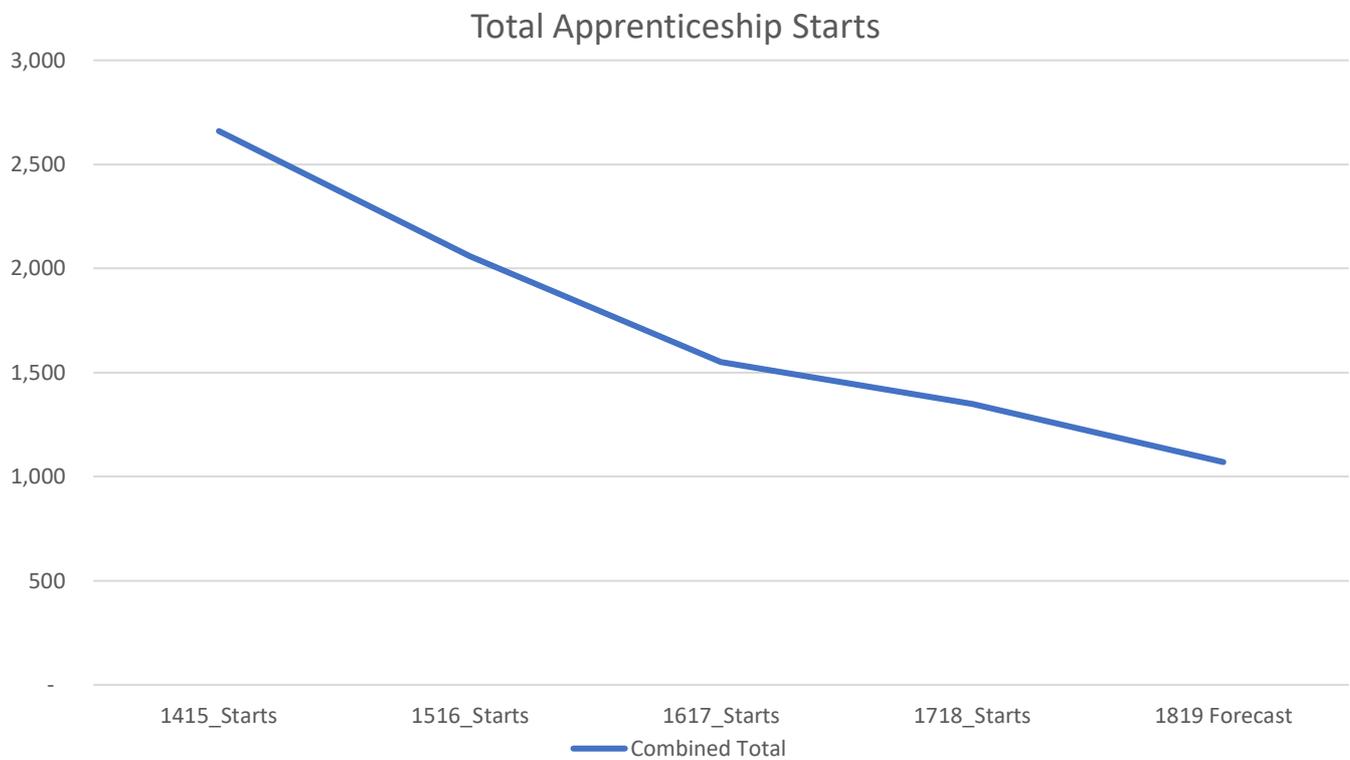
GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE START DATA FOR FRAMEWORK APPRENTICESHIPS AND TARGET STANDARDS-BASED APPRENTICESHIPS:



The table above, based on ESFA start data from the Government statistical releases, shows the recent starts data for the existing rail apprenticeships that continue to run parallel to the new rail standards-based apprenticeships. The graph suggests that there is migration across to the new standards.



Standards start data supports the claim that there is migration across to new standards but at a generally lower overall rate of apprenticeship take-up.



The total apprenticeship start data establishes some migration from framework to standard but results in an overall lowering of the total apprenticeship take-up of apprenticeships with 2017/18 down on 2014/15 levels.

Summary analysis of the start data highlights a number of factors for consideration:

- There is a clear transition across the industry, from framework apprenticeships to the new standards, as expected
- The total apprentice numbers from pre-reform level to post-reform level seem to indicate an overall reduction in numbers.

EPA NUMBERS TO DATE

When looking at anticipated end-point assessment volumes, forecast data is showing the following:

- At level 2 there is >200 forecast as entering EPA during the next six months with only five having completed EPA to date; there were potentially 500 apprentices forecast as due to complete by now, for example, in 2016/17 there were 70 apprentice starts that should have completed by now and in 2017/18 there were 400 apprentice starts that should have completed by now
- At level 3 there are 200-500 being forecast as coming through EPA in the next six months. There has been no EPA done as yet.

Workshop Discussion Point 1 - Thoughts on the start and completion data

The workshop group was asked to reflect on the findings above and to offer views based on their engagement with employer providers and training providers.

The following views were expressed:

- There is not a direct *like for like* translation of framework to standards apprenticeships so volume and need will not be exactly the same.
- The rail infrastructure standard and its uptake should be included to give a more accurate account of the sector. Track, electrical and signalling sit on this framework apprenticeship.
- There are challenges in retention and completion of apprentices at level 2 because:
 - some move from apprenticeship to agency working on the achievement of various 'tickets'
 - the presence of the RVQ and NVQ on-programme represents significant enough value and achievement putting pressure on the need to put apprentices through Gateway for EPA
 - providers are being caught out by the fact that standards are not the same as frameworks and apprentices have not been properly prepared
 - employers have not understood the amount of commitment needed by and from them to move apprentices through Gateway
- Presence of other localised issues leading to blockages in the system and preventing apprentices moving through to EPA.
- Standards may be proving to be better for new starts (entrants); while frameworks worked better for new and existing staff.

Worth noting is that the volume of apprentices on standards and passing through Gateway is one key driver for establishing EQA charging as part of the external quality assurance approach to cost-recovery.

SECTION 2: END-POINT ASSESSMENT VIEWS ON EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

End-point assessment organisations were asked about what they were looking for from the EQA service. Four themes emerged from the responses made:

- Honest, constructive and transparent and related synonyms (n~4)
- Support with continuous improvement (n~3)
- Aligning or coalescing of EQA practices around a common approach (n~2) in response to the challenge of having to deal with different EQAs.
- Clear, timely communications, free from surprises leading to open and honest conversations (n~3)

The ability to create opportunities for EPAOs to come together to support EPAOs in reducing faults, share good practice and to work to ensure consistency were also mentioned. (n~2) There was also a request for the EQA to be visible and accessible, as well as actively engaged with EPAOs.

EPAOs were asked where and how they expect the EQA service to add value. Responses to this question were split across three themes: comparability and help with consistency of EPAO practice, and in supporting continuous improvement.

On comparability, one EPAO responded:

As detailed in NSAR document 'EPAO Comparability Review', facilitate a shared understanding of assessment plans and their application.

With regard to consistency, the focus should be on ensuring the EPA process is fair and robust across all organisations. (n~3) There was clear support for collaborative and supportive work with requests to 'get to know us and work with us'; 'help us resolve challenges' and help in 'scrutinising our processes and practices may identify ways in which we can operate more efficiently'. (n~4)

End-point assessment organisations were asked **where** EQA should start when looking at the EPA in rail. Responses were wide-ranging and included:

- Comparability across active EPAOs (n~2)
- Ensuring there is a clear communication channel with employers, EPAOs and EQA to support the validity of the assessment plan and its consistent application, as well as any eventual refresh. (n~2)
- Professional recognition process and interfacing with PEIs as a non-PEI EPAO (n~2)
- Training Provider readiness (n~2)

One the last point, training provider lack of understanding of the transition/differences in delivering frameworks and standards is a concern. There are some key 'old world to new world' differences that are causing problems, for example, progression from level 2 to level 3 is different both quantitatively and qualitatively and the 'old world' craft level 2 to craft-type level 3 is no longer the case with a very different level 2 craft to level 3 technician progression replacing the old progression route. While level 2, delivered robustly, does enable progression, this

is not in the way it has in the past and for apprentices to be successful in making this type of progression delivery methods need to change.

End-point assessment organisations, by way of recap, were asked to summarise the three most important points they wanted to communicate about the assessment plans and standards. Respondents listed:

- Open communication with EPAOs, EQAO, and employer group to feedback on assessment plans and standards (n~3)
- PEI and non-PEI interfacing in resolving implementation of the assessment plan (n~2)
- Harmonising of EQA approaches (n~2)
- Challenges recruiting independent assessors (n~2)
- Consistency and transparency (n~2)
- Guidance and support from the EQA
- Timely updates with regards to changes and developments
- Focus on assessor competency (in an industry facing fast-paced change, assessor competency is vital)
- Protecting independence is vital in ensuring that assessment decisions are credible
- Help EPAOs engage with any standards refresh process, help support consultative approach and facilitate early and advanced notice of policy and standards changes.

One important cautionary point made was that this is still very early days for EPA, especially at Level 3 and 4 where the standards are longer and are only just starting to come towards Gateway. So, there is little actual experience that involves significant numbers of apprentices, as yet.

Workshop Discussion Point 2 - Thoughts on EQA Expectations

Participants were aware that there was to be some announcement in the IfATE EQA framework very soon and given the relative newness of EPA in most rail standards and the challenging volumes in most areas, agreed that NSAR should remain supportive, collaborative and proportionate in how it proceeds.

Any help in giving greater certainty around data and EPA pipeline would be appreciated and a firm recommendation to IfATE and ESFA that the EPA field on the ILR data should be mandatory would be a significant step forward.

SECTION 3: FEEDBACK ON INDIVIDUAL APPRENTICESHIPS

RAIL ENGINEERING OPERATIVE, LEVEL 2

NUMBER OF EPAOS: TWO

RECRUITMENT OF ASSESSORS

To date, EPAOs have been able to recruit in line with their existing commitments. However, recruitment may prove more challenging when larger numbers start to come through (anticipated from later in 2019). Managing unpredictable demand across a range of possible rail pathways may also bring some assessor recruitment challenges.

The pool of assessors in the industry is seen as limited and presents various challenges. These were reported as including:

- Having to recruit for six different pathways with uncertainty in the take-up for each pathway further complicating. At one point there was a majority of track apprentices, but this is now thought to be changing as they diversify across the pathways, again adding an assessor recruitment pressure.
- Dealing with the on-programme need for competent assessors (e.g. for RVQ and NVQ). The presence of the NVQ on-programme means assessors are needed on-programme. This is thought to add a layer of restriction/complexity to the search for independent assessors because of the risks of potential conflicts of interest.
- The cost of accessing appropriate assessors; these are well paid roles in the industry.
- The opportunity cost of releasing assessors for EPA from their day job.

As yet, there has been no recorded interest in employers utilising the 'employer, independent assessor' option within the assessment plan.

RISKS TO ASSESSMENT IN THIS APPRENTICESHIP STANDARD

Where risk was identified it centred on whether portfolios will be accessible and fit for purpose, e.g. allowing the EPAO assessor to review the evidence and use to inform the viva. Similar issues may arise at level 3 where some employers are unwilling to release portfolios because of confidentiality and intellectual property concerns.

This may have a knock-on effect with regard to effectiveness, efficiency and reliability of the internal quality assurance moderation activities. This challenge maybe potentially exacerbated by geographical spread of specialist demand for pathway assessors. This may make comparability work across employers and independent assessors more important.

Other associated risks to EPAO IQA reported include:

- Parity in access arrangements and fair assessment
- Limited time to review portfolios prior to interview
- Establishing comparability across Independent assessors and employers (particularly in the assessment of portfolios)

IMPLEMENTING THE VIVA

The viva is considered to be a positive process and is working well so far. Apprentices, generally, are considered to be ready and prepared.

THE ROLE OF THE PORTFOLIO OF EVIDENCE

So far, this has been satisfactory and portfolios coming through Gateway have been of a good standard. This is particularly so in the signalling pathway. Here, apprentices have been gathering evidence for IRSE membership which is thought to be having a positive effect on the depth and quality of work going into the portfolio. (n~1) However, there is also evidence picked up through pre-EPA activity, that some portfolios have little more than the NVQ evidence included. (n~1)

EPAOs are supporting employers and training providers to ensure the Viva portfolio is fit for purpose at the point of Gateway. This portfolio readiness does seem to be being left to the end (Gateway) although the Viva portfolio could be worked on earlier to gather more comprehensive evidence alongside the qualification evidence being gathered throughout the on-programme phase. The later generation of evidence might lead to more synoptic and better-quality evidence being produced that better captures the apprentice's abilities.

Workshop Discussion Point 3 - Thoughts on the Portfolio of Evidence generally and employer role

The workshop group was asked to reflect on the Portfolio of Evidence as currently cast in all assessment plans and to reflect on the employer role. At level 2 and to a lesser extent level 3, there was some concern expressed that what was being seen as little more than NVQ evidence in the portfolio of evidence and that more needed to be done to communicate what was sufficient in EPA terms.

The link between the portfolio of evidence (employer assessed) and the Viva (EPAO assessed but portfolio of evidence dependent) was proving to be a key area of risk in EPA and work is needed to make sure the portfolio will support the apprentice in the Viva, appropriately.

This led on to discussion about the qualitative step up in employer engagement and input needed within the standards-based approach which was not necessarily a feature in frameworks. There was an awareness raising and support piece needed here with rail employers and providers that NSAR could look at as EQA.

THE EMPLOYER ROLE AT GATEWAY

EPAOs have reported the need to provide considerable support in helping employers understand their role in the Gateway and assessment process. (n~2) They are reporting confusion between the training providers and employers with Gateway responsibilities with employers approaching the apprenticeship as a Framework and assuming that the training provider takes responsibility for the assessment plan requirements. There is a measure of confidence that this is an early implementation issue and with continued support this year it will not be repeated in the future. (n~2)

The lack of awareness by some employers about the importance of the Gateway and the numbers of training providers delivering frameworks like overemphasis on the qualifications is potentially adding to the confusion about what is different about the standard-based approach.

EPAOs are reporting that some employers are overwhelmed by the level of engagement needed for new standards. (n~2) The NVQ is considered to be the gold standard and some employers are reluctant to release apprentices off-the-job for EPA post-completion of their NVQ. (n~1)

The assessment plan is thought to be relatively straightforward but in future refreshes of the assessment plan there needs to be more understanding of what safety critical training is needed, when it is needed and then aligning this to on-programme requirements. The assessment methodology itself is thought to be straightforward. (n~2)

The Level 2 standard, while good as a standard, asks for too much work in too short a time. This may be a guidance issue and there is thought to be insufficient guidance on expectations. However, one area of weakness has been employers' awareness of the importance of EPA, their role in the Gateway and the amount of responsibility they have been given for the smooth running of the process and the key decisions needed to make it work effectively. (n~2)

One EPAO is reporting seeing an increase in registrations for SASE apprenticeship frameworks, citing their continued presence as a reason why the transition to the new apprenticeship standards is slow.

When considering readiness for EPA (and this is a particular issue for non-PEI EPAOs), the following factors are cited as confounding variables partially responsible for small volumes:

- SASE frameworks running in parallel with the new apprenticeship standards, and
- The need to change delivery models

There is the belief that SASE should have been switched off earlier than is currently planned (2021) and that there is scope for co-delivery with deferred decisions about end-certification possible, i.e. framework or standard. However, one EPAO is reporting that they are seeing an increase in frameworks and not standards.

There was an expectation that due to the higher funding allocated to the new apprenticeship standard, providers would be encouraged to make the change. However, the cost for providers of adapting to the new standards is being thought to outweigh any additional funding. (n~1) Providers are not yet prepared for an EPA event and quite a substantial amount of training is needed if they are to be helped to make the changes in their training models.

RAIL ENGINEERING TECHNICIAN, LEVEL 3

NUMBER OF EPAOS: FIVE

RECRUITMENT OF ASSESSORS

At present, none of the EPAOs active in offering EPA for the Rail Engineering Technician (Level 3) report any current challenges in accessing the right assessor talent. (n~3) Each is able to recruit sufficient capacity to meet current and foreseeable demand. Initial EPA assessor recruitment has taken place and appropriate capacity and capability are in place.

While EPAOs have been able to recruit in line with their requirements, recruitment may prove more difficult when larger numbers start coming through later in 2019 and beyond.

Critical in managing appropriate levels of assessor capacity and capability is the need to have a clear EPA pipeline 'booked in' and manageable lead-in time.

In anticipation of numbers increasing, EPAOs have some measure of contingency in place to add further capacity and to develop a larger assessor resource.

As yet, there has been no recorded interest in employers utilising the 'employer, independent assessor' option within the assessment plan.

Workshop Discussion Point 4 - Thoughts on apprenticeship length

The group was asked to reflect on the length of the apprenticeships. For example, the Level 3 is 3 years; the level 4 is four years. There was no real agreement on why the durations were what they were. There was some agreement that more work may need to be done to establish the nature and shape of the skills need and then to identify an appropriate duration especially if apprenticeships are to be workforce development options that meet needs and comfortably fit within the prevailing rail employer operating conditions.

RISKS TO ASSESSMENT IN THIS STANDARD

Three risks to assessment of the Rail Engineering Technician apprenticeship assessment were identified by the EPAOs active in providing EPA for this standard. These were:

- Assessor related challenges, for example, challenges in benchmarking assessors given where they are being recruited from (industry) and challenges in securing the appropriate skills for a manageable financial package.
- Risk to whether portfolios will be accessible and fit for purpose for EPAO assessor review as part of viva interview.
- Logistical risks related to scheduling EPA delivery. This increases as volumes build. The cost effectiveness of the service provision is related to various parties working together to help mitigate these logistical risks.

IMPLEMENTING THE VIVA

There are some challenges in implementing the viva. These challenges are, in part, around building stable, predictable working relationships and processes between the two types of EPAOs (professional engineering institutions and non-engineering institution EPAOs). These are necessary if non-PEI EPAOs are to deliver manageable and affordable EPA that they can be held accountable for.

Inherent in managing these relationships is the need to also manage PEIs that are not EPAOs for the apprenticeship but may be requested for professional recognition.

Where there is a dual input in EPA (e.g. PEI and non-PEI EPAOs), there is concern about which organisation is ultimately responsible and accountable for quality.

The viva is seen as close to/modelled on existing PEI viva processes. This is identified as a strength.

There is some risk related to consistency in viva delivery/assessment but there is strong evidence that EPAOs are using training and standardisation to mitigate the risk.

THE ROLE OF THE PORTFOLIO OF EVIDENCE IN EPA

Where risks with the portfolio of evidence are seen, EPAOs are confident that these can be managed. Risk mitigation includes:

- Guidance about portfolio structure and plans in place to coverage and sufficiency clear (n~1)
- Document control risk, mitigated by data management systems to help manage requirements including a learner management style functionality allowing evidence to be managed (n~1)

THE EMPLOYER ROLE IN THE GATEWAY

Gateway documentation and support, and Gateway sign-off processes should make the management of employer role straightforward. However, there was a mixed response from EPAOS ranging from no anticipation of any issues (and confident in managing existing customers), to experiencing employers needing considerable support in understanding their role in the Gateway.

There does seem to have been confusion between the training providers and employers with Gateway, with employers approaching the apprenticeship as a framework assuming the training provider does it all. EPAOS are confident this is just a first-time issue and with support, this year will not be repeated in the future.

MANAGING THE PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION DIMENSION WITHIN EPA

The presence of the professional recognition/registration process is welcomed but there are challenges around setting up the correct relationships and processes. This 'hard-wiring' of professional recognition into EPA was a key policy intent of the early Trailblazer apprenticeships and seen as a key quality indicator.

The core issue centres around some EPAOs being able to offer a full EPA service (PEIs) while others (non-PEIs) are only able to offer a part EPA service and are dependent on forging the appropriate commercial, operational and 'ownership' relationships with professional engineering institutions to complete EPA.

The challenge is made more complex when an employer specifies which professional institution it would like its apprentices to be recognised by. This can mean some EPAOs having to negotiate arrangements with different PEIs, each with particular sets of requirements.

Non-professional engineering institution EPAOs are concerned about overall ownership, accountability, and responsibility for the quality of end-point assessment in a model that has shared roles. This makes the challenge not so much about how the shared EPA activity is brokered but where ultimate responsibility lies. (n~2)

The absence of any real volume of apprentices at present may be exacerbating this issue and increased apprentice numbers may facilitate greater stability and clear processes for how this will work across PEIs.

There may be some merit in understanding how recognition works with the Rail Design Technician assessment plan to help inform how this might work. (n~1)

While motivation to become professionally recognised is thought to be influenced by a range of factors (progression, financial incentives, sector-specific progression (e.g. signalling) or the value proposition of recognition), employers are seen as having a big impact on motivation to become professionally recognised.

In terms of what is working well and can be seen as a strength in the current assessment plan, feedback suggests that the assessment plan is relatively straightforward to interpret and understand. (n~3) EPAOs are satisfied that as numbers pick up and they move out of the 'build' stage into EPA business as usual no problems other than the procedural ones mentioned will exist.

The way professional recognition process within the assessment plan aligns/fits with existing professional recognition approaches was seen as a strength. This was thought to give the EPA approach an element of self-moderation. (n~1)

The level 3 Rail Engineering Technician standard is seen as good but the pathway information could be expressed in a more balanced way between pathways. The standard is viewed as easy to work with. (n~2)

With regard to what is causing concern in implementing the assessment plan, one key factor is the perceived vulnerability of the plan. This an apprenticeship role with a high funding band and is one of the early assessment models (published April 2016). EPAOs have expressed concern about how imminent potential changes to current arrangements may be. Concern about change, however, doesn't seem to be the main factor influencing a lack of EPA activity, rather the continued availability of the framework alternatives is seen as suppressing apprenticeship numbers in EPA.

Document handling has been mentioned as a concern given the need to involve more than one organisation in some EPA activity. (n~1)

When EPAOs were asked to consider where more clarity and guidance may be needed in support of the assessment plan, the following feedback was given:

- How the assessment methods are set out could be simplified

- Sorting out the EPA and professional recognition process.
- Firming up on the interpretation of what constitutes recent experience in the rail sector for assessors. Ownership and accessibility of portfolio to undertake EPA. Aligning approaches taken by EPAOs to this would help with consistency and quality. (n~2)

On the last point, interpretation varies from 2-3 years' recent experience or extensive knowledge of the sector supported by a route map of updating/familiarisation as a requirement and agreed with the employer and training provider, to currently operating in the role or with responsibility for the role.

OTHER APPRENTICESHIP STANDARDS

There was feedback received about early implementation of the Train Driver EPA but with the standard only published in June 2018, this has been kept and will be added to as more insight and experience develops.

The level 4 Rail Engineering Advanced Technician is a four-year programme with small numbers and is still some way of the first apprentices appearing for EPA. It is expected to largely mirror the level 3 in any insight and feedback.

The level 5 Rail and Rail Systems Engineer has no EPAO, as yet and no EPAO was aware of any take-up by a provider, to date. This standard was only published in September 2018.

CONCLUSIONS

There are some clear areas to monitor as some early signs emerge, pointing towards potential challenges around:

- Take-up of the standard-based apprenticeships and understanding the push-pull factors that are exerting an influence on take up
- Completion rates and the impact of the nature of the on-programme structure, Gateway requirements and other factors on some apprenticeship standards

Much of what exists as evidence of what might be happening is anecdotal but based on discussions with those directly involved. The anecdotal nature of the feedback is largely due to the low volumes, early stages of take-up and implementation and other confounding variables like the concurrent running of some rail frameworks, Levy introduction, adjustments to Levy policy, and changes to training provider registers. All come together to create a continued, dynamic policy environment. There will be opportunities to triangulate some of these findings with the training provider experience to help provide a fuller account.

What seems clear is that as volume increases and experience of EPA grows, there will be some key messages to feed into any standards refresh programme about the nature of the on-programme structure and requirements and the framing of EPA to ensure we have apprenticeships that:

- Retain sufficient value and value-add within the EPA requirements for employers
- Ensure smooth and maximum uptake of appropriate professional registration
- Balance need, form and function of the apprenticeship solution with duration of apprenticeship.

There has been a strong sense that much of the status quo should be preserved in the transition from framework to standards apprenticeships, partly because stability was seen as important as the sector focused on increasing volumes and sector attraction to meet predicted skills needs. The NVQ had enjoyed a particular standing within the rail sector and protecting this was also considered important. However, in preserving much of the framework requirements within the on-programme phase of the standards-based apprenticeship, other challenges look to have emerged.

While the interfacing of EPA with professional registration looks to be a major new benefit of the level 3 and level 4 standards, many of the other benefits of the standards-based approach have not been realised. Instead, there is a risk in some standards that more work is now required, e.g. the old framework requirements as well as EPA requirements. This may be why the standard is being seen as a new entrant product and not one for existing staff.

The on-programme opportunities that sought to clear this phase of continued assessment in favour of larger learning and skills development spaces and opportunities are there, but only as best practice NVQ delivery transfers across.

There is a need for supportive, clear and trusted communication about the rail standards-based apprenticeship requirements, aimed at training providers and employers. This support should range from basic policy and implementation awareness raising to targeted support for critical phases of the implementation phases, e.g. moving from a standard to a delivery plan, getting ready for the Gateway; getting the portfolio right; preparing for Vivas. EPAOs are willing to help but see NSAR as well placed to support EPAOs by supporting training providers and employers in helping facilitate a greater understanding of the standards-based apprenticeship requirements.

The cautionary note here is that apprenticeship volume and EQA cost-recovery models do not allow for this to be a naturally occurring aspect of EQA activity. This means other ways to support this will have to be found.

A great deal of what has been done at the standards level and the assessment plan level is viewed by EPAOs as extremely positive. Where challenges exist, they tend to be in the 'connective tissue' that links key areas, e.g. on-programme to Gateway; Gateway to EPA, assessment through to professional recognition. Some of these challenges are partially exacerbated by the low volumes experienced to date or the absence of any apprentices in EPA, as yet. The expectation is that as volumes increase paths will be forged, connections established and processes refined, taking care of many of the challenges currently experienced. The low volumes at present also present challenging operating environments for EPAOs to make the internal business case for resource to develop guidance and support materials.

What is clear is that there continues to be the need to support key stakeholders, to provide clear channels of accurate information and guidance, and to ensure that evidence is fed back to the right stakeholders, as it emerges, to act on.

If you have any questions, or would like any further information, please do not hesitate to contact us using the contact details below:

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