

Joint statement on functional skills requirements for apprentices



The Association of Deaf Education Professionals and Trainees (adept), the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD), the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) and Signature believe:

- the requirement for apprentices in England to achieve functional skills in English and maths discriminates against some deaf people;
- there should be flexibility for employers to state whether English and maths requirements are essential or favourable when developing apprenticeship standards; and
- fluency in British Sign Language (BSL) should be accepted as an alternative to fluency in English.

Background

The majority of deaf young people begin vocational education at 16. Every year around 1000 deaf young people under the age of 25 are active apprentices.

For many deaf people, an apprenticeship is a much needed route to employment. It is an opportunity to develop vocational skills.

In 2013, the UK Government introduced mandatory requirements in English and maths for apprentices in England. Level 1 English and maths are required to complete an intermediate apprenticeship and Level 2 English and maths are required to complete an advanced apprenticeship.

The challenge

Achieving proficiency in English and maths can be particularly challenging for some deaf people. They may experience difficulties with literacy and working memory due to the impact of delayed language development and earlier barriers to education.

Some have a low level of English literacy but are fluent in BSL, an indigenous language of the UK. BSL has its own grammar and syntax, and ability can be assessed as with any other language.

The requirement for apprentices in England to achieve functional skills in English and maths therefore treats some deaf people unfavourably. It puts them at a disadvantage by requiring them to do more than a hearing English speaker. They are expected to either achieve a qualification in a language other than their first language, or perform as well as an English speaker who is not deaf.

We understand the Government's desire to equip apprentices with general skills that will support them in employment and wider life. But for many jobs, English at the prescribed levels is not necessary.

In addition, a sign language interpreter can facilitate communication between a BSL using employee and a hearing colleague or customer when they do not share a common language. And

a communication support worker (CSW) can assist a deaf person with written English. If the employer is unable to provide an interpreter or CSW as a reasonable adjustment, funding is available from the Access to Work scheme.

The solution

The Government should allow for greater differentiation. New apprenticeship standards should state whether English and maths qualifications are essential or favourable. If not essential, English and maths should not be required for apprenticeship completion. Apprentices should still be incentivised to achieve English and maths by recording attainment of these qualifications on the apprenticeship certificate.

Where English qualifications are essential, BSL fluency should be accepted as an alternative. In the current absence of a functional skills or GCSE in BSL, existing level 2 BSL qualifications should be accepted as an alternative to functional skills in English.

Alternatively, for BSL users who do not have a BSL qualification, a reasonable assessment of language ability can be made at an apprenticeship interview where a sign language interpreter is used to facilitate communication.

Case study: Max

Max is an 18 year old engineering intermediate apprentice. He struggled to progress to an advanced apprenticeship as he had not achieved his level 1 English qualification.

Max is deaf and uses British Sign Language as his main language. He is also dyslexic. He excelled in all areas of his apprenticeship except English. His employer is pleased with Max's work and does not consider his ability to use English to be an issue.

The English requirements have caused Max and his family considerable stress. They are concerned his career progress is being hampered and limited by an unnecessary requirement. They fear it will take Max considerable time to reach the level of English required to complete the advanced apprenticeship - if at all.