



Association of
Employment and Learning
Providers

AELP Submission: #100

**National Skills Fund (NSF)
Consultation:
AELP Response September
2021**

Introduction

AELP welcomes the Department for Education's (DfE) consultation on the National Skills Fund (NSF). Whilst being buoyant about the impact of the mix of driving employment outcomes and the delivery of high-quality technical training for learners and employers through the continued rollout of skills bootcamp programmes, we harbour growing concerns about the implementation of the Prime Minister's ambitious lifetime skills guarantee - specifically the deployment of the new level 3 adult offer that was introduced from April 2021.

AELP strongly supports the continued rollout of skills bootcamps across England as we believe these programmes are ideal at supporting both unemployed individuals through technical pathways into employment and supporting existing employees upskill with the latest technical skills that employers require moving forward.

AELP believes though that some flexibility should be considered in regards to the level 3 starting point for some skills bootcamps, especially in sectors such as construction and the need for stronger progression pathways into advanced and then higher-level skills development.

AELP also believes the DfE should evaluate the use of a more flexible duration for the programme as the current duration is a significant commitment and some learners may benefit from programmes that are shorter in length, especially those looking to make the transition into employment – we believe that for adults there is currently a gap in provision between intensive sector-based work academy programmes and skills bootcamps programmes.

AELP commends the intent behind the level 3 adult offer but feels the implementation of this key commitment opportunity is being hamstrung by a piecemeal rollout, which is a significant missed opportunity to support adults to retrain and is sadly not putting learners at the heart of the approach. The specifics of our concerns are:

- The focus solely on adults without a prior level three qualification locks out adults with existing qualifications critically looking to retrain through displacement as a result of automation and/or as a result of the pandemic. In the current climate, this is a significant missed opportunity to help more adults in need.
- The availability of funding for independent training providers (ITPs) to offer this provision is negligible - an undeliverable four-month delivery window between April and July 2021 and the outcome of the ESFA led Adult Education Budget (AEB) procurement in the summer of 2021 means only a handful of ITPs now have access to a level 3 adult offer allocation. We are concerned about the capacity of the current provider base and urge the government to focus on a learner-led rather than institutionally-led approach moving forward to increase both choice and capacity.
- In April 2021, AELP expressed concerns about the narrowness of the catalogue of qualifications on offer and the exclusion of sectors massively impacted by the pandemic such as hospitality. Whilst new sectors and qualifications have been added there is a developing trend starting to surface of limiting access to some qualifications particularly in devolved areas, despite this being a "national" offer. We are concerned that adults should be able to access the same opportunities regardless of where they happen to reside.

Section 1: Free Level 3 Qualifications for Adults

What do you think will be the key barriers to adults taking up the free level 3 qualifications?

- Being able to access NSF funding, through a limited range of providers.
- Current training provider capacity to deliver.
- The breadth of qualifications available in the qualification catalogue still excludes a number of sectors badly impacted by Brexit and the pandemic.
- Traditional delivery models for the delivery of some of the qualifications on offer might not fit the flexible needs of some learners.
- Prior attainment, making many adults looking to reskill ineligible for this opportunity.

Different sectors may use the offer in different ways, depending on their skills needs. How do you think different sectors might make use of the offer and why?

A good example to consider here is Adult Care. It is important to recognise that the free level 3 qualification will certainly displace existing FE provision for both advanced learner loans and apprenticeship provision. For example, the Level 3 Diploma in Adult Care is a license to practice; it is already a popular option as an advanced learner loan and is a mandatory qualification as part of the level 3 Adult Care Worker apprenticeship standard. In some sectors there might be a mix of competing or complementary provision and consideration should be given to appropriate mapping of funding streams and the potential unintended outcomes.

How might we adapt the offer to better meet the needs of employers, including those from a range of different sectors, and a range of sizes

AELP believes that DfE should give employers and individuals greater choice and empowerment of lifelong learning through the utilisation of individual skills accounts, moving away from an institutional-based approach. DfE should review the breadth of qualifications available in the qualification catalogue needed to ensure support for the full range of sectors and both large and small employer needs.

There were also multiple instances where qualifications and equivalent qualifications were available from a range of awarding organisations but the free Level 3 was only available from one awarding organisation. This acts as a barrier because training providers are sometimes reluctant to enter into new arrangements with additional awarding organisations due to additional cost and bureaucracy and is in effect a restrictive practice.

If a qualification is added to the approved list by the DfE, then all of the awarding organisations delivering equivalent qualifications should be in scope. This would help increase the number of training providers offering and being able to deliver the free Level 3 qualifications.

How else can we encourage employers to use the free level 3 qualifications for adults to train or upskill their workers?

In a fast-moving economy where individuals need to constantly upskill and in some cases re-skill, the fact that an individual may have an existing Level 3 qualification is far too restrictive in respect of programme eligibility. This is a concern raised by a range of stakeholders and not just AELP. In other parts of FE, graduates are allowed to undertake apprenticeships at a lower level in a different occupational field and AELP believes that the DfE need to adopt a similar approach for adults who are moving industry or occupation and need to upskill. Enabling skilled adults with a good employment track record whose existing employment has become redundant should be a priority for reskilling and upskilling regardless of their prior qualifications as many of these individuals will be able to reskill and help reduce acute skill shortages

Therefore, the most effective way of supporting employers to upskill their workforce is to review the eligibility criteria and funding arrangements currently in force. The current eligibility criteria do not support the reskilling or upskilling of adults who already hold a level 3 qualification, regardless of what field that qualification is in. If affordability is an issue then the government could also consider expanding the scope of the free level 3 offer to at least offer a co-funding option for adults with a prior level 3 in an unrelated occupational field.

Section 2: Skills Bootcamps

Which current aspects of the Skills Bootcamps do you think are most valuable?

Select all that apply.

- Short, intensive courses X
- Industry-specific training, designed to meet the needs of employers X
- Focused on in-demand skills X
- Fast-track to an interview X
- Line of sight to a job X
- Recruitment pipeline for employers X
- Flexible delivery model X
- Emphasis on improving diversity in technical skills. X

What do you think are the challenges in delivering Skills Bootcamps?

- Securing significant co-investment payments from employers - in relation to comparability vs apprenticeship provision.
- Delivering concurrent provision to employed and unemployed adults can be a challenge in terms of needs and existing experience.
- Challenging targets in regards to converting unemployed adults to employment – significantly higher than specific employability based programmes run by DWP.
- Ensuring the curriculum remains current in dynamic sectors such as Digital/IT.

How best do you think we might help providers to overcome the challenges to delivering a Skills Bootcamp?

AELP believes that more funding needs to be set aside in the 2021 Spending Review to support the intention to increase the Bootcamp programme. The DfE should also consider a more dynamic approach whereby they and employer groups were able to trigger a targeted responsive procurement process to be able to inform DfE of the opportunity to introduce a skills bootcamp programme to an occupation or sector to meet a known skill shortage or skill gap.

Skills Bootcamps are designed to give adult learners the skills they need to fast-track them to an interview for a specific job. Do you think Skills Bootcamps courses should continue to be a maximum of 16 weeks long?

For some technical programmes, then 16 weeks is ample. To encourage progression onto a further apprenticeship programme, the risk of extending bootcamp durations is that it puts learners at greater risk of being moved out of scope for an apprenticeship due to having too high levels of prior learning which impacts their ability to meet the minimum requirement of the apprenticeship programme.

What is the minimum length of time that you think a Skills Bootcamp course should be?

AELP believes there is a gap in provision for adults between sector-based work academy programmes (SWAPs) which are short intensive programmes and skills bootcamps that could last up to 16 weeks. In some sectors and occupations, a programme longer than a SWAP, but shorter than a fully-fledged bootcamp could be an option for the DfE to consider.

Please select the non-financial contributions below that you think it would be most valuable for employers to make.

- | | |
|---|---|
| • Providing space for training. | X |
| • Providing technical equipment for learning. | X |
| • Helping delivery of the training | X |
| • Giving their workers time to learn. | X |
| • Any other additional non-financial contributions not already listed | X |

Section 3: Meeting Critical Skills Needs

Are there any current critical skills gaps below degree level and in particular sectors, occupations, or locations that you think the skills system will not meet, either now or in the next five years?

There are skills gaps across all sectors and occupations concerning digital skills not just occupations in the digital sector. In addition, AELP believes there is a need for additional

upskilling with the most obvious examples in the construction and the green sector as the country moves to an ambitious low carbon economy.

As the country moves to different forms of heating in domestic and industrial settings, then existing technicians require upskilling and similar issues exist with the rapidly increasing number of electrical vehicles (EVs). Currently, only 5% of automotive vehicle technicians are professionally qualified to work on EVs and the government is planning to remove non-EV vehicles from sale in 2030.

Could more options for shorter courses or more modular learning opportunities help adults to overcome barriers to learning?

Yes, absolutely. AELP believes shorter course or modular learning have a role to play and note the DfE's intention to utilise this approach for the Lifelong Loan Entitlement. AELP believes that this approach is not just applicable to higher-level skills and believes a flexible approach to learning can benefit many adults at intermediate and advanced levels too.

About AELP and Our Members

The Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) is a national membership body with over 800 members. The majority of our members are independent private, not-for-profit and voluntary sector training and employment services organisations with employers, universities, FE colleges, schools and end-point assessment organisations comprising the remainder of the membership.

Our members support employers of all sizes across the full range of occupational sectors in the successful delivery of high-quality work-based training which equates to 70% of apprenticeships delivered in England, and they also deliver other publicly funded skills and employment programmes.

The growth in apprenticeships over the last decade has been driven by the adaptability of our members to continually respond to and meet the changing needs of employers to support their aspirations to improve their productivity and address their skills needs. AELP members utilise their outstanding links with employers to deliver the vast majority of skills bootcamps and 16-24 traineeship provision in England, the latter a programme with fantastic outcome rates for young people. Our members also support adults access their legal educational entitlements, reskill, upskill and/or progress into employment through funding provided through the national and devolved adult education budget (AEB). Alongside work-based provision, AELP members also successfully deliver high-quality classroom-based provision in the guise of study programmes, which pave the way for young people to progress into further education or an apprenticeship.

Ofsted's annual breakdown of the quality of provision highlights that independent training providers continue to lead the market in the highest average outcomes from inspections and the Department for Education's annual employer and learner surveys year-after-year provide further evidence of the class-leading service as judged by the end-users and beneficiaries of the skills system.

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September 2021



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