

**GoSkills` briefing on the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill (second reading 20 May 09 in the House of Lords).**

The Bill creates the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) as part of the new Skills Funding Agency. This should be very effective in promoting apprenticeships but care will need to be taken in ensuring that it works in close partnership with Sector Skills Councils` regional staff and is not competing for employers` attention. If it is driven by targets then it will not be fully joined up with regional and sectoral priorities. We regret that the opportunity was not taken of strengthening the employer voice in apprenticeships, working through their respective SSCs. The Bill removes certification rights for apprenticeships from SSCs and other standard setting bodies. This is again regrettable in that it sends an unfortunate signal to employers on the ownership of apprenticeships, makes more detailed queries more difficult to deal with and seemingly gives a Government quango rather than employers or their organisations the power to decide who has completed an apprenticeship and may be awarded a certificate. It also removes c£4 million of income from SSCs and other sector bodies without any long term compensation.

The Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (in effect a new Blueprint) is much more restrictive and bureaucratic than the former Blueprint and will threaten the achievement of more demanding apprenticeship targets as employers will be tied down by red tape and innovation will be stifled. As it is a definition enshrined in law for the first time, it will be very difficult to change if experience shows it should be amended. It is essential that the Bill includes a clause on amending the Apprenticeship Specification which involves consultation with interested parties. The existing formulation seems to vest power exclusively in the SfA and SoS.

The creation of the Young People`s Learning Agency (YPLA) and the funding of 16-19 provision by Local Authorities create communication difficulties for SSCs in areas such as the new Diplomas. Whilst welcoming the YPLA`s role in providing “strategic data and analysis”, we make the point that such work will be at up to age 19 only. There is a case to be made for the creation of a Higher Education Statistics Agency type organisation (FESA?) for the entire FE sector and which operates on a UK wide basis like HESA.

We wonder what the role of QCDA will be in the 19 plus area given the new responsibilities of Ofqual and SSCs in the approval and regulation of vocational qualifications. We welcome therefore the Secretary of State`s power to exclude qualifications from QCDA`s remit.

We greatly welcome the Clause requiring schools to give careers advice to pupils which is in their best interests.

*GoSkills* welcomes the Time to Train proposals but feels that there is a case to be made to exempt businesses below a threshold size.

We welcome the direction given to the SfA to prioritise those without basic skills and L2 qualifications.